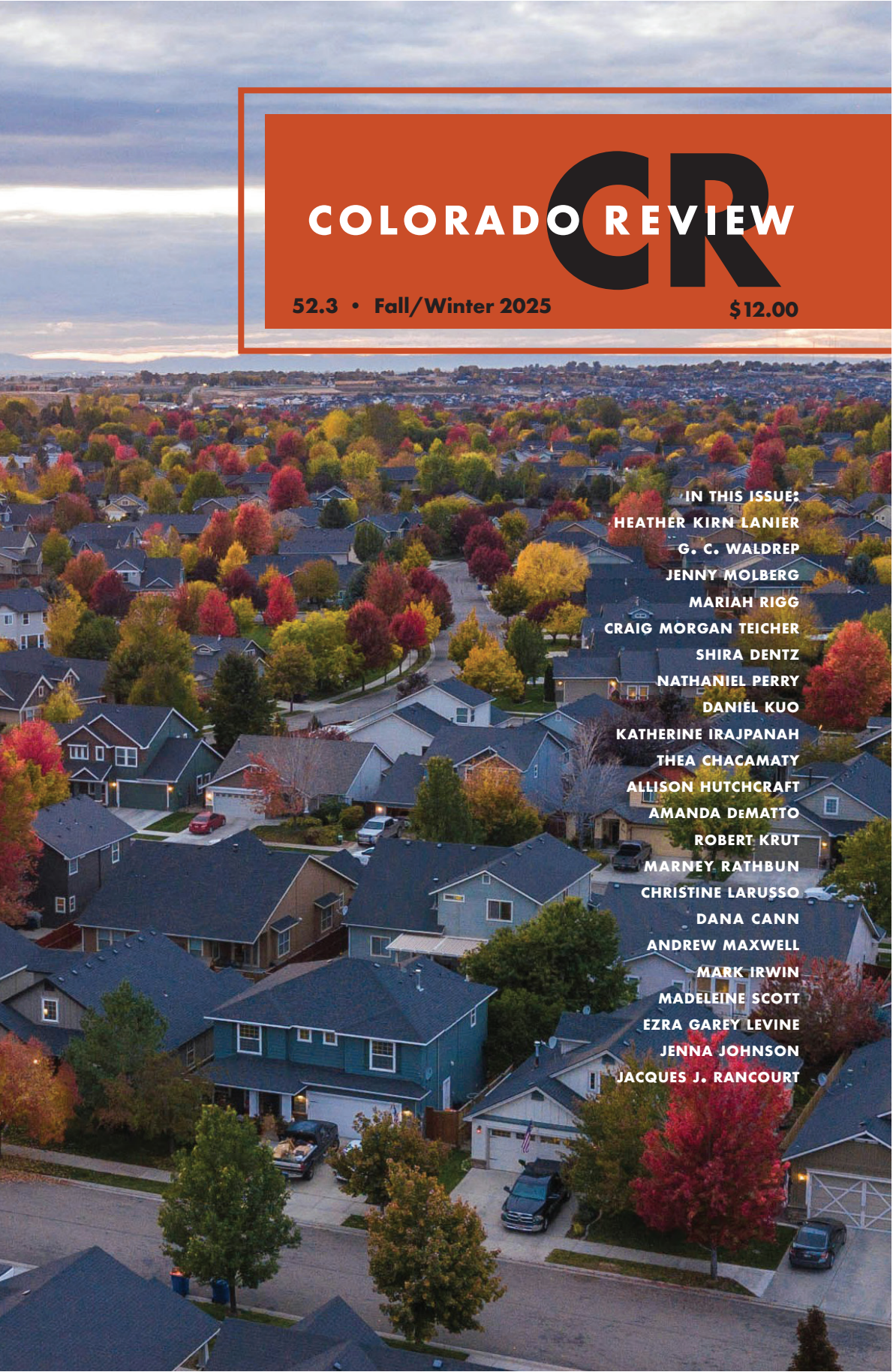
# COLORADO REVIEW

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IN THIS ISSUE:

HEATHER KIRN LANIER

G. C. WALDREP

JENNY MOLBERG

MARIAH RIGG

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

SHIRA DENTZ

NATHANIEL PERRY

DANIEL KUO

KATHERINE IRAJPANAH

THEA CHACAMATY

ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT

AMANDA DEMATTO

ROBERT KRUT

MARNEY RATHBUN

CHRISTINE LARUSSO

DANA CANN

ANDREW MAXWELL

MARK IRWIN

MADELEINE SCOTT

EZRA GAREY LEVINE

JENNA JOHNSON

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

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# CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 1 | *Editors' Page* |
| **FICTION** | 7 | **MARIAH RIGG**<br>*The Impossible Real* |
| | 50 | **DANIEL KUO**<br>*Empty Spaces* |
| | 86 | **THEA CHACAMATY**<br>*Death of Marat* |
| | 106 | **AMANDA DeMATTO**<br>*The Little Spragger* |
| **NONFICTION** | 29 | **HEATHER KIRN LANIER**<br>*An Ounce of Light* |
| | 74 | **MARNEY RATHBUN**<br>*On Feasting* |
| | 127 | **DANA CANN**<br>*Lariat* |
| **POETRY** | 3 | **KATHERINE IRAJPANAH**<br>*I*<br>*To Pass* |
| | 24 | **JENNY MOLBERG**<br>*Elaine and Frank*<br>*The Bay* |
| | 27 | **ANDREW MAXWELL**<br>*Miraculous*<br>*Inherent* |
| | 43 | **CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER**<br>*Epic*<br>*My Other Wasp Poem* |
| | 47 | **SHIRA DENTZ**<br>*Nocturne*<br>*Scant*<br>*Curl* |

63 **NATHANIEL PERRY**
*54 (Song, with Empty Table)*
*56 (Song, with Mute Dove)*
*57 (Song, with Calamities)*
66 **ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT**
*European Goldfinch*
*Taconic Crest*
80 **MARK IRWIN**
*Now*
*Over Open Water*
*The Time It Took*
84 **MADELEINE SCOTT**
*In Caverna Maceriae*
100 **EZRA GAREY LEVINE**
*Over Ludgate Circus*
*The Waves, Part IX*
102 **CHRISTINE LARUSSO**
*Offerings*
*No One Sees the Bones*
124 **G. C. WALDREP**
*Lower Strasburg*
*Clearfield*
138 **JACQUES J. RANCOURT**
*Charlie Hebdo*
*Solstice*
140 **JENNA JOHNSON**
*Exits*
*Dear Neighbor*
142 **ROBERT KRUT**
*Interior Decorating*
*Biosonar Dawn*

144 *Contributor Notes*

## EDITORS' PAGE

"Do I really know what I think I know?" asks Heather Kirn Lanier in her essay "An Ounce of Light." "Do I see what's truly there?" Beset by a mysterious itching that defies diagnosis, Lanier questions the medical community, and herself, as she searches for relief. There are many kinds of knowing and unknowing in this issue's essays and stories, people reaching for what evades them—sometimes glimpsing it, sometimes grasping it, sometimes missing it altogether. In Mariah Rigg's "The Impossible Real," a woman looks back on the intensity of an adolescent friendship fraught with danger and betrayal as they explore the terrain of their emerging sexuality. During a residency on a strange, remote farm, a grieving artist forms a tentative connection with the enigmatic caretaker in Daniel Kuo's "Empty Spaces." A young woman, in Thea Chacamaty's "Death of Marat," takes a position as a personal assistant to an aging rock star she thinks might be her biological father. In Amanda DeMatto's "The Little Spragger," a grandfather with undiagnosed dementia grapples with the mystifying loss of his beloved grandson. Marney Rathbun meditates on the ways in which we come to know one another, and ourselves, through the pleasures of food in "On Feasting." Finally, in "Lariat," Dana Cann reflects on his father's long-buried childhood trauma and its impact on their relationship. In each of these pieces, what is imagined, desired, feared, forgotten, or remembered can both tease and torment. But sometimes the remedy is trusting intuition, even in the darkness. "An ounce of light would be everything," Lanier tells us. And yet, "I realized: I had known before I knew."

As we move closer to the darkest days of the year, we hope you'll join us here, in these pages, and find a bit of light. Welcome to the fall/winter issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

Candor is the morning star of Truth, its brightest messenger. And in a time of advancing and, perhaps, given this strange autumn, insuperable darkness, let me draw your attention to the candid lights shone by poets assembled here. Take note of Andrew Maxwell's "unending" and "innermost" lights. Take note of Shira Dentz's "concentric/ of communal sunlight." Take note of Craig Morgan Teicher's companionable light in its sure ascent. You might begin to think that all real poetry is simply the unguarded candor of lights. And you'd be right.

—DONALD REVELL

KATHERINE IRAJPANAH

## I

look up,
surprised,
to see the
moon through

the branches,
my other
half of me
stands

as more

than two
hundred—
thousand?—
what are miles

away. I
crossed me,
the street, the
galaxy like

death finally
found the
end, the end
of the line.

Click goes
the wind. Click
goes my portal.
Click the heavy

morning dew.
You, who

arrive to me,
through these

eyes. You. Why
do you
follow, blood-
shot &

out of time.

KATHERINE IRAJPANAH

## TO PASS

through you, the light be-
tween the shades,
and still

not know which I is
to live
beneath the trap-

door. Bird chirps the
truth, once
shriveling

vine. Here for a new
home. Your
voice called and

I heard, crouching
in the half-eaten grass, trying
to play bones.

Bones painted
on walls. To not notice un-
til you notice. All the time. The bird falls

off, flipped, down,
and over. Lost my
locus. Lost

my mind
in the darkening. Does it say,
we are here to-

gether in your womb, walls
to gather
dust, or

touch. My hands
on the soot, re-
collecting the absence

of song, re-
collecting our
hand in it all.

MARIAH RIGG

# THE IMPOSSIBLE REAL

When we were thirteen, my then best friend Katie and I found my parents' sex tape. It was almost twenty years ago—October of 2008—and we were in my parents' office because Katie wanted stamps. She was sending a postcard to her dad, who we'd been told was in Tallahassee to oversee a resort's development.

"Why don't you call him?" I asked, pulling open the top drawer to my dad's desk. Its wood squeaked against the runner.

"He doesn't have his cell," she said.

Her nose twitched, which I knew meant a lie. Over the years, I'd seen her dad with not one, not two, but three BlackBerries: one for clients, the second for his wife and daughter, a third that Katie and I liked to pretend was for calling the president. Katie lied a lot. Mom called her an attention-seeker, said it stemmed from Katie having parents who didn't pay attention.

I wasn't sure who Mom thought she was, passing judgment when she and Dad had worked for Katie's family since I was four. When we lived in their Wailupe guest house. When we spent nearly all our waking hours making sure Katie and her family did not experience a single inconvenience—my parents managing the Matsons' grounds and picking up their takeout and coordinating with their lawyers and accountants. But even at thirteen, I think I had an idea of what Mom meant. Though Mrs. Matson didn't work a traditional job—her life was spent signing Katie, and often me, up for piano and tennis and ballet lessons—her interest in her daughter was limited to how Katie could be packaged. Because of this, I didn't mind Katie's lies, or that the purpose of my existence was, basically, to be her companion. For years, I'd even tricked myself into believing that we were really best friends.

Katie's hand rustled against the printer paper in the desk drawer. No stamps, but she did, after a moment, pull out an unfamiliar digital camera.

"Pose for a pic," she told me, pressing the power button.

I held up a peace sign. I pursed my lips. The shutter clicked.

"You're so fucking cute," Katie said. Mom didn't let me swear. She caught me and Katie yelling *ass!* while jumping in a bouncy castle for Katie's eighth birthday and pulled me out by my arm, threatening to wash out my mouth with soap if I did it again. Mrs. Matson didn't care as long as Katie didn't swear at her. If she did, she got a slap—to the hand, to the arm, once to the face when Mrs. Matson was especially blasted.

Katie held the camera up so I could see myself: brown hair, brown eyes, a small, brown mole peeking from behind the shadow of my right nostril. Behind my broad shoulders, the green of blooming spider lilies through the screen door, their white flowers like fireworks. Then she brought the camera back in front of her and sat at my dad's desk chair, her elbows balanced on the table's edge as she used the camera's buttons to scroll left. The pupils of her blue eyes grew small. "Oh my fucking god," she said.

I'd thought a sex tape would be obvious. Burned onto a DVD labeled *Sex Tape* in permanent marker, or maybe a video tape to make it more classic. Katie and I first learned about sex tapes from Mrs. Matson, whose diet was limited to dry martinis and *People* mag. She'd told us about Kim Kardashian. "What a shame," she'd said. "It'll ruin her."

"What is it?" I asked. I stood behind Katie.

She pressed play, and the camera zoomed in on my mom's bare breasts.

The year before we found the sex tape, our private school had begun loaning students MacBooks for the school year. Katie already had a laptop and desktop computer, where we often played *Club Penguin*, but that wasn't enough for Mrs. Matson, who'd won the PTA presidency on the platform of getting the school to update its tech. I remember watching her practice her speech on a lawn chair in the backyard, which overlooked the pool, and beyond that, the ocean and Diamond Head. Her skin was oiled with tanning lotion, the edges of her triangle bikini stained from bright to burnt orange.

"They'll be instrumental to our children's education," she muttered, calling to my mom—who sat under the umbrella typing something for Mr. Matson—every now and then to ask if she should add something about the digital age, about helping with development. Mom said yes, to all of it.

The speech wasn't great, but Mrs. Matson got Mr. Matson to donate $3 million and the school board was convinced. They borrowed Mrs. Matson's language for the rollout of the laptops—the computers would facilitate our development in a digital age, and the skills we learned would make us more competitive in college and, someday, job applications; besides, all the mainland prep schools were doing it. We got enrolled in typing classes, assigned group projects that required PowerPoint and Google Docs, swapped out flashcards for Quizlet. In spite of this, most of us used the MacBooks recreationally. We binged ABC Family, trolled Tumblr, watched porn under the covers at 2 a.m. We thought we were safe outside the school's firewall, not realizing we could be tracked wherever we went.

*Our boyfriend often typed* I miss you, *which confused me—I didn't understand how a person could miss someone they'd never physically met.*

It was on this new MacBook that Katie found an internet boyfriend. "*Our* boyfriend," she corrected, when I referred to him as hers while she GChatted him, her MacBook's fan whirring against the pineapple Pottery Barn quilt of her queen bed.

This was maybe a month before we found the sex tape, and we shared most things back then—boyfriends, bathing suits, a bed on hot summer nights when the trade winds died and the ceiling fans in the guest house didn't cut it. Katie even gave me her hand-me-down Razr when her dad brought her back an iPhone from a San Francisco business trip.

Our boyfriend often typed *I miss you*, which confused me—I didn't understand how a person could miss someone they'd never physically met. When I asked Katie how to respond, she told me to say we missed him back.

"Even if he doesn't mean *I miss you*, he's still thinking of us," she said. "And thinking about someone is number one." She held up her pointer finger and smiled like she'd won something. "I learned that from my dad."

The first time Katie and I watched my parents' sex tape, we did not watch it in its entirety. Katie stopped the video three minutes in, just as Dad's disembodied voice told Mom to flip over, as his right hand entered the frame to grab her hip.

"We need to put this back," I said. I reached for the camera.

Katie held the camera out of my reach for a moment, then relented. "Okay," she said. "But I want to keep your photo." She grabbed my cheek. "You're too cute to be erased." She was out the backdoor before I could protest.

I followed her down the lava rock path that connected my house to hers, past the waxy anthuriums that looked plastic. Outside, the sky was dark, a tropical storm rolling over the island. In the main house's living room, we passed Mrs. Matson. I said hello and she pointed at the TV, where *The Real Housewives of Orange County* played.

"I would have been in this if we hadn't been run out of California," she said.

"Sure, Mom," Katie said.

It wasn't the first time we'd heard about the botched casting call. Before her mom could keep talking, Katie pulled me down the hall and into her bedroom. She locked the door and opened her MacBook, plugging the camera into it. We sat on the bed as the iPhoto logo bounced, then opened. Selecting the image of me, she then, as I knew she would, held down the command and A keys, pressing enter to download every item—including the video of my parents.

"Katie," I begged. "Please."

She just winked. "Pics or it didn't happen," she said.

I thought about ripping the camera from its download cord. Taking it and her MacBook and throwing them both on the ground, out the window, into the pool, where the water could erase the video, and with it, I imagined, my knowledge of its existence. But I didn't do that. Part of me, I think, was afraid to say no to Katie. Instead, I watched as, outside, the storm broke, its wind whipping the Christmas palms that edged the backyard. The loading bar on Katie's MacBook screen moved from left to right. Soon, rain streaked the window's glass. The download was complete. But Katie wasn't finished. She reached over for my laptop, and, opening it, she plugged the camera in and repeated the process.

Our boyfriend said his name was Keith. He said that he was twenty and a business major at USC. That his dad owned a Huntington Beach SAT prep company successful enough for Lakers season tickets and a private jet. Our boyfriend played

volleyball—not for USC, but on the beach in Santa Monica. His favorite food was linguine alla vongole. We had to look up what that meant.

I had doubts about Keith from the first message, but they weren't confirmed until he sent a dick pic. There were gray flecks in the happy trail crawling his navel, and, in later photos, where his hand stroked his shaft, the back of his hand was flecked with sunspots identical to ones on the back of my dad's hand.

I knew better than to bring my doubts up to Katie, who was excited about the prospect of an older guy's interest. At thirteen, we were both over six feet, though I was broad, big boned from Mom's Samoan blood, and Katie was more delicate. When we walked past the popular bench that circled the middle school's singular monkeypod tree, the boys there called us brace face, daddy long legs—once, lesbians. I have a hunch that Katie's parents knew she didn't fit in, but knew, too, that their money would someday buy her way out of it. I have a hunch that one of the reasons they'd hired my parents—unlikely candidates for personal assistants with their lack of college, and in Mom's case, high school, education—was because they'd hoped to buy a shield for their daughter. They thought I could take the brunt of the bullying, which I did. I was the one who got my legs forcefully Naired in the girls' locker room, who was nicknamed Ollie the Elephant at swim practice.

Katie messaged Keith first. She'd found his email on a Tumblr list seeking connection. In the beginning, I felt sorry for him. I imagined him lonely, an outcast like us, and here we were, lying to him. It wasn't just that we were two girls instead of one—something that now, I imagine him happy to find out—we were also decidedly not a freshman at Santa Clara homesick for the sea breezes of Malibu, struggling to balance modeling with her pre-med track. Hell, we weren't even high school freshmen. When the dick pics came, my pity fermented.

Nine years later, when I was twenty-two and had joined an online forum for survivors of pedophilia, the feelings I had about Keith would become even more complex—there was pity, but also guilt and fear. Reading others' posts, I would be grateful: that things with Keith, at least, had not been worse, that he had not lived closer, that Katie and I had never gone so far as to upload pictures of our thirteen-year-old bodies to the internet. I wondered, then and now, if Katie continued to message

Keith after our friendship ended. I wondered, then and now, if I should pick up the phone. If I should call her, or send a text. But I'm scared that, after all these years, I might find that she has not unblocked my number. And there is a part of me, too, that does not want to see or speak to her ever again.

Even as a child, I knew Mrs. Matson was beautiful. She had that Southern California shine, born and raised in Laguna Beach. Through the years and over social media I've seen Katie grow into her mom's beauty, those long legs and large breasts, hair she now bleaches platinum but was naturally blonde when we were kids, cheekbones so defined that sometimes I worry, while I scroll through her Instagram, that they might poke through her skin.

Every few months, Katie's profile changes. Now, she's a Pilates instructor, but four months ago she was a stunt woman, before that a preschool teacher. A few years ago she was engaged to a rich Parisian with whom, she told her Instagram followers, she was thinking of buying a fixer-upper in the Hamptons. In our early twenties she even had a stint as a swimsuit model, which is ironic given that, for most of our ten years of friendship, the two of us swam naked.

The nudity was her mom's doing. Mrs. Matson, though serious about her own adornment, encouraged us to be naked as kids.

"This is the freest you'll ever be. The most beautiful," she told us, tracing the faint line where Katie had been cut from her. "You hit puberty, and it's all over." She waved her martini, lemon peel corkscrewing through gin. "Plus, tan lines won't ever be in."

We ran naked across the prickly zoysia of the back lawn, crushing fallen plumerias as the sprinklers threw water, manufacturing rainbows that haloed above our heads. We ate grilled cheese and musubi and even pasta without clothes on, grease dripping down our chests and stomachs. We pretended we were mermaids, racing through the pool toward shipwrecks, the sharp chlorine turning Katie's blonde hair fluorescent. When Mom was not there to corral us behind the naupaka hedge, Mrs. Matson counted down from ten as we pawed at the back gate like racehorses, and at one, we shot down the wooden dock and off its edge. We hit the water, and its salt stung the careless cuts on our legs and stomachs and arms, red scrapes that soon

turned to scars, the memory of which I sometimes still trace, though they are long faded.

The nudity stopped soon after we found the sex tape. Though neither of us had started to menstruate, our bodies were preparing for it, pimples sprinkling our foreheads, the flesh of our chests rising in budding, painful breasts.

One day, Katie pointed out my pubic hair as we washed in her two-headed shower.

"It's so dark." She bent to pull a curl, and I yelped. "My mom doesn't have any," she said, standing to pump conditioner in her palm before handing over the bottle. "I thought it was just her armpits, but I asked, and she lasered everything." She rubbed conditioner into her scalp. "Even before, her hair was blonde, like mine." She nodded down to her own crotch, then pointed to the hair at mine. "You get that from your mom, I guess."

Her eyes closed as she rinsed, and I looked, for a moment, down at her breasts, her areolas' swirl of pink many shades lighter than mine. "Did you watch the rest of the video?" I asked. Through the window behind her, a ricebird landed on a plumeria tree's limb. The flowers of the tree were multicolored, cut and grafted from many sources. I tried to focus on them, on anything but Katie's body before me.

*We pretended we were mermaids, racing through the pool toward shipwrecks, the sharp chlorine turning Katie's blonde hair fluorescent.*

"You were asleep. I was bored." Katie blinked, the conditioner gone. "They get into some pretty serious positions," she said.

I massaged conditioner into my own hair, working from my scalp down. I wondered if the dark curls between my legs needed to be conditioned. I glanced down at Katie's crotch, which was bare minus a soft mound of golden fuzz, and when I looked back up at her, she was watching me. Something like shame twisted in my belly.

"Should I shave it?" I asked. My mom did not talk to me, then or ever, about my changing body and what to do with it.

"Definitely not." Katie stepped out of the shower. "Your hair is too thick. You need to wax." She began to towel off. "When you get out, we can YouTube it."

Katie walked out of the bathroom. I closed my eyes and stood

under the hot water, the conditioner running down my back. Behind me, the ricebird chirped in high soprano. A breeze blew the sharp scent of the plumeria blossoms in. Up until then, I'd been operating under the illusion that Katie and I shared everything. But she hadn't just downloaded my parents' sex tape against my wishes—she'd watched it without me. She had, I realized then, not told me about Keith until she'd already begun messaging him. Turning off the water, I dripped for a moment in the shower. Then I grabbed not one but two towels—one for my hair and the other for my changing body, which somehow felt like something to hide from my best friend. The next day, when we swam together, we wore bikinis. The halter strap dug into the skin of my neck.

I'd like to say that the first time I watched my parents' sex tape was the only time, but it wasn't. I watched it dozens of times, maybe a hundred, on my own and then with Katie, after she'd decided how we'd use it.

Each night, I waited for my parents to sleep. Once Dad's snoring started, I opened my laptop and watched the sex tape once, twice, three times. I barely slept. By the end of seven days, I'd memorized every recorded movement—from the flutter of Mom's eyelids, to the moment twenty minutes in when a disgustingly long curl on Dad's left butt cheek moved with the wind.

My parents were more flexible than I'd believed, more creative with positions and with the noises they made with each fondling and penetration. At thirteen, I had barely reconciled myself to the idea of my parents as *people*, let alone as people needing and desiring sex. Though their video is lost to me now, I still wonder when they found the time to make it. It could have been six months before, when I'd gone with the Matsons to Maui for spring break, Katie and I spending much of it sticky-fingered from virgin piña coladas and farmer's market butter mochi. We kept the back windows of her parents' rented G-Wagon down even though Mrs. Matson screamed at us not to, and the wind blew my long curls into a crown of knots that, when we returned, my mom had to cut. It could have been the year before that, during the hellish week that Katie and I spent at Camp Timberline shooting bows and arrows, hiking through ironwoods up to Mauna Kapu, where a camp counselor forced

an endemic snail into Katie's hands even though I'd told him she had a phobia. Katie dropped the snail, crushing it beneath her feet, and the gooey pile of mollusk and shell shards looked like broken glass. It could have been any of the many hot nights of the preceding summer, where I'd lie beside Katie in her bed, close enough to smell the candy of her breath, sweet from the ring pop that she'd sucked down to its red nub, the plastic ring tight around her middle finger. Maybe my parents had not even waited for me to be gone. Maybe they made it when I was asleep, down the hall and in listening distance.

The video ended with Dad's frame collapsed over Mom's, tired from over an hour of rubbing and thrusting and sucking. As he stood to stop the recording, a long fart escaped him, and Mom laughed. The sound of her joy was jarring, and though each time after the first I knew it was coming, I still winced when the video froze in the middle of her laugh, the frame full of Dad's face as he bent to lift the camera.

Before Katie watched the sex tape without me, I'd thought we were the same. Sisters. As we brushed our teeth and practiced our makeup in the mirror, I'd sometimes felt like her reflection was more mine than my own was. By the time Mr. Matson was sent to federal prison a year later, I'd realize that our differences extended beyond how we looked, to what we wanted. They shaped our view of the world and, more importantly, how we thought of each other. I'm not sure, if I'd met her out of the context of my parents working for her father, that we could have been—that I would have even wanted to be—friends.

Mom always told me to be careful of men.

"You can't trust a single one," she said. "Not even relatives."

It's not because of this that I have a difficult relationship with my dad, but it didn't help. I was always looking for ways he could fuck up. I saw how he chose himself—going out for drinks with Mr. Matson instead of coming home and, after he and Mom were let go, to the bars with his stevedore friends. I wish my dad had been the type of parent to help me with school projects. To sing in the kitchen while he cooked dinner. But he was angry instead, always a cup to the ground or a fist to the wall instead of a hug or kiss. During the nights that I lay in the dark, watching him fuck my mother, I often wondered at the smiling man on the screen. I tried to find him in the light of day,

and sometimes I caught glimpses. But he never stayed, and as years passed I lost count of the panels of drywall he busted and bought to fix holes punched in the houses we lived in, lost count of the times I walked in to find him storming out for a smoke in the backyard or to get into a friend's pickup.

I've always been jealous of girls whose fathers are their heroes. Katie used to be one. Mr. Matson played doting dad and husband well—never outwardly angry, always coming home from his work day with flowers, from trips with gifts. Unlike many men I've known since, he seemed excellent at communicating, calling nearly every day when he was away. Until he didn't.

In the month after we'd found the sex tape, Katie left messages, sent postcards, even emailed her dad's secretary, who replied curtly to say he was busy, that Katie should not email again. She tried to pretend that the silence didn't bother her, but I knew it did. He had never abandoned her like this. I could see how it bothered Mrs. Matson too, who, though regularly known to down a martini or two every evening, had upped her intake to three, even four, if she made it past 9 p.m.

Katie had not heard from her dad for two months when Keith asked us for nudes.

*send me a pic of your tits*, he typed. *lol*, he added.

It was the end of an unseasonably hot November, the trade winds dead from what we'd realize, over the next decade and a half, was a product of shifting ocean currents from the rapidly changing climate. Katie and I lay on my bedroom floor, trying to suck up the travertine's cool.

"We don't know what he might do," I argued. "I don't want pictures of me out there"—I gestured at Katie's bare stomach, where her laptop balanced—"on the internet."

Katie sat up. "I don't get why you're so worried," she said. "He doesn't know who we are, or where we live."

I ignored her, watching a moʻo crawl in the corner of the room, its eggs visible through a translucent stomach. I wondered how long it would take for the eggs to be laid, to hatch. Katie stood and sat at my desk, furiously clicking at her laptop.

"What if," she said, "we sent him something from the video?"

I sat up to look at her. "Are you serious?"

"We can crop a still," Katie said. "He won't know the difference."

She pulled the video up and took a screenshot of a moment a few seconds in, when the camera first zoomed in on my mom's breasts.

I stood. "If you're going to send him my mom's boobs, there are better options." I pushed her finger off the trackpad and dragged the cursor to the video's end.

Katie's right eyebrow rose. "You watched it," she said.

I stopped at a moment of my mom with her back arched, breasts pushed forward. It looked, almost, as if she'd taken the picture herself. Taking a screenshot, I cropped out her head and lower half. "See," I said. "This is more believable." From the corner of my room, the gecko chirped.

Katie pointed at Mom's right breast, where stretch marks fanned. "I'm not sure that'll pass as eighteen."

I dragged the screenshot into iPhoto, and, clicking the retouch wand, we went to town on the blemishes—stretch marks, freckles, marks from my dad's teeth and lips—getting rid of everything that might hint at her age. When we were done, I could barely tell the breasts on the screen were Mom's. In fact, when we sent the picture to Keith, I almost felt turned on.

My parents' sex tape was not the first time Katie and I had watched porn. We'd stumbled upon it on Tumblr and online forums, searched for it ourselves after a group of boys started shouting in the cafeteria about a Pornhub video where some guy fucked his cat. That video got taken down for animal cruelty before we could watch it, but it didn't stop us from looking at others—videos of men roleplaying as dads, girls wrestling girls, threesomes of two men and one woman and two women and one man and three women with no men.

We called it research. We thought it could keep us from being left behind. We figured, when we did have sex—which some kids in our grade already had, or at least claimed to have had—it would prepare us. We didn't have anyone who knew enough, who cared enough to tell us that, most of the time, losing your virginity sucks. I wish we had.

One night, while skimming my parents' video for something to send Keith, Katie paused at a moment early on—Dad's disembodied hand three fingers deep in my mom.

"Do you think we should try?" Katie asked. "So we're not surprised?"

She wore a pink bikini she'd stolen from her mom, and again I felt something twist in my stomach as I looked at her. "I'm not sure," I said.

The TV hummed from down the hall, where Mrs. Matson had fallen asleep in front of it. Katie got up. She closed and locked the door, then told me to get on the bed. She shimmied out of her pink bottoms, and I took off the jean shorts I wore. I thought about telling her I'd already tried this a year before, when we'd first stumbled upon a Tumblr GIF of a man and woman fucking. I'd felt nothing with my pointer finger inside of me. But she'd already lain down. Her hand was in the shape of a gun. Her fingers slid inside herself.

Squinting, she moved her fingers in and out. The feeling that had started in my stomach twisted lower, between my legs, which now felt damp.

"It kind of hurts," she said. She took her fingers out, and, from where I lay, I could see they were wet. "Do you think it feels better when someone else does it?"

"I can try." My pulse hammered in my throat as I knelt beside her. "If you want."

She said she wanted to, so I slid one finger inside her. Then two. Her back arched, and I hooked my fingers deeper, trying to find something inside her to hold on to, wondering, if I found it, if I could pull it out and keep it for myself.

She blinked at me. "That feels good," she said.

She closed her eyes and I kept going. Our breaths grew shorter as my fingers slid in and out, in and out, my thumb circling what the diagram in our fifth-grade sex-ed class had said was her clitoris. Too soon, she cried out, the muscles inside her spasming around my fingers. Her eyes were glassy when she opened them. I pulled my fingers from her, and they were pink.

"Fuck," I said, and got off her bed. In the bathroom, I pumped the soap dispenser, rubbing my hands together until the suds half-filled the sink, until her blood was gone from my hands.

"Hey," Katie said. She stood behind me. She wrapped her arms around my waist. "It's okay."

I was crying. She kissed the curve of my shoulder, the most tender she'd been since we were three and exchanging bougain-

villea blossoms in the sandbox, and I shivered, pressing back into her, trying to find an anchor in her arms.

"I don't want to do that again," I told her, and she said she didn't want to either.

But I was lying. I wanted to do it to her over and over again.

From the outside, the distance that grew between us after this was hard to notice. We still fed each other popcorn while watching *High School Musical* on the couch, giggling as we licked the butter from each other's fingers. We still screamed "Fergalicious" into each other's faces and out the windows of Mrs. Matson's Porsche. We still wrote math equations outside on the pool deck, Katie making sure I flipped the fractions when we divided by them. We continued to message Keith, though we no longer watched the sex tape—alone or together—shutting the laptop whenever he requested nudes. Though Katie seemed fine with showering and even sleeping naked together, I often wore my bikini when we did.

For years I blamed the end of our friendship on our parents. On Katie's dad. I still do, if I'm honest. But I'm beginning to think that, maybe, they were also what kept us together. As the years passed and I fucked other women, had a string of girlfriends, I realized that when it came to Katie and me, she had always been the one with the power. That we had always been as incompatible as we seemed in the end. I did not notice it before thirteen because I was a child, because she was all I'd ever known. Because I was in love with her. I am still trying to be okay with not knowing if she ever loved me, or if she just liked my attention.

When the news broke about her dad—that he had not been in Florida for business, that over the past several months he'd been tried and convicted on five counts of possessing and trafficking child pornography—we didn't find out from our parents. We found out on the internet. A girl from our English class sent Katie an email without a subject line. There was no body text besides a link to a *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* article. The headline read, "Hawai'i's premiere developer exposed in child pornography scandal as part of Project Safe Childhood."

What went down after we read the article happened so fast that I still, after years of recounting it to different girlfriends

and therapists, have trouble keeping track of it. I remember Katie walking into the living room. Holding out the open laptop to show the article to her mother. Yelling, because Mrs. Matson already knew—how else could someone react the way she did? She slapped Katie so hard that Katie dropped the MacBook, and then Mom was there, having heard Katie. She picked up the still-open laptop. She read the headline. Then she was screaming at Mrs. Matson too, and it was like years of fermented rage had popped open. She stepped forward, and I was worried that she might hit Mrs. Matson. But Dad ran in. He held her back. Mom struggled in Dad's arms, and Mrs. Matson, whose face was wet with tears, smiled, widely, at my mother.

We did not read the full article then because it was behind a paywall. It took me the next few years to find out exactly what it said. Mr. Matson paid half a million dollars in fines. He was sentenced to up to twenty-five years in prison. I did not know he had taken photos of Katie, of us, until I was twenty and, curious, looked up his case file. The pictures were not there, but our names were. I found the photos after many nights of rabbit holing through the dark web, scrolling through hundreds, thousands of images and videos of other children, in positions and doing things that often play unbidden in my mind as I pass babies in strollers, watch five-year-olds score goals for the AYSO soccer team while walking the loop of Kapi'olani Park with my girlfriend. My therapist calls these intrusive thoughts. She says she knows I will not act on them. But I wonder if I would be a different person if I had never seen the photos—of me, of Katie, of anyone else. If I could erase them.

*I wonder if I would be a different person if I had never seen the photos—of me, of Katie, of anyone else. If I could erase them.*

I heard, from an acquaintance, that Mr. Matson is out now, on good behavior. I have often wondered if Katie has spoken to him since his conviction. I wonder if she has forgiven him. I would not have.

What I remember best from that night is how I clung to Katie. How, after Dad had dragged Mom back to the guest house and returned for me, he had to peel each of my fingers from her.

When he finally got me free, I continued to reach for her, but she did not reach back. Instead, she was curled at her mother's feet, arms around Mrs. Matson's ankles. She let him take me away, did not fight to keep me with her. Did not even look at me as I left.

After that, my parents sent me to the Big Island to stay with my mom's mother. She lived in a small round house my late grandfather had built at the base of Kīlauea, and I did not speak much during that time, though Mom called each night, anxious to see if I had eaten, if she could send or do anything that would make life easier. I asked once for Katie, but Mom couldn't—wouldn't—give me her. Sometimes I wonder if they blamed her for what happened. They'd taken my phone and computer away, so I could not contact Katie on my own.

I spent those days with Grandma digging sweet potatoes from the yard, pinching weeds from the sprouting bok choy, and, in the evenings when the mist rolled down the mountain, learning to snap kiawe branches over my knee and beneath my heels. We built fire after fire under the hot tub on Grandma's back deck, the two of us stripping naked to slide into its hot water. My pubic hair thickened, as did the curls beneath my armpits, and Grandma did not fuss when, finally, I got my period, simply leaving a box of pads on the counter of the sink in the bathroom that we shared.

I cried the first time I lined my underwear, wishing Katie were there to walk me through it, to pull up a YouTube video. This want stretched over decades, present in every formative moment—birthdays and graduations, first dates and breakups. I wish I could say that, in the two decades since we last spoke, I have found other friends that I love as much as her, but I can't. I didn't. I've hoped, through all that time, that Katie was thinking of me.

I opened the bathroom door in my underwear, a drip of blood running down my legs.

Grandma smiled. "You're a heavy bleeder," she said. "Just like your mama." Gently, she pushed past me to grab a box of tampons from the cabinet beneath the sink. "Do you know how to use these?" she asked, and I shook my head. She spent the next half hour explaining how to use an applicator.

That night, we ate beef stew on the back deck, the broth rich

from a leg of cow given to Grandma by one of the neighbors. We fed the ever-present fire, and I—not yet comfortable enough to get in the water with my tampon in—sat on the edge of the hot tub while Grandma slipped in. I held her hand over the wooden tub's lip as we counted the satellites that streaked the sky above us, and, for the first time, I forgot Katie, full enough to move past the emptiness I felt without her.

In January, I returned to O'ahu and found my parents had moved from Wailupe to a one-bedroom cottage at the base of Maunalani Heights. I slept on a Murphy bed on the back lanai, the hinges old and squeaking each time I pulled it from the wall, the corners of it cobwebbed from spiders. I attended Kaimuki Middle School, my parents no longer able to afford the tuition of the private school I'd gone to without the help of the Matsons. Mom gave me back my phone, but when I texted Katie, the message went undelivered.

My parents bought an old Datsun truck, which Dad used to drive to the stevedore docks in Sand Island. I took the bus, sometimes biked, to school and Mom walked to work, up the hill we lived on, to find people with a view who would pay her to clean their houses. She returned each night smelling of Pine-Sol and bleach, and over the years her hands cracked beyond repair, even with the help of thick gloves from the City Mill on Waialae Ave that Dad bought her.

Mom never told me if she looked through my MacBook before she returned it. If I were her, if it had been my daughter, I would have. I do not know if the school scanned my files before wiping the laptop of its memory and passing it off to the next kid. I do not know if Katie continued to watch the sex tape without me. If she uploaded it to the internet. Sometimes, when I watch porn, I search for it.

When I finally saw Katie again, it was six months later. I was on Kaimana Beach, having skipped school and taken a bus to the Natatorium. I read alone, having yet to make friends at my new school, thanks to the rumor mill leaking my connection to Mr. Matson. At first, I did not recognize Katie, walking down the lava-rock jetty of the private beach club to the left. Her blonde hair had been cut to her chin, and in Mrs. Matson's pink bikini

she looked older. I only looked her way because of the thong creeping up her ass.

She stood alone at the end of the jetty, and at the last moment, she screamed. I could not hear her over the talk of tourists around me, but I saw her throw her head back. It was then, when I saw the profile I so loved, that I realized who I was watching.

Now, I wish I had gotten up, run down the beach and jetty to stand beside her. Though I have no children of my own, am not sure I ever want kids, I am around the age our mothers were when they bore us. During the last Olympics, a man was allowed to compete after spending four years in prison for raping a twelve-year-old girl. Just yesterday, I read an article about three fifteen-year-olds who got sent to juvie for deepfaking porn of one of their sisters. I cannot imagine raising a daughter, then or now, in the world we have been given.

Twenty years ago, as Katie stood at the edge of the jetty, I laid my book face down. I opened my mouth to call to her, thinking of all the times we'd held hands and jumped off the dock in Wailupe, all the times we'd been suspended together, midair, for a moment, before we crashed down, the impact forcing us apart as we hit the water's surface. But before I could, she had launched herself into the air. Her head disappeared under the splash of the ocean.

JENNY MOLBERG

## ELAINE AND FRANK

After Diane Seuss

After spinal surgery I fill my dream pockets with dream stones,
tumble their cold hardness through my fingers and walk,
dream-walk, into the river. The pain is a lover no one knows
but me. *Oh Elaine, how nice*, Frank O'Hara said when he was my age
and dying at Mastic Beach, what a lover he must have been.
I long for friends like these, there for the other's dying more than
coffee or lunch, friends who play the shipwreck, at least, that's how
I romanticize them like I romanticize drowning, not at all afraid
to swallow water. No one here to tell this to but the dead poets
and the dead painters who fill my glass with scotch and say
*You'll love it here*. I make one small promise to my friends
every day. The difference between a rock and a comma is only
a point of view. Elaine said, *Get better* and Frank said, *All right*:
Like any great friend she knew when to tell him what to do.

JENNY MOLBERG

## THE BAY

Helen Frankenthaler, 1963

No one can see you cry
in the pool is a trite thing

a novelist said to me,
but anyway I do it

the day my stomach
drops like a lake

onto a topographical map.
When loss is disorienting

one arrives from a nap
or a longer pill-fueled

sleep into the disgusting
truth, an ocean with no

edge. Not-dream.
One of us knows

she'll never see you
again and the rest

are not so sure. I'm too
in it: my hands underwater

glide like fins or ghosts.
In the pool my mind

empties like an overturned
urn, the image of death

circling the drain. Like
an overturned urn, the one

I purchased at the garden
store because the funeral

home urns were too
depressing. The blue enamel

flowers watery at the edges.
A dragonfly perched

on the lid, which someone
doused in silver.

My riptide body cannot
catch, myself suspended

above myself. Myself, as if
that mattered. As if myself,

watery at the edges, were a kind
of wholeness or perspective.

ANDREW MAXWELL

## MIRACULOUS

That innermost as if. Impossible therein already that open.

Wide open that wound of which winter.

Might fleetingly offer you only
some fugitive sigh of which distant winds.

Therein arriving. Like silence arriving.
Might suddenly hear.

*

That innermost as if. That overgreen as if
that deeper descent of shade

by which
already

your last word approaches. Your last word spoken.

As thunder already might
open these flowers.

Already that by which. That to which
might only your open bones only return.

ANDREW MAXWELL

## INHERENT

If therein unwritten. Already by crowspeech. If therein
unwritten by falling
twigs also
unwritten. If therein abyssal this
distance. Across which dark
windows appear now
as dark

as dark windows already
appear now. If therein
arises such utterly

soft light

arises. Unending such naked
light as such light as will
make naked this

distance. You also
make naked this
distance.

Embracing already this
distance. Embracing unwritten this

wounded word this.

HEATHER KIRN LANIER

# AN OUNCE OF LIGHT

Given all the fancy diagnostic tools in the world—blood draws and biopsies, CT scans and MRIs—my new doctor was relying on a popsicle stick. He split it in half, then took the pokiest, splintered end of that popsicle stick to the underside of my forearm. He scraped a long, diagonal line down my arm's length, from outer wrist to inner elbow. Then he scraped a second line, running the opposite diagonal. On the wall of this office was the name of an Ivy League–affiliated hospital everyone knows and respects. On my forearm, scratched white into my pale flesh, was now a huge letter X.

I was game for the busted popsicle stick, which might tell you how desperate I was. But also, unlike the other six doctors I'd seen so far, Dr. A. moved with a degree of dispassionate confidence that made me trust him. Maybe, just maybe, he could tell me what was wrong with me.

If, in about ten minutes, my body responded to that engraved X the way Dr. A. suspected, then a simple allergist finally had a diagnosis. If not, well then, I would be left in the dark. Assuming the worst. Believing my body was harboring some mysterious disease.

We stared at it together, Dr. A. and I: the scratched white X. And we waited.

X

For seven weeks, my body had been ablaze with a low-key, invisible fire. The fire burned a millimeter beneath my skin. There were no visible signs of this fire. No rash, no hives, no redness. Sometimes when I walked and my clothes rubbed against my arms and legs, my nerve endings felt like they were being rubbed with sandpaper. On good days, it seemed like my skin was perpetually in that pre-goosebump stage of rising up. Other days, I was just very, very itchy.

The morning it began, I woke before the rest of my family,

padded down the steps in the dark, and sat down to meditate. The meditation I do is pretty simple: release all thoughts. A thought includes an itch, the teaching goes, as well as the urge to scratch it. I've practiced this teaching for twenty years. But on this morning, I couldn't. The urge to itch crept up my scalp, down my neck, into my arms. I left my cushions before the timer dinged.

It was five days after the new year, ten days after a Bernedoodle visited my home for the holidays, eleven days after the first somewhat normal post-pandemic Christmas, thirteen days after my third Moderna shot, one day before the first anniversary of January sixth, and three months after I'd read the memoir of a woman whose leukemia began with incessant itching.

Maybe the Bernedoodle had fleas, I thought. Maybe when I carried the wood inside for a Christmas fire, I'd also carried in some mites. I thought of an infestation, like the vitriolic MAGA-cap wearers breaking Capitol glass and hunting hallways.

I stepped into a hot shower. The itching got worse.

There are physical ailments that offer more elegance in their literary possibilities. Vertigo, for one, which poet Pádraig Ó Tuama describes artfully in his book *Being Here*. Physical pain can conjure a degree of respect or reverence. Tinnitus could be interesting on the page.

But itching? Scratching? It's cartoonish, the namesake of the animated TV show inside America's longest-running animated TV show. It's a joke inside a nesting doll of jokes. Nobody wants to hear about itching.

But also, this essay is not about itching.

So, I won't say much more, except to say that the worst part was not the burning. The worst part was that if you have no visible explanation for these symptoms, the potential diagnoses are terrifying. You are in the first stages of leukemia. Either that, or your kidneys are failing. Google told me so.

Maybe Google was overreacting, as she tends to do. So, I got the quickest appointment I could with a doctor I'd never met. I still haven't met him, because his commitment to a clear telehealth image ended with his nostrils and chin.

"I'm just concerned that it could be something systemic," I told the nostrils and chin. "Something serious. Especially since there's no rash."

I waited for him to say it was probably nothing. That I was young and healthy. That it would go away on its own.

"I am too," he said, his nostril bobbing from the screen's southwest to northeast corner, indicating that he was nodding. He ordered blood work right away.

X

I'd never seen the crystalline quality of light come so fully alive until I visited James Turrell's artwork at MASS MoCA, one of America's largest contemporary art centers. Turrell uses light as a sculptural medium, which is a very weird and cool and even breathtaking thing to see. "Squares of sky seem to float, suspended, in ceilings or walls," writes one museum curator. "Architecture disintegrates; and brilliant geometric shapes levitate in midair."

In one exhibit, you step into a vacant museum room and, on the opposite wall, a massive square of white light taller than you beckons you to it. It's the only thing in the room. Everything else is dark. You think the white square is like a television screen, a physical object emanating light. But you step closer and realize it has space and depth. You put your arm into it, and your arm enters more light. Your arm moves past the museum's wall.

How did he do it? *What* did he do? He made you see what wasn't there. It's a cutout. The light comes from a room beyond the room. The object of your attention is not an object at all. It's more space than substance, more nothing than something. How can this be? How can you be drawn to nothing?

But light is also something. It's just not something you can touch.

X

I have a history of not trusting myself. I take a good job, then wonder for a year if I should *not* have taken it. I get the creeps from a coworker dude, then worry that *I'm* the jerk. I make a decision that feels good in my gut, then spend months haunted by the fear that it could be wrong. My initial reaction is often as clear as a newly cleaned window. It's afterward that I struggle. Do I really know what I think I know? Do I see what's truly there?

Years ago, when my husband and I lived in a first-floor apartment of a house with our two crawling babies, I did not love the bullshitting handyman who lived above us. But he was smiley and neighborly and, for the first year, seemed harmless. In the second year, his perpetual smile dropped. He started slurring a lot of his words. He started shouting at his wife in God-awful volumes at two in the morning. (We called the police.) In the driveway, he once made out with a woman not-his-wife, after which he banged his head so hard on the car doorframe that I was shocked he could still walk.

One afternoon, I found shards of glass all over the front yard, just as both kids were doing those favorite baby pastimes of crawling and shoving foreign objects in their mouths. My husband traced the broken glass back to the shared garage, where a bunch of window panes that once leaned against the wall now lay in a shattered pile. When we asked the handyman about it, he said one window broke, so he broke them all. That way, none would break again. I had to give him credit for his perverse logic. When you fear trouble, one answer is just to create the trouble you fear.

*This is not safe*, I thought.

When I told my landlord about the broken glass, I thought he'd at least express concern for his youngest tenants, my crawling kids.

Instead, the landlord stood at my door, squinted his eyes beneath his flat cap, and said, "Well, he says *you* left dirty diapers unbagged in the trashcan. And he had to scrub the trashcan clean. So."

I took a step back. Unbagged diapers were not an equivalent. I knew this. I had to tell myself over and over that I was not the problem. I knew this too.

And yet, that didn't stop me from doubting. Maybe I *was* the problem? Maybe broken glass was no big deal?

*We should move*, I thought. *Should we move?* I thought. *How can we afford to move?* I worried. Our rent included heat, and Vermont winters were brutal. My fingers felt unsteady as I clicked through online rentals, tallied the costs on our small income.

I relocated my whole family and didn't realize how right I'd been until I sat in a quiet Cape Cod on a hill with nobody shouting above me.

Again and again, I can see what's right in front of me. Again and again, I can talk myself out of seeing it.

But I can also talk myself into seeing things that aren't there. It's hard to know.

X

"What could it be?" I'd asked Dr. Nose-and-Chin before he clicked off the telehealth call.

"We'll know more after the blood work," he said.

It was a Friday. I wouldn't get the results until Monday. That weekend, I didn't sleep. I spent it teetering on the edge of terror. I thought of the memoir of the woman with leukemia, how the first page was all about itching, and the rest was a fight for her life. I envisioned chemo, medical leave, my family bankrupt, my body heading into the fire of a crematorium. It sounds melodramatic. It felt as reasonable as paying taxes. My whole body was on low-grade fire.

"What if it's something really terrible?" I whispered to my husband in the kitchen while the kids played in the living room.

"Whatever it is," he said, "it's nothing we can't handle."

I cried into his T-shirt. My life felt so tender, my children so vulnerable and sticky and unaware.

On Monday, the office of Dr. Nose-and-Chin called. A voicemail said the blood work showed no concerns. The voicemail said that if the problem continued, I should follow up with my regular doctor.

The problem continued.

X

In Philly, you can lie on the floor of a Quaker meeting house before sunset and watch as a rectangular skylight opens above you. If it's December, the whole sanctuary gets blasted with winter air. This is James Turrell's "Skyspace." Some people bring blankets and pillows. Squeezing yourself on the floor between two pews, or lying on the hardwood of one, you gaze up and watch the rectangle of sky. Slowly, perceptibly, the sky changes. It turns turquoise and lavender and green. It turns colors you didn't know the sky could turn. Meanwhile, around the ceiling

above you, cove lighting shifts into saturated hues. In contrast with the rectangle of sky, the ceiling turns tangerine and amaranth, aqua and emerald.

Is the sky really lavender? Or are the contrasting cove lights making it *look* lavender? It's some kind of magic trick, made with light and color and time. If you were standing outside, what color would it be? You don't know. And here, it doesn't seem to matter.

X

The itching and burning were the worst after sunset. And sunset came so quickly in winter. Once the sky turned dark, I wanted to lie under the white fleece blanket my kids called "Marshmallow" and not move an inch.

I taught my classes at night. I stood in front of twenty students and wondered if I could keep teaching and undergo chemo or radiation or whatever I needed to keep living. One evening, I didn't notice I was furiously scratching my back until I caught a redheaded, tattooed Gen Z-er staring at me. I withdrew my hand from behind my shirt. I forced myself to keep my arm at my side.

Sometimes, after itching, I found a few red micro-islands raised on my skin. Proof of something!

"Look!" I called out enthusiastically to my husband. "Hives!" He served dutifully as my audience of one to every dumb itching development.

But the bumps were minor, and an hour later, they vanished. They hardly represented the fire I felt. *This is real*, I kept telling myself. But without any proof, maybe it wasn't?

X

How many times have I been told that I don't see what's there? That my version of reality is questionable? Or wrong? Hundreds? Thousands? Somewhere in the cosmic books of history, a tally exists for every time a woman is told she can't trust herself. That guy is fine. Those boys mean you no harm. This problem is in your head.

Author Kate Bowler writes about doctors dismissing her se-

vere abdominal pains for months before she was finally diagnosed with stage IV cancer. When author Tricia Hersey was pregnant, her OBGYN said her son looked "too big" on scans for Hersey to deliver the baby on her own. Hersey insisted her boy would be exactly eight pounds, but the OBGYN mandated a C-section. When the doctor weighed her baby on the scale, he was exactly eight pounds. "You knew!" the doctor said.

When my water broke with my first child, the hospital required me to submit a sample of the fluid, just so they could be sure it wasn't actually urine.

"But I think I'd know the difference," I said, "between peeing and my water breaking."

"You'd be surprised how many women can't tell," the otherwise kind male OBGYN said.

I wondered if the doctor remembered that, in women's anatomy, these two fluids emerge from different holes.

"Women have been driven mad, 'gaslighted,' for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience," Adrienne Rich writes. "The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us."

X

But what happens when you gaslight yourself? And do you do it because the culture does it early and often, or because you are just predisposed to self-doubt?

Then again, how could you know for sure, when you live in a world that thinks women can't tell the difference between urination and labor?

It seems impossible to separate the self from the world. Just like it's impossible to separate Turrell's cove lighting from the rectangle of sky. The lighting turns green: the sky appears purple. The perception of one shapes the other.

X

I followed up with my regular doctor. Because she wore a mask over her nose and mouth, she was the opposite of Dr. Nostrils-and-Chin. Her dark eyes below her hijab were calm and caring.

She asked me to hold out my arms. She inspected them closely. It was late January. She said she saw evidence of dryness. She encouraged a gentler soap and lotion after showers.

I loved her kindness. I also knew this ailment wasn't a surface-level need for lotion. It was deep and fiery. I still believed I was dying. I went home and hydrated. I also hardly slept.

Weeks later, I returned to her with the same problem. "What about leukemia?" I asked her directly. "Kidney failure?"

"The blood work looked normal," she said.

"I just need you to look at me," I said, locking with her blackish-brown eyes above her mask, "and tell me I don't have leukemia."

"You don't have leukemia," she said.

In the absence of proof of anything, my brain kept hanging on to the worst answers.

She added "anxiety" to my file.

"You think this is from anxiety?" I asked her.

"Anxiety can cause a lot of things," she said.

## X

But the real reason I'm talking to you about Turrell is because of one particular exhibit called "Hind Sight," which isn't about light at all. It's about light's absence. "Hind Sight" is contained in a room of absolute darkness. The sign beside the entrance shows you a little map, outlining the way to the exhibit. You'll need the map. Once you take a few steps, you won't be able to see anything. The sign advises you to use the handrail.

As you start down the corridor toward "Hind Sight," the only source of light is behind you. The corridor is dark but not pitch-black. After a few meters, you turn 180 degrees to the right, and the clichés are insufficient but also true: darkness will *close in on you*. If you go with a child, this is when they'll grasp your hand tighter. If you go alone, this is when you might seek out the handrail, flu season and Covid spikes be damned. The darkness becomes a dense and thick thing, and if you're like me, you'll put your hand out in front of you because you're certain you're about to walk into a wall. An ounce of light would be everything.

You feel the handrail bend, and you let it guide you through another 180-degree turn. Then it stops. Your hand drops into open air. You still think you could smack your forehead into a

wall at any moment. You have no sense that the whole space has just opened into a room, but the map told you it would, so you believe the map.

You paw around in the nothing. Your hand eventually finds an armrest. You position yourself in front of a chair, ease into it, and wait in the black. You try to remember what the sign said: *It can take as long as fifteen minutes for your irises to open sufficiently to perceive this work. In the meantime, you will be in total darkness.*

X

I went to a dermatologist. She told me to change my laundry detergent. I did. No relief.

I went to a Chinese medicine practitioner. She felt my pulse and said I was "stressed out." Which was true. Low-grade, full-bodied burning will do that to a person. She gave me an acupuncture treatment that made me feel amazing and calm and, for the first time in weeks, unconcerned about dying. Then the sun set three hours later, and the itching returned.

Google lightly suggested that maybe I had a full-blown bodily yeast infection, which also meant I was dying.

I kept living. I stopped Googling.

My general practitioner, to her credit, didn't settle on my mental state as the cause. "Just because something *could* be from anxiety doesn't mean we treat it as such. I think it's time for an allergist."

At nights after I taught, I lay as still as I could beneath the marshmallow-white blanket.

X

When you're sitting in the pitch-black room, waiting for your eyes to adjust, you know something's there. You just can't see it yet.

X

Before I was in labor, I dreamt that I was in labor. Was it minutes or hours before? I don't know. It was dreamtime. A soupy, timeless, magic time. A time when my self-doubts couldn't possibly distract me from the truths I held inside me.

In this dreamworld, I was wandering through a hospital, strolling down the hallways, gliding past doors and between partitions. All of a sudden, I felt it. My water breaking. Suddenly, in the dream, I gushed.

Then, in real life, I gushed. I was closed-eyed in bed, cocooned in my sheets. Water leaked from between my legs.

I woke.

I realized: I had known before I knew.

X

"Your body is yours and knows the way."

— Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*

X

If you had asked me, during this itchy and anxiety-riddled time, to get very quiet and ask myself what I knew, I would have told you at least some things for sure. I would have told you more than my fear and doubt could offer.

I would have said: This is not from anxiety.

I would have said: I am not dying.

I would have said, still: I can trust my body's messages. Something is not right.

X

Here is what you might see on a wall when your eyes finally adjust in the absolutely black room of "Hind Sight": a barely there amorphous gray splotch. The faintest source of light. It's so faint, you might not be able to place its shape. Circle? Oval? Blob? It's like a reflection of a reflection of light, like a moon of a moon. Or it's like a gray puddle's mirroring of a dulled silver spoon, then dimmed a few degrees.

I leave "Hind Sight" wondering if I really saw what was there. I leave how I often feel: unable to trust myself.

X

We sat there together, Dr. A. and I, waiting for the white X on my forearm to speak.

Meanwhile, he wrote words on the paper-covered examining table. What he thought I had, he said, was *dermatographia*. *Derma*, he wrote, meaning "skin." *Graphia*, he wrote, meaning "write." The ability to write on the skin. The skin turns into a page, and a scratch will leave a mark that can last an hour. This is because the body does have hives, but they're so deep beneath the surface layer of skin that they're imperceptible.

If Dr. A. was right, a person could scratch my skin, and minutes later, red imprints of their marks would rise up and remain.

"Look down," he said.

I lifted my forearm. Sure enough, the X against my blue veins had risen, bright red.

X

"Excuse me," I say to a woman in a black shirt with the museum's logo. She turns to look at me.

I tell her what I saw. I describe the barely there faint gray thing.

I don't ask, *Did I do it right? Did I see it right?* But that is what I am asking.

She nods. "You saw what was there."

*You saw what was there.*

It's a sentence so simple, so relieving, so necessary, so everything, that I don't know what to do with it. Put it in a trinket box? No, I want it closer. Hide it in my bra cup? I want it right by my beating heart. I want to swallow it down into the center of my body, that core where my contractions began. *You saw what was there.*

X

Dr. A. wrote more words on the paper. He said that because I'd experienced my condition for longer than six weeks (he wrote *6 wks* on the white paper), it was officially chronic (he wrote *chronic*). He said chronic *urticaria*, or hives, could last two to three years (he wrote *2–3 yrs*), or a lifetime. He did not write *lifetime*.

I nodded and felt euphoric. A name! A diagnosis! An answer!

One to two weeks after a Covid shot, Dr. A. said, these symptoms appear. He had seen the condition in fifty patients so

far. A later online search would send me to places like the NIH and *Forbes*, confirming as much. Dr. A. said he was headed to a medical conference that very weekend, where doctors would discuss the reaction. Why does it happen? What does it mean? He'd learn more and let me know.

Meanwhile, there were allergy medicines we could try, he said. First over-the-counter, then more aggressive.

I was elated. Not because I might have a condition of vague burning and itching for the rest of my life, but because I had a name for it. And a treatment. I was not dying. I was just allergic. Seven weeks of believing I was a fragile bundle of illness, seven weeks of barely sleeping, seven weeks of manic Googling—even a few weeks of thinking maybe my anxiety was driving me to an itchy madness—and now I was free. And all it took was a busted popsicle stick scraped across my arm.

When I left the allergist's office, the sky was bright blue, and the air was crisp, and the February sun shone with the strength that says we've surpassed winter's darkest days. I felt like I was flying as I clutched my diagnostic report and a prescription for super strong antihistamines.

X

"What do other people see?" I ask the museum worker.

She explains that not everyone sees what I saw. For some, the faint splotch of color against the black wall creates a lava lamp of oozing shapes. This is what she herself sees. Other people see colors, especially purple. Some have reported seeing blue or red, or even flashes of green.

"But you?" she says. "You saw what was there."

X

I took copious amounts of antihistamines. The burning and itching decreased considerably. Without feeling mildly aflame all the time, I could focus on my work. Without wondering if my body was quietly eating itself, I could laugh with my kids. I could enjoy a whole movie without Googling my untimely death.

"So you're better!" Dr. A. said at our six-week follow-up.

"Well, I *feel* better," I said. "On the drugs."

He told me I could take the medication for the rest of my life.

I wanted to find out what he had learned at his conference. Did he gain any insights? Had there been any studies? What did the medical community say about people with my reaction?

Dr. A. turned away from me. Where his passion and curiosity for research had bloomed in our last meeting, this time the subject deflated him. He said who really knew why I'd developed the symptom. He said maybe I was just the kind of person who got dermatographia. He said maybe I would have gotten it anyway, with or without the vaccine. He said, in other words, that the problem was probably me.

In a month and a half, the symptoms were gone. Also in a month and a half, I got Covid for the first time.

X

I know my third shot gave me dermatographia. I know Dr. A. spoke the truth on my first visit. I know my Covid shots kept me safe when variants were their deadliest—and I'm grateful for them. I also know we shouldn't shush stories, or bodies, that we find inconvenient—I know silencing does more harm. I know when my body is in labor. I know that my water breaks first, and then the contractions come—a second baby confirmed this. I know when a guy is not trustworthy. I know when it's time to move on.

Some things I know, and I don't know how I know them. But if I can't see the thing I sense, or if I can't validate my intuition with a person's opinion, I flail. In every room of my life, I need a museum attendant. I need someone to nod at the exit of precarious or strange events and say, *Honey, yes, you saw what was there.*

X

An hour into "Skyspace," a mechanical timer goes off. The door to the skylight protracts. The ceiling becomes a solid enclosure again. You pick yourself up off the floor, or the pew, grab your pillow, and head out of the sanctuary space. A Quaker guy in his sixties stands at the door and thanks you for coming.

An hour ago, when you'd entered the meeting house, you'd ignored the sky. Now you want to see it fully. It's no longer con-

tained in a rectangle, so you have access to its immensity. It's no longer surrounded by Turrell's cove lighting, so you can name its unfiltered color. Maybe it's a chestnut-charcoal. Maybe it's an indigo-onyx. Maybe it's humming on the horizon with a line of electric blue. Regardless, it keeps shifting, changing, getting darker, darker—except the stars. All those stars!

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

## EPIC

At dusk down
at the bottom
at the core of

the bottom if
you follow me
I walk Dante

and Virgil as if
they could be
one traveler

like the old man
at the crossroads
says I am alone

leading myself
astray
walking here

is a kind of
curling and
curling

into oneself if
you'll bear with me
like a mortified

flower so I
fold myself over
and under myself

so much I draw
myself through
a needle's eye

*my eye* and then
draw myself back
onto myself a tattoo

in the finest
pinprick print
I am almost

gone but
come back
gasping until

I am wide
and light
as light

and I ascend
now I know
what and you

would too
if you went
and curled and

unfurled and
ascended
and spoke

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

## MY OTHER WASP POEM

I'm worried about wasps. My father was born
today in 1947, except it wasn't today, it was 1946.
They can make hives in wood, and the deck is wood.

I'm on the deck. I have intense nostalgia
for the late 1970s, 1976–1979. I was born in October
of 1979. But my parents couldn't afford

to replace all of their furniture, plus
they liked it and the clothes they'd bought
before I was born, so I grew up in 1976

in the early 1980s. I squirted one with poison spray—
there was only one wasp in it, a very small hive,
but a big wasp, and I stood like the can

said, a few feet away. The dog is freaking out now,
barking back at some other dog who sometimes barks
back. And I sprayed up into the little opening

where our lonely homemaker had started building.
I think my mother might have been happiest
in the late 1970s, and it was *that* happiness

with which she lit the first years of our family.
The light in the back hallway in our house
was always dim, jaundicing. It scared me

but I wanted to get to the TV. The dog is prowling
around the deck like she's desperate for news
from the hospital. We were always waiting for news.

The hospital would call in the evening with the white
blood cell count to gauge the infection. I've never
been stung. My mother lived 48 years and was never

stung—she was terrified. I'm 43.
I'm not as scared as she was—I think I know a way
to brace myself. It's worked before.

And there's been no more activity around that hive,
but I keep seeing wasps. I guess they must
live somewhere else? My dad was probably

happiest in the 1960s, in his late teens.
He was handsome and could water-ski. I think his dad
hadn't left yet. My mom was probably happiest when

she was little, when she and my aunt got
the one bedroom and her parents slept on a fold-out
couch. My grandmother was 96 when she died. She met

my son. She couldn't remember Brenda's name, called her
"your bride." My aunt, my mother's sister,
just turned 80 last month. My dad's sister killed

herself at 48, which was also how old my mom was.
Can that be right? I could check. It's late. Wasps
are quiet and still at night. I don't need to worry. My dad's

forgetting his memory. I keep buying late '70s
Sonny Rollins LPs off eBay. Awful but cheerful.
I put the dog inside—she was freaking out.

I don't know how to stop this—I'd like to. Memory
is painful. Brace myself. I have nothing else to say
about wasps. It's August fourteenth, 2023.

SHIRA DENTZ

## NOCTURNE

The line bulbs in the night,
strung at whim, a stem of chalices.
Naught for nothing we pray.
Our lives for orange coins along
rows of orchids streaming downward
into silt, draught, and cumin.
Inside the chariot, a flower sparks
open—our food and sky.
Colored beads shine like pearls.
Really, though, the center's dark
as pupils. Beware of his, of hiss,
a coax and hoax.

SHIRA DENTZ

## SCANT

A mask grew before
shame grew flush,
the mask caked on
layer after layer,
thick as a plaster cast,
dry specks crumbling
to dust in the pastiche
of all the overlay,
and the ~~sore~~——————wound (*wünd*) / wound (*waünd*)
beneath the mask,
now cast, wrapped
round to bandage
and ward, is stiff
and any word coils.
*Shed, shed, shed,*
*the flesh of sound.*

SHIRA DENTZ

## CURL

nowhere sunlight
only a wash,
an inflection,
a through-song

no safe streets
for an outsider to go
even in their family
with the displacement

the Nowhere shell:
a concentric
body impression,
a silkworm's cocoon
with a moth left to live

silk a moth's song
*a* as *safe*
*a* as in *a part*
nowhere communal

but inflection,
a silkworm's concentric
of communal sunlight ::

DANIEL KUO

# EMPTY SPACES

About a year after I lost you, I accepted an invitation to a solo artist's residency at a farmhouse in rural Montana. It was scheduled for the month of July. Celeste—you remember her—agreed to come to my apartment twice a week to look after my plants. They were all succulents, so in truth they needed very little care, but I felt bad for them sitting in their pots all day, unloved and lonely. Celeste rolled her eyes when I told her I just wanted her to hang out with them for a little while.

I'm a saint, she said. Literally no one else would agree to do this for you.

Good, I said, because I don't have anyone else to ask.

The closest city to the farmhouse was called Crystal Springs, about ninety miles away, population: 26,000. The airport had a single runway in a plain brown field, and the passengers—all eight of us—collected our luggage by waiting at the counter for the ticket lady to shout out our names. I had been told that the residency program had arranged for a driver to pick me up, which was something I'd never experienced before. I imagined a mustached man in a neat black suit, holding up a sign with my surname in bold, addressing me as *Mister* and *Sir*. Instead I found him outside the terminal, leaning against a plain yellow taxicab, drinking his second of two Red Bulls.

His name was Richard. When I asked him about the sign, he laughed.

Passengers like you come in every single day, he said. But me? I've got the only taxi cab in all of Crystal Springs.

He grinned proudly as he took my luggage. So if anything, he said, *you* should have been holding up a sign for *me*.

The car passed open seas of wild grass, tangled wire fences, cows gossiping under trees. Stark gray mountains floated in the sky. We lapsed into silence, which I found perfectly amiable but Richard did not seem to enjoy, based on how he kept fiddling with the radio. When you and I used to take taxis together, I

could always count on you to handle the small talk with the driver. It was one of your best talents: finding the most inane thing possible to discuss with a stranger. I really like your hat, you'd say, or Tell me about this symbol hanging from your mirror. There was the time we rode to the train station to pick up my aunt for Thanksgiving, and you looked down at the seat covers laid out in the back and exclaimed, This is the most gorgeous shade of blue I have ever seen! I fell asleep listening to you and the driver debating the best and worst colors for decorating car interiors and woke to the sight of my aunt's face in the window, laughing at me through the glass.

The entrance to the farm was an unlabeled dirt track, leading off a two-lane stretch of empty highway and secured by a livestock gate. It occurred to me, briefly, that this could all be a very elaborate human trafficking scheme, and if so, it was smart of them to target broke, struggling artists. Richard honked his horn, and a few minutes later a mud-splattered SUV appeared on the other side of the gate. The man who got out was wearing a red collared shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers with white socks pulled up to the knees. He looked to be in his seventies, though I've never been good at guessing ages, and it was also clear he'd spent a lifetime out in the sun. A white paper napkin was tucked into his shirt, fluttering in the wind—we had caught him in the middle of a meal.

The man introduced himself as Hollis. I recognized the name—he had been emailing me over the past few days about my stay. He was the caretaker of the farm. His handshake was scratchy and sinewy, like worn leather.

You're finally here, he said. I was starting to get worried.

We bid farewell to Richard and piled into Hollis's SUV. The dirt road curved to the left and opened into a large clearing with three buildings. First was the barn, painted brown instead of red, with its large wooden doors thrown open to reveal the bareness inside. Then a majestic two-story stone house, bordered on both sides by long rows of maple trees. On the far end was a modest guesthouse, a white-trimmed A-frame with a yellow wind sock flapping at the tip.

There she is, Hollis said, pointing at the last building. Your digs.

He still had the napkin tucked into his shirt, and I decided it was too late to mention it to him. He pulled off the road and let

the truck roll through the dirt until he picked a spot, seemingly at random, to shift into park. Of course, I thought. We're on a giant empty farm. He can park wherever the hell he wants.

Hollis brought my luggage inside and switched on the lights. There was a kitchen with a mini-fridge and a hot plate, a bedroom with an old cathode ray television set. The artist's studio, as Hollis called it, was an empty room tacked onto the side like an afterthought. It was sunlit, with large windows facing onto the stone house.

If you get mosquitoes, Hollis said, there's a zapper by the coatrack. Oh, and keep an eye out for Witness.

I'm sorry? I said.

That's my cat, he said.

You have a cat?

I had assumed that the caretaker of a farm would own multiple herding dogs who bounded along as he tended the land, who ached to be told that someone was injured and they needed to go fetch help.

Oh yes, Hollis said. She goes where she pleases. You'll see her around.

After I had unpacked and settled in, Hollis took me on a walk around the farm. There were no crops, or hay bales, or animals at water troughs. As far as I could tell, the land looked identical to what I'd seen from the back of Richard's taxi. The land grant for the farm, Hollis explained, had been acquired back in the 1800s and never relinquished since. It had once been the pride and joy of the family who owned it, but over the generations the clan had been whittled down: boys who left for war, girls who left for the city. Now it had been decades since anyone had attempted to grow anything, and nature was reasserting herself.

*Now it had been decades since anyone had attempted to grow anything, and nature was reasserting herself.*

He told me all of this while loping easily through the trees, along deer trails shadowing the creek, or up across rocky crags that separated the farm from the interstate. He did not bother to wait for me and more than once disappeared from my sight,

leaving me to pick through juniper patches alone until I suddenly came upon him, stooping to inspect the droppings of a coyote. At one point he paused by a lightning-seared tree that had fallen across our path, pulled out a pocketknife, and carved a straight line across the trunk.

That's where I'll come back tomorrow with my chainsaw, he said. *Great*, Celeste responded, when I recounted all of this later for her via text. *So the man you're living next to owns a chainsaw. Good to know.*

Near the end of the walk, Hollis showed me an outlook up a steep hill. We stopped to catch our breath—or rather, I did, because Hollis was not winded at all—and stood with our hands shielding our eyes from the sun. I felt the landscape rear up and take me by the shoulders, pulling me over the edge of the cliff, into the unknown. Mountains were shimmering in the distance like mirages. The entry road on which we'd driven, the cattle gate, and the long stretch of highway had all vanished. It was only open land, an endless quilt of greens and browns, vibrating gently in the wind. At the center was the little clearing with its trio of buildings. Three specks of rice in an untamed meadow.

There's your place, Hollis said, pointing at the A-frame, the tiny yellow squiggle on top squirming in the air.

I gestured at the two-story mansion next to it and asked, Who lives there?

He stared blankly at me. I do, he said.

It was at this point that I understood Hollis was not, in fact, the farm's caretaker. He had told me his whole family legacy during our walk—the long and storied ownership of which he was now the sole trustee.

Anyone else live there with you? I wanted to ask. Wife? Husband? Mistress? Children, legitimate or il-? But I had hesitated too long while putting it all together, and he was already heading back down the hill. The opportunity was lost.

As we were returning to the guesthouse, Hollis mentioned that he had looked up my work—the one and only time we discussed art. I found your website after the committee chose you, he said. You have this one particular exhibit on there. With all the interchanging faces standing in front of a beach.

That's Colonial Beach in Virginia, I said.

The faces, he said. They're extremely unsettling.

Thank you, I said.

I did not tell him that we were only at that beach because of you. All your stories about your family driving down to Mexico in the summer, swimming in the ocean to stay cool and then letting the sun dry you out. I forced you to wait for me while I approached strangers on the boardwalk and asked if I could take pictures of them for a project. Once we were home, I loaded the photos into my animating software and began to mix everyone's features—a left eye, a right nostril, a patch of acne scars along the forehead—until all the faces were composites of dozens of different people. As a personal touch I added a picture of you and me on the sand and sprinkled us throughout the strangers as well. It was a helpful addition because I realized I could still recognize the curl of your eyelashes, or the scar from when you'd broken your nose, and I needed to scramble the faces even further.

My original title for the collection was *Warriors*.

I don't get it, you said.

You know, I said. Like, we're all fighting for our lives out here. That sort of thing.

Hmm, you said.

I told you to go hmm somewhere else. But at the very last minute, I changed it to *Wanderers*. Later, after you were gone, I would pull these faces up on my computer and sit so close that my nose would leave smudges on the screen, trying to find the traces of you I had buried. There. That's you, those are your lips—I'm sure of it. No, maybe not. Maybe it's somebody else.

Before I came, I had decided that this residency would change my life. It had been over a year since I'd created anything, and I had a vague idea for a series of austere self-portraits, done in charcoal. But the quietness of the place, the weight and volume of it, made it impossible to work. I could feel every waist-high strand of grass leaning in toward me, peering through the windows like looky-loos. The trees and juniper patches, the mountains and the bulbous clouds in the sky, all casting their collective shadows over my canvas until it was too dark to see. Instead of working, I texted Celeste incessantly, sending her my voyeur shots of Witness sunning herself on the porch. (*It's a fucking cat*, Celeste texted back. *We have those here too, you know.*) I took long walks through the farm, and to stave off the silence I would murmur whatever words happened to be

in my head: poetry lines, advertising slogans, pop song lyrics. My voice would slide between and through the rustling leaves, blending into an ocean wave of whispering. Once, as I trooped back onto the porch of my guesthouse with foxtails stuck to my socks, I realized that I was muttering your name over and over, like a prayer.

Hollis steadfastly avoided the guesthouse, to the point that I wondered if I'd offended him somehow. But starting around the fourth or fifth day, he began to leave Post-it notes on the door. At first the messages were simple: *Have a good morning* or *Rain tomorrow, chance of lightning.* Slowly, they became more complicated and intricate: *Two dead birds on my front porch today, likely flew into the glass door. Hate to think this, but could they have been a couple? Rhetorical, no need to respond.*

About a week in, I happened to be near the kitchen window when I heard Hollis's footsteps scuffling at the front stoop. I wrenched open the door but caught only his khaki shorts and flip flops, fleeing around the corner. The yellow square stuck to my door said: *Had a dream last night about Witness playing with a group of pale white cats under the oak tree behind my house. It was quite peaceful.*

Below that, he had added a second message: *Headed into city for business. Be back tomorrow. You have my cell.*

That night, a truck I had never seen before pulled up to the front of Hollis's house. I could see it through the line of trees, with the hatch pulled down and two figures climbing in and out of the back. A delivery, I thought—but then again it was nearly midnight, and as far as I could tell, the figures were taking things out of Hollis's house, not bringing them inside. In the dark, I went to fetch my phone and Hollis's number. I hadn't texted him before, and it felt like an intrusion on my part, especially this late.

*Two figures at your house loading things into a truck*, I said. *Can't see them clearly.*

There was no response. I watched the figures emerge from Hollis's front door, carrying something large and rectangular between the two of them.

I tried again. *Are you expecting some movers? Should I contact the police?*

*No*, he replied. He didn't specify which question he was answering.

In the morning, after checking that Hollis still hadn't returned, I slipped between the maple trees and went to examine the house myself. The vehicle had left behind tire tracks in the dirt and I bent down to examine them, but then I heard your voice, laughing in delight: What do you think you are, some kind of truck whisperer?

Very funny, I said. I stood back up and tried the front door. Unlocked.

Inside, the house became much larger than its outer dimensions. Hallways led in strange and random directions and contained spare guest rooms, powder rooms, dens, offices. Some of these rooms were lavishly furnished, while others were empty or used solely for storage. A cavernous front space held a three-couch living room set and an upright piano. Bootprints trailed back and forth between the front door and a massive set of shelves on the far wall. The coat of dust on all the shelves was interrupted by geometric voids representing the things that had been taken. A long rectangle for the television—the large object I had seen the figures carry out to the truck. Circles and ovals for decorative vases, perhaps. A ridge of square bumps like knuckles, for all the stolen books.

I found Hollis's bedroom on the second floor. He slept on a sprawling four-poster, across from a refined little writing desk under the window. On the desk there were three photographs. First was a picture of Hollis, somewhere around ten years ago, grinning outside a restaurant with a toothpick protruding from his teeth. His arm was around a woman. Next to it, another picture of him and the woman on a hike, younger still. She was wearing a comically large straw hat, and the camera had caught Hollis in the middle of adjusting it on her head. In the last photo, the two of them looked no older than me. They were gussied up for some formal occasion—a wedding, probably, because in the picture they were dancing. They were smiling at each other, but their heads were tilted partway toward the camera, as if to ask it a question. Here is our life; here is our joy. Do you deem it worthy?

*They were smiling at each other, but their heads were tilted partway toward the camera, as if to ask it a question. Here is our life; here is our joy. Do you deem it worthy?*

A clock chimed somewhere in the house. I started, then reached out and plucked a picture off the desk, stuffing it under my shirt. It was my favorite of the three: the wedding photo. Happy and young and beautiful. The picture was cold on my skin, glass against heartbeat. As I hurried down the stairs, I listened carefully for Hollis's car. He wouldn't care, I decided. I had warned him last night that people might be taking his things, and he hadn't bothered to say anything back, or to hurry home and check. Maybe, I thought, maybe he even deserved it.

I put the picture on the nightstand next to my bed. Hollis and his woman side-eyed me while I changed into my pajamas; they stood upright and held each other while I wriggled under the sheets and sighed. I stared at their faces for so long that I ceased to see faces and instead saw a set of deconstructed body parts: eyebrows, eyes, nose, cheeks, ears, lips. Teeth like fangs.

My only regular interaction with Hollis was a weekly drive into nearby Barristan (population: 850) to buy groceries and use their laundromat, and on our next trip I tried to steer the conversation toward the woman without directly revealing that I knew about her. I pointed out the small chapel in the middle of town and asked about weddings. They used to hold them there, Hollis said, but now all the young folks seem to get married outdoors. I brought up the yellow floral quilt in the guesthouse and asked if he—or possibly someone else—had made it. Oh, people give those kinds of things to me, he replied. They seem to think I need them.

As it turned out, the mystery woman came up entirely out of nowhere, as we were waiting at the laundromat for our clothes to finish drying. Hollis was reading the paper and I was fidgeting with my phone while country music played over a tinny radio.

I was never much into this twangy stuff, Hollis said, without looking up from his paper. But my wife couldn't get enough of it.

Just like that: a lightning bolt from a clear blue sky, without a drop of rain to warn you.

She liked music? I said. Who were her favorites?

Anything and everything, Hollis said. If it had a beat and a melody, Martina would listen.

He turned the page.

Martina. I repeated the name in my head, tested it out on my tongue. Marty. Tina. Mar-TI-na.

We were on our way back to the farm when I started to talk about you. I felt the words bubbling up in my throat, rattling against my teeth, and suddenly there they were, spilling into my lap. I told Hollis your name, and then I told him things I thought about daily and things I didn't know I remembered. The story behind why you hated raccoons. The funny way you shuffled cards. The time I knocked my elbow into a lit stove and you cradled it in both hands, skin to skin, as if you could leech the burn out of my body and draw it into your own.

Hollis's eyebrows were tight as he hunched over the wheel. Neither of us seemed to understand what, exactly, was happening, but he let me talk for as long as I wanted. The drive stretched itself out for us, adding more trees and fence posts and mile marker signs until I was done.

I have this feeling, I said, that my own life has left me behind. We were out on a bike trip together, me and my life, but then something terrible happened to my bike and I had to stop and fix it, and instead of waiting, my life just rode off without me. So here I am, with my broken bike, unable to go any farther.

Yes, Hollis said. Well. That happens, doesn't it? Everyone takes something from us when they leave.

Then, as if to signal the conversation was over, he turned up the radio and we listened in silence to an international news update. After we pulled up to the guesthouse, while I was unloading my laundry and groceries, he began to talk again as if no time had elapsed.

Sometimes it will be years before we've noticed another thing they've taken, he said. We won't know what it is they took. Only the empty space where that thing once was.

He was sitting in the driver's seat, talking to me through the open window with one sun-weathered arm dangling out. Anyway, he said. Have a pleasant evening.

That night, under the watchful eye of young Hollis and young Martina, I sat in bed and texted Celeste.

*If I disappeared and never came back home, would you go on taking care of my plants forever?*

*Would I know why you disappeared?* she asked. *What happens to you?*

*I get kidnapped*, I said. *It's either the plants, or come and rescue me.*

*Okay listen*, she said. *If you need someone to bring you chick-*

*en soup, or to go get shitfaced and complain about men, or to sit with your stupid plants, I'm your girl. But I'm not the heroic type. Get your other friends to rescue you.*

*I don't have any other friends*, I said.

In response, she sent me a poop emoji. And then, fifteen minutes later: *Maybe you can make friends with the kidnappers.*

Hollis spent a night away three more times over the course of the month, and the thieves always came back. A well-established routine, not even worth explaining to the sad artist living in the guesthouse. I texted him again but received nothing in response. Whenever it happened, I stood in the dark at the windows of my art studio, watching the figures as if I were responsible for supervising their work. The mornings after, I let myself into Hollis's house and attempted to catalog everything that had been taken. It became a game of sorts, remembering what had been in each room the last time I'd been there, and what was now gone. Then I wandered upstairs—casual, meandering, as if I'd forgotten what was up there—and into Hollis's bedroom.

By the last week of July, they had emptied out the front space and most of a guest room, all the way down to the rugs they peeled off the floor. That front space was like a high school gymnasium now—I could stand in the center and stomp my foot and track the sonic wave of it, spreading out in all directions. Meanwhile, I had taken the other two photographs of Hollis and Martina from the bedroom. I wanted the hiking photo first, because I liked Martina's little put-upon smile as Hollis messed with her hat, and then I took the one from outside the restaurant because it didn't feel right to leave it all by itself. In the desk drawers, I also found a faded black book of Hollis's phone contacts, twenty or thirty years old. He had written little reminders in parentheses of who everyone was, next to their names: barber, mechanic, tow truck guy, aunt-in-law. I left the book in front of the three photos on my nightstand, which I had arranged in a small semicircle. I decided that I was trying

*I was trying to gather together everyone from the various stages of Hollis's life—all the past versions of himself, all the people he had at one point known.*

to gather together everyone from the various stages of Hollis's life—all the past versions of himself, all the people he had at one point known. For what purpose, I couldn't say.

Each week, on our drives to Barristan, I waited for Hollis to mention the burglaries, the stolen items, the missing photographs from his bedroom—but he never did. Then again, I was withholding things too. I had vowed to keep you properly inside me, after my earlier outburst. We spent the rides mostly in silence, watching the landscape flow past us. Still, the daily Post-it notes continued. *Why do they call it a wake when the loved one is being put to eternal rest? Rhetorical, no need to respond.*

On my last day, I spent a humiliating morning packing up all my unused supplies. I had attempted just four self-portraits over the course of the month and finished none of them. The most recent one, from about a week before, consisted of a plain black oval with nothing inside. I piled my luggage by the front door and was about to head out to the porch when it occurred to me that I should bring home a gift for Celeste. That's what people did when they traveled somewhere for a while, and she probably deserved a thank-you for looking after my plants. I went to the guesthouse's linen closet, which was stuffed full of spare quilts bulging out from the shelves like beer bellies. Unfolding the top one to check for moths, I found a patch stitched into the bottom corner: *Crafted with Love and Gratitude by the Ladies of All Saints Church. Livingston, Montana. November 6, 1985.* I folded it back up and stuffed it in my suitcase and went outside.

I told myself, as I sat down on the front stoop, that I should remember to be grateful for Celeste. A year ago, in the church, she had stood next to me at the window and admitted to me that sometimes when she was afraid she would talk to her mother, up in heaven. She was whispering, as if worried the nuns would catch us and whip out rulers.

What do you talk about? I asked.

Anything, she said. Dying alone. Getting chloroformed in a parking garage. Growing old and disgusting. Whatever's scaring me at the moment.

How often do you talk to her?

We were staring out at the church's parking lot, watching all the cars patiently wait their turn to exit onto the street, to leave this miserable scene and return to their normal lives. Her

hand was resting against my wrist, her thumb pressing against the cuff of my sleeve. The most physical contact I have ever witnessed Celeste willingly initiate, with me or anyone else.

Every day, she whispered. I talk to her every day.

Hollis's truck was parked sideways in the dirt, but I hadn't seen him all morning. The sky was clear. Witness wandered by, sniffed at my shoe, and then strode away with her tail in the air, as if to emphasize that she knew I was leaving but didn't care. I stood back up, got my suitcase, and rolled it across the clearing to Hollis's house.

It was quiet inside. The wood floors moaned and sighed under my feet. There were lighter-colored rectangular voids scattered all across the walls and the floors in that front room, marking where the thieves had taken furniture and rugs and paintings. Looking up, I realized they had even removed the ceiling fans.

I found Hollis upstairs, in his bedroom. Standing in the hallway, I peeked around the open door and saw him on the floor next to his bed, curled up on his side. He was wearing a plain white undershirt, boxer briefs, and socks. His eyes were closed, but I could see them fluttering gently, in rhythm with the slow rise and fall of his chest. His bony knees were pulled up to his chest, and his hands were half-clenched, as if holding something invisible.

I watched him for a little longer before slipping back downstairs. I rolled my suitcase into the middle of Hollis's empty front room and opened it up on the floor. First I removed the quilt, freshly pilfered from the guesthouse closet, and spread it out like a picnic blanket. Then his book of old contacts, which I had wedged between my rolled-up socks. Lastly, I removed the three pictures, holding them carefully with both hands, as if tipping them too far could risk spilling Hollis and Martina out of their frames and onto the floor. I laid them softly down on the quilt, in the same order I had found them in his bedroom: restaurant, hike, wedding. Three couples, captured on a warm summer night, or in a cool mountain breeze, or amidst the chatter of the other guests. Now those people and those moments are somewhere else, and the rest of us have only photographs.

And what about you? When I imagine you now, I see you floating in an infinite white space—clean and spotless, like one of my unused canvases. Watching me, listening attentively to my every word. But I suppose this vision of you is only for me.

Your preference would probably be a crowded room at a house party, warm and saturated with body heat, wine vapors seeping through the air. Someone shouts your name and you are already turning, moving away, smiling at them. Am I right about you? Is that where you are?

Rhetorical, no need to respond.

It was almost noon, when Richard the taxi driver was scheduled to collect me. At best, I had about ten or fifteen minutes. I zipped up the suitcase, dragged it outside, and went back up the stairs.

Hollis was still there on the floor. There was no sound or movement. As quietly as I could, I tiptoed across the floor and lay down next to him. I was facing him; I could see the red sunburn on his nose, the web of wrinkles on his neck. His eyes remained closed. In an hour I would be gone, on my way back home.

I reached out my hand, hesitating in the air for a moment or two before cradling it within his, palm to palm. Hollis didn't stir. His breath came out calm and even. Then, in the silence, I felt his fingers move and tighten around mine.

NATHANIEL PERRY

## 54 (SONG, WITH EMPTY TABLE)

Tonight, strangers are risen up against me.
I can see their shadows in the grovey dusk;

they're looking in the windows. And though they risk
my seeing them, they dash from tree to tree,
hiding in the shadows. Why won't they flee
away? All I said was maybe violence
wasn't always justified, like silence,

or like giving your soul away too easily.
But they didn't like that. They wanted to shop in peace.
History should stay predictable
and safe. So they've come into the olive grove
with hard designs. I will freely sacrifice

most things, but not to have them at my table
when they come not in love and I only wanted love.

NATHANIEL PERRY

## 56 (SONG, WITH MUTE DOVE)

I do see it occasionally, in fall
when it's passing through to some other cheerier wood
and in spring when it lingers through the minor floods
of May long enough to build its nest in the holly.
The dove of distant places has no call,

of course, but the bird book I found in the house has a good
description of its plumage, the conspicuous blood
red streak between the wings, the unusual wall-
like way it builds its nests. Sometimes I pretend
it's you, since I know it also won't respond.
Deliver my feet from falling! What time I am

afraid! *Birds of the Olive Garden* claims
the dove has excellent hearing. I tease it. Who cooks
for you? What cheer for them? Are they not in thy book?

NATHANIEL PERRY

## 57 (SONG, WITH CALAMITIES)

The horizon firelights my windows even
in the shadow of thy wings. I try to sing

to calm the present feeling of everything
coming apart, my safety here, your haven
with its false advertisements. What kind of craven

lion would burn a man at home? But the thing
is the lions don't care, and everyone is a raging

lion in their heart somewhere. Believe in
the sunrise! you said. Awake, psaltery
and harp! you said. I myself will awake

early, because no human sleep can last
the reddened night here anymore, thy glory

more and more like a fever that will not break
until these calamities be overpast.

ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT

## EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH

Its head crimson, the old
legends said,
because as Christ dragged
his body up

the last exhausting, dusty
mountain, his own
head shining with thorns,
the finch, flying,

lit down on what
must have looked
like any other perch, and
was pricked

hard enough to draw blood,
to bathe a bird
in brightness. So the story
goes, and so

medieval masters painted again
and again *Madonna*
*and Child*, placing a gold-
finch firmly

in the child's fleshy grasp
to tell of what
would come. Bird made symbol,
yet, stroke

by painted stroke, also
coaxed to life—
tiny heart thrumming
faster in fear, ripple

of wing bones tensed
between those lively
fingers. I've sought these
paintings out—

which used to hover
in triptychs,
high in cathedrals' bad-light
candle flicker,

and now, dismembered,
hang in this museum's
mostly empty medieval
wing. I've sought them

as one might seek the real
avian thing—
my eyes flicking past saints
and golden thrones,

past feathering angel wings,
to spot what
the infant holds. Look,
even di Pietro

painted him pink-cheeked.
Hand knowing
it is hand, bird knowing it is
bird and wanting

to get away. The finch and I
eye level—
can it smell my
aliveness, can I

turn to see what it
sees—meadow just
slickened by rain, by plumes
of grasses

stained, dusk and its veils
        of insects falling
as they dive, field of birds
        sounding in alarm—

ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT

## TACONIC CREST

Because it is too close
to dusk for hiking alone,
and because I am lonely, distracted,

the foreseeable
outcome of a day of loose
threads, I decide

otherwise, take the twenty-
minute drive from
where I'm staying to where NY

teeters greenly
into MA. Because there is a gravel
lot I know

will be empty—it is midweek
and rural—and because
I am not from anywhere

near here, I tell myself,
*A short one*, to clear
the air of the mind,

to make up
for a sallow mood.
I have a phone and a head-

lamp if things
go bad, a plan: twenty, maybe
thirty minutes up

the trail, then straight back
down. I am nothing
if not usually crystalline

with worry, but this
is not some cautionary tale—
the hike, of course,

is pure beauty—it blows
my synapses
back open, unfolds in coverlets

of summer greens—new
shoots springing from oak, from hickory,
from high chokeberry,

ferns filling up the hollows
in waves, so many
grasses crowding out the path.

It's untended, over-
grown, and only a small part
of my frontal lobe

thinks of what I would do
if I were to meet animal
or man—a thought that

thins to sheerness
the longer I go up—deciding
now there is time

to make it to the peak, which
when I reach it,
radiantly opens—

bare clearing,
bald summit, cleaved almost
of trees.

Because up here it is still
fully day, the grass
still gleams with it—

yellow flowers bursting
up, leggy, daisylike, even
the broken glass, the

shards of charred, used-up
firewood shine—
and I, too, am clarified,

rinsed in this light
I am certain now will hold
for the way back down,

the way back always twice
as fast. Because the heart,
its chambers, open,

and "Taconic" is another
mishearing of a name,
which might

be translated
as "in the trees,"
and because

I am thinking I am
singular, separate, intact, I round
another bend

to find a bear squarely
in my path. A fact
earlier I had imagined and so swiftly

waved away, now
a body, a heft, a heaviness
standing center of the trail

regarding me. Grasses pool
at her haunches,
heavy and damp, maybe with dew,

with recently waking,
maybe with berries delicately plucked,
lip and tongue—

this animal body, gleaming, eye
level, with only tender
grasses between us. The stillness

not yet rising
Bodies in blades—
Evaporate of air—

Because a scholar writes, *the way*
*a culture explains its animal*
*encounters reveals a great deal of its*

*broader sense of being*
*in (or against) the natural*
*world*

Because am I in against—
lichen
on the branches, giving off

a kind of light.
Do we regard each other. Does
the bear run

up the hill
minutes or only
seconds in. There is nothing

to fear, though I fear
the nothing my mind makes.
Bald summit,

blank clearing, cleaved also
of feeling.
Because I am calm, because

there is always a small
part of my brain elsewhere,
hiding in a hollow,

harrowing a ditch—
Because I cannot fully
get to it—

Am I in against—
the light still holding, the way
down twice as fast.

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The italicized quote is from *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, by Rachel Poliquin, Penn State University Press, 2012.

MARNEY RATHBUN

# ON FEASTING

On the subject of feasting: My wife just handed me a hand-thrown bowl of popcorn covered in nutritional yeast, salt, and oil. She discovered nutritional yeast in September at the school where she works, where first graders get reusable plastic tubs of popcorn every afternoon, over which teachers, some of them vegan, shake generous portions of nutritional yeast. Since September, we have gone through many packages of it. We have wondered if it has something to do with our recent bloating. This bowl I've just received has two different popcorns: The bottom layer is the burnt first round—made from a cheap tub of kernels we bought at Job Lot—and the top layer is the second round—unburnt, light, fluffy, and crisp, from a Goya bag we had in the back of the pantry. My cat keeps trying to settle into my lap, but each time he does, he is struck by a whiff of the popcorn and his ears cock as one kernel drops to the floor. So he scrambles to his feet and hops down to eat it. Then he comes back, situates himself in my lap again—after several agonizing minutes of circling, kneading, drooling—and now, right now, he goes again, leaping down to the floor to catch another piece.

I eat every day, but rarely do I feast. The last time was in Belgrade, last September. At the fresh market we bought one kilo of apricots and one of strawberries. We brought them back to the apartment and rinsed them and set them out in the sun on the deck that overlooked the brown water of the Sava with a view of the bridge to Zemun. There was a motorcycle event that day, and for an entire half hour, motorcycles with single and double riders roared beneath the balcony, made louder by the echo over the river and the graffitied stone walls of the underpass. Each day that week there was a traffic director with a whistle, which he used from dawn until sunset, even though nearly every car had its windows sealed tight against the blazing late-summer Serbian heat. But without a care, he would blow and blow, sometimes urgently when things were getting tight,

and we wondered if any driver heard him. The apricots were tiny and they were not sweet—they tasted like an element. The strawberries, however, were very sweet. We poured out kefir and sliced up a cold štrudla sa makom (a sweet poppy seed roll), and doled out spoons of soft, salty cheese, like feta but creamier, to eat with whatever smoked meat we had bought that day. We were in my wife's home, though not her home—the city, her first home; the apartment, a stranger's; and without our cats, it was not really home at all. Where were they to torture us, meowing urgently through the glass windows, as we shared a cigarette on the balcony? Like the man with the whistle, we could only see them. Oh, but worse—we could only imagine we could see them. We ate the entire kilo of apricots in this way in the first two days, between cigarettes and engine sounds and missing our cats in the heat.

On our first night, it felt like dusk at midnight. We walked to the bus station and ordered pljeskavica and cold tallboys of a Balkan beer. The woman behind the counter lathered thin pitas in sour cream, mayonnaise, and paprika, then stuffed them densely, at our urging, with spiced meat and cabbage slaw and onions. We waited to eat them until we had made it to the walls of the ancient citadel called Kalemegdan, where my wife used to stay up all night drinking rakija and smoking with friends. She tells stories of taking the bus back to her home at six a.m. when she was only sixteen, still drunk, her neighbor on his way to work jostling her awake at her stop, entering the apartment as her mother handed her plates of crepes and eggs to soak up the drink. We waited until we got to those benches, that one bench specifically, to pop our cans of beer and unwrap the tinfoil around our pljeskavica. A tiny, lank kitten weaseled up to my side. My wife said it was because she knew I was weak, American. She mewed, and her eyes were wide and crusty. I gave her a significant hunk of my meat, and she chomped happily at my feet. When she was finished, she waited, watching patiently, her gray-black coat dusty from the sand and dirt of the fortress—no doubt she slept between some spidery stones high up on the wall, a little nook built three thousand years ago with a view of the Danube—but I told her no, that was enough for someone so small. She gave up, eventually, and loped off, though not so far as to be out of earshot if I caved and gave her more. Which I did, as I couldn't finish it myself.

Our best friends had gotten engaged just that summer in

Belgrade, and we wanted to treat them the way my uncle had treated us when we told everyone we were getting married: champagne, potato chips, caviar, homemade spaghetti, etc. We booked a table at the fanciest restaurant I could find in the city. It was the exact kind of place an American would book in Europe. No one was there. It smelled like a Marriott, and the bathroom had black lacquered floors and peach-scented soaps. We ordered plates of steak and river fish and a bottle of wine. We ordered asparagus and a cheese board and received complimentary side plates of a French-looking salad. My wife and I were dumb enough to think that the skirt steak was only twelve euros—it was actually twelve euros *per ounce*—and we ate the most expensive meal of our lives. After, our friends drove us to Zemun to a crepe stand, where we ordered crepes that were unspeakable, enormous, each filled with half a tub of Nutella and shoved into a tinfoil holder to be sprinkled with crushed Biscoff cookies and berries, which we barely licked, just nibbled at the edges of, before we had to throw them out, how full we were, how heavy and rich we felt. Where were any cats then?

They were asleep on the bed at home in Woods Hole. We trained a camera on the bed for the entire week, and every time they leapt onto and off it, we got a notification. By the time we made it to Rome, we stopped checking when it rang. We hardly missed them anymore. We bought mortadella with pistachio and fresh mayonnaise and made demitasse cups of espresso on the stove that we lit with matches, and we drank Aperol, everywhere, and learned about melon gelato and tourist trap pizza and how to argue in front of the Pantheon. On our last night, we had a ten-thirty reservation at the best restaurant in Trastevere. We ordered the artichoke—just barely in season—and it arrived splayed like a lotus. Each petal did the job, making everything that followed oversweet, which was right.

The first time we traveled together was two weeks after we met—she got us a room in Provincetown in the middle of July, by some miracle, at the end of the block where I used to live. We trudged up the stairs to the suite in our rain boots, with a long bag of bread, tomatoes, and olives, which we ate on the king-size bed. She had ordered champagne and a cold plate of chocolate-dipped strawberries to be delivered to the room, and we ate all of that too. And when we did go to dinner—to my

favorite dingy Italian place—I ordered the artichoke, which I then learned she loathed. We were drunk. And we knew we had landed on something astonishing. So we were high, in a way, or relieved of the pressure of the world. I already knew we would marry. I couldn't believe my new lack of need. Like I had been fighting a terrible crush of waves at Nobska all night and now, at last, I could float on my back and look up. Instead of eating the artichoke with me, she fed me each petal with her fingers until it was done. This is how it started, the long spoons of our heaven.

*We knew we had landed on something astonishing. So we were high, in a way, or relieved of the pressure of the world. I already knew we would marry.*

I never thought I would leave the country. I had almost not, before her. My father never left, and my mother never left. Never having left the country, my father feasted strangely, a cook himself, after days of preparing vats of commercial tomato soup for the rehab where he worked. He would come home once it was dark and cook eggs, sunny-side up, with canned peaches and canned corned beef hash and, when he was not drinking, tall glasses of whole milk or, when he was drinking, coffee and whiskey or a can of light beer. He would smoke on whatever stoop of whatever place where he was staying, and he would sleep on the couch with the TV on. I can't say my mother has ever been a feaster. At least I have never seen her feast. I have watched her hum as she takes a bite of my boxed macaroni and cheese. I have watched her face relax when she sips a cold martini. But I have never seen her really eat.

In the film *Babette's Feast*, as saucers of dessert cake made it to the table, and the light red wine was drained before the sweet, honeyed one was sparsely poured out, the Lutherans' faces could not hold it back anymore, their pleasure at Babette's feast. I waited the whole film for them to crack, which they did—gracefully, cautiously, honestly. I want to see my mother crack like that. She is a singer and a writer and the most beautiful woman many of her friends know. She makes jewelry and warps old pieces of silver on an anvil in her basement, shaping them by force into earrings and pendants. She loves her one

loyal cat. As penance—as thanks—I would like to treat her to apricots and strawberries, cigarettes and piles of thin, shaven meat, artichokes, a cappuccino on an ancient river. So she can know the hunger of wanting to go home, or of never being able to, or of being able to and doing it. Of letting herself feast.

There is one time in my memory. When she worked for a used book dealer, her boss's boss was a man who looked like a god or a marathon runner. He'd wake up at four a.m. to tootle out on his skiff off New Bedford's wharf, hunting for tuna. This was in the summer. By the time my mother's day began, after her hour-long commute off-Cape, he would arrive in the office having exercised, scaled and filleted the tuna, then packed a cooler tight with its red-pink meat—a translucent oxblood-red with threads of gray fat like marble through the cut. He would hand my mother—young, single, beautiful, only in her late thirties then—three pounds of the catch folded in his own fine work of parchment and plastic wrap. She would stow it in the mini fridge with her small lunch until it was time to go home. And when she did come home—I was always waiting for her in the summer, her return a reminder of the living, to relieve me of my own lonely desert of a day—she would unwrap the tuna fast, not changing out of her work clothes, and at the counter in our kitchen, she would slice it into thick strips. In one bowl, soy sauce, and on a flat plate, sesame seeds—then she would lift a piece with her fingers, pat it in the soy sauce, then press it, wet side down, into the sesame seeds so that one side became encrusted. She would eat it in one bite. She and I would eat the whole belly like this, standing at the counter, by ourselves, seeds catching in our teeth.

Today at church it is almost the Last Supper; Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, on the same path Pilate takes on his warhorse. A deacon's black lab wears a headband with donkey ears as a stand-in for the original. Jesus's followers are chanting, singing and shouting, waving fronds of greens, and the Pharisees say: *Tell them to be quiet*. Jesus replies, *If they are*, *even the stones will cry out*. The minister holds up a stone and declares that she will teach it to talk. When the Last Supper comes, Jesus will break the bread, pardon the friend, share the cup, walk to his death. We know this, as we fold our fronds into crosses and little woven cups. And we know the hunger for what happens after. Hunger for more than the sole terrible

fact of this life, which is that we will have to let everything we have ever loved go. It will either be taken from us or we from it. When I get home, my wife is resting on the couch, waiting for the episode to end before she gets up to wash out her popcorn wok. Her legs are splayed, flaccid and loose. Her eyebrows, the confident lines of black oil pastels, narrow and focus. The cats purr by her like gargoyles. Rain outside on the rhododendrons, my mother next door in her studio hammering silver, our dirty floors, candied citrus on the stove, the friends I have to call. All of it, each kiss, each touch in the night, each shower together, each memory of my father laughing, each song, each poem, each strand of hair on the head, each petal, each kernel, each taste—all of it must go.

MARK IRWIN

## NOW

Now the boy / and girl come home / the dog
too. Mom \ cooking \ as the sun \ goes down.
Now Dad arrives / the dog barking / jumping
in the kitchen. Corn \ beans, squash, and \ ham

steam. / We say grace then / eat and talk about
the day. Now \ the empty plates \ are holes on
the table / now the boy / grown has gone away /
joined the army \ now the girl \ married in

another state. / Now they come / to the Thanksgiving
table \ the turkey, sweet potatoes \ pumpkin pie
make them sleepy / now Mom & Dad / the guestless house.
Now the hours all \ years growing far. \ Now

Dad doesn't / wake one / morning now / mourners
come \ place food on the table \ for the family
minus one / now Mom dusts / the photos of those /

not home. \ Now she sits by \ windows going
gold. Now how to slow / the violet dusk / the night absorbs.

MARK IRWIN

## OVER OPEN WATER

For Angie Estes

Hearing the small noises
I recall the mewling of
where one of Paris' oldest
planted in 1601, leans
touch for good luck. I
toward the Seine one
washed a homeless man's feet
hair. There was no
huge, over open water. A tree—
of the infinite lodged
of desire and grief
pigeons outside Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre
trees, a black locust (robinier),
its giant crutch that people
touched it once before walking
evening where a homeless woman
then dried them with her
clapping, but church bells rang,
hair. Descartes describes the idea
within a thought that cannot contain it.

MARK IRWIN

## THE TIME IT TOOK

She's seven and I want
to show her
a sunflower taller than
she in a field
of hundreds, early
autumn, the slant sun
speaking my age, she
much more dear than
this one's spangly
crown burnished with
seeds, huge thimble
our thumbs touch what
the past frost browns,
making the sun
gleam more in mornings—
what is this thing we
call death, but what
has grown too detailed,
particular and must
be leveled out by
coming days, and so I
lift *you* up, your face
now the sun looking
down into one's ragged
corolla where an old
bee slow-hectors a rusted
petal as the real sun
still warms, a magic
wand, but warning too
how brief its light's
journey, one hundred
million miles in eight
minutes, the time it
took to lift a crimson

worm, wriggling on
        the flooded walk, then
place among the new lashes
        of greening spring grass.

MADELEINE SCOTT

## IN CAVERNA MACERIAE

Last snowfall melting in my bedroom,
first bulbs of snowdrop spring, stretching

for light. Moths flutter. My eyelashes.
Let me sprinkle lustral water, scatter petals

on the carpet, let me come
to my beloved as dew. My

linen nightgown, humility,
my sheer peignoir, chastity,

ivory veil, finely woven,
holy desire, His.

The little white lamb
I carry on my breast, my ring

finger knotting frosting
coils of his fur, beloved,

yes, I will meet you at the edge,
the woods, in secret places under

the stairs, in shadows, in coolness, in
cedar and firs. In this cut of light,

there is the flock of your teeth. Oh, your
eyes are my eyes, your lungs are mine,

your mouth mine.
The needle through my earlobe,

the arrow through my heart.
And my lamb, he's also bleeding.

The winter is past. The rain is over.
Shoots and pistils speck the meadow,

and pollen honey-dripping from
the stigma of my palms.

Milk and kisses gild my linens,
scattered petals, stellar dendrites

fall from lacerations on these lips.
Mouth so tender, the stomata

of my skin. Your desire, beloved,
and your pleasure and I'm pure.

Exhaling every pore.
Eyes of doves in your hair,

and these wounds
have made us one.

THEA CHACAMATY

## DEATH OF MARAT

Claudia's latest screenplay burned on the fire escape's grate, her failure set alight in a miniature tin waste basket. At the start of her shambled tenure in Los Angeles, Claudia had clung to her tiny dream of fame and fortune like every other sucker. She didn't want to be famous. She wanted to breathe in the vapors of fame, and get a little high off them.

Claudia wiped ash from her forehead and whined to her roommate, Meredith, "If I ever make another Bloody Mary, you'll have to lock me up in the psych ward."

"Just don't burn down our building," said Meredith. They shared an apartment and worked at the same bar, where Meredith seemed content to pour vodka Red Bulls in perpetuity.

Claudia thought the script was good or, at the very least, good enough. Hollywood disagreed and was uninterested in the arty retelling of the French Revolution through the eyes of a Jacobin portraitist.

"I did hear about a job opening the other day," Meredith said. "You know Creepy Jim?"

Claudia nodded. Creepy Jim was an alcoholic session bassist who frequented their bar on Sunday afternoons. He came down with what they called "the creeps" as evening set in, when he asked where they purchased their underpants.

"He did session work for an old rocker who needs a personal assistant."

"Who's the rocker?"

Meredith filled their glasses with cheap zinfandel. "Remember William McDonnell?"

Claudia struggled to swallow the wine as surprise caught in her throat, pricked by the name's sour, heated familiarity. "My mom used to listen to his records all the time."

Meredith plucked the chopsticks from the folds of a Chinese takeout box, pounding on air drums. She sang, *"Vroom, vroom. Rolling thunder. I'll get what I am after. Girl, it's rolling thunder. Vroom, vroom."*

"Oh stop, I remember the damn song." Claudia slid a green bean into her mouth. "You know, my mom hung out with him once, when he played in Phoenix." Claudia shared with Meredith an edited version of their meeting.

"He took my virginity," Claudia's mother had slurred as she fried eggs at the stove. A younger Claudia ate her eggs silently, the whites burned with plasticky edges. Her mother didn't eat. Instead, she poured another slosh of bourbon into her coffee. "For all I know, he's your real dad."

Claudia's mother was a talented liar, but there was a washed-out color photograph found in an old shoebox that backed up her story. In it, Claudia's mother, still a teenager, clasped a vinyl record to her chest protectively, her smile so wide it bordered on demented. William McDonnell's hand clutched her mother's shoulder. His legs were imprisoned in ridiculous leather trousers, his face painted with an ambivalent, punkish stare.

"Do you still have the picture?" Meredith asked.

"Maybe," Claudia said. The photograph, along with other evidence, lived in a box under her bed, but she didn't say so. "I should apply for that job," she said, flush with false bravery and wine.

Meredith drifted into her bedroom to get ready for her shift at the bar. Claudia listened to her banging around, discarding dresses and knots of cheap jewelry. She emailed a copy of her resume to the address Creepy Jim had scribbled on a cocktail napkin. William McDonnell responded quickly. Breathless, she typed that she would meet him at the farmers market in West Hollywood.

To celebrate, Claudia drank tequila with Meredith until they closed the bar down. They cranked "Rolling Thunder" over the sound system and shook their hips as if watching the band play in their heyday. It was as if they were in a London club full of leather-clad teenagers. Wild, untethered, free.

Claudia waited in line at the market's breakfast counter the next morning. It pained her to cough up eight bucks for an egg muffin, so she settled for coffee. While the clerk poured her cup, Claudia watched a movie star fish the mushrooms from an omelet. When Claudia first moved to LA, this sight would have thrilled her. An actor out in the wild, foraging for fungi! But it was now as common as the traffic, dry heat, and the bus-bench

advertisements of personal injury lawyers. The actress flicked the mushrooms to the ground without a thought.

She recognized William across the marketplace. He was mauling a short stack of pancakes in front of the flower cart, backlit by puffs of blue hydrangeas. Her stomach creaked with pained, hungry sounds. He was smaller than she expected. He was comfortably, but expensively, dressed. His famous skin condition revealed itself as a rash that crept over the top of his unbuttoned collar and ended at his neck in a jagged red line.

She approached his table and introduced herself. Foregoing niceties, William launched into a series of questions about her taste in music, movies, and art. "You studied art, so this should be easy for you."

"Art history," she corrected him. "I don't make any art, but I do write about it." She spent a few minutes discussing the painting of the French politician who inspired her latest screenplay—murdered bathing, head wrapped in rags, a feather pen dangling from his hand. "Charlotte Corday got a bad rap. She was villainized for killing Marat. But it was an act of patriotism, for the extreme love of country. Not that I care much for patriotism."

"Nor do I," said William. Globs of congealed flour slid over his tongue as he spoke. "Why do you want to write films?"

"I suppose I like the sense of control it gives me. I like telling characters what to do. Besides, there's more money in it than in fiction."

"Ah, she's after the money." He pointed the fork at her like a spear. Claudia shifted uncomfortably in the plastic chair, exposed.

"I can't tell if you're smart exactly," he said, "but you're ambitious, and you have that fancy degree. I never cared much about those things in my younger days, but here in America that counts for something."

Before leaving, William handed her an envelope of cash for expenses and a list of tasks to be completed in the coming week. He said, "I trust you. You seem like a scrupulous girl with good character." His eyes reviewed her body carefully. He tugged the hem of her oversized button-down shirt. "You need to get some decent clothes."

Dressing that morning, Claudia had felt like Patti Smith on

the cover of *Horses*. Unassuming, on a mission to fuck up the world. Secretly thrumming with a potent energy. She knew that something important would happen that day, even if it was only the chance to meet William. She had always thought that at the first sight of William she would know deep in her gut if her mother's drunken ramblings were legitimate. But her gut lay empty, foretelling nothing, eating itself.

"Just wear black next time," said William. "You can't go wrong with black."

Claudia knew better than to defend her outfit—she'd been called an entitled millennial enough times by rich old men.

William's calloused palm scratched her hand as he shook it. His gaze was both wide open and clearly discerning, as if he were aware that he was making a careful mistake, but it was too late not to.

In the following weeks Claudia ran William's errands. She picked up William's laundry at the dry cleaner on La Cienega. She searched three different Starbucks for the unseasonal flavored coffee that he preferred. She waited in line for his prescriptions at the pharmacy at Cedars-Sinai and signed for his packages at the post office at the foot of the canyon.

William's house was of the rustic Old Hollywood sort. Ivy climbed the exterior walls. Statues of naked muses demurely covered themselves with shredded togas. In the atrium, koi fish shipped from Kyoto swam lazily in a fountain. Busily patterned rugs from Tangier spread across the parquet floors.

Upon entering the house, she unballed a pair of socks from a cubby where pairs were left for guests. William's ears were sensitive to the sound of bare feet smacking against the floor.

"My ears are shit now," he had said. "Any drummer you know will be nearly deaf in ten years. When you hear that high ping in the back of your ear, like an obnoxious bell? That's a pitch you'll never hear again in real life."

She walked across the house and up the grand staircase to the bathroom where he spent hours in the bathtub soaking in a concoction of tonics and essential oils to soothe his irritated skin.

His dog, a goldendoodle named Chardonnay, was sprawled on the bath mat. The bathroom's walls were silver-veined mar-

ble, the windows curtained with sheer panels. A crystal ashtray overflowed with cigarette butts. Newspapers piled up in the corner. A wine bottle, uncorked, beside the tub. In the bath, thick bubbles provided some needed modesty to William's frail body.

"This pumpkin spice shit is hard to find at this time of year," she said, and set the coffee cup on the counter.

"Do keep your voice down," he whined. William blamed his guitarist, Reggie, for his tinnitus. With his amp turned up to a piercing volume, Reggie swung his guitar around like a third arm. This was before their records went multiplatinum, before the world tours, before Pepsi used "Rolling Thunder" in a halftime commercial. They were just kids practicing in the basement, below the pub where Reggie worked, the cement walls not soundproofed. They never wore earplugs. "We thought earplugs made you soft," he said.

The commercial: a girl splayed over the hood of a cherry-red Camaro. The white French-cut bathing suit. Bronze legs up to her eyeballs. The song's chorus punched home as she poured the brown syrup down the front of her swimsuit, grinning like a fool. It aired between sitcoms and during baseball games. Claudia's mother shut herself in her room after it played.

The years in the basement ruined William's ears, but a life snorting, shooting, smoking, and drinking destroyed everything else. And now, among the side effects from his Dionysian days, he had the blisters to contend with. "My body is a temple. Crumbled and stomped all over by tourists," he had said during their first meeting at the market. Now, he said, "Fetch the tape recorder from the vanity."

As the tape ran, she looked out the window at the elm trees, the lawns, and the pool—stacking his fortune in her mind. She made a list of everything that she knew about William McDonnell.

He was born on October 27, 1948.

He grew up in a village outside of Manchester.

His father worked in a button factory.

His mother was a dressmaker.

He moved to London to go to art college. He dropped out and started a band.

He met his first girlfriend, Louise, at the 100 Club. She wore feathered black eyeliner and suede flats. She never ate and

smoked Fontenoy cigarettes. Louise left him for a poet in Paris. His heartbreak inspired "Black-Eyed Blues."

His first wife, Madeleine, divorced him in 1975. She had "an ass like a peach but no style to speak of."

His second wife, Ginger, ate a bottle of pills when she discovered him in service of the housekeeper, "trussed like a chicken."

He had three daughters and one son. Penelope, Josephina, Poppy, and James. They lived in London, Brooklyn, and Marseille. Only Josephina still spoke to him.

Poppy overdosed in 1994.

He liked Spanish olives, white wine, and Jacqueline Susann novels.

He owned five cars.

He didn't know how to drive.

In November of 1986, he played a concert at the Starlight Theater in Tucson, Arizona, where he met a seventeen-year-old girl named Bettina Anderson.

Claudia's mother said that he took her to the Copper Cactus Hotel. The king-sized bed was shaped like a wagon with wheels. William wore gold snakeskin boots.

On May 5, 1987, her very pregnant mother married her high school sweetheart, Sherwood Morris, at Church of the Good Shepherd in Oracle, Arizona. Sherwood would die in a head-on collision on Route 77, driving home from Peterson Electric in Tucson, where he worked the graveyard shift. He died at 5:36 a.m. on December 12, 1994.

Claudia was born on July 14, 1987.

Claudia drove her relic of a car back to the east side. The tape hissed as she listened to that day's session with William. He rambled about the late sixties, what he wore and where he wore it. Sta-Prest pants, Fred Perry polos, a hand-cut suit from Savile Row. Nothing useful. What did she expect him to say? "You know, I once met this bird in Tucson . . ."

She opened the door to the apartment and found Meredith brewing coffee in a shabby kimono. Claudia admired Meredith's luxurious, garbage loungewear. If Meredith were a character in one of Claudia's screenplays, she would play Desdemona in *Crescent Heights*, the one about the jaded starlet who throws herself off the roof of her lover's hotel. That screenplay had met

a kinder death than the burning of her more recent project, *Death of Marat*.

"How was work?" Claudia asked.

"Pretty slow all night. The bands sucked, so go figure. I was bored senseless without you."

Claudia had dropped a few shifts at the bar, and Meredith hated that they no longer kept the same hours. She missed the mornings lounging around the apartment in their underwear, smoking cigarettes over coffee: Meredith talking about her paintings, never painting; Claudia talking about the movies she would write, never writing. Hungover and hungry. Talking about the boys they kissed. The drugs they did. The cash in their pockets: going in, going out.

William had paid her that morning. She counted the stacks of twenty- and fifty-dollar bills. She had planned to start paying her student loans this year, but she hadn't made a single payment yet, and wasn't sure when she would. Collection agencies called from towns she'd never heard of. La Grande, Oregon. Kokomo, Indiana. The callers were bored shitless and unwilling to bargain, passively threatening to take everything. Good luck. They could come after her rusty car with a hole in the roof if they wanted. They could get rained on too, if it ever rained in Los Angeles again.

*They could come after her rusty car with a hole in the roof if they wanted. They could get rained on too, if it ever rained in Los Angeles again.*

She put the cash where she stashed the collection notices: under the bed. A mouse could make a lovely home there.

Claudia and Meredith walked down North Alvarado for four-dollar burritos from the taco truck near the lake. Shuffling down the hill, the city was immediate and tangential, windshields reflecting against the sun like signal mirrors. *Help us, we're stuck in traffic. Forever.*

They ate on the grass near the lake's edge. "Someday we'll go to one of those fancy places opening up in the neighborhood," Claudia said. The al pastor burrito, usually juicy and well spiced, tasted acrid in her mouth.

Meredith squinted. "I thought you loved these things," she

said, licking salsa verde off her pinkie. "Not good enough for you anymore?"

"The rocker eats like a king. He's the loneliest, best-fed leper in town. Someone should put him out of his misery."

Meredith said, "Don't get your head full of wild ideas, Claud."

A man muttered to himself on a nearby bench, scratching his arms. He ripped a scab off his elbow, and placed the bit of skin in his mouth like a rare delicacy. Claudia's eyes locked with his, as if they shared a secret.

William sent Claudia to a transcendental meditation cult in Ojai in search of a cure for his rash. The cult's guru charged Claudia over a thousand dollars for a single jar of salve.

Leaving Ojai, she drove down to the coast and stopped for gas. Her radio went on strike, and she smacked the dashboard as if the action would reanimate it. Her phone rang.

"Baby," her mother's voice said. "I'm having a real bad one over here. They've been knocking on the door all day. I don't know why they won't just go home."

"Did you call Eleanor?" Claudia asked. Eleanor was her mother's sponsor.

She huffed through the phone. "You know how she is. Just brings over more of those marshmallow chickens. Says sugar will calm me down. Says I need to eat."

"You do," Claudia said. "You *do* need to eat. What did you eat today?"

"It doesn't matter, baby. I'm just tired." Claudia heard the clink of ice against a glass. Her mother was reasonably sober if she called before dark. Claudia didn't answer her calls once the sun had set.

Her mother lived at the edge of the Catalina Mountains in Oracle, Arizona. Her pleasures were few. Maker's Mark was her favorite, but she often ended up with Old Crow. She cleaned the labs at Biosphere 2, Oracle's famous scientific failure. Her wages covered the rent, the electricity, data cards for the pay-as-you-go cell phone. Claudia sent her money for cartons of Merits and those nuclear-orange cellophane-wrapped cheese slices she liked. She made a little extra money dyeing batik for an artist friend in town. Alpaca scarves covered in goofy desert imagery. Coyotes howling before a full moon, giant saguaros, jackrab-

bits, and warbler birds. A roadrunner speeding across the highway on the beam of a trailing star.

"You're angry with me, aren't you?"

"You said you wouldn't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"You know what."

"There is one other thing. The air conditioner broke again, and I'll have to pay the man to come fix it."

"I'll put some money in your account tonight."

"It won't be too much."

"It's fine. Don't worry."

Claudia hung up and drove to the canyon. She pictured her mother in her little house with the tin roof, the dead Saab parked out front. Inside, the television tuned to tennis. The volume low. Sitting at her computer, writing fearful emails to her internet friends about terrorism. Watching videos of rabbits sprinting across dewy meadows. Could she continue like this forever? On Sunset, palm trees lining both sides of the road curved toward each other with a sensual ease. To the north, the summer wildfires ravaged the hillside, the sky thick with smoke. A girl collected donations at the base of the canyon: canned goods, blankets, and clothes. Claudia pictured William, morose as Marat in his chamber. Her hands over his mouth, his face bluing beneath the bathwater.

Claudia stomped around her room, wired on coffee, looking for the rubber container of old journals she'd brought from Tucson. Finally, behind the shoebox full of cash and the rubber-banded pile of bills, she found it.

Throughout high school, Claudia had kept a ruled composition book documenting William McDonnell's bad behavior. She used a good pair of heavy steel scissors lifted from her mother's sewing kit to snip articles from magazines. The scissors cut the paper efficiently, cruelly, with a deft swoosh. The divorces, trashed motel rooms, drunken award-acceptance speeches. The lawsuits over royalties, sexual harassment, teenage lovers. Stint after stint in rehab. Religion found, lost, then found again.

There were poorly printed photos from her high school library's laser printer. Stripes banded across William's face where the toner ran low. She had manifested a father from glue sticks and paper. It was the most pathetic kind of teenage witchery.

Claudia knew that her plotting mimicked the intimations of an erotic thriller's unhinged killer. If she dared write a screenplay about a girl who worked as the personal assistant to a rock star whom she secretly believed to be her father, the final scene might be a murder. Someone had to pay for the irreversible act that had occurred between the rock star and the girl's mother. Claudia could almost hear the violins creaking as the girl approached the rock star while he dozed contentedly in his bathtub.

*Why couldn't the rock star have an epiphany somewhere around the midpoint and, after begging the girl's forgiveness, rebuild their relationship from the ground up?*

Inspired, she opened her computer and began working out a one-page treatment. Quickly, as she entered the third act, it occurred to her. Why did it have to end so miserably? Why couldn't the rock star have an epiphany somewhere around the midpoint and, after begging the girl's forgiveness, rebuild their relationship from the ground up? The rock star might even pay off the girl's student loans, or buy the girl's mother a house. The girl, Claudia decided, deserved to be happy.

Her navel buzzed when she changed the ending. It was pathetic, but it was hers, and for this she felt humbled in the face of purpose, fate, and chance.

The next day, Claudia fixed William a late breakfast. Fruit salad with pineapple, yellow Washington cherries, and mango over yogurt cultured by French monks. A record played across the house. William often listened to Slade, Marc Bolan, Roxy Music, or Mott the Hoople. "My contemporaries," he called them. Outside the kitchen window the sprinklers fanned plumes of water over the grass. A letter had come from the county admonishing William's water use, but he brushed it off. "I'll pay the fine. There's nothing worse than a brown lawn."

She carried the tray to the bathroom, where William soaked in the tub.

"I'm feeling my age today, darling."

William's eyelids fluttered dreamily, wine glass aloft. White slime foamed at the center of an especially heinous carbuncle

blooming between his nipples. She set the breakfast tray on the nightstand in the bedroom.

William squinted at her. "You look almost pretty today. Like a Brontë with your hair mussed up like that. But I'm sure that even Emily owned a brush," he said. "Help me out."

Claudia looked away as she held the towel before him. He stepped into the walk-in closet and emerged in satin pajama pants printed with tiny white poodles. He sat on the bed and patted the coverlet beside him.

"Come here," he said. When she sat their thighs touched. His body let off a chill instead of heat. When he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and cupped her chin with pruned fingertips, the scent of the earthy bath oils settled in Claudia's nostrils. "You've got an old-fashioned, painterly sort of beauty." He wrenched her face to the side and ran one finger against her cheekbone as if appraising art. She tried to pull away, but he was stronger than he looked.

"I almost forgot to bring you the salve," she said, her words warped with her jaw still in his grip.

The promise of the salve made him release her. He blinked his eyes greedily and shooed her away. "Oh, do fetch it."

Claudia stumbled down the hallway to the kitchen. She found a bottle of chemical solvent for cleaning silver under the sink. The label on the back read, *Danger. Peligrosa. Keep out of reach of children. If product comes in contact with eyes or skin, call poison control immediately.*

She imagined William's already fraught skin printed with larger, more menacing blisters, unsoothed by bathwater or marijuana.

The Ojai guru's salve smelled of bay laurel and sage. Claudia poured the silver cleaner into the jar of salve and mixed it with a silver spoon until the spoon shone.

Claudia made it back to the east side with enough time to eat her gas station dinner before her shift at the bar. She was barbacking for Meredith that night—washing glasses, restocking the limes and maraschino cherries and cocktail straws. She wove through the Saturday night crowd with pint glasses piled in her arms. She or Meredith usually agreed to abstain from alcohol in order to drive the other home. It was Meredith's turn, so Claudia set out to get thoroughly blasted.

The band was crummy—two skinny boys tapping on keyboards. One of the bar's regulars sat in front of the wash station while Claudia rinsed glasses. He nodded at her and winked, signaling that it was time to take a shot. She placed two rocks glasses on the bar and poured the tequila. Añejo, the good stuff that didn't make you feel sick. The regular slung his back straight, and she took hers with a lime wedge to cut the burn.

Meredith yelled over the music to refill her well with new bottles. Claudia danced as she uncapped them, but slipped on a slimy piece of lime. "Watch it, Claud!"

Claudia shrugged—*shit happens*—and poured herself another shot.

"You should slow down," Meredith said.

Claudia shook her head and leaned against the door of the walk-in fridge. "It's a good night," she said, flinging her soggy bar towel over the empty kegs before stepping outside for a smoke on the sidewalk, where young people huddled in close circles laughing and talking.

Her phone was piled with voicemails.

One: "Doll, I know I've said this a thousand times, but you really should come home. Come home right now, and we'll go to the fair and ride the roller coasters. You can stay in your old room—I've left it nice for you. I'll be good. After tonight, I'm done. I promise." A pause. "I know I've said that before too."

Two: Her mother cried softly, a raspy kick in her throat.

The third message was from William. "You won't believe it, my girl. This cream seems to be some kind of miracle. I can already tell the difference. Well done."

She slumped against the stucco wall.

Some basic truths she learned and unlearned about life in general: Donating to charity does not make you a good person. When it comes to sex and love, personality does not trump prettiness. Punk rock will not save your life. People are not inherently good. She was not inherently good.

After closing up, Claudia swept the floors sloppily while Meredith sat in the back booth counting tips. She lay a cigarette in the ashtray while she handled the money. Claudia played "Rolling Thunder" through the stage monitors, pushing the broom around until all the lime wedges, broken glass, and stained napkins were heaped in the center of the room, then lurched to the booth.

Meredith looked up from her count and said, "You should drink some water."

Claudia lifted the cigarette from the ashtray and took a long drag. "I don't need any water. I want a cigarette," she said. "I want a car. I want a sandwich. I want a new pair of shoes."

"I want, I want, I want," Meredith mimicked.

She stubbed the cigarette out and leaned closer to Meredith but slipped and caught herself on the table's lip. "I could have anything I want. I'll get it from William."

Meredith rolled her eyes. "That old fool would rather throw his money in the lake."

Claudia huddled into the corner, head lolling around like a toy. She said, "I always thought when I met him I would automatically know the truth about him, and about myself, like a reflex or a premonition." She giggled. "Someday I'll make all my dreams become real. Like how it happens in movies about LA. Girl gets off a bus. Casting director spots her in the drugstore, admires her sweet face. The next thing you know . . ."

Meredith didn't say anything, just counted her money, dipping her fingers in a shot glass full of water to keep the bills from sticking to them.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Claudia asked, leaning her head on Meredith's shoulder.

"Sure."

"My revenge is a total failure. I put some nasty chemicals in the old man's lotion." She felt tears bud in her eyes. "But he loves the stuff."

"You call that revenge?" Meredith wrapped the last stack of twenties with a rubber band and nudged the glass of water closer. "It'll take more than some spiked beauty cream to give that man what he deserves."

As Meredith drove home, Claudia watched the city lights pulse in bright, meandering flashes. Meredith retreated to her bedroom and Claudia to hers, where she flipped through her notebook and paused on a newsprint clipping of William's image. His cheeks were carved with dimples as he smiled.

She pressed her fingertips to her own plump cheeks, where there were no dimples, only the faint scars where the desert sun had once marked her. Claudia's mother made her wear a sun hat whenever she played in the yard, but invariably she cast it

aside. Claudia located the thick silver scissors and, dividing the photograph into tiny strips, excised his dimples.

The impulse of revenge was not unlike love. She decided to drive to the canyon and visit William.

Claudia grabbed her car keys, then thought better of it. After calling a taxi, she placed the scissors in her purse. Wincing at the ride's total, she handed that night's tips to the taxi driver. At William's house, she slipped on a pair of socks from the cubby. She followed the night-light, fumbling around in the near dark to locate the staircase. She brushed her fingers against a marble statue, a bearskin tapestry, an iron candlestick. Climbing the stairs, the banister was smooth and cool under her hand. Then came a shuffling sound, near William's bedroom door. She stood still, feeling around in her purse until she touched the chilled metal handle of the scissors.

The dog padded toward where she stood at the top of the staircase. She reached her fingers out to him. Patting the silky fur atop the dog's head, she sat on the carpet. The dog rested his head on her thigh. She felt the rhythm of his breathing, and breathed slowly herself. The dog's eyes settled on the scissors. They said, "Don't."

Out the long window over the hall, far beyond the hills of the canyon, the sky was hazy with lavender smoke and orange at the edges, where the wildfires burned.

EZRA GAREY LEVINE

## OVER LUDGATE CIRCUS

O, I, I am no letterer, I have
Never taken a joke or dream too far.

Even now, as in every time, I am
Milling about the narthex fenneling
Into some green and sheathed Within,
                                anise-
Soaked and tossing knucklebones,
                                seconds chanced,
Seconds slaked with seconds, always the first time.

I am no catechumen, eye on an airplane
Stripping sound and line and leaving linseed
Streaked across cooked blue copper.

                                I am not—
I am waiting, thank you—to blow off this
Pigeon-shingled roof with bells and thunder.
Prophet, no. Only at the tidal edge of
I—, I—, I—, I—, I—

EZRA GAREY LEVINE

## THE WAVES, PART IX

Now the mackerel are watched or watch themselves,
wave themselves or are wafted and beheld
by that which beholds
                war, banked yellow, shelves
warped and molding, books missing eyes, eyes felled
in boots and now wooled over. An eye on
either side, one wicks itself up into
the crest
        and catches one dandelion
in its gaze, on the bank, and the whole blue,
all of it, on its right.
                Briefly a man,

now the wave breaks, and the scattered sun still
sets the school alight and shattering, sand
churning, all eyes, all breath and green and gill.

You, kaleidoscopic, brief as horseflies,
bacterial and lithic thousand eyes.

CHRISTINE LARUSSO

## OFFERINGS

The crows wanted me to be all humdrum
about the future, and name some ways I thought

the sky could crack open for them and their wishes.
But there's no sky in the future, I explained,

bashful that they thought I had the means
to get there, my head spinning with the heaviness

of sleeping too little and for how many days.
I actually lost track of all the times they burrowed

nearby, brought me sticks and paper clips believing
I was some sort of witch with the vision

for the afterlife, and I had to explain that the past
was just that: the past. Before, it is true,

I was chased out of every town by angry mobs
who hated the way I talked about electric

vehicles and extraction. Often halting dinners short
to lecture strangers on the amount

of magnesium in the soil. The ocean toils on
and on, pushing against my backstroke

and butterfly as the lighthouse in the distance blinks
its lonely red light, the cool memories of boats

growing heavy and farther apart.
Even with thinning cardboard costing every

coin I have left, I write down what I can recall best:
warm bread, tide pooling, a cigarette shared

with friends. The moon has no reason to believe
the season or weather has changed. If I look at her

long enough, I can still taste honey. I can hold
a small hummingbird in my hand.

CHRISTINE LARUSSO

## NO ONE SEES THE BONES

but they are there. They are rotted down,
dried up, in some places, ground. They are
in the soil, beneath the shop that sells
ceramics and gold-plated trinkets. The bones
of loved ones, neighbors, elders, matriarchs,
martyrs. These are the bones I mourn.
No one sees the calcium deposits
but the rose garden, the compost bin. When
the weather gets wetter, the soil
turns itself over to reveal a soft white
speck. No one sees the bones but
they see mineral, debris, detritus. It's easy
to squint and think of it all as trash, the lost,
tough organs of the lives that lived
here before you. No one sees the bones
because they are old, relics from a different era:
ossification predating road rage, drive-thrus,
the Hollywood sign. No one wants to be close
to anything old, always preferring the scallop
of silver that can fill in for a crescent-
shaped whatever, even the waning moon.
I didn't want my osteo-cored memories, but I felt
a pull to get my hands dirty, slip some piece
of my flesh into the earth as an offering,
a reminder that I am an old bone too.
I have my curves, tissues, crannies.
A dent in my shin from falling down, a rounding
on my skull because I think too much.
These pieces of me are broken without
being fractured, they are the tools of body
that can be of service, my frizzy hair
a stretchy fiber for a hummingbird making
her nest. I could do what you do, I could
seek some other end for my bones

that doesn't leave them to become waste,
degrading under the freeway overpass—but
that would be entitled abandonment, pure
and simple. I would be culpable, guilty
as charged, treating my bones as somehow
better than those before them, as somehow
more worthy. I cannot give myself amenity
greater than that of a daisy. I am with them,
the old, forgotten, the tortured and removed,
the entire displaced city. My bones
are theirs too. Dust to dust, dirt to dirt.
Trabecular, marrow, cells, I atone.
I will not dissolve alone.

AMANDA DEMATTO

# THE LITTLE SPRAGGER

After the second month of drought, the sky broke under the heaviness of the water in its carriage and pilloried the earth. The robins stood vigilant, crowns cocked. Through the earth, thrumming up their spindly legs, came the symphonic slurs and suspensions of the worms that tunneled just below the surface. Improvising paths through time.

The damp air grew hooks, set them, reeled. The surface suddenly scored with the reared heads of earthworms. It was the worst kind of trick that posed itself as a choice—to drown or to live? The will to live gifting instant, bilious death.

Earthworms seeped out of the soil like a plague and collected in twisty piles like none had ever seen before. Robins speared the earth with augers. The sleek bulges of their cadmium orange breasts stirred as they fed upon the carnage in the new grass.

It rained for days without rest. The vision of everyone inside that corridor of cloud faltered. Everything was impressionistic—a mere suggestion of its true form. The hickory trunk pulped, the car furred over with lichen, everything dirty-dishwater complected. Water wizened boundaries.

It made the old man more sluggardly, more forgetful. He went about rubbing his eyes, trying to massage out the gray. In the other room, his wife did her jigsaw puzzle, murmuring to herself a hymn in alto, the rain a salvo of castanets on the asphalt roof.

The doorbell rang, something it never did so early in the day. The old man hoisted himself out of the recliner and limped heavily to the door. His torso bent in the eternal bow of an arthritis that looked much like it sounded—ankylosing spondylitis. An angle of deference at odds with the spite that soured within him. Upon opening the door, his whole body perked, he felt lighter, his joint pain receded.

"Grandpa, there was a bomb threat at my school!"

Grinning back at him was salvation—his grandson Jack. A

ray of light pierced the haze and the leaves shone a virgin green through pastilles of water. Suddenly there was color again, definition, meaning.

"Bombs? That sounds scary."

"Did they have bomb threats when you were a teacher?"

"No, no. Our worst fears were projectile sloppy joes."

He tousled the boy's damp hair and waved him inside.

"Who's there? Who do I hear?" his wife called, turning the corner from the other room, her smile a fresh start. Jack ran to her, and they embraced.

"Oh, you're soaked!" she squealed. "Come, let's get you a towel."

"Sorry, I tried calling first." The boy's father stood at the door, looking abashed. "Can you watch him for the day?"

"Of course, anytime."

Of all thirty grandchildren, Jack was the only one who still visited. The old man wanted to convey gratitude to his son somehow. For a moment, they were looking in each other's eyes. The son rubbing a fist over the dust of a memory. He looked away first. He held a waterlogged grocery bag in each hand, dripping.

"What's all this?"

"Your trunk was open."

"What?" the old man said, his voice breaking. "No, it wasn't."

His son opened one of the bags to eggs, milk, a soggy box of granulated—disintegrated—sugar. "I took out the carpeting and opened the drain plugs." He gestured at the floor of the porch where he'd laid the sopping trunk interior. "But you're going to need to get some fans on it soon."

The old man must have forgotten to finish bringing the groceries in last night and to close the trunk. He must have. But then again. He frowned and backed away as his son held the groceries out to him.

"Those aren't mine."

There was a stiff pause. "Oh." An argument aborted. "My mistake."

A patch of gauzy blue sky appeared between parting clouds, just over the crown of his son's head, as he ducked into his car and drove off. But the old man had heard it first—the abrupt sound of the rain stopping, branches shaking off droplets.

His ears were ringing. He believed he could hear the worms, their pinprick screams. The soul wrenched from the soil. The third act of an everyday horror.

Jack had become obsessed with what was going on beneath his feet—in the soil, the clay, the aquifers, Earth's mantle and core. The backyard was pocked with archeological digs, and he was often dirty. Much of the bedrock in the area was composed of porous sedimentary rock, prone to erosion. Who knew when the ground would continue doing what humans trusted it to do, or when it was a fragile flap of skin, a wafer over maw and cavern? Jack wanted all the books, and he got them, even if he couldn't understand them. The boy would have everything he wanted.

*Who knew when the ground would continue doing what humans trusted it to do, or when it was a fragile flap of skin, a wafer over maw and cavern?*

They lived on the outskirts of an abandoned coal mine that had been reclaimed and repurposed for tourism, and one day the old man took Jack down an earthen vein in the coal trolley. Orange helmets and headlamps on, they watched the square of daylight at the mouth of the shaft fade to a button, then a speck. It was darker than shut-eye. The air spiked with cold, even in August.

The old man explained to Jack that anthracite coal ran in their own veins. His father had been a miner, and his wife's father too. The lowliest work always fell to immigrants. They rose with the morn dark, descended into the bowels of the earth, and rose again—coal-dusted effigies dissolving into night. To earn their keep and provide for their families, they conquered their phobias of tight spaces, darkness, and depths.

"Maybe that explains why I'm only scared of heights," Jack wondered aloud.

Because of their small stature, children as young as Jack were recruited to spend all their waking hours thousands of feet underground. For ten hours a day and sixty-five cents, with a tiny orb of lamplight to guide them, little nippers would listen, heads cocked, for coal cars rumbling down the sloped tracks of the

tunnel. At exactly the right moment, they would open the door of the shaft and shut it behind the car once it was through. Many were crushed, having surrendered to the soporific spell of the dark.

The fastest boys were spraggers. They would run about the tracks with strips of wood and jam them into the spokes of the fast-moving wheels of the coal cars to make them stop. Losing a finger—or limb—was common.

Then Jack had become obsessed with being a spragger. He'd send an old red wagon down the drive, then tear after it with a stick in hand, throwing it like a fish spear into the spokes. His grandpa would whoop and applaud at the wisp of a boy, depositing a dollar bill into his cap with every successful sprag.

One of those times, Jack tripped and broke his wrist. The old man felt the ghost of old habits rattling in his chest. The burning urge to scold the boy—*why was he crying?*—as he had his own children. He had worked two and a half jobs and given all he had. What reason did they ever have to cry, unless he'd given one? A black eye knows how to cry.

The old man made a great show of displacing his rage. Leaning on his walker, he scolded the ground where Jack had fallen. He wagged his finger, the one he'd broken decades before, the one that was permanently curved up like a ramp. Jack thought this was hilarious.

"You know you can retire from this line of work anytime."

"I could try being a nipper instead."

But what ignited Jack's zeal for the underworld most of all was a class field trip deep into the limestone caverns in the valley. The children tiptoed around spikes of stalagmite and cradled their heads under barbed baffles of stalactite—the caverns' incisors—formed by the chemistry of the rain.

In awe, Jack stood shivering on the slick banks of the subterranean Lost River, lost because its terminus was unknown. The guide explained that when the river was first discovered back in the early 1900s, scientists had placed small flotational objects—ping-pong balls, essentially—into the water. After the balls disappeared beneath the stony overpass and traveled their undulating course, they should have ultimately emptied into a body of water in contact with the surface. Perhaps in the Philadelphia Harbor, or the Chesapeake Bay. Someone would have found them.

"But, Grandpa," Jack recounted, wide-eyed, "the floaties were never found."

So the Lost River stayed lost.

Now people were telling the old man that Jack had gone missing.

That, as with his twenty-nine other grandchildren, it was likely he wouldn't see the boy again. Every morning before dawn the old man woke in the recliner to the tremors of his wife sobbing beside him. He would snap: "What are you crying for?" Then he would apologize.

Loss bristled in every follicle, every sensation filmed with yellow nausea. There was Jack in every blue jay's battle cry. In every streak of rain trifurcating on a windowpane. Under every pregnant sky to which he opened his mouth for a raindrop that contained the world.

He chalked it all up to a dream, or a lie. He called his son, every morning, to get a read on things, his ears on alert for innuendo, for variations in the story.

"What did Jack have for breakfast? Does the boy have a ball game this weekend? What day is it?"

And every morning, if luck had his phone call answered, there came the same response: "No, Dad, no. We've discussed this. Nothing's changed." A pause. A quavering, subdued sentence. "Jack is gone."

His skinny-boy arms and legs, his toothy grin, here one moment, visible, touchable; the next moment—gone. Air. Did he become air? A boy-shaped parcel of air? Did a door open in the ether, timed just right, swallowing a whole little boy in its draft, and was it closed again?

"Did you at least put the dog down?"

"Jesus, Dad. The dog didn't do anything."

"Please, tell me again how it happened. Please." The old man didn't believe the story.

"I can't today. I don't have it in me. I'm sorry."

The old man tried to remember the events of his last day with Jack. He replayed them compulsively, mouthing their dialogues like a recitation. And always, always, he arrived at a point that mystified him, like an oft-used word he couldn't recall.

It had rained torrents after a dry spell. Salvation had arrived in the form of the only grandchild that visited him, and Jack had brought the sun with him too. The old man was on the

porch watching the robins feed. The sky's spigot had closed, and the bleach and singed-wire smells of ozone spiced the air. He was thinking about worms and how no one ever thought about them, except anglers, vermiculturists, and his grandson, for whom earthworms were the latest obsession.

The screen door blew open. One shoelace untied, romping out onto the squish of the lawn with an exaggerated pumping of the arms—Jack. The sun was shining and he craved an expedition.

"The radar map says we've got thirty minutes before it starts up again," the old man warned.

"10-4!" Jack bounded. "Onward!"

The old man entrusted his heavy frame to his walker and its worn handholds. Jack would not be denied. Every "yes" to this boy was a balm on the psychic wounds that so scathed his offspring. The man's balance sheet would be reconciled through him.

The damp stuck like nettles. But the reprieve from the rain was glorious. Fresh voltage fizzed round every blade of grass. Everything was lambent, haloed, like a good run through the carwash.

The boy challenged himself to collect as many worms as he could for a future visit to the fishing hole. The robins flushed at his raucous progression. He crouched along the road to lift whole handfuls of writhing worms from the grass, grimacing, and dropped them with a plunk into the empty coffee can his grandma had given him. What did the worms leave behind, in the ground, unseen? Soul-sized funerary spaces, shaped like bucatini.

The field that was their unspoken destination was scalped of grass, awash with mud. A vacant lot that, like a bowl, sloped down a few feet in elevation from the surrounding land. A place of runoff. There were no robins here. No worms. It was strangely still, but for a drainage point a few yards away regurgitating overflow.

Jack's face brightened at a ball in the middle of the field. It called to him. He lowered his can to the pavement. A ball that was a deep teal with reflective grains in it that held a bit of the sunlight inside before glinting it back out into the world. When Jack reached the ball, he took it up in his arms, which were too short to hug its circumference, and asked if he could keep it.

The old man halted at the edge of the field, where the ground stayed smooth and firm. He didn't mind that Jack ran through the mud, though forty years ago he would have felt very differently. He scanned the surroundings. It was like looking through gauze, so much moisture clung in the air. Dogs barked in the distance. He felt he had a lot to make up for in his life. He would do things differently with this boy, who might be the last of his lineage, the one who would remember him longer than the rest of them. Of course he could keep the ball.

*He felt he had a lot to make up for in his life. He would do things differently with this boy, who might be the last of his lineage.*

Off Jack ran, through the field thick with mire, joyously kicking the ball ahead of him. Every footfall a squelch. With each rotation, the ball lifted more brown from the earth and was caked in it.

"Be careful!" It would be reckless not to say it.

Both were so engrossed in this simple shared delight that neither noticed him at first—the other little boy—in the shadows at the far edge of the field, where it abutted a forested acre. He sat on a stump, in the borderland, watching Jack. The other boy would have completely blended with the shadows if it weren't for the bright eyes that lent an outline to his presence.

"You left him alone?"

That was the first question his wife asked, back at the house, once he was safely inside.

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Did he say anything?"

"He wouldn't answer."

"His face was dirty, Grandma." Jack cut in, didn't he?

"Like a little nipper in a mine shaft."

When the other little boy noticed he'd been discovered, he rose to his feet on the stump. So achingly slow that the old man imagined every skeletal hinge issuing its own special crackle in protest. How could such a little thing take so long to unfold? The old man tried to summon Jack over to him, waving a hand, snapping. But Jack was transfixed. The little nipper continued

to stare at Jack; the whites of his eyes shone like bulbs plugged into the dirt on his face.

The old man felt that to utter a word—or Jack's name—would be to introduce a flaw into the delicate joinery that held everything peaceably together. He felt terrified at the prospect of his own voice sounding. It would curdle his insides; fling the moon off into space; make the oceans crawl up over the land, suffusing every hollow body.

The boy raised his arm and extended his sooty fingers into the air at Jack, both stock-still and staring like figurines. There was possession in the gesture. A transference of energy. It was as if this little nipper had heard the shining of Jack hurtling down his icy corridor, yanked on the door to let him pass, and sealed it behind him. Trapping him.

The old man squeezed the holds of his walker, his long disused muscles rousing. He was agitated. He could sense the worms at his feet, their abduction furling and unfurling in the tin can. He wanted to shout, to snap Jack out of it.

From the shadow of the tree line, a mastiff charged. As it angled toward Jack, its hind legs pounded the earth and mud sprayed around it. The old man finally let out a piercing yell and gripped his walker, preparing himself. Jack shivered out of his trance, picked up the ball, and ran toward his grandfather, who would protect him. For the boy carried the future.

The man could feel the earth throttling in response to the brawn of the dog's legs. He could sense how unstable it all was, couldn't he? He looked away for a moment to brush sweat from his brow, pressing saltburn from his eyes. And when he looked again, it was just a blank expanse. There was nothing, nothing in the field.

They turned back. They were rushing. The boy, breathless from his romp, kept in line with his grandfather. Hear that? The timpani in the head, the blood rushing to the neck. The surge of adrenaline that bonds souls, and solders memories. They'd had an adventure. Hadn't they?

A great wind whipped up from behind. Here the robins flushed as they drew near—their orange blazes ripped across the cindery arcade of clouds in the distance. An abandoned worm flailed on the macadam.

"Grandpa." The old man felt a tapping on his arm. "He's following us."

He craned his neck to see and, sure enough, the other boy was there. The look of exhaustion was outsized for his meager build. His filth was remarkable, as if he had been burrowing for protection, sustenance. Beneath the filth hid the calcium dullness of eternities spent in the marrow of the earth. Opening doors, closing them.

"Hey, you!" the old man called. "Where are your parents?"

The boy went on staring at them in silence, the wind passing over him without ruffling so much as a hair on his head.

"Are you lost?"

Nothing.

The old man swatted the air. "To hell with you, then."

Hurrying, they covered another stretch of pavement, and the little nipper was still with them. Up on the front porch, when they looked again, they saw only the diorama of the neighborhood, harassed by the wind.

In the dining room, Jack laid out napkins and silverware on the dinner table, as he had countless times before. This was just one of many times he'd done it, blending together with all the others, the dutiful boy. The old man hunched there, watching him, his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. His heart still hammered in his chest. On the stove, tomato sauce frothed and bubbled. Time had collided, ricocheted, stopped, and swirled around him, blended.

The vertical blinds had been semi-pulled over the sliding glass doors that led to the backyard. Dusk was gathering deeply, drenching gray the oaks beyond the fence. What day was it even? Everything was mixed up now. The old man felt his consciousness seeping away from him, a dark tunnel enveloping him, then startled at the clatter of a fork falling against the table.

"Do you see him, Grandpa?"

He squinted out through the blinds that made a striped sense of it all, his fingers wiping absently at a puddle on the table that must have come from him. Were his eyes failing? There was the little nipper boy at the fence. The old man stood up fast and went to the door for a better look.

The clouds faltered under their burdens and burst, wrung themselves out. Chinch bugs and crickets darted for shelter in bivvies under blades of grass. Rain came down in wavering sheets, fed the craters Jack had dug in the backyard, and flecked the glass with pebbly coalescence and racing stripes.

The rain washed over the little nipper's face, rinsing the dirt away. He was the image of Jack. The old man rubbed his fists into his eyes. When he opened them again, the chain-link fence quivered as the child's bony little hands released it. He backed into the shadows beyond the fence, where the gloom flourished, reaching with gray fingers that infected all they touched.

"There, there. I don't see anything."

The tomato sauce on the stove spilled over the pot. A hiss from the flame of the gas burner.

"I'm scared, Grandpa."

The old man felt himself softening.

"Of what—a little nipper? He won't hurt you." But he felt scared himself, confused. Water rushed the banks of his mind, flushing away the sediments of memory. Eroding them into bits of muddled tones, frequencies that hissed and crackled, the red swell and blue fade of sirens whooshing by.

The old man rested his hand on the boy's head, didn't he? He told him without telling him, *I will always, always protect you.*

But he had failed, or his son had. Every morning he called. He had never been so faithful to anything in the world.

"Tell me how it happened again. Tell me, please," he begged. And after hearing version after version retold by his son, and spinning it endlessly through the tumbler of his obsession, the story that crystallized in his mind was incredible.

When Jack and his father had arrived home that day, the three pit bulls greeted the boy with glee. A leak in the kitchen warranted immediate attention—the alleged reason the boy's father wasn't there when it happened. The dogs were bulky and uncoordinated, bouldering about and crushing feet with all their bluster. They knocked Jack onto the ground. They licked his face. They loved him.

"How could you know something like that if you weren't there?" This question punctuated every retelling.

"Will you just listen?"

Jack dropped the prized teal ball, which rolled, glittering, into the corner. One of the dogs barked at it, bared its teeth, growled. Jack ran to the ball and the dogs charged, knocking him over just as he was lifting it off the ground.

*Back, Koda, back!* Could those really have been his last words?

The one they called Koda sank her teeth into the ball, punc-

tured it. The ball hissed. That was when the boy's father entered the room. It was all deflation. The ball, the dogs reduced to whining cowards on the ground. No Jack by the fireplace. No Jack in the hallway, or in the bedroom. No Jack anywhere. A door had opened at just the right moment and sucked the boy through it, into another frequency.

It couldn't be! It couldn't be corroborated.

"That doesn't happen. It *can't* happen. No, no, no. I don't believe you."

"Dad, you have to let it go. Understand? I can't mourn my son with your constant interrogation."

His son was hiding Jack from him, poisoning his mind against him; he was sure of it. His son wanted *his* assessment of the old man to be the one that lived on forever.

Odd hours the old man would haunt his son's home. The dogs would hurl themselves against the front door in a wild rage at his snooping presence. At the elementary school, he waited surreptitiously in his car for the boy to exit after the dismissal bell rang. He never did.

One afternoon, when he felt the chafing of exhausted options, he grilled a steak. He broke into and entered his son's house, armed with his rifle. With the meat, he lured the dogs into the garage and locked them in. He launched a full-scale operation, searching all the closets and drawers, any pocket big enough to hide a whole boy.

Jack's bedroom was chaos, as if a child, mid-play, had been called to dinner and, with the pang of the abandoner, left all his toys in suspended animation. The old man maneuvered around bits and bobs of a robot on the floor. An ant farm stood on the dresser beside animal bones—artifacts—Jack had unearthed from his excavations. A stuffed canary from the coal mine gift shop rested against his bed pillow. There was no sign of the ball, which supposedly had popped and was sitting in a landfill somewhere.

Back out in the living room where it had allegedly happened, the old man lowered himself to the carpet, keenly aware he might be stuck down there until someone came to his aid. He floated his hand in the air, waiting for a sensation he madly craved but couldn't explain the fanciful contours of, even to himself.

If something stayed lost, the possibility of discovery prevailed.

He wanted the air, the earth, to move him, to transmit a message. Anything. How could a happy boy who liked to spend time with old people just disappear? Where could Jack be?

"Take me there," he said aloud, closing his eyes and pressing his hand into the carpet. "Open up the door."

The ground felt like a good place to be. He felt closer to Jack down there, and he was sitting on the ground still, against the loveseat with his rifle, when his son came home. The bundle of moving boxes he carried slipped from his fingers when he saw his father.

"Going somewhere?"

"Jesus, Dad. What are you doing?"

"Where's Jack? Where is he really? Did he transfer schools?"

"Does Mom know you're here?" his son asked, his eyes wild and bloodshot. It looked like he hadn't slept in weeks.

"What's changed? What did I do wrong? I can fix it."

"Why do you have a gun?"

"Your dogs, that's why. And how can a man know who to trust anymore? Can I even trust you?"

"You're completely mad!" He laughed cynically, despairingly, ran a quivering hand through a forelock of hair. Then he pointed at the door. "Get out! Get out now!"

The old man shifted the rifle onto the sofa and turned over, pressing one palm into the carpet and pulling on the arm of the sofa with the other, trying to lift himself up. The nerves in his back fretted, and he cursed.

His son paced back and forth, rubbing his hands together absently. When he finally came to help his father, the old man slapped his hands away, seething.

"You're the reason that boy is gone," the old man said. He wriggled himself up against the sofa and finally was able to stand.

"Maybe that's true. Because I trusted you with him."

"That's a crock of shit." He held his hand to his heart, panting.

"I loved him in a way that you could never *begin* to fathom."

"Sure, sure. You took your eyes off him! Or you're a liar and you're keeping him from me. Out of, what, jealousy? Are you jealous?" The old man looked past his son, whose tears were re-

pellant to him. It was a black eye that knew how to cry. "None of you asked questions the way that boy did! None of you—"

"I'm tired of lying to you. I won't anymore. *You're* the reason Jack is gone."

The old man's head hammered. "What did you say?" He grabbed on to the wall, fearing his knees might buckle.

"You, Dad! I won't lie anymore to protect you. I'm sorry—you don't deserve it."

"What do you mean?"

His son breathed, and his shoulders rose and fell in fast defeat. He wiped his face. "You really don't remember—the field? The ball? The dog?"

"The weird little nipper kid. Of course I remember those things. I'm not a fucking imbecile. And how dare you blame *me* when *you* were the one who took *your* eyes off him. Did you even give him the time of day? Not like I did. Not like me."

"Don't come back here. Don't call me again." He shuddered. "I'm done."

The old man jabbed that menacing ever-broken finger into his son's chest. "You don't get to say that to me." His teeth were brittle to breaking from grinding them together. "*I'm* the one who's done with *you*."

For the better part of a month, all he did was sleep and scorn the sun for shining. He lay in the recliner as long as he could, bladder on the verge of rupture. He refused to attend the ceremony they had for Jack. *A funeral for a child? With an empty casket?* It was preposterous, a charade.

He told himself he would sleep it off before making his next move. Jack was out there somewhere. He just wasn't thinking about it correctly.

He woke from a deep nap one afternoon to what he thought at first were strange incantations, but which he soon realized was the voice of his wife talking to herself in the dining room.

"What's going on in there?"

She kept babbling under her breath in her frazzled singsong way. The acrid smell of burnt coffee in the moka pot seeped through the rooms.

"Well?"

"What?!" she called back.

"Come in here."

He didn't recognize the woman who appeared. Her face was chapped, her hair in oily disarray.

"I hate when this happens. Five thousand pieces. A beautiful garden. And I'm missing the last piece. It's this empty space where a frond goes." The woman went on, hemming and hawing, and came around in front of his recliner. She stopped talking abruptly. A secret smile turned up her lips.

"I see *you* have my puzzle piece."

He frowned.

She peeled something from the sole of his foot, shaking her head, and puttered to the other room.

That's when he rose, relieved his aching bladder in the bathroom, and went out with his walker to the car. He didn't tell the woman where he was going or his motives. He wasn't sure himself, and he hardly recognized her. She might try to stop him.

The car, reeking of riotous mold and mildew, seemed to have a volition all its own. It drove him to the store, where he bought the biggest, most colorful blow-up ball on the shelf. It drove him on familiar streets into the development where his son lived. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and left the car idling in the driveway with the emergency brake on. He broke the window in the side door of the garage and let himself in.

Upon opening the door that connected the garage to the house, he was knocked to the ground by the first pit bull, a seventy-pound mottled bouncer whose wagging could set off seismographs. He licked the old man's face. Two more pit bulls gamboled in—the white one and the gray one, which was also the only girl and the smallest. This was Koda.

They attacked him with licking and love. This was the man who brought the meat. *All right, all right*. He grumbled and pushed the dogs off him. He struggled to get to his feet, with the dogs circling him happily. He wrangled the two bigger dogs into the house, shut the door with all his weight, and turned around to face Koda. She panted and licked her lips, her sharp teeth a flash in the dark.

Was she smiling at him?

She skittered off behind the tool bench and then returned, wondering what game this was. She lowered herself to the ground at his feet, her chin on her paws, gazing up at him. Her tail gave a little wag.

How could she be happy?

He gave her a good, hard kick. She cried out and retreated. He lifted the rifle and fitted his mangled finger into the trigger guard.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Koda cowered in the corner. Her whimpering set the other dogs off, snarling, their claws raking the door. There were no guardrails emblazoning the path to Jack. There was an order to things, a correct assemblage of elements. But he knew, with a sudden overwhelming potency, that this was not the way.

He loosened one of the dog leashes that hung from a nail on the wall and tethered Koda to it, then dragged her to the car, trying to cajole her with soothing sounds. It was up to him to make things right.

After he got her into the back seat and folded his walker into the trunk and sat behind the wheel, he realized his face was wet. He'd been crying.

Koda whined and paced from one window to the other the whole way, a pendulum in the rearview mirror. The old man sped past his house to the field where they'd found the ball. The nipper boy was heavy on his mind. He had something to do with this.

The field was cordoned off with yellow tape that hadn't been there before. He saw a rusty coffee can on the ground and kicked it away. There wasn't a bird or a person. Not among the copse of trees that harbored the nipper boy. Nothing but an emptiness that broadcasted the business of every pill bug and damselfly.

The old man tucked the deflated ball into the front of his pants, deciding, for efficiency's sake, to blow it up in the field, and retrieved Koda from the car. No matter which direction he pulled her in, she pulled the other way. It was tiresome work, and her whining was constant and grating.

He dragged Koda under the yellow tape. Heaviness seized him as he backed into the field, towing the dog, to the right place. It was sad work, but it had to be done. Koda panicked and leapt into the air away from him, and he fell to the ground, cursing. He yanked her hard toward him, pulled in the slack of her leash, and held her there. *Now you calm down*. He petted her, his liver-spotted hand firm against the soft gray fur of her nape. She trembled as he hugged her to him, and he felt her little heart, a million chambers firing at once.

A few yards ahead, the smooth plane of the field fell away. He propped himself up to see better. What disaster was this? There was a gaping hole in the ground, as wide as a common pergola. Whatever caused the collapse had carved a neat circular rim into the earth. His thoughts turned skyward, to heavenly bodies, asteroids, and meteors.

The section of wall inside the hole that he could see was brittle, granulating, like a healing wound. Streaks of deep carob-colored earth cut across rutted bands of ashen sediment, and here and there were the delicate ends of tendrilous root systems and jutting rocks—last-ditch lifelines.

The day Jack disappeared, it had rained enough to inspire arks. Now, though the day was dry, the spiced smell of ozone and damp soil overwhelmed the old man. He saw Jack's light-footed leaping over the thin skin of the earth, in this field that faked tranquility. There was the little nipper, opening a door. The dog lumbering through it. The salt stinging his eyes. The fragrance from another time.

*He saw Jack's light-footed leaping over the thin skin of the earth, in this field that faked tranquility. There was the little nipper, opening a door.*

The old man's mouth hung open. *No, no*. His eyes searched the edge of the forest for movement. For the whites of the little nipper's eyes. *No*. He clutched Koda nearer. He tried to make himself taller to see how deep the hole went, how far a fall. *No, it can't be*. His pulse pounded in his ears. Koda whined. His throat tightened. The ground beneath him shifted, sheared, and they were falling.

The old man was uncertain if his eyes were open or closed. His fingers searched his face, his head, came away wet. His mouth, plugged with sand and dirt. He looked in the direction of what seemed to be up and saw a floating light. A pinprick of the world above. The light was shrinking, waning from half-moon to crescent. Then, like a manhole cover sliding into place, the light was gone.

He heard the sound of water trickling and, again, wasn't certain he was awake. One night, when he was a boy, his father

had dreamt about running water and, being very superstitious, called in sick to the coal mine boss the next morning. An explosion killed nearly all the miners on his shift, except for the ones he'd warned.

Maybe the old man was paying for his father's sins. Maybe that's all that children were put on this earth to do.

He drifted off. When he woke, it was still completely dark. There was the familiar suede of his recliner, which his hands told him later was Koda's body, pressed against him. That beautiful, damned dog.

The smell that engulfed him was of raw earth, a sebaceous musk. Of petrichor, from "petros" (stone) and "ichor" (fluid in the veins of the gods). It was beery and aromatic.

He felt the smother. He was not only hearing water now, in his dark blister of earth, but feeling it too. Ice cold on his skin. Soaking his bottom, trickling around his fingers. He felt it in his hair, thrilling his scalp, and rising into his ears. He sat up fast before the water formed a seal over his sense of sound. A vertebral pain made him cry out.

A pale sickle of light formed above him. The sun blushing its salute to a new longitude. The old man cycled through untold phases of consciousness. The grittiness tightened around his eyes. He blinked through the scratch, eyes tearing. Daylight shone in a brightening cone all around him. The water pooled, hungrily rising, lifting up four, five, six ping-pong balls, buoys on the surface.

He heard a dog barking. A boy laughing. A boy sailing, among orbs scattered across the universe, remembering only the good things.

The water established a current. The force opened a tunnel in front of the old man. The ping-pong balls floated away from him, downstream. One was stuck in an eddy, whirling. The water washed over this rogue ball, cleaning the muck from it.

The ball was spinning fast, resisting being pulled under, as if something from downstream were refusing it. A stake thrown in the wheels of the water turning. Something from the future, or from another frequency. Love, maybe, running athwart the gears of time.

The old man lifted the ball from its eddy and brought it close to his face. The marking was faint, but he tilted it to the sun: LR-5.

This should have meant something. He could feel it, familiarity swirling along some corridor and knocking, first politely, then more urgently, almost forcibly. That it might enter and set his body humming with epiphany.

But no. The ball continued to puzzle the old man—the water lapping now at his belly, welling up to his chest—until he let the water take it away.

G. C. WALDREP

## LOWER STRASBURG

(1)

the sheltering categories of weakness

two deer in the fallow field, allusions

the eye's uneasy belief (a legislation)

(2)

gravity's polite applause, an occasion

(3)

apprehensions of silence
among the old examples, the former
(ghosts in what machine)

a history of traps
& of the hallucinators of traps

the known exchanges, a dim pretense

(4)

the precise distance between change
& the consequences of change

the situation brushed against, contact
floods the flaw (with detail)

a rehearsal of the necessities of song

G. C. WALDREP

## CLEARFIELD

absence, a renewal
a longitude

the debt I draw
from the platen's
reverence,
a history of wind

the salience
of what can't be
momentary
(or not merely so)

echo's twilight
monastery recasting
the text I manumit

into the cold cedars
(purpose-in-waiting)
their treaty-loss

the circulation
of distances
I am measured by

the river's battered
silcrow overmining
the biblical skep

fugitive sweetness
imperative
on the red porch
(its muted lexicon)

an emotion
recalling
it too once suffered

DANA CANN

# LARIAT

I don't remember any of us asking to go to a rodeo. As best I can tell it was Dad's idea. It was early 1976. My brothers and I were thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. We'd grown up in the suburbs. I'm not sure we'd ever been on a horse. Maybe a pony at a fair. I remember that the arena's floor was covered with dirt. I remember rodeo clowns and a bucking bronco, though these could be things I've seen in movies or television. One part of the evening I remember distinctly: There was a patriotic segment. 1976 was the bicentennial year, marking America's two hundredth birthday. Celebrations (and hype) were everywhere, months in advance of the Fourth of July holiday. As a horse adorned with bunting galloped across the dirt floor carrying a rider waving a Betsy Ross flag while "Yankee Doodle" blared from the PA, one of my brothers said, off-hand, "I'm getting so tired of this bicentennial stuff."

Tensions I hadn't noticed until then ignited. Dad exploded. We were ungrateful, he told us. Why couldn't we have a nice evening out? For me, the classic middle child, uncomfortable with attention, adept at flying under the radar, who'd most embraced our father's maxims—children are to be seen and not heard; speak when you're spoken to—I'd taken a grin-and-bear-it approach to the evening. I suppose we all had. We were too old for a rodeo. We were teenagers coming of age outside Washington, DC, during the sour, post-Watergate years of oil embargoes, gas rationing, and a lost overseas war. My father could be volatile, as some fathers are, as I've been on occasion since I've grown up and had kids of my own. I had none of this context at the time. Yet this was the memory that stayed with me—a jarring shift, a few minutes of white-hot rage on an otherwise unremarkable night.

His history was murky. For years I'd remembered only one photograph of my father as a child; he's three or four years old, outdoors, in daylight, though I don't recall details such as the

background. He has long, curly hair, which is funny since he'd always been, in my life, bald. He is alone, though the photograph is torn—additional markers or persons excised from the image, on purpose or by accident. I haven't seen the photo since my mother showed it to me when I was a child, about twelve years old. I don't know what became of the picture or if it still exists.

I'd never seen pictures of his parents. None of his grandparents, either. It seemed, with the exception of that one black-and-white image, evidence of my father's childhood in photographs or other documents began when he was in high school—a boarding school in Upstate New York—in yearbook photos when he played on the soccer, hockey, and baseball teams.

He was born in New York City in 1931. He grew up in Brooklyn. These are facts I've always known, the way any kid would know basic facts about their father.

He'd been an orphan and was taken in as a teenager by another family—the Whitneys—in his Brooklyn neighborhood. The Whitneys had three children, all girls, who were close to my father's age. When I was growing up, my father referred to them as his sisters, and we—my brothers and I—referred to them, as well as their mother, as our aunts.

My dad also had an *actual* sister. Aunt Shirley was older and lived in London. She was married to a man named George. They had no children. Shirley and George visited our house in Maryland once, when I was six years old. It was the only time I met her. Since moving from New York to London, she'd taken to calling herself *Sherry*, which she reminded Dad of often, as he—whether out of indifference or stubbornness—never got it. Her visit was brief and tense in my memory. Sherry gave my mom a present, a bottle of expensive perfume, which Mom fumbled and dropped in the front hallway, breaking the bottle and spilling its contents, which soaked into and permanently stained the floor.

*It seemed, with the exception of that one black-and-white image, evidence of my father's childhood in photographs . . . began when he was in high school.*

A few years later Sherry began calling our house, insist-

ing on speaking to whoever answered, unless that person was my mother. (This was the 1970s, the dark days of landlines—though no one called them that—with no caller ID or answering machines. When the phone rang you answered it, and, if you lived in a family like ours, with three hypercompetitive brothers, you raced to do so.) If the caller was Sherry, my heart sank when I heard her voice. She often phoned when my father was at work, timing that my parents deemed purposeful. I understood then, as an adolescent, that it was later in London, that if it was afternoon for me, it was night for Sherry, and I grew to understand, perhaps from my parents' commentary, that the impetus of these calls was alcohol. Sherry—whose dry English accent sounded hopelessly sophisticated and native to my ear, despite the fact that she'd grown up in Brooklyn and moved to London as an adult—liked to talk about two things: how awful my parents were (especially my mother) and how much my brothers and I stood to inherit when Sherry died. I'll admit that, as a teenager, the idea of inheriting vast sums from someone I barely knew held allure, though my memories of these calls remain unpleasant. We had two phones in our house—one in the kitchen and one in my parents' bedroom. I remember sitting on the floor next to my parents' bed, listening to Sherry disparage my mother, unable to stop the attacks or defend her. This was who I was as a child—quiet, shy, and deferential to adults. As I sat in the bright, airy space of my parents' bedroom in the late afternoon, I imagined Sherry in a small, dark study, a single light above a wooden desk, a black phone in one hand, a tumbler with ice and an amber liquid in the other, a cigarette burning in a heavy ashtray on the desk, imbuing the dim light with a hazy quality. I imagined her alone, though George was still alive then (and would be until the end of the 1970s). She was sad, I understood, and this sadness had prompted the frequency and volume of both the drinking and the phone calls to our house. Finally, my father put his foot down and told Sherry no more phone calls. She didn't comply, but my father was insistent, and, after several more calls to London, Sherry's phone calls to us eventually ceased.

Some twenty-five years later, my brothers and I, now adults with families of our own, heard from London again, this time from an official informing us that our Aunt Sherry was dead,

and we were named executors of her will and residual beneficiaries of her estate. My brother David and I traveled to London. It was my first and only trip to England, and, between sightseeing visits to Tower Bridge and Buckingham Palace, we met the lawyer we'd hired at Sherry's apartment in the Barbican, located in an area, I learned, that was destroyed during the Blitz and completely rebuilt during the 1960s in a sprawling example of Brutalist architecture.

This was the apartment from which Sherry had placed those calls to us in the mid-seventies. It wasn't as small as I'd imagined, nor was it as dark, at least not during the day, when we visited that summer. Her furniture was, though—dark, heavy wood pieces—and there were ashtrays on many surfaces.

When David and I met the lawyer, we took inventory of her assets and liabilities. It turned out there wasn't much. The flat was rented. So was the television. Sherry wasn't destitute, but she was getting close.

For his part our father demonstrated a curious lack of interest in the proceedings. He was guarded in a way that my brothers and I recognized whenever the subject was his blood family. His only advice to me as I prepared to go to London to settle the estate was "Don't make it personal." I'm still not sure what he meant by that. Personal was the goal as far as I was concerned.

While the monetary value of the estate fell well short of my adolescent fantasies, I came away with some nuggets. Our lawyer intimated, for instance, that Sherry's death had been a suicide. She'd left a note, he told us, and, while the note was never made available to us, we learned that her instructions were to contact my brothers and me in the United States "and NO next of kin," meaning our father.

In addition to a few thousand dollars in inheritance, I brought home a trove of photographs and correspondence, which I packed in a vintage Harrods hatbox that Sherry had stored in a closet. Most of the photos were of Sherry and George with various friends in and around London and what appeared to be the English countryside, as well as on voyages across the Atlantic aboard the RMS *Queen Mary* of the Cunard Line. These pictures, regardless of locale, showed Sherry, George, and their friends often dressed to the nines, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, sitting at tables in clubs and restaurants, with glorious food on expensive china.

Like my father, Sherry didn't have photographs from her

childhood in New York, with one exception: a faded picture of an infant held by a man with a full head of hair and glasses, wearing a suit and tie. The image is labeled: "Shirley R. Cann 5 wks old." The man, I believe, is her father, my grandfather. They're outside in this picture, like the only photo I'd seen of my dad as a child. And, like that photo, this one is torn in half; the jagged edge runs down the man's spine.

The centerpiece of the documents I'd retrieved from London was a series of letters and telegrams sent across the Atlantic between Brooklyn (Sherry) and London (George) in 1947. Sherry would have been twenty-five then. They'd apparently met in New York, and the contents of these telegrams—in addition to professing their eternal love for each other—form the plan that will allow Sherry to move to London and marry George. The biggest complication is Gerald, my father, now sixteen, for whom Sherry is presumably legal guardian and supports through her salary and any residual assets from their now-deceased parents. At one point George suggests that Sherry bring Gerald with her, an idea that Sherry dismisses. In a later telegram Sherry enthuses that she's worked it out, and she leaves New York for London with what is presumably a clear enough conscience to live her life with George in post-war England.

Despite my father's pleas, I was making it very personal.

I regret now not asking my parents to fill in the blanks when I was young. My mother, with whom I was close, died when I was twenty-three, an age at which I was still self-absorbed and incurious. My father and I were never close, but I don't believe it would have helped if we were. As my brother Jeff once observed, "You don't ask Dad about his childhood."

My father had many good and loving traits. Once, when I was in first or second grade and sick in bed, he came home after work bearing a gift for me, a Batman game. The 1960s-era *Batman* TV series starring Adam West was popular then. I loved Batman and loved that show. He didn't need to bring me that gift, but he did.

Despite a demanding job, he was also hyperinvolved in afterschool activities. He led our Cub Scout pack for two years. Later, he started a youth soccer league in our neighborhood, an endeavor that involved countless hours of organizing and Saturdays on the field.

But despite the good, he was difficult (for me, at least) to be

close to. His sternness and admonitions contributed greatly to my shyness and my inability to speak up and defend my mother when Sherry hurled her abuse over the phone. My father, who'd had no parental guidance during his adolescence, took it upon himself to over-parent me, to order meals for me in restaurants, to guide me toward a college and a major that launched me on the wrong trajectory. He was controlling, though I don't fully blame him. He was doing his best. But his overbearing presence, I believe, contributed to my chronic and sometimes debilitating depression that developed during my early adolescence and manifested in poor grades and few friends. My depression was only identified as such years later, in my thirties, when I sought treatment and read books about mental illnesses and learned that my illness had likely attached itself to me through him, his genes, and our shared family history. I came to understand that his controlling behavior was a byproduct of his own feelings of abandonment as a child, and those feelings, along with the responsibilities foisted upon him when he was orphaned, perhaps also created distance between us as I grew older.

*Those feelings, along with the responsibilities foisted upon him when he was orphaned, perhaps also created distance between us as I grew older.*

Once, on a weekend road trip, my car's clutch failed in the unforgiving peaks and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains. My friends were at the beach. I called my dad from a payphone to see if he could help me, as I was stuck. His answer was unequivocal: It was too far. I should find a bus to bring me home, even as I explained that I was in the mountains and saddled with a bicycle and a guitar and my weekend bag in the back seat of my broken-down car. It was a big ask—to drive six hours roundtrip to rescue an adult son with car trouble—though now that I have adult kids of my own, I can't imagine saying no to a similar predicament.

Another time I merely asked to borrow a tool for a project I was undertaking at my house. This seemed an infinitesimally small ask. I'd drive to his house, pick up the tool from his garage, and return it when I was through. Again, he refused in a

tone that made me feel as though I'd been taking advantage of him for years. I vowed then to never ask him for another favor, a vow I largely kept, even as he relied heavily on my help in his final years.

By the time Sherry died in 2000, I had another tool available—internet content had exploded in recent years. Newspapers, especially major newspapers like *The New York Times*, had been largely digitized. I dived into *The Times*' archives in search of my father's family. Here I learned his father's name was Milton and his mother was Stella. I learned the names of Stella's parents, though the names and origins of Milton's family remained opaque. I also learned that Stella died in 1931, the year my father was born. I learned the name of Milton's textile business and found a notice of bankruptcy and liquidation from 1944. I found no obituary or death notice for Milton. But armed with his name I found a publicly available summary of the 1940 U.S. census that listed Milton, born in 1896 in Georgia. (I've never learned if *Georgia* meant the state or the country.) Other members of the household included Shirley, then eighteen, and Gerald, then eight. A fourth member of the household was listed as Cicile Dudley, a housekeeper. My father subsequently explained that he was raised by a governess, "a witch," he called her once, months before his death, who spanked him often with a wooden spoon.

Over the years my brothers and I learned through the Whitneys that Milton's death, like his daughter's more than fifty years later, had been a suicide.

While my father was reticent to talk about his early years, he told occasional anecdotes. In one, which I understood took place when he was eleven or twelve, he and a friend each bought a single token and rode the entire New York City Subway system over the course of a day. This story was told with a dose of bravado and a dizzying sense of freedom, like in a children's story where the young protagonist gets away with mischief without consequence.

Then, sometime in the new century, in the years following Sherry's death, he finally told a story about his father. Milton, it seemed, loved opera. There was a radio program he listened to on Sunday evenings. One Sunday Milton was driving my father home from Manhattan to Brooklyn when a news bulletin inter-

rupted the opera broadcast. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

This brief story—one scene, really—brought Milton suddenly and vividly to life. He was no longer constrained by an entry in the 1940 census or the name of his textile business as it appeared in a bankruptcy notice. He was a man who drove a car. He loved opera. An image formed of a living room with a large radio—a "wireless," they might have called it. They lived in a brownstone in my mind, though I later learned that they had little money and had rented an apartment.

In April 2022, my father, on the cusp of turning ninety-one, lost his wife, Diane, to cancer. This was his second marriage, which had lasted nearly thirty years. His first marriage to my mom had lasted twenty-five years and ended in 1984 with her death from cancer at the age of forty-nine.

On the morning Diane died, I visited him at his assisted living facility. Diane's body was still in the apartment, in the next room in a hospital bed that Medicare had provided. Diane's son Mark was there, having attended to his mom, along with my father and the hospice nurse. My dad was distraught, of course, as he and Mark recounted Diane's death, how she'd announced she was ready to die and then did.

Then, over the course of the next hour, an expansive mood overtook my dad. He told Mark and me that he never knew his mother, that she'd died of a brain tumor the week he was born. Then he told us a story about his father. It was 1942 in this story, maybe early 1943. His father owned a textile company, a fact I already knew from my review of *The New York Times*' archives. My father went on: Milton's business was failing. He relied on dyes from Indonesia. With the war in the Pacific, his source was gone. Other sources were directed toward the war effort, and dyes became prohibitively expensive.

Then my dad made a surprising pivot: "I begged to go to the rodeo."

"The rodeo?" I asked, not understanding the nexus.

"The rodeo," he said. "The rodeo was coming to New York, and I begged him to take me."

The windows of my father's apartment in the assisted living facility faced east. They received lots of sun in the morning, but he kept the blinds down, the slats closed so that the quality of light, even on an April morning, felt like dusk in wintertime.

"I asked for a lariat," he continued.

"A lariat?" I asked. "What's a lariat?"

"A lasso," he said, as though he'd raised a dullard. "A lariat is a lasso."

The heating unit cycled on and blew hot air toward the ceiling with a volume that threatened to impede conversation. I leaned closer on his couch, my forearms on my knees.

"I begged him for that lariat. He bought it for me."

There was that word again—*begged*. The story was about an eleven-year-old boy who never knew his mother and wanted to see the rodeo when it was in town and persuaded his father to take him and buy him a souvenir—a lasso—from a concession stand.

"I woke up the next morning," he went on, "and my father had hung himself with the lariat in the bathroom."

The apartment went silent. Maybe the heating unit ran, maybe it didn't. After a few moments I asked, "Did you find him?"

"Yes."

As I absorbed the image—my father, eleven, discovering his father hanging from the rope he'd begged him to buy the night before—he said, "I'm tough. I'll be fine."

Here was—finally—my dad's story. Here was how his mother died when he was an infant, how he never knew her. Here was how his father died, how he learned his father died. He'd lost two wives to cancer. He was alone again, in his nineties. But he was "tough." He'd be "fine." His was a story of resilience.

In the weeks that followed, I remembered again the night in 1976 when Dad took us to the rodeo—how the tensions swirled and then exploded. Compared to our dad, age eleven when his father took him to the rodeo more than thirty years before, we were older, jaded, and, no doubt, comfortable, both emotionally and financially, in a way that Dad had never been when he was young. I didn't have this context at the time and wouldn't have understood it even if it had been available to me. All I knew was that our evening had turned bad, that my dad was disappointed in his kids, even as that characterization, to my mind, wasn't fair. The pall cast in that moment remained the clearest memory of our night at the rodeo for decades, though I'd barely thought of it until Diane died and Dad, in a rare moment of candor, shared the story of his father's death and the rodeo he'd begged to go to and the souvenir lariat he'd begged for and received.

Some months later I took him to a medical appointment. His heart was failing, a condition that would eventually take his life a year later. But at the time, his doctors were considering a procedure to replace a valve. We checked in and took a seat in the waiting area, when he said, "I saw that psychiatrist."

I nodded. A psychiatrist visited him once a quarter at his assisted living facility. He'd already told me about the most recent visit. Since Diane had died and he was now alone, he repeated himself more and more, a condition that would get worse as he grew closer to the end of his life, as his weak heart restricted the oxygen flow to his brain. "What did you talk about?" I asked.

"She wanted to know how I'm *doing*." He emphasized this last word, as if to say it was obvious how he was doing, and it wasn't great.

"How *are* you doing?" I asked, a question I posed every time we talked. (It was a question he routinely asked me too. *Okay*, I usually said, the noncommittal, go-to answer for the chronically depressed.)

"I told her I'm fine," he said, "except I'm bored." (This too was his standard response to the how-are-you-doing question, though it was often accompanied by a complaint about his arthritic knee.)

The conversation paused before he continued: "She asked whether I ever thought about killing myself. I said, '*What*? Of course not.'"

"Good."

"She wants me to take medicine," he said. "I told her no."

I've taken antidepressants for decades, though I'd never discussed it with him.

We sat in silence for a few moments. I'd often wondered if he was depressed. My brothers and I encouraged him to talk to a therapist, but he always refused.

"My father killed himself, you know."

"Yes," I said, to remind him that I knew the story and to encourage him to continue.

"He sure took the coward's way out."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, his wife had died, his business was failing, and he had a kid at home."

I wished to defend him. "He was probably depressed," I said.

"I guess so," he said.

The door opened and a nurse called his name. We stood—my father on his cane—and we walked toward the open door and the hallway that led to the examining rooms and another test for his failing heart, still somehow beating for ninety-two years, now with little time left.

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

## CHARLIE HEBDO

Notre-Dame, 7 January 2015

This humid musk, this light stained lavender
by the red and blue shards
of glass fixed together into a rose's
florescence. This nave shaped like a cross
where I alone stand in its sight, at the center
of its crosshairs, struck dumb
and open-mouthed. Empty
but for a statued archway of saints
standing clustered, peering down. Empty
but for the sarcophagi, the apse
where the carcasses of clergy lie dissolving
under a marble floor (*get murdered*
*and you too could become a martyr*, a youth minister
once joked). The Virgin etched
into reliefs in the doorway I passed through,
a crown lowering onto her head
because no one's as relatable as a mother
holding in her lap a dead son.
The ceiling's ribbed vault chambering
each sound I make, then hushing it
to nothing. The forest of thousand-year-old trees
supporting a roof of gunmetal lead
arched above like the rib cage of a whale,
and I, Jonah, ever the disbeliever,
brought by awe back into belief. *How lucky am I*,
I think, ignorant as marble, arriving
with my roller bags and dead phone
to a vacant cathedral, sirens' arcs swelling
up and down these city streets built for horses
as I step into that medieval dark.

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

## SOLSTICE

Because this day is as long as any will be,
you go out at night to see the velvet blue band
still rim the sky, a reminder you live

on a planet that turns, the flat stars
shivering above you like mites. Your life is small;
you're aware that from here on out

it only grows smaller. That time you were at a party
(it was your party, after all, everyone had come
to celebrate you—someone had baked

a cake, someone strummed a banjo),
you stepped outside to watch it happen
like someone walking home late at night

who, hearing music play from inside
a house, pauses at the lawn's threshold
under a streetlamp to listen.

JENNA JOHNSON

## EXITS

After Bhanu Kapil

Who are you and whom do you
love? I am not responsible for the answer, nor
my mother's suffering. I can tell you who was.
I asked the angel to wean me. All day a gauzy wind
worked to clot the wound on my back. Out west
on the cliffs, the J on my neck turned
on its side. Lucky if I could remember
which key unlocked the front door
or the path to God. I know what to do in case
of a tsunami. Describe a morning you woke
without fear. Blowing Rock 2015 first spring. The house
sparrow bathing in a dark puddle. That summer
a severe drought, so needing of love or to sleep
in my mother's bed. I held the hem of my shirt out
to form a basket and stood at the base of the mountain
waiting for an avalanche. Asked my angel
to list the consequences of silence. To my credit,
it cost me bitterly to lie.

JENNA JOHNSON

## DEAR NEIGHBOR

There's sometimes a young woman
in the window next to you, and I can't tell
if your apartments are connected. I waited
here to see if you'd hold something small
again, like when you look through
old pictures. Do you want to know more
about me? I have a vase in the shape
of a head on my table, the red roses I bought earlier
exploding out kind of like a brain. Where do I look
at my hands to see them best? Last night,
a man walked by me wearing an eye patch.
Then another wearing a trapper hat. I fell asleep
then woke to my hand holding my other hand.
Do you love that woman? I hope
you are not alone. I'd have been
in the Berkshire Valley by now. I'd tell
the man I love to meet me there. I often dream
about us in a new town. He tells me about cutting his lip
open and points with his crooked finger that he
must have broken. He has big, soft hands
and wears the hats I make for him. I like when
I can see through your apartment to your balcony
on the far side, the sunlit room before it
when it's empty.

ROBERT KRUT

## INTERIOR DECORATING

The cruelty is a dish of tines
to be eaten by hand. The mural
behind the table pictures a furious
ocean cradling a seagull. You're

on your way, you say, but slammed
the brakes to avoid a deer. We will
drink another thimble of air, praise

you from afar, and your efforts. Each
time we look at the portrait
of the sea beside us, the wave

is placed differently. Across town,
the deer won't leave your headlights'
arms. Go ahead, open the bottle you

planned to bring, raise a glass while
you wait. The painting's water has
frozen, the seagull flown away. Polish

off that bottle, we toast you from afar.
The deer lifts as if by strings and
disappears into the treetops. We are
a painting for you to see upon arrival.

We are poisoned and we are gone.

ROBERT KRUT

## BIOSONAR DAWN

The metronome of a faucet
drip in the kitchen, a quiet pulse
through the house, a ghost
dancing around the stream
of its rhythm. I was looking
for a dance partner anyway, so
here we go.

I call for you to ask: *You hear
this too, right?* to no reply. Are
you simply asleep, or are you
halfway across town, seated
comfortably in a phantom taxi?

Could go look, but the house's
center of gravity is a skeleton's
hand tugging at my leg.

Look out the window. I'll look
straight into the sun
if it will help. When I'm done,

all I can see is a line from
straight ahead. Launch

this arrow. Drink

the water. Are you home.

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Dana Cann** is the author of the novel *Ghosts of Bergen County* (Tin House). His short stories and essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Florida Review*, and *LitHub*, among others.

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**Amanda DeMatto**'s fiction has appeared in *The Cincinnati Review* and is forthcoming in *Boulevard*. She received an MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College. She divides her time between New York City and New England and is currently at work on her debut novel.

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**Allison Hutchcraft** is the author of *Swale* (New Issues, 2020). Her poems have appeared in *Boulevard*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Missouri Review*, Poem-a-Day, and elsewhere. She teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

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**Jenna Johnson** is a poet from North Carolina. She received her MFA in creative writing from New York University. Her work has been featured in *The Penn Review*, *Spectrum Literary Journal*, Cornell's *Rainy Day* magazine, UCLA's *Westwind* magazine, and internationally in *SurfGirl* magazine, among others.

**Daniel Kuo** is a fiction writer based in California, where he is completing his MFA at UC Riverside. His work has appeared in *Red Rock Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *Hyphen*, and has received support from the San Francisco Writers Grotto and Community of Writers.

**Robert Krut** is the author of *Oh, Oblivion* (forthcoming in 2025), *Watch Me Trick Ghosts*, *The Now Dark Sky*, *Setting Us All on Fire* (winner of the Codhill Poetry Award), *This Is the Ocean*, and *The Spider Sermons*.

**Heather Kirn Lanier** is the author of a poetry collection, *Psalms of Unknowing*, and a memoir, *Raising a Rare Girl*, a *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice. Her essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *Longreads*, *The Atlantic*, and elsewhere. She works as an associate professor of creative writing at Rowan University.

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*Green*, *Narrative*, and elsewhere. She is the 2017 winner of the Madeleine P. Plonsker Emerging Writer's Residency Prize and has been named a finalist for both the Orlando Poetry Prize and the James Hearst Poetry Prize. Her poem "Lunar Understanding" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is a producer for Rachel Zucker's podcast, *Commonplace*. She moved home to Los Angeles after spending a decade in Brooklyn.

**Ezra Garey Levine** is a poet, dramaturg, chaplain, and editor whose poems have appeared in *Thimble Literary Magazine* and *In Parentheses*. They earned their Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School in 2024 and are based in Brooklyn, New York.

**Andrew Maxwell** is from Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His poems have previously appeared in *Digital Vestiges*, *Antiphony*, *Image*, and *Lana Turner*, among other places.

**Jenny Molberg**'s third poetry collection, *The Court of No Record* (LSU Press, 2023), was a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist. Her poems and essays have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Agni*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Oprah Quarterly*, and other publications. She has received support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Hambidge Center, the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Longleaf Writers Conference. A National Endowment for the Arts fellow, she is a professor of writing, literature, and publishing and editor-in-chief of *Ploughshares* at Emerson College.

**Nathaniel Perry** is the author of two books of poetry, *Nine Acres* (Copper Canyon, 2011) and *Long Rules* (Backwaters, 2021). His book of essays, *Joy (Or Something Darker but Like It)* (University of Michigan Press, 2024), is recently out in the Poets on Poetry series. He lives in rural Virginia and teaches at Hampden-Sydney College.

**Jacques J. Rancourt** is the author of *Brocken Spectre* (Alice James Books) and *Novena* (Pleiades Press). He has received honors such as an NEA fellowship, a Halls Emerging Artist

Fellowship from the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. He lives in San Francisco.

**Marney Rathbun** is a chaplain and a writer. She holds an MFA from NYU and an MDiv from Harvard. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Harvard Advocate*, *West Branch*, *Iterant*, and elsewhere. She lives with her wife and two cats on Cape Cod.

**Mariah Rigg** is the author of the short story collection *Extinction Capital of the World* (Ecco, 2025). Her work has been featured in *The Sewanee Review*, *Chicago Review of Books*, *Oxford American*, and others, and has received support from organizations like MASS MoCA and the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Madeleine Scott** is a doctoral student in Religion at Harvard University, where she works on gender, psychoanalysis, and Christian sanctity.

**Craig Morgan Teicher** is the author of *Welcome to Sonnetville, New Jersey*, and the forthcoming *Memoir and Other Poems*.

**G. C. Waldrep**'s most recent books are *Feast Gently* (Tupelo, 2018), winner of the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America; *The Earliest Witnesses* (Tupelo/Carcanet, 2021); and *The Opening Ritual* (Tupelo, 2024). Recent work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *The Yale Review*, *The Nation*, *New American Writing*, *Conjunctions*, and other journals. Waldrep lives in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where he teaches at Bucknell University.

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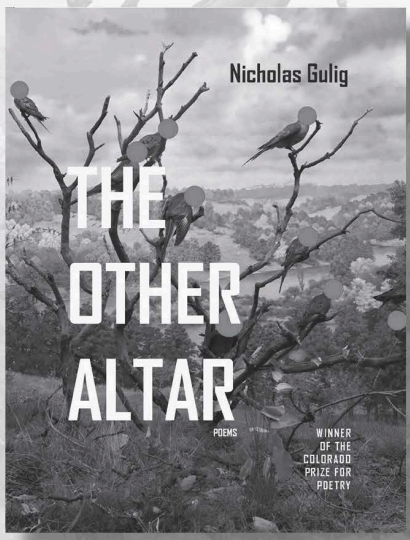
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**—BRENDA SHAUGHNESSY, final judge**

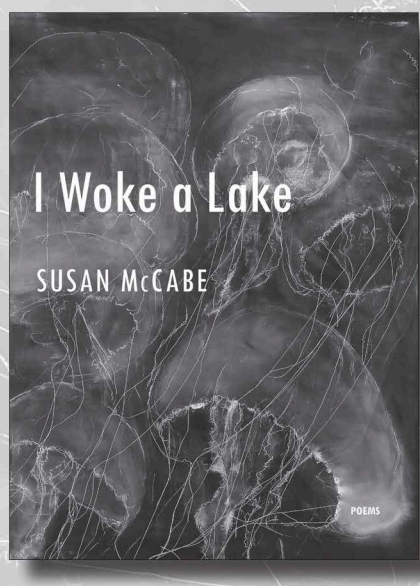
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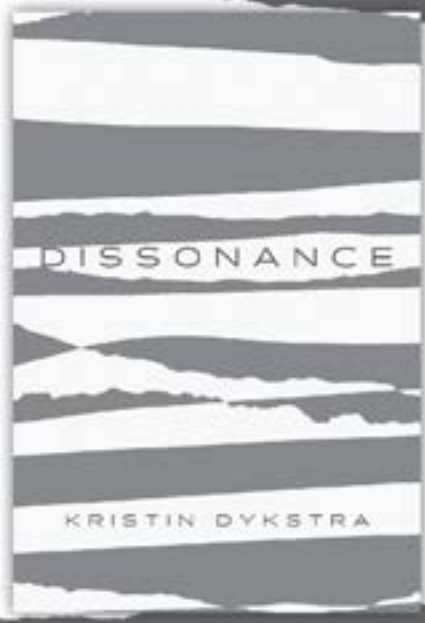
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