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JOHN GALLAHER

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R. X. ZHANG

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EDITORS' PAGE

It's mid-December as we wrap up production on this issue, and the news cycle, often grim anyway, feels particularly so at the moment, creating an unfortunately familiar sense of disconnect: Adjacent to so much tragedy and sorrow, there is inevitably still joy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the stories and essays in these pages echo this peculiar crux of our human experience. Norm, a grieving saddlemaker in Mellissa Sojourner's story "Queen of the Rodeo," makes this doleful observation: "In one square mile there could be loss and sickness, there could be sun-scorched inner tubes and autumn nights—that was how the world looked to him now, heaped in contradiction, a shiny jewel just waiting for a thief." In a family on the verge of imploding, a pet bunny serves as the repository for everyone's unspoken grievances in Kate Lister Campbell's "If You Wanted to Live." A father and daughter, hobbled by grief, illness, and addiction, struggle through a Vermont winter in Priscilla Hunnewell's "The Good Thing." And in R. X. Zhang's "The Making of the Imperial Tofu," a young girl attending mandatory military camp agonizes over her family's reduced circumstances and mourns the absence of her troubled friend. Darius Stewart's lyrically beautiful essay "In the Wake" examines the complex threads of his grief following his father's death. Keith Stahl's poignantly humorous "Rabid" explores the nexus of fear, love, and death as Stahl recounts a run-in he and his wife have with a likely rabid fox as they are about to visit his dying father. And as that bit of inevitable joy in the midst of so much grief, T. L. Khleif's "Everything You've Ever Done Wrong" recalls the summer of 1989, when she and her strict father, having spent weeks fighting with each other, reach détente at a Ringo Starr concert: "I was acutely aware that we were in a moment of calm and happiness—that, however elusive, this was our true life together—and I should hold on to as much of it as I could."

We hope, of course, that you come to this issue from a space of joy rather than grief, but if you find yourself in that other territory, perhaps Darius Stewart's experience offers something of a balm: "I was trying to write from there, not around it but through it."

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

What I am most grateful for these days are moments when the world encourages me to stop and appreciate its treasure. It's hard to know where splendor will show, but the poems in these pages offer instance after instance of glory. Like Byron Xu, "I Test the Ductile Strength of Everyday Objects," and despite the many forces that tear our world apart, often I find evidence of unbreakable connections. Sometimes, as Donald Platt does in his poem, "Slides," I discover bombastic grandeur hovering all around, like fireflies, and the music of the world grows more wonderful and welcoming. The poems in this issue offer lessons in looking. Adam Edelman has us looking at a "Labyrinth in a Dewdrop," and through such a lens, the world grows simultaneously weirder and clearer. There's Bob Hicok's concern about the "unintended consequences" that erupt endlessly from our very existence, and Jordan Hamel describing "How to Drive Drunk in a Flaming Paddock." These poems tend to provide more clarity on how *not* to live a life than easy answers about how to persist. Such clarity might help us survive, though survival is rarely a given, or something to be simply attained. Apollo Chastain offers lessons for survival in "My Old Man," and we find a different sort of dangerous instruction in Akhim Yuseff Cabéy's "When a Black Man Dies." If survival depends partially on trusting the human spirit to live on through mistakes and willful cruelties, John Gallaher and Suphil Lee Park make art from such horror and error. Sarah Gambito, Lana Reeves, and Radha Marcum attend to what is left to celebrate and praise, and Andrew Israel Reed and Hee-June Choi look to something I might call justified hope. Like Mik Johnson, all these poets understand that catastrophe might happen at any moment. It's enough, sometimes, to be grateful that the worst of the worst has not happened yet and to look, meanwhile, for beauty.

—CAMILLE T. DUNGY

JORDAN HAMEL

HOW TO DRIVE DRUNK IN A FLAMING PADDOCK

Don't do it, obviously. Unless
you have to. Unless you're trying
to impress the crop farmer's daughter
lounging in the hue of the scrub burn-off,
drinking bourbon and Coke from the can.
Unless school is over and what else is there
to do? Unless your mates are doing it.
How could you say no? When all are sauced
on the myths of fathers in their secondhand
chariots, cutting laps into pleasure hours.
It feels good to survive what you shouldn't.
The tires epilate rapeseed from soil.
You are dirt quickened. You all want to be
the close shave of a careless generation. A bottle,
now, vomited into the ether. A windshield buckled
is a bulldozed dusk choir, is a murder
of china crows. Is that how your bro went?
No, that was much later. A few farms over.
A quick trip home from the tavern. Alone.
Deep winter. No courtesy coach. No taxi.
Traction. Gravel. Spooked willows.
Seat belt splintered. Stars, no longer
fixed guides, just the night
baring teeth to the living.

JORDAN HAMEL

HOW TO DESECRATE A HOLY MESSAGE

Drunk; God bothered. We rearranged the basilica
signage: “no matter who you are, dogs love you.”
The bells rattled pigeon shit off the steeple, doubling
as last call for the nearby pub. We promised each other
we’d never again bridge these twin pillars.
Postmidnight, we abandoned mass, ripped the guts
out of the evening and, with echoed incaution,
jumped the town-square boxer—a southpaw
bronzed in semicrouch—now adorned
with road cones lifted through shattered glass
from the council office where your father, looking
upon his constituency, often sat. Later, you would feed
me a blame you knew I would stomach;
the lion’s share. But not before we swapped
mouths in the slop of your family hot tub, lapping
any wetness, like mangy strays being fed the hose
by a kindly neighbor. We’re all neighbors. Here,
a newspaper can raise an army. A child will learn
no parent can deny the burning bush.
Do you ever go home? Stay. Your new family,
do they know where you went to church, and what
does the sign say? Sit. You’ve always known. Good
boy. There is only one dog; he loves you no matter what.

JORDAN HAMEL

THIS IS THE END (& OTHER DECLARATIONS)

Between Bunsen burns & studio
heads, inner bliss was bungled.
Now, like analytics, we
re-create God in the aggregate—
spring hyacinth, death
after life after death.
A good woman, with arms
as big as high school, looms
a tapestry of all the gone
ever known. The eyes
are wrong, wrong. We only love
what's in front of us. Can't see
the forest from the other forest.
Sometimes people are friends
then not friends, but,
wait, yep, friends again,
like cytokinetic cells in mitosis,
or coming-of-age comedies. When you
see it coming, it's the opposite
of real life, of whatever
this should be.

JOHN GALLAHER

THE CHANCES ARE PRETTY SLIM THAT YOU EXIST

While on the phone with investigators, the last time
my identity was stolen, about the things done
with my identity, they wouldn't tell me what they were,
because I was me, not fake-me, and therefore
it was privileged information. I don't know what's going on,
as leitmotif. As everyday volcano. A meanness
in the weeding or E I E I O. Why did the insult machine
suddenly give compliments? You may well ask.
What about this unusually shaped chair? You may well ask.
Sometimes I say to myself, "Hey you."
Like your motivational self-talk you're glad
no one else can hear. You wake in the recovery room.
Yes, this is my name on the chart. No,
this is not my name on the chart. That the rose stands for.

*

It's the dust's heaviness that imbues it with meaning.
There's always another way in, and finding it isn't so difficult
as it is foreign, and you may have to make yourself small,
or wear a funny hat, with your own inimitable relationship
with your feelings. Finding a way to that question
will retroactively color your response.
How did I not notice this room before?
How do you explain the sudden appearance of the Grim Reaper?
Yes, I live here. No, these are not my puppets. The name
of my first pet. It was a good-sized asteroid
66 million years ago that turned our planet into a debris field
of chemicals that, eventually, fostered life.
Follow me. The doctor will see you now.
Much consternation and vestiges of a river.

JOHN GALLAHER

MINOR HOUSE GOD ON VOLCANO VOTIVE CANDLE, GLAZED

I had rocks for pets, and now people look at me funny
for crying at rock gardens. Maybe I don't cry.
But I want to. And the air is full of shrieking,
that one grows roses next to, and then momentarily notices
in moments of weakness. I must be having a moment
of weakness. And always the volcanoes we keep building
our houses on. I think we weren't supposed to do that,
but the soil was delightful. There were weddings
to go to and seat belts not to wear. Many signs
of trouble to come, but they look like regular street signs.
"Kings Park Exit 2 Miles," that sort of thing. Years ago.
And there were a lot of emergency texts we didn't get
because they hadn't been invented yet. Maybe try
telekinesis? Like everything is wind chimes?

*

I mean it suggestively. Because there are real volcanoes
and then there are the volcanoes we hold inside ourselves,
like deciding to put all your money in your mattress
and then dragging your mattress everywhere you go. Hold on,
everyone, I'll be right there, I'm having trouble
getting my mattress through the door. And the volcano stuff
is hyperbole, too, like saying I don't think people
like me. Or saying we're never more fully alive
than in the past. And I'm worried this is how I'm always
going to be. And, now that I think of it,
maybe people really don't like anyone all that much. So keep
dreaming you're something else. A self-actualized pocket watch.
A nice pencil set on tax day. Which would be worse, angry
giant robot or giant robot in love? Which would win in a fight?

JOHN GALLAHER

UNMADE FLOORS

Some problems are dropped on our heads, some we invent.
Sometimes it's both, brain sparking and flashing.
"I can't believe I'm trapped," we say. Then, maybe, "I can't believe
I'm free." Even the mice, live-trapped and set out in the field,
are thrilled to be here, back at the bottom of the food chain.
"Look how we provide!" they squeak, scurrying off
toward the fox in the underbrush. I guess I'm free?
How does one know? I'm having trouble
with the coffee machine and I think I'm talking to myself
when a voice comes from somewhere with what I need to do
to make it work. Thank you, disembodied voice-over
narrator. The world is myriad and can't be generalized.
People get lost in the woods and make a phone call.
People walk out the front door and disappear.

*

Even when you get it right, you have to do something
the next day. What's the current thinking on space aliens?
How about coffee shops? The biodiversity prospects of bananas?
Your upbeat friend turns decidedly not upbeat at the end,
and later you have to decide what to do with the notes.
Hide? Revise? Destroy? Or do we lean into the complication,
the real one, where you have to stand on one foot
at the end of the plank and sing? "Heavens to Murgatroyd!
It's the Holy Grail!" you might say. The wisteria muses
are on a bender again. However we say it, it's "I'll get you yet,
Cully" we hear, a parade of housekeeping pushing its way
down the hall. The little elegies of the place one is,
in which we speak all the parts silently to ourselves,
holding the lion's paw, thinking of the world to come.

JOHN GALLAHER

LOOK AT ALL THESE THINGS I CAN PRETEND TO BE

This is a poem about control. Everything I know about control
isn't very much, so the poem is going to be brief.
I'll try to stretch it out, as I have a form I'm wanting it
to be in, which is also a good way to start talking about
control. The dog keeps herding the cat to the steps
for the photograph. You and your love caught between
a better way to fold towels. A large figure
approaches. Fight or flight? Maybe sing
or act weird. Maybe take up painting. What is the ultimate
purpose in life? Throw some golden apples? Like how
we become something else after years of being the same.
Today I feel huge, looking at small things. At some point
I will feel small again. Everyone's going through
some shit. You laugh, sometimes, pretending to get a joke.

*

You have to tell all the truth but tell it in semaphore,
so it's going to take a while. Maybe coffee first?
The people of Paris are walking in and out
of their apartments. Psithurism is the wings of trees
or lovers you overhear in public.
Patience, I think, is the lesson. And certain
percussive effects of machinery in the dark.
Professional athletes are wild. That's all I can offer
on that. Musicians, too,
the ones who up and play along with a song
they're just hearing for the first time. Where did all this amazement
come from, from the soda fizz of your brain to the elbows
of your heart? It's important to find out, I was also born beside a river
and placed in a lute.

JOHN GALLAHER

THE ART OF POETRY

There's a ladder in my bedroom for six months, because
six months ago I was going to paint. Or maybe
there's nothing to it. You trip, and it's a Jackson Pollock.
You trip and it's Thelonious Monk. Monk and Pollock,
who knew? So close, but look how much closer
one can still get. Tripping over what, for instance. "Yes,"
what answers. I'm overpowered by imagining this feather.
I'm overpowered by these life lessons through macaroni.
There's glue all over my fingers, like science mixed
with snot. And what is there to say other than "ugh,"
at the room of your past loves? They're having
expensive champagne they put on your hotel bill.
They're talking to each other, passing around
your secret diary. The one so secret you didn't even know.

*

The fight between the parents is visited upon the child.
Glib fantasia. I pretend I don't want to control anything.
It's my version of control. No, we're just talking,
I pretend. A key component of control is pretending.
The possum plays dead at the end of the block.
Maybe it's really dead. Then it's gone. Maybe something
ate it. We play dead at work. We're practicing. Power
makes rules to keep things tidy. When you have no power,
you have to sparkle or pass notes. This one says,
"Don't anthropomorphize the rich."
This is a version of sparkle. You're sure you're in love.
All bets are off. It's easy to be a monster.
This is the end of the second parable.
There is a dark room behind you.

PRISCILLA HUNNEWELL

THE GOOD THING

The explosion was missed, though by how many miles or minutes, I can't say. We saw only the blood it left behind, pink with melt on the trampled snowbank. My father made a show of examining the spatter and, sucking condensation from his mustache, pronounced it *fresh*. There was no sound except his breathing. We looked down the trail for the dying thing—for it must have been dying, dying still, because dying, I'd come to realize, takes so fucking long—but we saw no sign of it, just gray light and the perfect chiaroscuro of the snow-decked conifer: beauty like a blunt object.

"Some idiot," my father said.

He grunted irritably, like he always did before cursing the failure of circumstance to, yet again, prepare him for the execution of some unnecessary act of heroism. His whole self-image was a quixotic patchwork of these projected futures in which he would have saved the day if only certain distances, inclemencies of weather, or incompatibilities of filial blood types had not prevented him. It made me want to pat his hand, like a little boy's, but I just watched him spit brownly into the snow. He sighed.

"I don't have a goddamn gun."

We had set out—snowshoed and down-coated—to buy lunch. The lunch in question was seven miles away, which was the sole reason I entertained the possibility of eating it. My father, unacquainted with the rarified equations of calorie counting and burning, took this as a sign of progress. Our expedition then assumed an air of martial festivity, as though we were on our way to vanquish some enemy whose flag was, for all intents and purposes, already in hand. Perhaps scared of losing this strategic advantage, he hurried us out of the house at nine a.m. Only a heathering of clouds suggested that the sun, somewhere, was in evidence. I felt incalculably old as I watched him rush out the door, hat still off, his gloves dangling from one wrist, trying to zip endless waterproof zippers with hands trembling from the last night's drink, all while maintaining the brisk stride that

only he, in his fear and zeal, thought necessary. There were so many things, it seemed then, that he needed protection from.

"It might heal," I said, as an offering to the silence. He scoffed.

"No," he said, "it won't. An injured animal is a dead one."

I kept my eyes fixed on the snow. Every dozen yards or so there was more blood, little droplets in demented zigzags. Looking at them you could see exactly how it had gone: the huge body stumbling along, its legs veering left and right out of time with the wildly swinging head, the furious eyes that could find nowhere good enough to die. I imagined antlers, though I knew it was a romantic detail; they would have been shed months ago.

"It's fucking illegal," my father continued, shaking his head, disgusted. He dug a gray tab of nicotine gum out of his chest pocket. "The season ended December fifteenth."

"Well, whenever it ended, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Somebody needs to shoot that deer. Put it out of its misery. It could be a week before . . ." He pressed the gum into his mouth as though to muffle himself and muttered something again about idiots and guns, the importance of mercy and its brutal administration. I was about to cut him off when a flash of neon burst and disappeared on the crest of the far hill. We both saw it. My father called out. The breath left me as we hurried toward the figure.

The man in the hunting gear had a rifle slung across his back and both hands in his pockets. He nodded in greeting, and I felt his colorless gaze catch for a moment on me before moving on to the misty distance behind us. In the eight years I'd been sick, I'd grown accustomed to the double takes and hard stares my body inspired. Many were just trying to guess what it was, exactly, that caused pale fuzz to grow on my cheeks and reduced my limbs to veined bone, but some—older women, mostly—marveled at my wasted figure, declared it wonderful, and looked at me as though I might im-

In the eight years I'd been sick, I'd grown accustomed to the double takes and hard stares my body inspired.

part to them the delicious secret. My father was the rare exception; he alone acted as though there was nothing to see. And sometimes, I loved him for this.

"D'you catch the deer?" he called out, almost jovially. He shook his head and laughed, immediately vivified by the proximity of another male. "Some chucklehead."

The man shook his head, still looking past us. "I tracked it 'cross the river three miles."

My father nodded. "It's the damn New Yorkers. They'd shoot my dogs if I didn't put vests on them."

The man and I locked eyes. His hair was very pale, almost silver in the winter light. He probably wasn't much older than me, twenty-three maybe, but it was easy to picture him with a wife and baby in a hunched little house somewhere not far away.

There was something about his look that chilled me. I could not classify it. A perceptiveness in the pale eyes that lacked curiosity. That knew all they needed to.

"I'm thinking I should go down to the ranger station," my father continued. "Let them know there's somebody hunting out here." He laughed again. I noticed he had stuck his tongue into his cheek, pretending, no doubt, a store of dip was tucked there. In order to impress the hunter.

"Aw, now." The man lazily moved his eyes from mine, checking, I thought, the trees. He rubbed his jaw. "I don't think there's any need—"

I coughed forcefully, bending my shoulders into it to demonstrate how powerfully illness wracked my body. What a pathetic case I was. It was a stunt I had not pulled in many years, a trick lost with my mother, remaindered to all the days I spent playing sick with her, the two of us curled in her special medical bed with novels and mugs of fruity tea, afternoons so lulled and cat-happy that by the time my father came home I would have forgotten to keep up the cough.

Though now I did. Keep it up. I coughed until I could be sure all minds had been diverted—my father's from his insanity, the hunter's from my father.

"Dad," I said weakly, when I had finished. My throat hurt. I sounded younger and more tragic than all of nineteen years old. "Can we go?"

I looked at the hunter with wide eyes, like I knew nothing of what had passed between us.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "It's just—I'm really cold."

My father straightened. He moved his tongue. His voice was flatter when he addressed the hunter, less eager to please now that they were both men with manly errands.

"Right, well, I'm Tom." My father put out his hand, then, seeing the man made no movement, turned the gesture into a wave. "Nice meeting you, but looks like I've got to get this girl some lunch." He laughed again and patted me on the back, too hard. The hunter watched us coolly. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. *My father is not a serious man*, I tried to tell him with my look. *Do not take him seriously.*

"Better get going then," the hunter said at last. "It's only getting colder out here." He glanced at the sky and smiled.

"Take care."

He readjusted the strap of his rifle and raised his hand as he trudged past us back into the woods. The icy mist closed around the space where he had stood, and, in a moment, it was silent again, his departure muffled, like everything else, by snow.

"It's a good thing he's doing," my father said after a minute, his eyes still on the place in the pines where the hunter had made his exit.

"What do you mean?"

"Going after that deer. It's a good thing somebody's taking care of it. I sure as hell didn't want to."

"Dad—" I began, before stopping myself. His capacity for faith—delusion—amazed me. It seemed horrible to tell him the truth, to complicate the simplicity that was his greatest claim to sweetness. But it was reckless. It made things dangerous. I wanted him to know enough to protect us both.

"Dad," I began again. "Don't you think *he's* the one who shot the deer?"

"No, no, that boy's a local." He shook his head and tried to laugh, but it came out as a fit of wheezing. The thought hadn't occurred to him. I could see his eyes were nervous.

"Why is he out here, then, with a gun and hunting gear? The season's over, you said. What else could he be doing?"

"Birds maybe? Or, no, but I don't think . . ." He looked searchingly at the sky, as though for inspiration. "Damn, it's getting dark! It's going to snow again. We better pick up the pace a little."

I was silent while my father prattled on about the weather.

Whether he was trying to distract me or himself from his blunder, I didn't know. The sky was darkening. It hung low above us, brushing against the tips of the pointed firs like the gut of a grazing animal. My teeth ached with cold, and, against my will, my thoughts strayed from the hunter and his deer's slow, ugly death and circled instead on the approaching bliss of lentil soup. I would get a cup. Or, if there was hot water, I would get a bowl and dilute it. Then it would be as many calories as a cup, but as big as a bowl. Something a little erotic—like arrogance or command—keened in me as I considered my imminent victory.

"At least he didn't leave it," my father said, and his change in tone roused my attention. "I do think that's a good thing. I respect that. He could've shot it and run and saved himself the trouble, but he's out here. He's looking after it."

"The only thing he's looking after," I said with difficulty, still thinking about how happy my father would be to see me eat a bowl of soup, "is his own interest. It dies whether he looks for it or not. The only difference"—I felt one of the headaches coming on and braced myself against the fog about to descend—"is that now he gets to keep the meat." I searched for the term. "That is, the venison."

The memory loss was a new feature of the disease, about a year old. At first it had been visual. My memories became summary, their sensory elements absconded. I was left describing people to myself, so I could reconstruct the faces I'd lost the ability to picture. There was Eric Borden, the first and only boy I'd kissed; his hair had been the same color as his skin, but what that color was exactly, I now couldn't say, though just the previous summer I'd run into him in the supermarket. He winced when he saw me. There were the faces of the various friends I'd had, when my life had been a normal one. Sober faces of bookish girls like me, who spent weekends baking and helping their mothers garden. I'd had a mother too, of course, one who had also gardened and smiled, but hers was a forgetting almost eleven years in the making. Of what I had left, the disease could only take her dark curly hair, which fell out in clumps that I woke to every morning on the bare face of my pillow.

"No," my father said. "He's a good old boy."

This was the term, pronounced like a German compound noun, *gudolboy*—meant to identify a Real Vermonter, a rural person possessed of historic rural virtues. Self-sufficiency. A re-

spect for animals and weather. A willingness to perform menial and increasingly uneconomically viable labor with poise and laconic dignity. My father and I, despite the fact that I had been born and raised here, would never be Real Vermonters. Real Vermonters did not, for one thing, engage in activities like skiing or strapping on snowshoes for a lark. They spoke with an accent and tended to trace their family histories to Ethan Allen, or else the Welsh and Irish immigrants who had been imported over a century ago to work the slate mines.

"So he should know better," I said.

"What I think," my father replied, sucking on his mustache, "is that deer is going to die."

He paused.

"I just hope it isn't too horrible." And, laughing his nervous, piercing laugh, he popped another piece of nicotine gum into his mouth.

The sickness: what to say about it. There was a time when certain authority figures—school administrators, pediatricians, one pugnacious ICU doctor who I think, maybe, was a little in love with me—had cajoled my father to do something about it. But what could he do, a single, fearful man, stupefied by his own compulsions?

There was one night, early on, when he'd tried in his drunk's ham- and tremor-fisted way to help me. To help us both.

I was in seventh grade. The previous afternoon, I had fainted in English class. I remember nothing of the incident, not even the pain of my forehead hitting the wood-laminate desk, though the collision left a vengeful bruise that made everything afterward much worse. Mrs. Mezzano contacted Child Protective Services. Words like *abuse* and *neglect* get tossed around at moments like these. Few people make room for good old-fashioned bafflement. Discombobulation. Parents or guardians Utterly Out of Their Depth.

Throughout the following school day, Mrs. Mezzano and an assortment of other school officials had pulled me aside. All day long, it seemed, I was called to get out of my chair and stagger—my vision always blackening for one to three stumbling seconds when the elevation of my head and heart were changed—over to the door. They spoke to me in gentle, presumptuous voices,

as though this sudden show of concern were reason enough for me to trust them.

My father was waiting when the bus released me at the rural post office that served as the last stop on its hour-and-a-half-long route. When my mother was alive, my father used to pick me up at this same stop and take me to regular child appointments: ballet, piano, karate. I used to go to these things—kick, pirouette, depress awkward chords—when my mother was alive, and then only if he was in one of his sober spells.

The sobriety could be borne for up to three months, by which time I would have become a yellow belt or minor swan, and it was usually ended by my mother herself—throwing down her silverware at the dinner table, demanding he take her out, get a real job, *do something*—or by the visitation of some stressful member of my father's family.

Then he wouldn't be sober, and the after-school programming would be forgotten entirely. He would pick me up at the post office, and together we would go to McMahon's, a dark, desperate bar located in a wild green field at the end of a logging road. On the weekends, there was dancing and live music. But at four o'clock on a Wednesday, McMahon's had only dimness and beer smell and a broken piano on which I would attempt to practice my brief lessons from memory, until I gave it up to play pinball on a *Sopranos*-themed machine. It took my father two hours to drink the four clear drinks that were necessary for him to execute whatever job it was that our home demanded of him. Then we would go. And my mother, standing tense and sarcastic by a steaming pot on the stove, would not ask how practice had been. Four, five months might pass this way. I would forget how to play piano and what first position was. Four clear drinks would become five or six; they would appear at dinner. And that's when my mother would snap. There would be a weekend of yelling. She would take me on strange adult expeditions in the afternoon—mother-daughter dates, she

It took my father two hours to drink the four clear drinks that were necessary for him to execute whatever job it was that our home demanded of him.

called them, in which she gave me sips of her pinot noir, talking all the time about *men*, over mussels and chocolate mousse—and then late at night, my father would come in to sit at the end of my bed and tell me about his old life as a cocaine-snorting young man in New York, or else about a woman he had loved years and years ago, a woman who was nothing at all like my mother. Who he had loved so much. And he loved me, he would say, weeping by then. On Monday, another sober period would begin.

Then my mother died, quickly and for no reason. Melanoma, misdiagnosed by a doctor unqualified to work anywhere other than Vermont, with its beauty and unemployment, mountains of snow and opioid addictions. And my father did not need to take me to McMahon's any longer. He could drink at home, and I could go upstairs to my room and discover all the ways a person can avoid thinking anything at all.

But the afternoon following my faint, I came home. He picked me up grave and trembling with thirst in one of the huge black trucks that was part of a dog-smelling series of identical trucks capable of standing up to an encounter with the occasional tree.

We drove straight home. I knew of course something was wrong, but other people's sense of wrongness had become distant to me by then. I wanted only to go up to my room and execute my daily goal of walking back and forth across it one thousand times. It took eleven steps to get from one corner to the other. The whole cycle would grant me twenty-two thousand steps, which was enough. Almost ten miles of walking and seeing nothing but wallpaper for all of it.

As we were turning onto our dirt road, he said, "I got a call today."

I was silent. Itching for my walk.

"CPS people are coming to the house."

For his part, my father did not say this with any kind of blame. If anything, he sounded embarrassed about telling me, like it was an unsavory detail essential to include for the sake of our continued trust and mutual respect, but one he hoped I would forget quickly and forgive him for mentioning.

What CPS was, I didn't really know and didn't care. More interesting was the prospect of visitors. It had been a long time since we'd had any—my father was prone to unkind outbursts after the first bottle of wine, which is what visitors tend to

bring—and our home was filthy, except the kitchen, which I liked to clean because it contained the food I so loved to hang around, in the attitude of a lusty but timid voyeur, and also because it was large and walking along the counters or back and forth from the dishwasher with individual plates and forks facilitated my daily goal of constant extracurricular movement.

"Are they coming for dinner?" is what I thought to ask.

He looked at me, with eyes unexpectedly afraid and sadder than usual. He shook his head. "They want to interview me tomorrow," he said. "You'll be at school. They might talk to you there." Then he laughed. We were friends in the face of this enemy, after all. "The hell if I know," he said and smiled.

But that night, he made steaks, fried in a pan. The smell reached me, a shock in my room, at lap 482. I could not at first tell what it was. And then my father did what neither he nor my mother had ever done before—he came and knocked courteously at my door.

"Dinner," he said, when I opened it, aghast.

The sirloins were gorgeous, dripping sinister fat and blood. He slapped a whole one on my plate. On our pristine table was a bag of peas, steaming from the microwave.

"God, I've been craving a steak," he said, smiling at me. The glass beside his heaped plate was water.

I nervously served myself a spoonful of peas, making note of the ones that had touched the steak, those that would be contaminated and thus made inedible by fat.

"Good, huh?" he said, while I delicately raised a small clean green bite to my mouth. He glanced at my sirloin.

Slowly my peas disappeared. Rapidly, his meat. I saw his bushy eyebrows raising, his eyes and face getting whiter as my steak remained untouched. When he finished, he dropped his fork and knife.

"Honey," he said. "Just one bite."

I stared at him, waiting for the joke.

"Catherine, take a bite."

Any minute now, he would want to retire to the living room, where there would be cop shows and the History Channel and a drink or six that he could have in peace.

"You need to take a bite of that fucking steak right now."

I looked at it. Huge. Disgusting. I shrugged and limply sat back in my chair. Certainly, this would be too much for him.

But then my father stood. He walked around the big table that was meant to accommodate a real family and grandparents too, and suddenly he was beside my chair, kneeling. Actually kneeling. A grown man. My father.

He made an uncertain bid for my hand then stopped. I kept my body limp, though I could not remember being more terrified in my life, except for right before my mother's funeral, when I had learned there was such a thing as an open casket.

"Catherine, I promise you that if you take a bite of that steak right now, baby, I will never have a drink again. I swear."

The whites of his eyes were clearer than they'd been in three years. Glistening.

"We'll do it together, honey, how 'bout that? Just one bite."

Would a better daughter have said, *Thank you*? Would a nice girl have said, *Yes, Daddy, yes!* I had no idea. All I knew was that it was a lie—a sick and outrageous one—that no person should demand another tell. Will you drink out in the garage now, I wanted to ask, the way you used to when there was a woman around with a right to ask something of you? And will it be my fault, then, for skipping lunch at school? Who are we, you and I, to make such promises? We are liars. We are being called to account now. How dare you make a falsehood of this one thing that binds us.

Who are we, you and I, to make such promises? We are liars. We are being called to account now. How dare you make a falsehood of this one thing that binds us.

Not that I could fully form these thoughts. A sense of ridiculousness and despair was all I could muster, as his big unhealthy body knelt before my awkward, formal chair. All I could do was stare at him and remain completely still.

My father, perhaps comprehending this, perhaps all out of ideas, stood suddenly. He slammed his fist on the table, and in a second, my steak and the greasy peas were on the floor, serenely intact on the broken halo of plate.

The CPS people came. I suppose I cleaned up the plate that night, threw away the food. What questions they asked when they visited me at school, I'm sure I answered calmly and truthfully enough to satisfy them. Only the bruise on my forehead

raised some alarm, but that Mrs. Mezzano could explain, if reluctantly. I'm sure they saw our big house and thought only: what a poor, friendly man, fending alone for himself and his spoiled daughter. He is doing his best. And they would have been right. We heard nothing more from them. My father never made his proposal again and we never mentioned it. Our days, longer and lonelier once the high school said I was too sick to attend it, passed in a stupor like peace.

The snow was coming down hard now. Alliances had been formed. The flakes caught hold of one another in their furious descent and came down as a conspiracy of big wet lumps. Their impact could be heard on the polyester of our coats.

My father was fussing with the collar of his jacket. I could tell he wanted to talk about what a mistake it had been to leave his cowboy hat behind. How there would be a coat of his more suitable to the weather. There always was. Weatherproof, windproof, waterproof, insulated. He had a way of discussing the failures of his immediate wardrobe that recalled a former college athlete describing a championship lost or a career-ending injury received, a woe made all the more forensic for missing the point—that of the past—entirely.

He was still too chastened about the hunter and the deer, though, to bring up the cowboy hat. I watched him tug uncomfortably at the less-than-ideal trapper on his head. Its fake fur was matted and did not stick out far enough to shield his troubled eyes from the flakes wetting our faces and filling the tops of our snowshoes.

My own vision was narrowing, dark at the edges. It was unclear if this was a blood sugar or pressure thing or had something to do with my slow heart rate, which standing only cleared about thirty-five beats per minute. I'd lost feeling in my feet and hands almost as soon as we'd left the house, but it was returning now. A burning sensation.

Up ahead, the trees opened up. We could see the river down the cleared bank. There were two weather-grayed houses on the left and, along the riverbank, a crumbling shed and a huge white lump, which I knew in summer would be revealed as an antique plow, glorious with rust. When the June sun hit it, it was the color of Grade A maple syrup.

We removed our snowshoes. My father, saying nothing, lifted

mine and slung both pairs over his back. We could see the store at the end of the road, called only, or maybe just incompletely, The Market. My stomach growled—a thing that rarely happened anymore—in anticipation. Our pace became overeager, bouncingly light.

"What."

It was all he could say when we were standing in front of it.

The Market was obviously, resolutely, closed.

My father looked around, as though for help. He laughed.

"No," he said and laughed again.

I mounted the wooden stairs and looked into the unambiguously dark windows. Closed.

I wanted to sit down on the steps, but I knew a show of weakness—of exhaustion, my frailty—would only deepen the panic I saw lighting my father's eyes, making him laugh so desperately.

"Well!" he said. "I guess I could call—" He scratched at his hat. There was no one to call. We, neither of us, had any friends. No allies. Our closest neighbors, the Helebas, were Real Vermonters. They would be at work.

"I think we go home, Dad" is what I said, my voice clear and calm, empty of disappointment or fear. Blame.

"No!" he said. "We can, we'll . . ." Again the hysterical laugh. He stared at the store, at me. He jumped up the steps and pulled at the big handle, an original from 1927. The door rattled a little, but yielded nothing. The misty street was deserted.

"Fuck," he said. "God-fucking-damn it. It's a holiday! The college kids are still on break. How the fuck are they closed?"

"Maybe someone died," I said. "Maybe Rebecca has Covid. Maybe she's driving her kid back to UVM." I clenched and unclenched my freezing fingers inside the cover of my mittens. "Or it could just be the snow."

My father continued to stare in the direction of the door, but I could tell he wasn't seeing it. He was thinking how badly he needed a drink. And how badly he needed, at this moment, my mother.

"All right. All right." He set the snowshoes down, spat out his nicotine gum, pressing it slimily into the half-empty packet, and inserted a new tab into his mouth. His voice, when he spoke, was firm, adult. "We'll go home."

Slowly, reluctantly, we stepped out from beneath the protec-

tion of the porch and began our walk back in the direction of the blackening woods.

A memory I still have, details somehow rich and unblemished in one of the mind's mysterious and random acts of mercy:

The beginning of summer, the last day of school. Me, six years old. From the height of the overheated bus, seeing my parents—both of them—sitting side by side in the front seat of my father's old Cadillac convertible, the one he would later crash, drunk and alone at six o'clock in the evening, and say that it was a good thing, totaling it, because the car had been a pain in the ass anyway.

But there they are, my parents, parked in front of the rural post office, which is painted bright white, white like the seats of the Cadillac, where they are sitting together, laughing. I pause in the back of the bus, though I am the only kid on it and should hurry so as not to inconvenience anyone, but I cannot. I am amazed. They look so in love. They are together and waiting for me.

She kisses me when I get into the car, which is navy and sparkles in the evening sun. My father is wearing cologne, like I, graduate of the first grade, am a party he's going to. We fly down the road. The trees shimmer in the breeze that will stay cool until July.

We go to The Market. They have a soft-serve machine they bring out for the summer, which can make twenty-four flavors, including maple, but only the tourists want that. I want orange, swirled with vanilla. Rainbow sprinkles.

I can taste it still, the ice cream. I sit between them on the warm hood of the beautiful car. My father jokes with people who walk by, proud of his big convertible and his little girl's big cone. My mother takes bites of my ice cream with a delicately held spoon. Her hand brushes my hair, which is hers. She tells me how summer will be.

Halfway home, we heard it. The explosion. One, and then, ten seconds later, the other. How far away it was, I couldn't tell. The trees, heavier then, did not shake for it. The snow continued to fall. Nothing, except the addition of black spots to my weakening vision, had changed.

My father stopped. We had been going so, so fast, racing against the weather, he kept saying, and also, as neither he nor I would ever say, against the terrible, inevitable thing that could only be run from and eluded by silly dreams, like steak and lunch—dreams that neither of us had the power or knowledge to make come true.

"So he did it then," my father said. We stood still. I flickered in my snowshoes. We looked out into the trees. By tomorrow, or perhaps in only another hour, all signs of the deer would be gone. Its blood and the tracks of both the animal and the man who had killed it, for right or for wrong, would be buried by snow. All would be made a whiteness.

"Thank God," my father said, laughing louder than the shots themselves had been, laughing, it seemed, so that the hunter might hear him, "thank God."

LANA REEVES

WESSIDE HAIBUN

For the sugarcane laborers

...there is such a thing as too sweet…haloed by mushroom-top hats…so happy when they put up the screen, I could change in privacy…fistfuls of splinters, blooming…resewing the bottoms of the baby's shoes, cast red by dust…three generations at the stove, another bathing in the sink…three rows of children on the porch steps, thick-chinned & sullen…three Portuguese on three brown horses…the cane…the cane…tonguing the blisters… they say when she arrived, her skin was like porcelain…now, leather…remembering the first time he laid eyes on it, said, which is the part you eat…*gaman*…*gaman*…chewed in the mouth…a word I don't know until I'm fifteen…whose house is this…whose pot on the stove…whose steps…whose children… whose money…what money…whose tongue…who arrived… who's jailed…caned…cast…who's ruptured…whose name on the dotted line…who pays…?

Ai— I pay for it
Ai-ya *Ai-ya* I pay 愛
I pay pay for it

DONALD PLATT

VERTEBRATE

> *L4-L5: There is a subtle bulge with ligamentum flavum thickening resulting in severe spinal canal stenosis. There is a mild bilateral neural foraminal narrowing due to a subtle bulge, anterolisthesis, and severe bilateral facet arthropathy.*
> —MRI report

I am a spine grown
crooked as the stalk of a yucca plant after it has flowered
white sleigh bells

and then stands bare all winter in the wind. Would that some
piano tuner
might take his tuning hammer to each jangled, angry

nerve, change
its fundamental frequency, give it new harmonics. But no,
I am this damaged

aging instrument. My body wilts like any orange-throated
daylily,
its day done. And so, I rave through all the seven octaves

of the night,
thirty-six black keys, fifty-two tones of moon behind clouds.
Anger's grand

glissando. Pain wakes me in the morning. I take more
hydrocodone.
I, who have lain a month in bed, get up, go outside

with my rollator,
limp around the block. Hydrangeas bloom their snowballs.
Montmorency

cherries strike sparks among green leaves. I taste one.
How sweet and sour
this ripe red world. Dumb tongue should learn to praise

the way a robin
now pecks the ground, stuffs beak full of dead grass, flies
away to build

her nest. So should I also build, brood, bring some little
thing to life,
feed it, let it too take wing, sing. Instead, I'm silent

as this pink
post-rainstorm earthworm wriggling across cracked sidewalk.
Fleshly question mark.

DONALD PLATT

SLIDES

Let my Fourth of July
fireworks be fireflies. They blink on and off at dusk like faulty
circuitry,

electrify acres of dark soybeans with their mating's Morse code.
We drive
through farmland turned to a metropolis of flashing lights.

On the horizon,
people are shooting off big showy fireworks like Crackling Rain,
Roman Candle

with Bombettes, Chrysanthemum. I like the barrages that resemble
dandelions'
blowballs, seeds of multicolored light loosed to the wind.

But it's fireflies
that become my unsteady constellations. Bucksaw. Work Boot.
Escalator.

They're slow-motion sparks from an arc welder's
rod, welding
past and present with what's to come. "All I Got's Done

Gone" goes
Strawberry McCloud's square dance tune. I've never heard hoedown
fiddling more

ecstatic. With one finger he plays "slides"—chords on two strings.
A trick
Doc Watson taught him after he injured his left little finger

as a crane operator
helping to build in 1936 Fort Knox, the United States Bullion Depository.
He was proud

of his skill on the fiddle and as a heavy equipment operator. After
Doc Watson's
stroke, he visited his mentor. He said, "We was crying like babies

about old times.
He never was beat in a contest, and now he can't play a lick."
All we got's

done gone. So play it tremolo. That slightly flatted B natural
on the high string.
Syncopate the offbeat. Staccato as a rat-a-tat-tat

pileated
woodpecker. Slide it. Millions of fireflies synchronize their flashing
on riverbanks

in Malaysian jungles and near Elkmont, Tennessee. They flash in unison.
Celebrate this
our bioluminescence. I too will flash. Short, long, short. Long, short, long.

BYRON XU

I TEST THE DUCTILE STRENGTH OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS

Dinner ended, your friends drove off
while you were not yourself, you were looking down

from a distance, you were blind as headlights.
You were a child stretching a rubber band to breaking.

All those times you met over coffee
to learn their music taste had changed. Two larks, tangent

flying at the same speed appear motionless
but only to each other. All else is forgiven except the gap

between who you are and where you want to be.
Wisteria cannot eat the house in time, so listen.

Listen—just forgive. The silent phone does not mean
they forgot, the reason is benign. On the road back

your car is a bird with high beams burning forests
from green to white. Once your hand shaped a man running

alongside your father's car, or skating
the black electric lines swaying in sine waves carrying

the sun's glow. The top was down. The wheels
carried you beyond, time beyond, and place into mist

as a tinny voice came through the phone.
You could not recognize it now if it asked you to.

Forgive me,
I can't hear you, the service isn't good. Recalculating,

turn left—it's breaking up. Forgive me—you're

recalculating. It isn't good. Give me, I left—
breaking up. I can't hear you. Give me up.

BYRON XU

INTERLINE

Tokyo, New Year's, just after
the clocks have ticked over, the last train.
All of us varying degrees
of an indefinite pronoun, blurred.
I felt like a marshmallow ballooned
in my winter coat. Every few minutes
time collapsed like the crowds pushing
through the doors,
then a closing, a chime
dissonant in remembering
only the feeling left. I was nodding off,
sake finishing its job. Strange lights,
strange life steadily unfocusing:
a lover, lovers, the years
stuck between youth and understanding
what it meant to die—a transition
between stations, a chime—

a departure in Shibuya away from problems
with weight. As if distance
could give perspective, more than looking at.
I hoped for acceptance,
I hoped I was making progress.
I laid my head back on the contour
between the seat and the window, bitter plastic,
bitter glass against my scalp, leaned more
into the present. And went too far

into a warm body
on my left, my eyes closed
to her perfume, like a moth
her head alighted
onto my open shoulder.
Intimate to be ignored

together in a room of strangers.
Why am I less frightened
with my eyes closed?
As if not knowing what will hurt
will make it less painful. A chime,
another train passing by—
I know my stop.
Her hair tickled my open throat
in understanding, my silence
acquiescence. A chime—I know my stop.
A foreign country. I felt her breath
and saw nothing. Invisible
above the roof of the train car
the snow lowered itself like a countdown.

BYRON XU

EPITAPH, AFTER VORING

With apologies

Like the time you called after hitting a cyclist with your car
and I asked *Are you okay*, I no longer feel guilty

going out with people who aren't you, which isn't the truth
but sounds close enough to it anyway. Crazy enough

a few weeks back you were asking me whether
you should start birth control, confessing the torture

each pill would inflict on your body, laundry list
of maladaptations. Scaled from *I'll get fat*

to *My liver will explode*, but the alternative still worse
like choosing the breakup over the fear of dying alone.

Crazy enough that further back, we drove

all the way to Dallas for the kink convention, crazy shit
without any filter you end up doing while

falling in love. You missed the panel
about voring, the sexual fantasy where the bigger guy

(and let's use the scientific term here) *gulps up* the little guy
and the little guy sits inside his stomach. Whole.

Crisscross applesauce. There's no sense to the anatomy
but driving back, you started the debate about birth control,

you beat teen pregnancy but weren't ready
for just pregnancy, it was serious, the state

had started threatening to shoot mothers for abortions and
paying people to hunt doctors, and all I could think about

was the little guy inside the big guy and you
charged with vehicular manslaughter. How do they all fit?

How oddly we love. That is to say
these days I no longer feel alone

which isn't the truth but sounds close enough to it anyway.

DARIUS STEWART

IN THE WAKE

Remember this date: Monday, May 23, 2022. That was the day Daddy died in the comfort care unit of Fort Sanders Medical Center. For about six months afterward, I kept forgetting it, often mistakenly using the wrong mnemonic device to remind myself that he died on the twenty-second, the same day I graduated from high school in 1998. When in doubt, which happened often, I'd ask Siri: "What day of the week was May 22, 2022?" Siri would respond: "It was Sunday, May 22, 2022," which always helped me remember that Daddy died on a Monday—the day after my graduation and six days after Aunt Debra, his eldest sister, called to tell me he was dying. Whenever I tell the story of his death, I keep it brief—perhaps because the facts speak for themselves: The call came on a Tuesday, and by the following Monday, my daddy was dead.

Thursday, May 19, 2022: I cut my vacation short in El Cerrito, California, to fly to Knoxville, Tennessee. From the moment I arrived, I braced myself for not sleeping enough, not eating enough, for not finding the right words to answer the endless variations of *You holding up okay?* that besieged me until I returned home to Iowa City.

I didn't mourn the way manuals and well-meaning strangers expected me to.

Grief did not progress through its typical stages: no denial, no moments of beating my chest, no wailing or gnashing of teeth or *No, this can't be happening!* hysterics.

There was no bargaining, no pleading with God to strike a deal. There were no deals, no grand cosmic exchange rates or easements.

Anger did not surge like a leviathan, thrashing and coiling around me, dragging me into its depths. There was no raging at doctors, nurses, or time itself. There was no righteous fury, no shaking fists at the sky.

Depression? Maybe. If I searched in vain for multigrain whole-

wheat bread in the frozen food aisle, staring blankly at the shelves, in general forgetting what I came for—this was as close as I got to *Woe is me*.

Acceptance? No, not that either. There was no waking up one day and whispering, *It was his time* or *He's in a better place now.* Instead, I carried his absence in my pocket. I felt for it when I least expected to, rolling it between my fingers like an old coin.

But what I didn't anticipate—what grief offered without warning—was a turn not away from sorrow but deeper into it. Not toward despair, exactly, but toward a kind of hunger: for touch, for recognition, for the old, dangerous intimacy of love.

And so I found myself circling back—not just to memories of love but to my ex, Andrei.

Though I would never truly know when, perhaps the pull toward Andrei happened on the night before Daddy died. I had just barely dozed off in the reclining chair beside his hospital bed—it must've been just after eleven—when I heard the door easing open with a subtle creak. The voices of two nursing assistants, low and unfamiliar, drifted into the dim room as they entered. The rustle of plastic, the faint snap of a seal breaking, and the crinkle of disposable wipes peeling from their packaging drew me from the edges of sleep. I opened my eyes just enough to watch them work—efficient yet gentle.

The dark-haired one—let's call her Sue Ellen—spoke softly, her voice trilling as she described the surprise anniversary dinner her husband had arranged at Ye Olde Steak House over the weekend. Across the bed from her, the other assistant, a slender, ginger-haired woman, who looked like a Nikki, did not look much older than Sue Ellen but had weary eyes. She unfolded a fresh wipe and let loose a long, slow sigh that seemed to convey more than mere exhaustion. "Must've been nice," she said flatly.

They moved together in a steady rhythm, warming the premoistened cloths between their gloved palms before gliding them over Daddy's skin—his arms, his chest, the curve of his shoulders.

I kept my eyes slitted, watching as Sue Ellen paused occasionally, gesturing with the cloth in her hand while recounting the fanciful parts of that evening. Her voice carried a note of disbelief, as if she were trying to convince herself that the anniversary dinner truly happened.

"I don't know how he pulled it off," she said. "He's not usually one for surprises. But when we got there, the table was already set—candles, wine, flowers, the whole thing. He even remembered to order the same dessert we had on our first date: German chocolate cake." Sue Ellen laughed almost apologetically. "I guess he listens better than I thought."

Nikki's hands became still. "Hmm," she said, as if she'd meant to respond differently. I heard it—the subtle shift from what she may have intended as *hmmph*, an antagonism, a *Girl, please shut up*—but she clipped the *ph* at the end, leaving it suspended in her throat, a suppressed grunt, disguised under the smooth legato of her *Hmm*, diplomatically masking how unimpressed she was by Sue Ellen's quirky misreading of her husband's capacity for listening.

Now fully awake, I watched Nikki from the recliner. Something in her expression—the slightly downturned corners of her mouth, the way her grip tightened on the towel—betrayed irritation. Maybe she was just exhausted from a long shift, from a hundred small indignities stacked one on top of another, leaving too little patience for the glow of someone else's happiness. Or maybe she listened better when there was something to commiserate about, some shared grievance to latch onto.

But there was something deeper in that sigh, in that brief pause of her hands: a flicker of regret.

Had she been let down before?

I imagined hers was a life spent coming home to a man who barely noticed how often she complained of sore knees and an aching back, who never thought to surprise her with flowers or a candlelit dinner accompanied by her favorite dessert. Or maybe she'd once had the kind of love where those gestures were abundant and effortless—only to watch them fade over time, romance dissolving into routine, then neglect, then absence.

Or maybe it wasn't about romance at all. Perhaps she had lost someone once—someone so dear that arriving at work, where life always seemed to balance so precariously, stirred their memory. She probably noticed the quiet details: a family's restrained laughter at an uncle's corny joke about a rooster and a minister, or two brothers sharing stories of summers spent toppling each other's sandcastles. These moments might have touched something tender in her, like the brush of a dull blade against skin not yet fully healed.

My speculations settled, and before I could push it away, another possibility crept in unbidden.

I couldn't help but suspect that Nikki's attitude had everything to do with a man not unlike . . . Andrei.

In that moment—watching Nikki's weariness settle into something sharper—Andrei returned not as memory but as presence: sudden, ambient, and insistent, like hospital light—there whether I wanted it or not, exhuming feelings I thought I'd buried long ago.

I never shared Sue Ellen's experience—no spontaneous romantic gestures, no whispered confessions of devotion over a dinner for two.

Perhaps Nikki and I were similar in that regard. Perhaps she too had loved a man whose name was so ordinary that its plainness became part of his charm. Maybe his name was Eddie, someone with whom she had never truly been intimate. Not really. Not even in the beginning, when intimacy might have been as effortless as a lazy afternoon spent watching soap operas after sex—when it was easy to be frivolous, to chase fleeting, sensual pleasure without expecting anything lasting.

Whatever they may have shared, if one could call it closeness, make no mistake: It would have been cautious and shaped by past wounds. Perhaps hers stemmed from being cheated on in previous relationships, while his might have arisen from being a DL fuckboy who could neither accept nor reciprocate love. Nevertheless, they would've been drawn together by a mutual loneliness so profound that it made connection feel urgent, even desperate. And if a bond could have been forged, it would not have been sustained by passion but by the careful maintenance of a fragile ecosystem—an arrangement of tentative trust meticulously preserved to prevent it from breaking.

Nevertheless, they would've been drawn together by a mutual loneliness so profound that it made connection feel urgent, even desperate.

This was Nikki's story—I was sure of it—because I needed it to be. Otherwise, why would her lips have tightened into such a thin, bitter line as she listened to Sue Ellen revel in the trappings of her perfect marriage? I told myself it was obvious: She had

spent years nursing the ache of suppressed longing and was now worn down by the charade—pretending that an abscess was, absurdly, a flourishing garden.

Of course, I couldn't know any of that. But I saw myself in her silence, and that was enough.

How often had I been my own foil, bending logic around desire, convincing myself that simply *being* with Andrei was the same as truly *having* him?

A door opened. Or maybe I imagined it did. Either way, an invitation waited.

I accepted—hesitant at first, like stepping into a dark basement. I didn't know it yet, but what I was reading in Nikki's stillness was my own history speaking back to me. Not just loss, but craving. Only later, much later, would I realize that the way her hands paused, the way her *Hmm* curled into the air like steam—none of that had anything to do with her. It was me, reaching for resonance, desperate for permission to want again. And in that quiet, I said yes—not to her story, but to the ruin of my own.

Whatever I had projected onto her, Nikki cut through it, grounding the moment in something far less abstract.

Nikki muttered, "So you think your husband listens because he remembers to order German chocolate cake?"

I wondered if Sue Ellen sensed the shift, if she regretted indulging herself by sharing her happy occasion. Nonetheless, she pressed on.

"Yeah, and he booked a hotel downtown after. Just for a night, but it was sweet. I forget what it's like, you know? To just be together, without the kids, without work, just like . . . before."

Nikki sighed again, even sharper this time. "Must be nice," she repeated.

"Let's turn him this way—I like this position better," Sue Ellen said. Then, maybe to alter the mood, maybe hoping for a moment of connection that had been awkwardly lacking, she asked Nikki almost shyly, "You ever been to Ye Olde Steak House?"

Nikki forced a smile, likely out of obligation rather than genuine emotion. "Nah," she said. "Not my kind of place. Anyway, come on, let's turn 'im and finish up. We've got five more beds."

They gathered the sheets around Daddy and tilted him to face

me. That's when he woke up, moaning deeply, his face wincing. I stood up immediately, alarmed more by how alive he sounded than by any sense of duty to protect him.

"It's okay, Daddy," I said, my eyes darting between Sue Ellen and Nikki as if to cast them back, which must have startled them. But they hadn't finished, Sue Ellen said and asked permission to continue. I allowed them and listened as Daddy's moans intensified, his right eye slowly prying itself open until all the watery sadness, grief, and fear that had been dammed behind his lids spilled out, coursing over the rim and streaming down his cheek—the brine of regret, the body's last desperate offering as his failing liver, swollen and useless, could no longer filter the poisons that thickened his blood. I felt the weight of all he had lost—years traded for the burn of rotgut vodka, each day and night surrendered to the slow, irreversible drowning of his own flesh.

This was when he saw me and moaned louder, insistently, his eyes fixed on my face.

"Are you his son?" Sue Ellen asked, her voice rising as Daddy's moaning persisted.

"Yes," I said evenly, staring into Daddy's jaundiced eye, the yellowish-brown flecks that spread across the sclera.

I approached him and cradled his neck to soothe him, taking inventory of his mouth rimmed with white crust, his left eye still shut tight with mucus, his tongue poking between dry lips like a raw chunk of chicken as he struggled to shape his moans into words I couldn't comprehend.

Sue Ellen demonstrated how to moisten his mouth with ice while I used one of the now tepid cloths to clean his face. She warned me not to place my fingers in his mouth—just as Daddy bit down suddenly on the cloth. The force of his bite proved that his strength had not entirely failed him, and I marveled at what I believed could only be his way of clinging to life. I watched his throat pulsing, as if trying to communicate something to me, or perhaps to Sue Ellen and Nikki, who were leaving quietly.

I stroked Daddy's coarse hair and took the free hand not tucked tightly beneath the sheet into my own. I rubbed the fleshy pad of his palm with my thumb. I whispered to him, "I know, I know, I know," until the resisting eye shut like a child fighting sleep. I listened to his moans ebb until a forest of nocturnal animals emerged from the hush. Breath lumbered through his chest

in low pulses—an old bear roused deep from within a cave. With each exhale, the room swelled with a deep-bellied baying, almost repentant, as if something ancient stirred there—bone-deep and brambled with a sorrow that had no language, only rhythm that curled around the walls, slow and deliberate, like a ritual remembered by instinct alone. Not cries, not speech, but something older: the body claiming its right to grieve.

I knew that neither of us would fall asleep easily as I settled back into the recliner, trying to rest through moans that gradually diminished to whimpers resembling the pangs of a once ravenous but exquisite beast.

When Aunt Debra had called to tell me that my daddy—her baby brother—was dying, I was struggling to finish a seminar paper on Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. I had been treating the poem like a historical artifact, neatly sealed in the past, from a time when grief felt less abstract—when it could arrive as a phone call in the middle of the evening, a single sentence from a loved one that soured the air in the room.

I gripped the phone tightly. "What do you mean, he's dying?"

"You heard what I said," she replied—not harshly but with a finality that cut through the melodrama looming in my shocked expression. I should have seen this coming, especially since my own brother had warned me just a week before that Daddy's health was seriously declining. How could I not believe it had gotten this bad?

As my aunt spoke, her words conjured an image in my mind of Daddy, twenty-five hundred miles away in Knoxville, Tennessee, alone in his studio apartment, hunched over the arm of his sofa, his face twisted in agony, teeth clenched behind tightly pursed lips, his wet eyes staring at the ceiling, willing himself to remain still, to take only the shallowest breaths, terrified that even the slightest movement might aggravate the pain burning through his abdomen.

"He's going to hospice," she said.

And there it was, that word associated with Daddy's imminent demise: *hospice*. It hung on the line between us, a strange, clinical thing, like a curtained bed one hesitated to open, fearing the deathly ill person behind it might be someone you didn't want to recognize as belonging to you. *Hospice*. I knew what it meant, vaguely. Didn't I?

When one neared the end of life. *Hospice*. Like a library book you checked out, knowing you would never bring it back. *Hospice*. A quiet corner of the hospital, perhaps? Or . . . was it at home? *Hospice*. A flickering image of disinfected rooms, soft lighting, and hushed voices.

But Daddy couldn't be that sick. Could he?

He was *Daddy*—the man who, when I was in eighth grade, spent $200 on a secondhand behemoth of a desktop computer from a coworker at the Radisson Hotel because he knew how much I loved to write and wanted to give me every tool he could afford. It was a relic from the 1980s—a hulking, off-white machine with a monochrome green screen and a keyboard that clacked loudly with every keystroke. It had no hard disk drive, only a slot for floppy disks that were large, thin, and flimsy, forcing me to swap them out constantly to save my work. The whir of the disk drive, the sluggish glimmer of the CRT monitor as it struggled to load each new screen—none of that mattered.

What truly mattered was that he saw me, recognized the depth of my passion for writing, and gifted me a machine that, despite its age, filled me with an endless belief that anything was possible for me to imagine.

And now he was going to *hospice*?

I let that word sink in. I felt its heft, its finality—like exclamation points at the ends of sentences that never felt deserved. I was a doctoral student in English, yet I still had to look up the word.

Hospice: a program of palliative care for patients with a terminal illness.

But what did *palliative* mean?

Pain relief. Symptom management. Comfort.

A form of care, not a cure; a means to alleviate suffering when no other options remain.

Terminal.

There it was—another word I'd been circling, avoiding, pretending not to notice. The elephant in the room, sporting a flimsy fedora with flashing neon lights.

My chest tightened. *Palliative care*. That was only when there was no cure. And there was no cure, was there? This wasn't a sprain, something time could heal. Not a cough silenced by a simple menthol lozenge.

No. This was a man who had turned sixty only three months ago, a man who had been a chronic alcoholic for decades.

And what had the doctor said?

Mr. Stewart, we've been monitoring your condition closely, and I'm deeply sorry to say that at this stage, there's no treatment available that can reverse the damage to your liver and kidneys. We've also noticed signs that your heart and lungs are struggling. Given the progression of your illness, we believe that aggressive medical interventions—dialysis, extended hospitalizations, or a ventilator—would only prolong suffering without improving your quality of life.

Maybe that's how it happened—how the news became *news*. The only difference was that Daddy would have insisted the doctor call him Clarence. Even if it felt too familiar or unprofessional for a patient the doctor barely knew, Daddy wouldn't have cared about decorum.

This was hospice.

And hospice meant . . . I envisioned Daddy struggling to swallow.

Hospice meant goodbye.

After my conversation with Aunt Debra, I arranged to fly from El Cerrito to Knoxville. My family—including my brother and sister, aunts, an uncle, and several cousins—was waiting for me. A decision had already been made that, once I arrived, Daddy would be taken off the ventilator.

I went directly to his room and relieved a younger cousin who had been keeping vigil at his bedside. I hugged her, and even after she left, I remained motionless, unable to approach him any closer. Instead, I stood at the threshold. I listened to the ventilator's rhythmic hisses and clicks as Daddy's chest rose and fell in tandem. I tried to avoid looking at the slackened skin, the hollowed cheeks where alcohol had eroded his weight, his strength. I marveled at how quickly his body had withered in the two days since we'd last spoken, when my niece—his first grandchild—held the phone while I used FaceTime to talk to him. He was still in his apartment

I stood at the threshold. I listened to the ventilator's rhythmic hisses and clicks as Daddy's chest rose and fell in tandem.

then, barely able to speak, managing only a gruff, pained, "It hurts!" when I asked him how he was feeling. He had already been fading, his body betraying him. Yet, for now, he was still here, holding on.

I held his hand loosely and listened to the machinery, to the hushed yet strained voices in the hallway. I had flown halfway across the country to sit in this room, to be present when the machines were turned off, struggling to understand what presence truly meant when the person I was meant to be here for had already left in every way but breath.

"Well, Daddy . . . I guess I should be mad at you for ruining my California vacation," I said, letting out a small, humorless laugh, one that faded before the corniness that generated it could linger. "Not that I was really doing much relaxing anyway."

I flicked my eyes to his face, searching for a sign—an eyelid twitch, a change in his breathing—any evidence that he could still hear me. But I received no response from him.

I leaned back in the chair, stretching my legs, feeling exhaustion seep deeper into my bones. "I've been stressed the eff out trying to finish this paper for my Victorian literature class. It was due last week, but I keep getting stuck on the introduction." I drummed my fingers nervously against my thighs. "Then Carlos called. Then Aunt Deb. So here I am."

My voice sounded too loud in the room. I let the ventilator's steady clicks fill the space again.

The air was laced with antiseptic, and underneath, a hint of something sour lingered.

"I'm writing about mourning," I murmured, speaking more to myself than to him. "About Black men's bodies and loss."

My eyes wandered back to his frame, observing how the sheets draped over his fragile form. I had seen this before—not him but bodies like his: men reduced to bone and cartilage, taken too soon by a virus that devoured them from the inside out. I wrote about these bodies, about how Black men who died of AIDS were mourned in silence, edited out of family histories, erased from public memory unless refracted through shame.

I stared at Daddy's body, ravaged by something different but just as vicious. Alcohol had taken him down slowly, made him disappear piece by piece until it left this man who was my daddy dying so young.

Grief, I was starting to realize, wasn't only about absence—it was about how one remembered the absent. More than that, it was about what grief made visible and what it refused to let surface. Christina Sharpe writes about living in the wake—not as metaphor but as an ongoing condition, the aftermath of Black death that shapes our living. She speaks of "residency in the wake" as a demand to witness what exceeds language, what remains even after the burial. Daddy was not just dying; he was slipping further into the wake—into that liminal space where memory, mourning, and erasure meet. I was trying to write from there, not around it but through it.

To sit by his bed was to recognize that I had always been in the wake—that I was born into it, borne by it. That our mourning was not discrete but collective, passed down like so many myths, like a mouthful of salt. And perhaps what I was writing—this paper, this elegy, this moment—was not analysis but ritual. A vigil made of syntax. A Black son speaking softly into the ear of a Black father whose breath lingered on the edge of departure. I was trying to convey what the body could no longer hold through language.

I reflected on this while tracing the outline of Daddy's hand resting on the sheet, listening to the ventilator breathe, watching him lie so still, worried that if he knew I was there, he'd given no sign until a knock at the door startled me.

I looked up when my Aunt Debra stepped in, her expression soft but resolute.

"Hey there, Nephew. It's time."

I nodded, my stomach twisting. I rose from the chair and walked to the other side of the bed, close to the machines, near his head. Hesitating briefly, I leaned down and pressed my lips against his temple, whispered, "I love you, Daddy."

When I pulled back, I sensed it. A squeeze. A faint but unmistakable pressure around my fingers.

I gazed at my hands, my pulse racing. "Daddy?"

Was it a fluke? A muscle spasm? My throat tightened. I asked again. "Daddy, can you hear me? If you can hear me, squeeze my hand again."

Then another squeeze.

Well, I'll be damned.

He had heard me. *But how could that be?* I had been talking to him the whole time.

Then I noticed that his left ear was pressed into the pillow.

All that time, I had been speaking into his deaf ear.

I bent down once more, speaking into the ear I now knew could hear me. "I'm here, Daddy. I love you. I love you."

He didn't squeeze my hand. He shooed me away—not out of malice but with a familiar insistence; this time, however, it was a gentle refusal to be fussed over, even then. For a moment, I could laugh—not from guilt or nervousness, but from the sheer joy of knowing that, until the very end, he was still very much himself.

I called Andrei to ask if he would take me to Daddy's apartment to see what else needed sorting, packing, or discarding—even though the place had already begun to feel like a remnant, a space from which life had long since withdrawn.

He was one of the first people I called after I'd hung up the phone with Aunt Debra. I hadn't planned it that way. My fingers just seemed to find his number and dial. Even though it was after midnight, he answered on the second ring, listened as I told him that my daddy was dying and I was coming home. He said he was sorry—softly, plainly—and then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, told me he'd pick me up from the airport. Said I could stay at his place while I was in Knoxville, either in the guest room or I could sleep with him—he didn't care. Whatever made me comfortable.

I appreciated the offer more than I let on but told him I planned to stay at my mama's.

Andrei tried during those first couple of days to keep my mind from spiraling. He brought me around our old friends, who were careful not to overwhelm me with their sympathy as we grilled in Andrei's backyard for old times' sake, enjoying easy laughter and classic R&B music humming through the screen door from inside the house. It felt strange to sit in a lawn chair, balancing a paper plate of ribs, baked macaroni and cheese, and deviled eggs on my lap while I anticipated that at any moment someone would call to tell me Daddy had died. However, the anticipation was also unobtrusive, and in some ironic way, a comfort. No news was not necessarily good news but rather a stay of the inevitable.

So when Andrei agreed to pick me up from the hospital after he finished work and said we'd stop at his house before going to

Daddy's apartment, I didn't argue. I understood—he wanted a little extra time to unwind.

I clenched my jaw as I sat on the sofa across from him while he popped the cap off one beer, then another, settling into his favorite recliner and smoking a Swisher Sweet. His eyes, usually so keen, seemed unfocused as he clicked through the TV channels with a weary slowness, as if the rapid pace of my grief had temporarily dulled his own quickness. The clock ticked away, and my hands twitched against my bouncing knees. Every cell in my body screamed, *We need to leave—now!* Still, my patience, worn thin, was tempered by memory: This was once the man I called home. So I stayed, watching the glow of the television screen reflect off the flat side of his face and neck as he tilted the beer bottle against his lips and turned his head toward me to exhale the smoke through his nose. Perhaps this was his quiet way of bracing himself—absorbing my shock or his own, at a distance.

Every cell in my body screamed, We need to leave—now! *Still, my patience, worn thin, was tempered by memory: This was once the man I called home.*

We arrived at Daddy's apartment with just enough time to clean out the refrigerator when his youngest sister, Tam, called.

"Darius, I think he's about to go," she said.

Rain had begun to fall, turning the drive back into a blur of wet pavement and streetlights smeared across the windshield. It came down steadily as we neared the hospital entrance, and just as I reached for the door handle, Andrei's brow furrowed.

"Which entrance? This one or—"

"This one, this one," I snapped, pushing the door open and already halfway out.

"No, I don't think it is," he said. "I think it's—"

"This is the one!"

"Okay . . . chill," he said, then took my face in his hands, kissed my forehead softly, and told me he loved me, his affection thawing my icy demeanor.

"I love you too," I replied, and then it hit me—I *was* at the wrong entrance. I didn't know how to get to Daddy's room from here.

"Motherfu—" I started to say, then ran—sprinted, really—inside, the soles of my sneakers squeaking against the tiles as I dashed down one corridor, then another. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, a monotonous drone that amplified the frantic pounding in my ears.

My heartbeat synced with the erratic beeping of monitors from open doorways, where fleeting glimpses of patients—some sleeping, others staring blankly—flashed past, ghostly in the sterile glow.

Yet the hospital felt eerily empty. There was no janitor paused mid-mop, with stretches of wet floor shimmering under the artificial light; no doctors lost in serious conversations; no murmuring families huddled in waiting areas, their eyes glued to a muted television screen; no slow-moving food carts to dodge; no muffled coughs behind curtains; no hurried clicks of heels against the floor.

It shouldn't have been this easy to navigate the hallways. The ease itself felt like an anomaly, one that slowed me down as curiosity pulled me around corners—not toward what I believed was Daddy's wing, but toward something livelier than anything I'd encountered so far. I glanced cautiously at the numbered doors, each one a possible barrier, a potential delay to reaching the wing where Daddy was.

Then, at last, I reached his room. The door was slightly ajar. I threw myself forward, slamming my palm against it; the impact reverberated up my arm.

Inside, the beeping was steady yet ominous, the antiseptic smell even stronger. Daddy lay there, still, too still, in the dim light.

I took a moment to breathe. The world shrank to this single moment, this one room. For the first time since I began running, I hesitated.

I lingered in the doorway, watching him in bed with his oldest and youngest sisters leaning over his body. The day nurse hovered at the head of the bed, her stethoscope in hand, with compassionate eyes fixed on Daddy's chest, which rose and fell more slowly—until, finally, it didn't. Yet, I thought I saw movement, some proof of life still striving.

Only then did I deliberately take the first few steps toward him, my eyes fixed on his open mouth, agape with only the air in the room—no breath—to fill it.

"It seems like he's still breathing," I said.

The nurse looked at me kindly. "Would you like me to check?"

I nodded. She inserted the earpieces, placed the diaphragm of the stethoscope against Daddy's chest, and moved it carefully, listening for any trace of a heartbeat, any whisper of breath, any sign of blood flow. She checked his carotid artery, deliberate in her examination. But there was nothing. No heartbeat. No sound of life. Then, she declared Daddy dead.

I had not braced myself for this—how my face felt weeping against his breastbone, the bones sharp beneath his threadbare skin. I was unprepared for the absent heartbeat, so I closed my eyes, not to blot out the room but to understand the full magnitude of his death.

I sought an apt analogy to capture the silence within his body, one that, to my surprise—perhaps because I could still hear the echoes of his gradually fading breath—was like the face of an ocean, calm and undisturbed, without a single ripple on its surface; I pictured it transformed into a smooth sheet of glass, as reflective and unbroken as a mirror.

As I pulled myself upright, I examined him, wondering what would come next. He died right there before my eyes, and yet it was such a simple death—nothing like the climax of an overwrought film, nothing to make his dying more familiar or more imaginable for those who weren't present.

There was no sudden, desperate inhalation that never exhaled, nor a collective breath held among the three of us at his bedside, waiting for a final dramatic release. No, Daddy's last breath conveyed his death anticlimactically, yet still so intimately. It slipped from his body like a paper note sliding beneath a door—the hush of it sweeping across a dusty floor to reach the other side.

RADHA MARCUM

DEVIL'S BEGGARTICKS

and so like anxiety spiked with glabrous leaves
pointing in all directions it appeared one year :
petioles and leaflets spiraling up in the bare spots
the downed trees left : the rerouted creek cleared
of cottonwood seedlings : so the barbed awns
stuck and spread with animal passing : with casual
latch and easy growth in decimations : the sun
opening a new map for its advance along waters
sudsed with lawn chemicals : as days flowed toward
diagnosis the roils choked on small green apples
dropped early : truly had I not noticed before? : or
was I like beggarticks a thriver in disruption? :
in cyclic over-meddling? : ever after I could not not
see it : burnt-gold florets exuberantly arrayed

RADHA MARCUM

IF BODY IS THE FIELD

in illness, words migrate in first-person plural
as sandhills ravel their slow, glistening cursive

down the continent's spine, papers collect
your pulses, the back-shifts, a fly leg twitching

like the second hand in a weakening watch
ticking off your treatments as the milkweed

bursts like a beacon for snow, and after a month
or so of the clear-bag drips and red-vial blears

punctuation loosens, commas fall out, foliage
resembles salt flaking at a lake edge, my leaking

drafts store conjunctions that have entered
an ice, and I pray for a rationally blind winter

in the dirty flare of taillights, wet road separating
the lines, red sumac berries lingering in twigs

RADHA MARCUM

EQUINOX

what purple lingers by the fire road
among the uprooted trunks that clutch
at stones : harebells maybe : asters that have lost
half their teeth to the receding temperatures :
what can't be named walks with you too
as you drink up the rough light ponding in dust
and name the shrubby maple *maple* : turning
in the tumbled nuthatch calls you perceive
the no time it takes to throw off summer
from the magnesium blear of leaf blood : *do not*
you think *write blue sky or godlike rays penetrating*
the ravine as a plane's twin engines buzz
transmissive schists and sandstones : exposed
like bone segments worked through a body
milk-white quartzes rise here and resettle
in the ochre berm : the pines smell of stars and
like the dead are undiminished by seasons : each
needle suckling light : *I promise you* : *shouldn't it*
be obvious by now : those dry eye sockets
are just a rock you can't stop tripping on as you
skirt the hill still enough this morning not to hiss
through its parched stalks and seeds

SARAH GAMBITO

KUNDIMAN

> *No imagination helps avert destitution in reality, none can oppose oppressions or sustain those who "withstand" in body or spirit. But imagination changes mentalities, however slowly it may go about this.*
>
> —Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*,
> trans. by Betsy Wing, an epigraph in *DMZ Colony,*
> by Don Mee Choi, who thanks Stephen Sohn,
> who teaches with me at the university where

I

I was talking to Matthew and saying:

What good is poetry in war? What is the role of a poet AS A PERSON?

What is it when the people can't receive a poem?

I had written in another time, another place but it was still TRUE

because my family wanted me to be a doctor, a dental hygienist,
anything to wear a white coat to make a good living and yet I

choose a life of words and

so, if they met a poem, they would really

punch her in the face.

II

Mahmoud Darwish said,

Beware, beware of my hunger

and of my anger!

III

What if the people need GRAIN.

And a hospital.

And the HANDS of a BURN UNIT?

Matthew said that Adorno said

that it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.

That no poem can exist.

IV

I said that
couplet

sounds like
a POEM.

V

Matthew and I were talking about Fred Moten and I told him how I loved how Fred said. It's funny that I think I was THERE, but I only READ it.

So, I say Fred SAID.

Why do you capitalize some words and not others? It is like you are SHOUTING AT ME, SARAH. I need to believe that you are HERE, that you hear my VOICE AND THE SCRATCHINGS OF THIS GRAPHITE PENCIL THAT BREATHES AND THEN DIES.

So, Fred SAID

that his book that I was holding in my hands was not so interesting to him.

The book was an artifact of 20 years of conversations with friends. The book was an inevitability, an approximation of a WITNESSING of deep friendship, of TRUST AND EXPLORATION.

That the book

accompanies.

Oh dear, oh my god

holding the hands of a book.

VI

Many years ago, Joseph and I were having a late night dinner in the East Village. It was in a bistro that I promise was so, so charming. So idyllic that it was as if the place was like Amélie—the character in the movie, the PERSON and the actress AUDREY TAUTOU when she was in her twenties and her skin was a dove and she was NOT FAMOUS YET.

So, we were in the bistro that was like AMÉLIE, BUT LIKE AUDREY TAUTOU WHO LIVES AND BREATHES AND WILL DIE.

Every single one of us was an Asian American poet.

Maybe there were 6 of us.

We were eating coq au vin, probably made with cheap wine.

But, you know, that cooks out.

Someone asked (maybe it was me) what do your parents do?

Joseph and I were surprised to hear that everyone's parents were professors, or doctors, or lawyers or accountants.

Joseph and I were the only ones whose parents. (Before marital law, before revolution, before the BEFORES WHICH WILL LIVE AND DIE AND LIVE AND DIE

AGAIN.)

Who were from the MUD.

My father worked in a warehouse where bleach tore up his hands.

Joseph's father worked in a HOSPITAL, IN THE LAUNDRY OF THE HOSPITAL.

And yet we were

EATING COQ AU VIN.

I said,

Joseph.

How

Did

We

Make

It

Out.

And did we really, TBH?

There were years and years when I did not buy new underwear. I would walk around with HOLES IN MY UNDERWEAR IN THE CROTCH.

I say "years and years . . ."

as I'm ashamed to say that not that long ago

I wore these DIY CROTCHLESS PANTIES.

VII

Remember what my uncle said?

(YOU WERE THERE TOO, REMEMBER?)

We were in Manila.

Manila was crawling all over us with her traffics and it was HOT.

He was talking to us about my MOTHER

when she was YOUNG.

VIII

You can't ever SEE your mother as YOUNG.

This would mean that you would have to understand HER AS NOT YOUR PARENT. BEFORE THE BEFORE.

IX

So my uncle was saying,

I never knew anyone that worked as hard as your mother.

Do you know that she had 6 jobs? She traveled and traveled to these jobs over the backs of Manila and she worked and worked and worked.

X

My friend Marissa, the filmmaker, made a documentary about the great Filipino American organizer Larry Itliong who stood shoulder to shoulder with César Chávez to overturn power via the Delano Grape Strike of 1965. I was 37 years old and had never heard of Larry Itliong. My educations had not led me to him.

Marissa's film brought me to him.

Her conversation brought me to him.

XI

My love, we MUST surface

ourselves to each other.

XII

ISANG BAGSAK!

Abby Pasion writes:

"Translating to 'One Down,' it was Filipino farmworker and militant labor activist Larry Itliong who introduced the Tagalog saying to fellow activist and organizer, César Chávez, during the era of the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Itliong and Chávez utilized the phrase to create the 'unity clap,' a practice that would join both Filipino and Latino migrant workers together after a long day in the fields—communicating across language barriers—to further their cross-cultural fight for farmworker's rights.

"Starting slow, like the pace of a heartbeat, the clap would grow faster, stronger, and louder. Eventually building up to a chorus of applause, someone cries out . . ."[1]

ISANG BAGSAK!

ISANG BAGSAK! ISANG BAGSAK!

1. Abby Pasion, "From 'Isang Bagsak' to #FilipinxForBlackLives, the Filipino Identity Has Always Been Political,"*Medium*, November 3, 2020.

SARAH GAMBITO

A POEM

holds back a tributary, which is the ocean, which is who I am becoming. A self—thin shelled, irradiated and pouring out legs for millennia. I herald my own herald which is the herald of these sneakers. I aqua-net my bangs into sea-bridges that made sense at the time. It really all made sense at the time. In a film, I saw other children being sprayed with DDT. Everyone said it was good and the children were laughing and rubbing it deeper into their heads. How to be 20/20 now? In desperation, I went to a healer who Zoomed her face to me from Buenos Aires. She was Bangladeshi and she had lived in NYC and she chain-smoked the entire time and fixed her hair the entire time. She said if you claim your medicine, you cannot live with the tribe. I sang o-I'm lonely-I'm lonely-I'm lonely-lonely-lonely-lonely-I want-to-be-with-the-many-others. She said, this is not your fate and she showed me the long feathers of medicine. They descended to the earth with no floor.

R. X. ZHANG

THE MAKING OF THE IMPERIAL TOFU

When I was three, my mother taught me a song:

Sharing fruits, sharing fruits.
In the end, two are left.
One is big, the other small.
The big one I give to Little Brother Zhang.
The small one I save for myself.

I twisted the lyrics and sang it as: "The *small* one I give to Little Brother Zhang / The *big* one I save for myself."

"No," my mother said, "the big one is for Little Brother Zhang."

"Then I am Little Brother Zhang," I declared.

As I was growing up, my mother brought up this story whenever she needed proof of my egotism: the original sin of all Chinese children born between 1979 and 2015 under the one-child policy, the so-called "little emperors." When the restrictions were lifted on January 1, 2016, my mother had already gone through menopause. Every now and then, during our phone calls, she'll whine about how the policy cheated her and left her with only a daughter, who, once married, is like splashed-out water that cannot be retrieved.

Though a skeptic of the one-child policy, my mother was a big supporter of another government scheme: Before entering middle school, every Chinese kid must go through a period of military training, during which they live in camps under the supervision of army officials. Weeks before the start of my training, my mother entered a jubilant state, as if she had just foreseen the downfall of her archenemy. "You think your wings are strong now. I can't handle you at home, but someone else can—the military officers . . ." She went on singing the praises of the People's Liberation Army and their marvelous power to crush and reform. The night before I was sent to the camp, however, she lavished on me such unprecedented sweetness, which filled my heart with dread. "Why don't you play your favorite games on the computer while I pack for you?" She ushered me into

the living room. I sat down in front of the computer screen, on which an army of zombies marched toward a row of defenseless sunflowers, my vision blurry with tears. My mother's honeyed voice rang in my ears: "Which sunscreen do you want, the vanilla one or the tangerine? Also, I've packed a beach bucket for you—it can come in handy when you have a fever at night and need to vomit." When she was done packing, she held me in her arms, my cheek pressed against her warm, sweaty bosom. "If the army officer says something, you just obey, okay?"

I knew my doom was near.

The first week at the camp was, to my surprise, not as excruciating as my mother might have wished. I was placed in a group with fifty-five other kids who would become my classmates in middle school. Every day we woke up at 5:30 a.m. and went hiking on a mountain nearby. Early in the morning, the sun had this creamy texture of a soft-boiled egg, leaking into the sky drops of liquid gold. Before the egg became fully cooked, when the summer air was still fresh and moist with the scents of dew and wet wood, we climbed up the mountain. On both sides of the hiking path, morning glories bloomed, an orchestra of tiny trumpets, purple and blue. When we reached the top of the mountain, we rested by a pebble-strewn brook and had breakfast: two steamed buns and a small bag of pickles. The round trip took about two hours. By the time we went down to the base of the mountain, the morning glories had fallen asleep again. In the afternoon we trained under the blazing sun, learning how to stand like soldiers, walk like soldiers, and salute our superiors like soldiers. We formed a phalanx, marched in unified steps, and shouted, "Ya Ah Ya, Ya Ah Ya, Ya—Ah—San—Sa!" until our voices merged into one.

The physical hardship was, however, softened by the excitement of meeting other kids my age. We soon bonded over our mutual dislike of the instructor, a soldier in his early twenties, who resembled one of those slim but fierce dogs made of only bones and muscle. We disliked him because he was different. To begin with, as kids growing up in the north, we found his southern accent ridiculous and had much fun mimicking him behind his back. The kid who did the best impression was a skinny spectacled boy with a milky complexion, who, at the tender age of twelve, already showed great promise as a comedian. He

came up with a nickname for the instructor: Bao Qingtian, the name of a legendary government official in the Song dynasty known for his upright character and dark skin, as the instructor was, due to his time in the army, very tanned.

At dinner, the comedian was the first to notice the instructor entering the dining hall. He shot up from his seat and, with his squeaky voice, greeted the instructor: "Good evening, Mr. Bao!"

A few choked laughs escaped from the crowd. The instructor's face darkened. "Firstly, it's Instructor, not Mister; secondly, my last name is not Bao!"

The kids could hold their laughter no longer. What followed was an explosion of chaos. Chopsticks were sent flying in the air; watermelon seeds were spat out like bullets; a bowl of mung bean soup was knocked over, causing a girl to scream, but the inharmonious noise she produced was soon devoured by a new wave of laughter. Our joy had a performative quality: We were overdoing it with an almost maleficent spirit, a form of revenge on the past few days of order and discipline.

Our joy had a performative quality: We were overdoing it with an almost maleficent spirit, a form of revenge on the past few days of order and discipline.

The carnival was cut short by the instructor pounding his fist on the table. All it took was for one timid kid to falter and stop laughing first, and the rest of us followed. Silence resumed in the dining hall; we had lost our first revolution. Like all failed revolutions, ours had a gruesome end. The instructor grabbed the comedian by his collar and pulled him out of his seat. The boy's glasses slipped off his face, one leg becoming detached as they hit the concrete floor. No one dared to pick them up for him.

"Stand on the table," the instructor said.

The comedian stepped on top of his chair and climbed onto the dining table, standing amid watermelon rinds and grains of rice. He pressed his lips together and sucked them in so that his mouth, which was once the source of infinite jest, tightened into a thin line. Leaning forward, he kept his knees bent and his head lowered, which earned him a slap on his back. The instructor lifted the boy's chair and passed it to him. "Hold it

above your head," he said, "and stay in this position while your classmates eat."

But no one was eating. The sound of our peer sobbing and hiccupping at the same time echoed in the hall.

I shared a room with seven other girls. Room 404 was about ten square meters, with two bunk beds on each side and a chest of drawers in the middle. The room was dominated by a pungent smell with a top note of socks, a middle note of preadolescent hormones, and an everlasting base note of Tiffany's treasured sunscreen, which she claimed to have bought in France. Tiffany's real name was Tian, but she insisted that we call her by her English name and labeled all her stuff, especially that bottle of sunscreen, with a capital T. As a result of the ubiquitous T's, her name was the first one I learned.

With Hui it was the opposite. Her bed was above mine, but she was so quiet and her movements so gentle that I often forgot she was there, less than a meter above my head. Right before lights were shut off at 10:00 p.m., Hui would climb up the ladder with the nimbleness of a cat and disappear into the dark for the rest of the night. There was a certain gracefulness in her gestures, and later I learned this was because she had been taking Chinese classical dance lessons since she was six. Once, when we both couldn't fall asleep, I climbed up to her bed and she performed for me the techniques of the water sleeves dance. She lifted her arm up and let it float in the air; it was as if her bones were transformed into water that flowed through her arm, with ripples traveling from her shoulder to her fingertips. The soft glow of the moon illuminated one side of her face, and I thought at that moment that she was beautiful, though she would have disagreed. Hui was not happy with her monolid eyes and frizzy hair, and she wished that her skin tone were lighter. "It's because I don't have a nice bottle of sunscreen like Tiffany's. My mom will never take me to France. It was difficult enough to convince her to let me continue taking dance lessons after my half-brother was born." Hui was the only person I knew who had a sibling. In her family, the bigger fruit was reserved for her "Little Brother Zhang."

One evening, when I returned to the dormitory, I saw my belongings scattered on the floor. Among them was a small paper

bag filled with rice crackers, which my mom had packed for me. The paper bag was stained with an adult-sized shoe print belonging to Mrs. Pi, who was now holding upside down someone else's backpack, dumping its contents on the floor. Mrs. Pi was our dormitory monitor. Every day when the sun went down, the instructor handed over his supervisory power to Mrs. Pi, who ensured that rules were followed during even the darkest hours of the night.

Standing beside her was Tiffany, who was checking the drawers one by one. "Have you seen my sunscreen?" she asked.

"No," I said. I picked up the paper bag; the rice crackers were crushed. When I looked up, I saw Mrs. Pi glaring at me, as if she had just caught me red-handed. "We have zero tolerance for theft here." She spit out each word with distaste. "Did you steal her sunscreen?"

I shook my head, but Mrs. Pi was not satisfied. She held out her palm to me, fixing her eyes on me with such intensity it was as if she hoped to burn a hole in my forehead with her gaze. My throat tightened, and my voice became high-pitched: "It really wasn't me."

Mrs. Pi didn't withdraw her hand. Just when I was about to break down in tears, she snatched the paper bag of rice cracker crumbs from me and said, "Snacks aren't allowed in the camp."

For the rest of the evening, I witnessed Mrs. Pi use the same interrogation strategy—guilty until proven innocent—on the other girls in my room. Some burst out crying right away; others, eager to prove their innocence, volunteered to help with the search. They turned the room upside down. Although no sunscreen emerged from the raid, two cell phones and one box of chocolates were found and thus confiscated by Mrs. Pi, who left with her hands full of the loot.

The girls restarted the investigation the next day, thrilled by the idea that there was a thief among us—the excitement came not so much from the search for the sunscreen as the hunt for the black sheep. Tiffany was the only one who cared about the sunscreen. While crawling on all fours to check under the beds, she froze for a moment; then, with a sudden jerk, she hit her head against the metal frame of the bed and let out a cry. When she stood up, her face flushing, she turned toward Hui out of the blue and accused her of being the sunscreen thief. Despite the lack of direct evidence, Tiffany stood by her allegation, which

was enough to convince the other girls. Now that a suspect had been identified, the excitement reached a climax and evolved into a phase of collective mania. Hui endured multiple rounds of interrogation, first with Mrs. Pi, then with Tiffany and the other girls, and again with Mrs. Pi, but she held firm. Seeing that Hui refused to break while the search remained fruitless, the girls lost interest in the case. As there was never a short supply of drama in the dormitory, they soon moved on to new sources of entertainment.

I refrained from participating in the persecution of Hui, but one night I could no longer hold back the question that had been haunting my mind for days. Hui said nothing in response; instead, she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders moving up and down as she cried without making a sound, like an actor in a silent film. After that night, Hui withdrew herself from me, shutting out the external world with her reticence.

The instructor visited the dormitory one evening to teach us how to fold a duvet in the military style, creating what he called a "tofu block," as the white duvet in a cube shape resembled a block of medium firm tofu. To demonstrate, he spread Tiffany's duvet on her bed and flattened it with his palms until the duvet looked like it had been ironed. Then, he ran the knife edge of his hand down the duvet to create two vertical lines that divided the duvet into three equal parts, and folded them in. What came next was a repetition of folding and pressing, which purged the duvet of its natural fluffiness and beat it into a compact cube, much like how a pile of shapeless soybean paste is transformed into rectangular blocks under the formidable pressure of the tofu machine. To fine-tune the details, the instructor reshaped the edges of the cube to make sure that it contained only right angles and straight lines. A perfect tofu block was therefore antithetical to a duvet: It contained no curves or soft spots, signaling neither comfort nor warmth.

A perfect tofu block was therefore antithetical to a duvet: It contained no curves or soft spots, signaling neither comfort nor warmth.

After the instructor left, Tiffany wrapped her arms around

her duvet. "I'm not gonna unfold it tonight." She rested her cheek on the duvet with her eyes turned toward the door.

It was past our bedtime, but we didn't feel like falling asleep yet. One of the girls started tapping her fingers on the bed rail, creating a series of metallic notes that echoed in the dark. Someone responded with more assertive knocks. The soft tapping and loud knocking alternated, creating a rhythmic dialogue, the melody of the night. Soon we all joined in, and the knockings gave way to titters. Careful not to attract attention from Mrs. Pi, we told stories in whispers. I treated my roommates to a series of ghost stories, all stolen from *Goosebumps*, with some improvised details thrown in to make the tales more relatable to my Chinese audience: The protagonists lived in run-down apartment buildings rather than large houses with gardens and basements, and they had to face the horrors on their own as none of them had siblings.

After midnight, the mood seemed to have shifted. Someone sighed and told a story of unrequited love. We sighed with her. It was then that the night truly began. We confessed to one another our past romantic experiences, real or made-up. Tiffany boasted about her boyfriend from elementary school. "He is the most handsome guy in our class, with thick brows and curled eyelashes. He was born with wavy hair—he has some foreign blood in him. His skin is darker than ours, and he speaks with a Taiwanese accent. Every week, he sends me a love letter from Hong Kong."

I laughed. "So he looks like Bao Qingtian?"

"Stop calling him that!" Tiffany hissed.

"Our instructor is kind of handsome too, don't you think?" another girl said. "I like the way he strides with his head held high and chest out."

Someone giggled.

"Speaking of our instructor, shame on you, Hui!" Tiffany said with glee. "When he was here tonight, your underwear was just hanging on the bed rail. The crotch part even looked a bit yellow! He must have seen it."

The girls uttered a burst of laughter.

"Shush! Mrs. Pi is coming!"

The sound of Mrs. Pi's footsteps reverberated in the corridor, becoming louder and then quieter again. From a distance came a sharp "ahem!" as she cleared her throat, forcing out

the phlegm from the depths of her lungs, which landed on the floor with a soft plop. Then silence took over the night, until my roommates began to snore.

I heard Hui tossing and turning in her bed. She had been quiet for the whole night until then. I imagined that she had grown used to Tiffany's taunts, as Tiffany had targeted her since the sunscreen incident, but this one must have hit different. "Are you all right?" I tapped on the wooden board of her bed but received no answer. Around two or three o'clock, I fell asleep to the sound of her bed creaking above my head.

When the alarm rang, I felt that I had only been asleep for five minutes. I sat in my bed, my head spinning and my eyelids heavy, until a deafening sound pulled me out of the limbo between sleep and wakefulness. Mrs. Pi was standing in front of me, banging a metal triangle ruler on the bed frame.

"Quit staring at the floor! You are the slowest of them all!" she barked. "Remember the training you had yesterday. I will be checking your duvets this morning. You can't have breakfast until you meet my standards."

And then the nightmare began. Tiffany was the first to receive permission to leave, as she hadn't unfolded her duvet from the night before. After refolding once or twice, my other roommates also passed the test. Hui and I, however, were stuck with Mrs. Pi and her unrelenting triangle, which she used to check that our tofu blocks contained 90-degree angles—they most definitely didn't. After my sixth or seventh try, I gave up. Instead of refolding the duvet again, I waited for a few minutes and called Mrs. Pi, who was chastising another unfortunate soul in the room next door. I told her that following her advice, I had put in some extra effort this time. I begged her to give me more guidance so that I could improve my work further. Mrs. Pi examined the same crappy tofu block she had seen just a moment ago. "It's indeed much better than before," she said, and let me go.

I stood by the entrance to the dormitory and waited for Hui. About fifteen minutes later, she emerged, looking downtrodden, with dark circles under her eyes.

"Hui, I'm sorry," I said. "To hell with Tiffany's sunscreen. I bet it wasn't actually from France."

"I didn't take it," Hui said.

"I know." I stretched out my hand to her. "Can we still be friends?"

She held my hand and smiled.

We walked together to the dining hall, but breakfast was already over by the time we got there. Realizing that we were late for the morning assembly, we ran toward the training ground. Hui tramped behind me, gripping her stomach with one hand. I grabbed her other hand and dragged her forward. When we arrived, our classmates were standing in a phalanx. The phalanx had a chipped corner, as there were two unfilled spots at the end of the front row. We moved in small, quick steps toward the spots left for us, like two latecomers tiptoeing to their seats in the dark after the movie has started.

"Stand where you are!" The instructor stopped us. He glanced at his watch and said, "Fifty-five people waited for you for five minutes, that's fifty-five times five—"

"Equals 275!" The comedian shouted out the result with a broad smile, which vanished when the instructor shot him a glare.

"Do you see my comrade over there?" The instructor pointed at a soldier leading another group of kids, who were goose-stepping across the training ground. "His students make him proud. You, by contrast, are nothing but a loose pile of sand."

Some of my classmates lowered their heads, their brows furrowed. I knew I was in big trouble: I had injured the collective pride and turned myself into an enemy of the people, a rat turd at the bottom of a pot of delicious soup.

"You"—the instructor pointed at Hui and me—"do 275 leapfrog jumps."

To perform a leapfrog jump, you had to bend over with your butt in the air, not a move you would want to perform in front of your classmates. Squatting down, I could picture in my mind the outline of my bottom becoming visible through the white polyester trousers of my school uniform, the fabric stretching taut. I felt hideous. I wished my classmates weren't so quiet. They were not whispering, yawning, or fidgeting, as they often did during the training; instead, they were watching with undivided attention, taking in every second of our shame.

Pressed against the ground, my palms turned gray, with patches of red marks matching the uneven surface of the asphalt. My heart pounded against my stomach and with every

beat threatened to escape through my throat. Luckily, I hadn't had breakfast, or I would have puked. Meanwhile, a few meters ahead, Hui kneeled on the ground with her back hunched and retched, but nothing came out.

"Get up! You haven't even reached fifty yet!" the instructor yelled. Somehow the more pathetic we looked, the more furious he became, as if our humiliation were an insult to his honor. "What a disgrace! I have never seen anyone with worse physical fitness than you two."

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and jumped, but fell on all fours. At this point, I no longer cared about how I looked. I bet I looked like a roasted suckling pig, with my face turning red under the sun and my eyes, stung by the sweat, narrowed to slits. I couldn't see the path ahead and felt that I was going in circles. The sky, too, was moving in circles, with red and green halos blooming around the sun like fireworks on New Year's Eve.

"She's bleeding!" someone cried. A few kids started screaming.

I opened my eyes and saw Hui lying on her side in a fetal position, her hands clutching her stomach. Her hair was soaked with sweat, as if she had just walked out of a shower. A crimson mark spread across the back of her white trousers. It seemed to have stolen all the blood from her cheeks. Her complexion turned pale, and her lips took on an ashen hue. As her face contorted in pain, an unsettling smell rose up in the air.

The screaming stopped when people noticed another stain of a much more sinister color appearing on her trousers. It merged with the blood, creating a dark void that seemed capable of devouring Hui as she shivered on the ground.

As kids, we found it funny when people injured themselves in foolish or unpredictable ways, but, cruel as we were, witnessing this ruin of a fellow human being elicited only horror. A chilly silence consumed us. No one dared to make a sound when the instructor carried Hui on his back and ran toward the onsite clinic. On the ground, there was a small puddle of tears near where her head had been.

When I arrived at the clinic, Hui had changed into an adult-sized camouflage uniform and was lying on an examination table with a doctor by her side. After measuring her tempera-

ture and taking her pulse, the doctor asked, "Is this your first period?"

Hui nodded.

The doctor took out a pack of sanitary pads from the cabinet behind her. She opened one of the pads and stuck it on her palm, folding the wings around the sides of her hand. "Put it in your underwear like this," she said, "and change it three or four times a day. It's normal to have an upset stomach during your period, nothing to worry about. You can leave now. And you"—the doctor threw a look at me—"go get her a hot water bag."

During lunch break, a group of girls gathered around Room 404. Reluctant to come in yet unwilling to leave, they blocked the entrance, forming a wall made of human flesh, their necks craning forward. They covered their mouths with their hands and murmured like a swarm of bees. The only clear, defined sound came from Tiffany snacking on a handful of sunflower seeds smuggled from the dining hall. She sat on the edge of her bed with one leg crossed over the other knee and cracked open the seeds with her front teeth. When she was done, she dusted off her hands and swept the shells under her bed with one foot. "Seriously," she said with a faint smile, "how am I supposed to continue living in this room? It stinks."

"If we talk to Mrs. Pi, maybe she will switch us to another room," one of my roommates said.

"But we don't want to swap with you!" one of the girls protested.

Tiffany rolled her eyes. "Nobody wants your room, right next to the toilet."

While the girls quarreled, I climbed up the ladder to check on Hui. She lay in her bed with her face turned toward the wall. She pulled the duvet all the way up to her forehead, leaving only her hair outside, untamed, growing in all directions. Next to her pillow was the spinach bun I had brought her from the dining hall, but she hadn't touched it.

"Hui, how are you feeling?"

She shifted in the duvet, like a moth struggling to emerge from its cocoon, and turned toward me. Her lips parted, but no words came out, so she compressed them and made an effort to smile. Her face was still that of a child, round and bland,

with no sharp angles, but her eyes had aged. It was as if she had skipped several decades of her life and moved directly into middle age. Tired, apathetic, those were the eyes of a woman who had taken more beatings from life than she could endure, but she had endured them and melted into a pile of unformed batter.

I avoided her eyes and handed her a bottle of body wash. "You will feel better if you wash yourself with this."

Hui removed the bottle cap and sniffed the liquid soap inside, then flipped the bottle to read the list of ingredients on the back: "Water, sodium lauryl sulfate, cocamidopropyl betaine, phenoxyethanol . . ." When she reached the end of the list, she started over. A beam of light flashed in her eyes, and she seemed to have acquired a strange kind of energy. She sat up in her bed, gripping the bottle with both hands, and sniffed it again. "Thank you," she said, her eyes still fixed on the ingredient list.

Seeing that her mood had improved, I offered to make a hot-water bag for her. I wrapped my plastic bottle in a T-shirt and went to the water station to fill it with boiled water. In the corridor, I heard Tiffany's laughter, scornful and melodramatic.

"You'll feel better if you wash yourself!"

"She sure knows a lot about *those* matters."

"I bet she's had her period many, many times . . ."

I sat down behind the boiler and buried my head between my knees. The water bottle burned in my hands; my face burned too.

When I returned from training in the evening, Hui was still in bed. I called and nudged her, but she did not wake up. Mrs. Pi pulled her out of her bed; she didn't wake up. She had drunk that bottle of body wash.

When I was eight, my father lost money in business and ended up in debt. My family moved into a one-bedroom apartment, where I spent my childhood and most of my adolescence. My mother took every chance to remind me of our financial struggles. I learned a lot during those years, such as "If it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down." Sensible as I was, I had the same obsessions as other kids my age: I wanted a Barbie and pestered my parents for weeks, maybe months. One day, after another fight with my father, my mother took her wedding ring off and placed it on the dining table. "Tomorrow I will have to

pawn this ring, the only piece of jewelry I own. We can barely afford food now, so forget about your damned Barbie doll!" It was then that I realized how bad things were for us, and I decided to help.

That night, I took the ring to the bathroom to give it a wash, so that my mother would be able to sell it for a higher price, I thought. It was a plain, narrow band of white gold, so light that I could not feel its weight on my palm. I turned the tap slightly to let a small stream of water flow out and brushed the ring with my index finger. Seized by a sense of despair, I began to sob. Tomorrow the ring would be gone, signaling the end of my parents' marriage and the disintegration of my family. Stitched together with ugly feelings, my family was as flimsy as this ring, a tiny circle in my hand, a period, a glimmer of moonlight. Then, the ring jumped out of my palm and into the sink. Amid the swirling water, it flickered one more time before vanishing into the dark, weeping hole. I put my finger into the drain—nothing. Fear exploded in my body like a bomb, shaking my frame and shattering all other thoughts and emotions. The blood in my veins froze; I stood there, paralyzed with a sense of impending doom. I learned the feelings of catastrophe long before the word itself entered my vocabulary.

I stood there, paralyzed with a sense of impending doom. I learned the feelings of catastrophe long before the word itself entered my vocabulary.

There have been a few times in my life when I wished time could go backward. The first time was for my mother's wedding ring, and the second time was for Hui.

That night, I stared at the base of Hui's empty bed and thought that I could still hear the creaking sound from time to time. Around four a.m., I gave up on trying to fall asleep and got up to take a walk in the corridor, wandering from one end to the other and then back. The walls were painted a pale, sickly green. With the paint peeling here and there, the walls seemed infected with some kind of skin disease. Walking down the dim and deserted corridor that stretched on and on, I felt like I was the only person alive after the apocalypse. Somehow, I was forgotten by the grand force of destruction and left be-

hind to outlive my destined time. At times, however, I felt like a ghost—indeed I was floating rather than walking, as the ground beneath me shifted and drifted. Every time I went past a closed door, I thought of the girls sleeping inside, safe in the cradle of dreams and deep slumber. I envied them.

At the end of the corridor was a shared bathroom consisting of a long, rectangular washbasin, a stand-up shower, and several squat toilets: holes in the wet concrete floor. In one of those holes, I saw my own face reflected in the treacherous water, illuminated by the incandescent bulb on the ceiling. The image sent shivers down my spine. I gasped for air, as if I had fallen into the deep, dark well that stretched all the way to the core of the earth, to nowhere.

Two new policies were implemented after what happened to Hui. The first one had to do with stricter surveillance in the dormitory. Every night, Mrs. Pi made the rounds at 11:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. She entered the rooms one by one, scanning our faces with a flashlight. With my eyes shut, I could feel the blinding white light crawling up my face, leaving a burning sensation on my eyelids. I was awake most of the time; I had lost the ability to sleep.

The second policy was met with enthusiasm by my classmates. After dinner, we returned to the training ground for an extra session, where we sat around a bonfire and learned to sing red songs. The instructor played songs on a boom box, and we sang along. The lyrics of the red songs involved variations of the same essential themes: Chairman Mao, the sun, a newly acquired sense of happiness, and an everlasting hatred toward the Japanese. The melodies, often derived from folk songs that preceded the birth of New China, evoked an earthy, hopeful atmosphere that defied time. After you heard them once, these songs would play on auto-repeat in your mind, until your blood boiled and your eyes steamed up. In the end, they left you with a warm feeling that lingered on in your chest: Life was worth living again.

"Instructor, will you sing a song for us?" someone suggested. Nighttime blurred the boundary between the superior and the subordinates as we sat in a circle, our shoulders touching. "Sing for us! Sing for us!" my classmates chanted. The instructor stood

up with a shy smile and started singing, his authority dissolving in the heat of the bonfire. Under the disguise of music, his voice sounded different: tender, tentative, and a little feminine when hitting the higher notes. After he finished, the students roared and clapped. Amid the cheering crowd, he seemed at a loss. He looked around and gave a military salute. The students would not let him sit down. They urged him to sing another song, and then another. The flames danced, sending tiny sparks into the night sky. I saw my classmates morph into faces without bodies; those faces floated in the dark, like bubbles in a pot of burnt sugar. They were laughing, their mouths stretching to the backs of their heads. At the center of their faces, dark holes yawned open, threatening to devour the moon, so that the sun alone would shine for ten thousand years.

Toward the end of the training, Tiffany reclaimed her Chinese name, Tian. "Our instructor said that I was like the sun at eight or nine in the morning, and my name suits me well: It means *the sky*," she said as she smoothed her hair back and tied it into a high ponytail, inserting an array of black bobby pins to keep the flyaways under control. "Our instructor has made me the flag bearer for the final parade because women can hold up half the sky." Tian would not stop talking about the instructor. It was no longer a secret that she was infatuated with him. The need for secrecy had disappeared because, by that point, all my classmates were infatuated with him. Admiration for the instructor was legitimized. In fact, those who did *not* have special feelings for the instructor should have reflected on their failing and hidden their deviation. I noticed that quite a few girls had picked up a southern accent and adopted phrases characteristic of the instructor, such as "reckon" and "yonder." Among themselves, they called him "Bao Bao," a diminutive of "Bao Qingtian." Unlike the previous nickname that was invented out of spite, "Bao Bao" was a term of endearment: It sounded like the word for "baby" in Chinese.

The instructor's attitude toward us had also softened: no more physical punishment or verbal abuse. I knew these changes were made possible by Hui, but no one else seemed to remember her. We did not talk about Hui—we were too busy marching forward to look behind. "Forward! Forward! Forward! Our army

faces toward the Sun . . .” After all, Hui’s tragedy was a small price paid to achieve a great leap forward: Once a loose pile of sand, we had now hardened into a dense block of cement.

At dusk, the girls emerged from the dormitory in white T-shirts and shorts, carrying shower baskets in their hands. The evening breeze wove through their damp hair and became laden with the artificial fragrance of shampoo. When they saw the instructor, they surrounded him like a flock of pigeons, waiting in anticipation as he took out a prepaid calling card and handed it to one of the girls. She held the card high above her head and ran back to the dormitory, her hair floating behind her. The other girls followed, their slippers slapping against the pavement like flapping wings. There was an old pay phone in the dormitory, a portal to the outside world; the instructor alone held the key. Like a benevolent god, he let the girls steal that Promethean heat from him during the most ambiguous hour of the day, when the sun had set, but the sky was not yet dark.

He saw me sitting on the stone steps in front of the dormitory. With his hands in his pockets, he bent over and asked, “Why don’t you join your friends?”

“They are not my friends.”

He smiled and took out from his pocket a red flip phone smaller than his palm. “Here”— he offered the phone to me— “give your parents a call. You must miss them.”

He wanted me to join the other girls. The moon on the fourteenth of the month, missing but one tiny piece, was the most infuriating existence: a hideous display of imperfection. If only it could be complete, if only I could join them. I looked at the phone, its screen glowing in fluorescent green, like a wish-fulfilling gemstone in mythology, the luminous pearl of the night. I looked away and said, “Can you give me Hui’s number?”

The instructor withdrew his hand and put the phone back into his pocket. His face tightened into a stern countenance, the one he wore when shouting out commands. He walked away, but then turned back. In the twilight, I could not make out his expression, and only heard him say, “Your friend was released from the hospital yesterday.”

On the last day of the training, my classmates stood around the instructor. They formed several circles, one inside another, and kept the instructor in the center like the sun. I floated out-

side the solar system, a comet that had drifted out of its orbit. Tian started singing first, and the instructor joined her. Their duet echoed across the training ground: "I am a soldier, coming from the people . . ." The duet soon turned into a chorus. Their voices mingled and trembled, until the singing gave way to sobbing. The kids fell like a row of dominos into the oceanic sadness that spread from the inner to the outer circles. Their faces, sun-darkened like the instructor's, reddened as they cried with all their strength. They spat out their tears and blew their noses hard, drawing out cries with a theatrical intensity. The instructor became tearful too, his fist clenched against his mouth. Encouraging one another, they let the mourning drag on, as if they were deriving pleasure from it. It was a pleasure I could not share, as no matter how hard I tried—my brows knitted and my eyes blinking fast—not a single tear came out. I felt the scorching gaze my peers had cast on me. Someone pushed me from behind; I stumbled, my dry eyes meeting the red eyes of the instructor. *I am the rat turd*, I thought, and smiled.

APOLLO CHASTAIN

PRINCESS TWELVE

We cover our breasts with eggshells
in the gas station bathroom. We live
in a nest of pink tulle and yolk. My sister
throws a lacquered box up in the air

and shoots the hinges—BANG
BANG! Ballet flats whisk out
as if the box is bleeding satin.
Gold Coast, mint soap, conch

shells in the kitchen: some girls are so full
of place I cannot bear it. The fuck
am I supposed to talk about with four
walls? Dancing is hurt in motion.

Speed on asphalt, hiss hot rain. The oaks
grow pastel eggs for when we're hungry.
Platforms for when our soles thin. My family
is anyone who can run as fast as me. I paint

her face with white acrylic left over from
the boiled shells at Easter. We shimmy
dawn down like shaking a curtain off
its rod. Poke holes in the pink. I wash dishes

when I wake up first. I try to abstain
from envy. I want to tell girls who bitch
about their mothers at Thanksgiving:
your home is just something we trip

over on our way OUT. We walk to 7-Eleven,
flirt with the cashier. Our hair gleams
like needles. We get ready again,
splash water on each other's noses.

APOLLO CHASTAIN

MY OLD MAN

spoke well you could see through him
like sweet water if he wore a crown
it would be a slender gold diadem

nothing ostentatious he loved King
David with his harp and nymph tongue
who loved boys could always snag a joint

was offered more than what he pretended
to expect by strangers I said he spoke well
he taught me how to do the same I mean

how to be seen by men as a window
in front of what they want how to drift
through hotels like panpipes bars like trumpet

sound he could get anyone to talk to him
affable humble and calculated bland
as floral print at beach weddings

how to get in anywhere act like you belong
how to make enough so you can always leave
town it was the news it was my dream

he wasn't even beautiful he acted like glass
in other ways to get what he wanted when he saw
how pretty I was growing up to be he said
honey love, you're gonna be a *monster*

APOLLO CHASTAIN

MUTE SWAN

I tested many possible doors
to other worlds as a girl:

The brambles by the elementary school wall.
A line of cygnets trailing near the algae.
Parentheses. Then, I discovered sex.

I made a potion supposed
to let me cross into the body
of a swan. The doctor said
don't worry kids play all the time
after she pumped my stomach.

This world is pressed against all the others
like hot sweat caught in wiry stomach hair.
Doors nested tongues inside bright beaks.

In the stories the boy becomes a swan.
This was supposed to be a punishment.
I ignored that part. I dreamed
of molting glossy feathers.
I believed if I changed my body
I could gain passage into a better world.

The doors were fine. The sex was fine.
The thing about transfiguration
is that it requires both faith and will.

To cross over one must first touch the knob
and find it gives below fingers
soft and heaving like a tongue.

The operations fantasy allows on a body:
The world of no lactation.
The world of orange bill.
The world of first fall dust
gray, mostly white plumage by November.

SUPHIL LEE PARK

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Each time, I'd return to my private life
cautiously disturbed.

Folders rummaged through, files reorganized
by the order of curiosity that belonged
not to me.

There you are, a child, cheeks decent as cotton
straight out of the dryer, sweating through
the shirt as kids do, on the other side.

Let's say you ran
your fingers through my hair much
the same way. Pin after pin, until
oh, this one's pearled—

There you are, still a child
decades after. Your hand
never let near.

(The door creaked ajar and you entered
your father's unoccupied study
you were never invited
warmly into.)

Let's say I do
prefer the mothballs and old pages
to your company
too. Let's say
I sat unmoving. Unstrung
pearls on the floor
so you'd trip.

There you are.
Believing not quite
in luck
or knocks.

My mind leaves the room
where I sit unstrung. I move on
up from the cold depths to the surface
light can reach where you're buoyed
by the law of water, where floating, once
known, is taken for granted.

In the shallows, beds of clams.
Each one I'll hold and knock
against a rock. And each time
I'll be asked the same: *who's there?*

SUPHIL LEE PARK

EVERYWHERE, LIGHT

After Icarus

Weight of light
in his pear orchard
where the day went, a slow tilt
of honey in a jar.

Some mornings the sun could barely see
the world, surrounded by itself.

I caught every feather falling from the sky.
Hawks in a hurry, the first spit
of rain that helped me
forgive summer, shrinkfit
grief after a good soak, a quip
of dragonflies:

There's nothing dragon-
like about dragon-
flies.

Their wet open eyes
that remind me of touching
myself for the first time
under another's roof.

Everywhere, a simile
away from home, then
another, another.

Loose cobwebs across the window
like hair left by a distressed soul
trying to break in all night, forehead black
from pressing the glass.

Everywhere, spiders coming
down in black scabs.

Light falling brighter on his lips
I mistake for my own
lucidity.

Everywhere, light runs across
the road like a child
rushing to meet his mother
and stops, realizing it's a trick
of clouds.

Everywhere, another
chance to break something
at dawn
reaching for water.

His hand I held
wasn't the hand I let go of.

The most I know
of a dandelion is what it's like to float
up first when all I ever want
is down.

SUPHIL LEE PARK

MY HEART DIDN'T BLEED FOR THE GRIEF OF THE WORLD[1]

Let alone yours
or mine.

Before the portrait of Fearing, I tried whole-
heartedly, tried to see what of it reminded you
of me. Perhaps you were more Neel than I was
Fearing. An eye for pain, a cold dark pool
in the chest cavity.

If letting myself travel down to Florida
in mid-July and meet you for the amusement
park rides through which I sweated and swore
counts as devotion, I am warm. But no blood.

Not when a woman broke down in the heat wave.
Not when we passed those in furry costume heads.
Not when you talked about the endless visits
to the doctors and no clear diagnosis. My heart—
if I had one—didn't bleed.

Not when I, thirteen, was left alone in the snow
for hours and fevered three nights away after.
Not when a boy threw a fistful of sand
in my face and didn't even call me names.
Not when a spinal needle tore my skin.
Not when I was sure my mother was dead.
Not when I held his hand for the last time.

Perhaps it was the skeleton that you thought
was cradling the heart. The skeleton that I thought

1. Alice Neel said, of her portrait of Kenneth Fearing, that "his heart bled for the grief of the world."

was milking it. Wringing it like a wet cloth
out on the balcony of Fearing's copious chest.
Perhaps you meant, *let's stop looking at all
this doom and be happier*. Than what or whom
I would not ask.

I would not ask
about the mother
of my father he didn't get to know
and I never met, the war she fled, or where
on my face she casts her shadow.
I would not ask about your letter
all those years ago. Nor would I ask myself
why, after one night I woke up to two clicks
of my typewriter in an empty room, I've been leaving
a paper on the platen.

And if you ever asked me, yes, the sky
was foolish for pouring
at the peak of sunset, the sea, reckless
for swallowing without a second
thought, and thoughts without
legs, the audacity to run
through any mind! I could go on
and on, but no, I did not
once bleed.

KEITH STAHL

RABID

One Sunday morning you will be reading in the gazebo and hear your wife scream. You will scurry in your slippers to the mulch pile, expecting a bear, having read about bears, thinking you will make yourself bear-like and scare the bear off, or maybe find a stick with which to hit the bear, or entice the bear into chasing you so as to save your wife and this will be how you are remembered.

But when you reach your wife, there will be no bear. She will be on the ground, grasping desperately. For what? For you? For air? Is she in the throes of a heart attack? Stroke? Do people scream when having a stroke?

Your insides will crumple at the desperation of the woman who moments ago was hauling clods in a rusty wheelbarrow with the vim of a puppy and the vigor of a USPS letter carrier—the same woman who fishes with worms and then guts her catch in accordance with a very specific YouTube video, the woman whom you went into debt for when "courting" by purchasing silly knickknacks and a piano, the woman who patiently listens to your "father issues" for hours on end while you watch the Mets drop their seventh straight and then timidly says, "You can have the last cupcake if you want."

You will notice a fox clamped to your wife's ankle. Not an elegant red fox—but a mangy gray fox. There will be no stick with which to hit the fox. There will just be you, in all your stick-less-ness and fang-less-ness, and you will make yourself large and bear-like and yell at the fox in a booming but incoherent bear-like voice until the fox releases your wife but comes after *you*, calling your bear-bluff, foaming, sinking its fangs into your slippered feet as you try kicking it away, not retreating until your feeble toss of a brick—thank God for the bricks—and you will think about following the fox to the woods at the edge of your yard and tossing bricks into what you think might be its den, hoping to kill the fox so that someone can dissect its brain, brain dissection being a thing you will have read about people doing to aggressive things that bite. But you will be reluctant

to squeeze face-first into a hollowed-out log in order to retrieve a fox that may or may not be dead, so you and your wife will drive to Community General Hospital to begin a series of rabies shots that will need to be administered at very specific intervals in the days and weeks ahead. You will worry that the rabies protocol might interfere with your trip to Canada to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time, your father who will loom large as most fathers do, the primordial essence of hero, safety, security—the source of change for the Coke machine down at Eddy's Gulf when you were a kid, the administrator of antacids when you had those salami nightmares about dinosaurs looming—whose voice over the phone lately has grown gravelly and choked with inevitability.

On the way to the hospital, you both will tell and retell the fox story to each other—from your perspective, your wife's perspective, the fox's perspective—and you both will laugh, Google having confirmed that rabies shots aren't in the stomach anymore, that only ten people die of rabies in the US each year, thanks to the coordinated efforts of health care and animal experts—and you will laugh at the irony of finally finding a house in the country within your price range, away from the rats and hoodlums and mayhem of the city, only to be bitten by a fox. As you approach the encroachment of Syracuse, you will lament that your father will never be well enough to visit your new *Anne of Green Gables*-ish house, that he would have appreciated it, having illustrated *Anne of Green Gables*, and your wife will then curl into a ball of shame for possibly jeopardizing your plans to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time. You will assure her that it could very well have been you who stirred up the fox, while inwardly blaming your wife for stirring up the fox and wondering if your wife's OCD extends now to weeding.

At the hospital your wife will jovially ask people in the emergency-unit waiting room, "How are you?"—and you will think, *How do you* think *they are?*—but people will surprise you with their cheerful responses (with the exception of that one person who's pretending to be sleeping), and you will recall your wife down at the lake, at the public landing, surrounded by adoring children, the excitement in their voices when she suggests they search for heart-shaped rocks, the energy and sincerity in that search, the tranquility of parents, grandparents, and otherwise legal guardians who get to ignore their children and smoke ciga-

rettes and talk about the algae bloom. And you will feel an inner glow and pride at the positivity your wife instills in complete strangers, and a twinge of guilt at having for a second inwardly blamed her for possibly jeopardizing your trip to Canada to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time, which maybe you won't want to take anyway, wishing it would all go away—the looming specter of death—perhaps imagining that you'll never die if your father never dies, although you will not become conscious of this concept until after the fact.

You will be admitted into the emergency unit and seated in dentist-like hallway chairs, while reassuring your wife and self that the hospital's eschewal of a private examination room for the administering of rabies shots bodes well for the seriousness of your predicament. It being Sunday morning, Memorial Day weekend, and somewhat slow in the emergency unit, medical personnel will appear from their mysterious nooks to hear your fox story, and you and your wife will become celebrities (mostly your wife because she's more outgoing and good for you in that human-connectedness way), until finally the nurse with the needles will say, "Okay, relax your arm," and that's when the person who was pretending to be sleeping will burst from his private examination room, shouting, "Fuck this shit!" and stride through the emergency unit doors, still in his hospital gown, followed by a nurse who keeps saying, "I was just doing my job," and your wife will do this loud breathing thing she does that makes you really uptight, and the nurse with the needles, an obvious veteran of emergency-unit unstable people hopped up on God knows what, will say again, "Okay, relax your arm," and time will stop as the needle pricks and you await your wife's response to being immunoglobulized.

The other side of that time warp will not be a place you want to be, because your wife will announce that she might faint, and the nurse with the needles will dismiss your wife in that tempered, tolerant, professional way that health care professionals adopt when they really don't have time for this—which is to say, the nurse with the needles will say, "You're not going to faint." But your wife will announce again that she might faint, this time more like a threat, and you will suggest she keep doing that loud breathing thing she does, and your wife will breathe aggressively but then announce that she might puke, and the nurse with the needles will say, "You're not going to puke," and you will consider rising from your own dentist-like chair and

shimmying between your wife's dentist-like chair and the robotic mobile contraption that holds a computer screen and the needles, in order to hold her reassuringly.

But you will not hold your wife reassuringly, maybe because of a moment that may or may not have happened exactly as you remember, when your father emerged from deep within his studio when you were a kid, his khakis a colorful universe of his latest artistic creation—acrylics blotched and whirled into galaxies of cobalt blue, lemon yellow deep, rose doré—like your fingerpaints at school—and you rose from your Saturday morning cartoons to hug your father, but he stiffened like a corpse and told you, "I'm still working," which translated to *Don't touch me*, which translated to a vacuum in your gut that collapsed you and kerneled an aversion to physical intimacy.

Thankfully your wife will not faint or puke, and after you are given very specific instructions as to the remaining vaccination shots (three days, seven days, fourteen days), you and your wife will exit the hospital. Your wife will pause at the door, remembering "Fuck this shit!" man, worried that he might be lurking, still in his hospital gown, and you will anxiously survey the periphery of the mostly empty parking lot while reassuring your wife that it's fine—there are guards, that you heard something about giving this man bus fare. But the specter of being attacked from out of nowhere will stay with you until you are safely in your car and the doors are locked and you are in motion.

But the specter of being attacked from out of nowhere will stay with you until you are safely in your car and the doors are locked and you are in motion.

You will read that foxes can see the earth's magnetic field, make forty different sounds, and are born blind. You will read about the magnetoreception hunting process, that foxes have radical pair-forming photopigments that act like a rangefinder, that foxes prefer to jump on their prey from the southwest. And when a former Navy SEAL (Special Ops?) your wife mostly knows arrives suddenly one day to set fox traps, you will follow him around the edge of the yard in your slippers and also learn that foxes like peanut butter.

Then neighbors that your wife mostly knows will hear your

fox story and pop in with homemade cookies and bunches of garden flowers riddled with tiny, fast-walking ants. And that Thursday, before you leave to teach community college students how to differentiate between simple, perfect, continuous, and perfect continuous verb tenses, you will walk into the kitchen while your wife's doing dishes and say, "Hello, *Baby*!" in your 1950s Big Bopper voice (like you always do), and your wife will jump and maybe break a dish, and you will suddenly resent your new-ish country neighbors for lifting your wife's spirits because why can't it be you lifting your wife's spirits? Why can't it be you setting traps?

On the morning you and your wife are to begin your two-day drive to Canada to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time, your wife will tell the nurse in the emergency unit (where you've been receiving your rabies shots) that the former Navy SEAL (Special Ops?) hasn't caught the fox but presumes the fox dead. The nurse will say it's a good thing that you've been immunoglobulizing, since there is no way to dissect the fox's brain, and you will grow impatient at your wife's need to inform the nurse about your plan to squeeze your trip to Canada to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time between now and your last scheduled rabies shot, seeing as how your father could die at any minute and you will have already put the trip off a week because immunoglobulizing in Canada might be a problem with the Insurance Powers That Be.

When finally in the car, your wife will say she sensed your impatience in the emergency unit and argue that it's a two-day drive to Prince Edward Island and it's not like a few extra minutes *today* will make you late *tomorrow*, and things will get quiet as you both ponder what *tomorrow* means—a visit with your dying father for what will probably be the last time (if he even makes it through the night)—and your wife will apologize for gabbing with the nurse and for being insensitive, and she will suggest driving through the night—to which you will reply that your father could conceivably live for months (probably not, but who knows?), so it wouldn't make sense to become reactively reckless. You will confess that a part of you doesn't even *want* to make it to your dying father in time, and the car will get quiet again before your wife points out how brave you are for not allowing yourself to be puppeteered by deep emotional and psychological strings, that these feelings of dread are perfectly natural, that nobody looks forward to confronting a dying dad,

that you are a good son for not "running," and you will feel a glow like something is reflecting inside you and express your gratitude for your wife by joking that you think you see "Fuck this shit!" man over there waiting for a bus and that he's probably rabid. But this will make your wife stiffen and toggle her eyes, so you will drive on and express your love more conventionally by saying, "Thank you" and "I love you"—which is a thing your wife will have taught you over the years.

Beating through Maine and New Brunswick, you will recall that the *last* time you made the trip to Canada to visit your father for what will probably be the last time, he'd reached out his IV'd hand for you to hold. You hadn't known what to do with that hand, thanks to your history with your father's hand-holding-lessness, but you'd figured it out and reached out your hands and taken his hand. He'd squeezed and you'd marveled at the strength of this dying man's hand, this man who made a living with his strong hand not the way most strong-handed men make a living, building houses and fixing cars, but by expressing longing onto a canvas and selling that longing to others who long. You will describe to your wife how your father's hand-holding had whooshed into your interior vacuum and felt kind of weird but fulfilling, and that you might just march into that hospital room and hold your father's hand again, like there's no tomorrow, maybe even caress it and say, "I love you—I love you, *Dad*."

But suddenly this notion will make your shoulders ache and the back of your neck tingle, like walking into your father's studio as a kid, the king throned in his swivelly art chair—you, peering over his parapet drafting board, asking meekly if he will cross that moat of *I'm working* and come out to play. You will wonder if holding your father's IV'd hand had ever actually happened, seeing as how the next day he'd kept his hands to himself, and you will accuse your father of moving to Prince Edward Island to get away from you, pointing out to your wife that PEI didn't even have a bridge connecting it to the mainland when your father first moved there, offering that this geographic detachment symbolizes your father's emotional detachment. But your wife will remind you that your father discovered the island while illustrating the *Anne of Green Gables* books, that he'd fallen in love with the island's colors and shapes, which you will counter with "The United States has colors and shapes. Who wants to be that far from their kids? Their grandkids?" and ask

if she can imagine her own father moving to Timbuktu—her own father who relished the daily company and support of several daughters and sons in the last few years of his life—and the car will get quiet again until your wife says, "Your father loves you," which will incite the recollection of times your father invited you into his castle to share the excitement of a collage of crosshatched heads for the reprinting of a classic novel, or maybe it was his clever placement of the wolf in a children's book, and you will recall how you relished the times spent on your father's side of that drafting board, perhaps not comprehending fully his crafty choices and strategies but inwardly sharing the vision, the joy. And you will remember being sent away but ultimately surprised when your father later presented himself between you and the TV with two baseball gloves, acting like you were late to a party, and you scrambled outside, following your father's paint-stained pants like a dog heeling and were handed a glove and told to go to the other end of the yard, the distance growing greater as you neared the woods, but a warmth and light escalating within, in anticipation of the electric connection of that hard ball stinging your mitted hand. So when you finally enter that hospital room to find your father blanketed to his neck, smiling like it hurts, his arms slinged beneath the covers to prevent their painful movement, and he says, "Just don't bite me!" (having heard about your fox encounter and likely exposure to rabies), you will laugh and feel grateful that your father's still in there somewhere, behind the parchment skin and cancer-ridden frame, grateful that you've made it in time to drape yourself across his breathing chest—you, with all your father's hug-lessness (with the exception of all those competitive bear-hugs, when your father squeezed out your air)—and you will find yourself wishing your father could still reach out his hand, the hand attached to his arm of metastasis, so that you might hold it like you'd held it before, that gesture so foreign that you will wonder to this day if it ever really happened.

You will laugh and feel grateful that your father's still in there somewhere, behind the parchment skin and cancer-ridden frame, grateful that you've made it in time.

But the next day you will find your father in distress, and he will tell you that it's not a good time for a visit, that the nurses can't draw blood from his blasted veins without making him howl, that the orderlies keep coming to clean him when all he wants is to sleep, that he can't get warm despite the heated blankets and turban wraps. You will ask if he wants to wait until after lunch for your visit and notice the uncovered breakfast tray and ask if he's had breakfast, while nurses and orderlies go about their duties like they're working a Tim Hortons drive-thru, and half-naked patients wander in from the hall, everyone talking in their outdoor voices, and you will say that you can't blame him for not wanting company, that you'll come back later, and you'll say, "I love you, Dad," to which your father will blink at the ceiling, perhaps not hearing you, and you will tell him to get some rest, and as you and your wife navigate the bustling hall to exit the ward, you will hear your father barking at nurses and orderlies and tingle with an overwhelming appreciation for being able to walk down that hall and out the door.

That's when your wife will stick her hand in your pocket, and you will take it in your hand and squeeze.

Visits will vacillate between vascular PICC procedures and never-before-experienced moments of intimacy with your father where you will share that sometimes you enter your office to write and imagine you are your father entering his studio to paint, and he will share that he's never forgotten when you—as a kid, when your mother was dying in the hospital—told him the breakfast he'd made for you was "better than Mom's." Your father will express anxiety about the "ball being dropped" regarding the plans for his estate, which will consist of a not-yet-paid-off Kia Soul, a turn-of-the-century Bose sound system, and dozens of never-sold paintings from his recent abstract years. But in his next breath your father will laud you for all your accomplishments, including the writing of a novel he will not yet have gotten around to reading and never will, and he will tell you about his mother, who turned into a monster after his artist-father abandoned her to run off with his model, that his mother braided strips of leather and left them hanging on a hook so your five-year-old father would see the progress of her DIY punishment whip. You will ask if she ever used the whip, and he will say, "Never had to."

Mostly the days will be filled with you killing time while

your father sleeps, hanging out in the lobby while your wife leaves to go birding, discreetly watching the withered parade by on their way to amputations and eye-gouges, everyone losing their shape, cruel gravity sucking skinny muscles into the earth and leaving behind the aged residue of wisdom spots and outdated cargo shorts.

And when you're driving over the Confederation Bridge, back toward the States and your flourishing life, the symbolism of an island being connected to the mainland over the Northumberland Strait and the new and improved relationship between you and your father will not be lost on you, and you will muse that this trip to visit your dying father for what will probably be the last time might turn out to be the trip to visit your dying father for what *was* the last time (but who knows, considering miracles of medical science, even in Canada), and you will regret that it's the end of things that brings about new beginnings and search your Spotify for Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi."

When you pull into that hospital in the Berkshires on a sleepy Monday morning, your wife having juggled the directives of county health departments and insurance companies and urgent care facilities to establish where and when you need to be to take that last meticulously scheduled rabies shot—somewhere between your home and your father's home, somewhere between past and future—there will be a déjà vu vibe to the mansion-like brick structure on a hill in the quiet Rust Belt town of Great Barrington, and you will seem to know the solo receptionist and affable nurses and fresh-off-the-weekend doctors, and they will seem to know you, a comforting light filtering through the large-paned windows like heaven in a religious painting. And as you are pricked, you will feel celebratory at being fully realized, immunoglobulinally, finally free from rabid worry—and you will step out into the sunshine and soar with the singing birds, and share with your wife that your father would probably say, "This is a honey of a hospital," and that you feel so good and so right in the present moment that you could die with her then and there and be okay with that. And maybe you will hug your wife before getting into the car, and maybe imagine a fox in the shrubs, lurking—but not for you—for small game, maybe peanut butter in the dumpster behind that picket fence—a fox whose time has not yet come.

ADAM EDELMAN

LABYRINTH IN A DEWDROP

I have this recurring dream about a schoolhouse
I've never seen before. In it, there are twelve desks
plus the teacher's, a mannequin seated behind each.
I've become extremely suspicious that the mannequins
make subtle movements—a raised finger, an ear twitch
when I'm not looking—but each time I examine them
closely I find nothing, not even a breath or cough.
I try to remain in the schoolhouse as long as I can,
but inevitably my alarm goes off and I have to wake up.
In my younger days I became a financier for a large,
notorious firm. Part of the job entailed interviewing
clients about their personal experiences
with our product, whether positive or negative.
One Tuesday morning on my way to the office
I met a strange man on the street; he had a medium-
sized green cabbage for a head.
He said he went by the name Lip Montgomery,
and that he was once a practicing hypnotist
though had long since retired. "Why is your head
like that?" I replied. "Let's flip a coin," was his
response, "if it's heads, I'll tell you why
my head is a medium-sized green cabbage.
If it's tails, you'll never know." Then he took out
a grimy silver dollar from his coat pocket.
He flipped the coin higher than his cabbage head
and caught it on the way down in his fist.
Finally, after a long pause, he placed the coin
without looking on top of the opposite hand, palm
side down—it was tails. Somewhat disappointed
himself, he offered me a cabbage leaf from the back
of his head as consolation. I thanked him, politely
declined, and bid Mr. Montgomery adieu.
The bank clock across the street read 7:16.
I would arrive at the office earlier than usual.

On weekend mornings I can sleep in, so I'm free
to explore the historic schoolhouse
and its charming mannequins for as long
as I wish. But there's a slight problem.
Hung in low-light and off-center,
I sometimes glance an impressionistic painting
of a door, but never find the actual door
to the schoolhouse—so I can't leave
to explore the rest of the dream world.
Not that I mind much. The windows
are each a single pane of glass fused
to the walls. A phone on the teacher's desk
usually doesn't ring, but when it does,
I pick up the receiver and say, "Good
afternoon, this is Frankenstein speaking."
I design two never-before-seen hand signals.
I can't explain why I'm so fascinated
with the place, but I do enjoy it and find
satisfaction with the time investment
frequent visits to the schoolhouse requires.
I'm glad I can see a huge glittery rock
through one of the windows; I'm pretty
sure it's obsidian. Next to the rock stands
another schoolhouse. A light in it
burns so bright that I can't see
what's inside. A visitor is tapping
on the glass. To kill time, I arrange
and rearrange a ruler, spiral
notebook, and stethoscope while blue
moonlight softens and melts the black
boulder. A black liquid seeps up
through the schoolhouse floorboards;
when their feet touch the liquid,
the mannequins vanish and reappear.

ADAM EDELMAN

UNWRITTEN OVERTURE

At this time, the snowflake rests
on the head of an unlit match
while the least suspected
access point to Silver Creek freezes solid
to demonstrate how we're all alchemists.
At this time, the toy trumpet
and wooden horse embalmed in October's
gleam are no more. At this time, the pear
blossom is obsolete as a musical instrument.
What little to give I have seems flawed or lost.
At this time, some of us appreciate tendrils
in the vineyard more than others.
At this time, the rabbit pair
in the gully behind my outdoor grill
hold themselves
as if they shared a secret before I spotted them.
At this time, the rotten cherry is a mnemonic device
for the sparrows of Aldrich Ave.
No map shows all roads.
At this time, you may join the mantis in moon worship.
At this time, the hardest part is I never got to hold you.
At this time, a darkness subsists on the undersides
of moss beds. Don't worry. I'll find another way in
at this time. Cigar smoke cascades
through sunflowers. Sheet music is meant to encompass
and release. Cooled molds incite
waning night to splendor in a pail
alongside wet flowers bound with notebook paper.
At this time, the brush stroke evoked
between two piano notes.
Light petals appear
as if all it ever takes is patience.

ADAM EDELMAN

AS WE WERE SAYING

11/6/24

It hadn't occurred to me how, in the dead of night,
no one else but you can take the next 3.5 seconds
to assess the luminous margin of where
the sky is going as a boundary of pretending
to be no longer alive strictly as a means
of better appreciating living. No one
else knows the rules of the game you made up
in collaboration with the only other kid in the neighborhood.
Undisclosed force directs the interplay of antitheses,
gods' faces nowhere among them
like a form letter wherein two abrupt transitions
between three digressive anecdotes culminate
with reference to a device capable of recording
all we apprehend, unifying idea and form.
Turns out the many I loved were all you.
When I revisited the location where
you were last seen, all I could find was a weather-
related leaflet blowing around a parking lot
and some discarded art supplies
covered by a torn, old sweater.
Then I was led quietly away, disbelieving
as sparrows bathed in loose dirt
in corners of the park that lose daylight first.
Too explain-ey? And the real truth—get this—
is that you don't have to change your life.
You must change everything.

HEE-JUNE CHOI

THE MASTERS

After the nurse left, I sat
with my sister's death,
alone, choosing pictures
for the funeral.

It was stuffy—I turned on the TV,
a window to fresh air.
Past midnight, a couple made love.
I blushed—
evidence of life.

Just then the undertakers came,
black-suited like officials,
hands clasped. "Our condolences."
I couldn't respond.

Perhaps they too saw the screen,
the desperate flesh.
From their gestures, I read:
We will forgive you.

In less than ten minutes,
the masters sealed her
into a glossy black bag.

As they slid her into the hearse,
her neck caught the frame,
snapped back.
One tucked it in like folding a mannequin.
Even her fiery temper knew
whom she had to obey.

Twenty years on,
that moment holds.

Did they judge the house—
or me—indecent?

Am I still guilty?
Yet she hasn't come to complain.
I take a pill
and sleep.

HEE-JUNE CHOI

THROUGH THE DMZ

How I loved that silky milk powder
the school served after the Korean war—
a taste of the future melting on my tongue.
But my favorite was "pig-bowl soup,"
leftovers from a U.S. Army kitchen.

People said it looked like pig's food.
If you spotted a cigarette butt,
you just scooped it out;
the chunks of sausage were so chewy.

Back then, nothing made me prouder than
my sister in Austin. Her letters came with chocolates.
We even sketched the wrappers, imagining
the flavor would linger with us.

But she wrote of eating day-old bread
in the school restroom.
My mother sighed, "If she were in North Korea,
I'd even cross the DMZ—but I can't get to America."

Seventeen years later, I landed in Van Nuys—
another sister, a house by the 405.
The freeway howled all night, welcoming me.
Big trucks rushed past,
as if the 21st century had pulled into the next town—
maybe hauling a newer brand of milk powder.

Walking three miles to Lucky supermarket,
I told my sister about my disappointment:
power lines should be buried,
like in the movies.
She said, "Then get a job on the line crew."

I studied the lines carefully—
wooden frames cut into the sky
like winter forests.
"I could do that," I said.
"I'll climb like a bear—slow but strong."

And if nothing else worked,
Hollywood was only a few exits away.
The movies, fleeting sweetness—
like old chocolates
or pig-bowl soup—
something just enough
to put me on my feet again.

AKHIM YUSEFF CABÉY

WHEN A BLACK MAN DIES

his girl-child shimmies
        through life chewing bubble gum
and talking shit like a locomotive chomping track
until so much fructose
                finds home in the permanent caverns
of her molars.

for years she spits blood into gutters
of his memory
        because her hot tongue
        —just as hot as his—
once provoked a white boy in high school
                to throw blows like he was shouting
those Siamese *g*'s at her, hard *r* close
        in tow.

she bobbed and weaved
like the old man preached, but still took a few
        on the chin.

when first a woman moves to defend herself,
        sugared wads are packed
like tobacco in the valley
between cheek and gums.
        after, saccharinity pricks the entrance
        to bloodstream,
and soon there's no more language

found in the executed uppercut
that drops the prettier-than-all-other-kinds-of-boys
        to the ground
        like a pool ball
                dunked into its pocket.

the man she finds to love her is,
        by that time, toothless just as she,
so their namesake boy-child revs into the world
        gunning middle-fingers
                at the obstetrician
who says, *the fault is sweetness not our words.*

the father monitors each bit of skin
scraped from her arms in commemoration
        of the man—
        bows to her teaching
the boy how to use his fists
        to exact revenge on the kinds of sentences

that once ordered the dead man
to lie face down
        on the ground—
put his hands behind his back. he complied

but paid, then, that clichéd price for first peeling
his last stick
        from its foiled home
        and using his mouth to do
whatever it longed for with its teeth.

AKHIM YUSEFF CABÉY

HYPERBOLIC OVEREXAGGERATION IS MY VICTIMIZATION

everyone needs love

was written by a white person in permanent black
on the stall wall above the toilet
where one night I took a well-deserved piss at the bar.
I shook dry, flushed with my foot, and on the back of the door
the same author had written the same noble phrase
again.

another, then, rebutted in red beneath the repetition,

tell us something
we don't know
motherfucker,

and yet another, beneath the second scrawler,
outlined a mock black penis and balls
in the initial ink
and colored in its center. I ride with the novelist
who warns, *avoid, at all costs, redundancy.* still, I wish

the whites would fight in front of me more. no, not that
theatrically acted beef I consume
on primetime television that one seasons
then fries then flips and then slips between slices
of toasted Italian
before shoving down the gullet.

but the kind of private and paralytic discord
that broadens shoulders
and absolves a urinator of time spent on his knees
outside the living room windows
of their hiccupped yet anchored lives.

that's how I knew the handwriting was white—
because I'd loved them back then
as much as I'd barked loving myself. now I need them
more than ever to damn anonymity
and sign a true name
beneath the archaic inked phallus
and debatable commandment
before the pop of law enforcement
compressed testicles and spirited choke holds
refuel the well-meaning among them
to resume hovering beside us with free vouchers
of cornbread and invites
to venture the deep ends of their pools.

the dark messiah remains trapped in traffic,
yet I scavenge the well-organized wreckage
of the human heart because there may be something of me
still to be found in them.

watch closely, though, the way I carve relation
finely—finally?—from the rib cage
with a spoon, scooping out pounds
of disingenuous bullshit marked on restroom walls
that should've been fact-checked
in the first fucking place
long before scribbling down your mouths.

KATE LISTER CAMPBELL

IF YOU WANTED TO LIVE

The bunny arrived at Easter, as many bunnies do, with a green fabric ribbon around its neck. I didn't ask for it; my sister Aileen did. I let everyone know, even as I petted its twitching haunch, that I would take no responsibility for its care. That was fine by Aileen, since I was forever co-opting her toys and books, fabricating reasons why they should belong to me. But when we ran down the staircase that Easter morning and I saw the bunny on the dining table next to our laden wicker baskets, I felt my spine tingle and my chest go cold. The cage sat between tall candlesticks, where the ham would be when we got back from church. We lived in the central part of Kansas City and occasionally saw a playful leaping rabbit in our small yard. The one on our table shook with fear and had already left pellets of excrement inches from our marshmallow Peeps and chocolate birds' nests.

Our mother and father were on their way to divorce, but didn't know it. A few of our friends' parents were divorced, and almost all would be in the years to come. It was the sunny era of the remade self, the end of grim-lipped marital endurance for the sake of survival or afterlife reward. People fell in love with their coworkers, or found EST or Lifespring, or committed fully to their alcoholism. Some of our neighbors had unusual pets, acquired around the time of a split. Next door was a potbellied pig that Dave—the father of twins my sister's age—walked daily on a yellow nylon rope. (A second man, also named Dave, had moved in when the twins and their mother moved out.) The pig—Lola—was black and she bristled and moved her snout eagerly in the terrace grass near the curb, searching for acorns, walnuts, and mulberries. She refused to eat the hedge apples that lay like hard green brains along the sidewalks in September, but would roll them playfully up the incline of our street. Lola hated the snow and screamed an awful human scream whenever Dave dragged her out in the cold. He forced the pig to walk with him while he smoked, no matter the weather. Second Dave didn't allow smoking inside.

The bunny couldn't live in my sister's room because she still had shag carpeting that would absorb the animal's smell. But my father, in a manic spirit of improvement that sometimes overtook him, had stripped my floors down to the hardwood one weekend while I was on a sleepover. I came home at noon on Sunday, exhausted from staying up all night, and opened my door to cold, yellow-brown boards on which my bed, dresser, and nightstand stood slightly askew.

"Isn't that better?" he said. "It's so much lighter in here. I feel wonderful."

When I took off my socks and shoes, nail heads made painful marks in my bare feet, but my father gave me a hammer to pound them down. My mother burst through the door not long after and wrestled it away from me.

After church and our egg hunt, my father carried the bunny's cage upstairs and set it below the window in my room. Aileen barged in immediately and began to feed it lettuce.

"She's always going to be in here now!" I cried.

"Mel, it's temporary. I'm going to build it a backyard hutch in the spring," my father said.

"It's Easter," I said, rolling my eyes. "Spring is today."

My father narrowed his gaze. Aileen and I both froze. He was deciding whether he could better relieve his anger by walking away or hitting me.

He extended his pointer finger and poked it hard into my forehead.

"Quit being a pain in the ass," he said.

He left and Aileen trailed behind, off to hide until the clouds blew over. The bunny chewed loudly on the cage bars. From my window, I could see the Daves' backyard, which was now a fenced square of rooted-up mud with an enormous doghouse for Lola. We used to play there with the twins on the sparse grass while bees droned in the hearts of unpruned roses.

Bunny became a rabbit quickly, with horrible long teeth and wary eyes. My father took several business trips that spring and failed to build the hutch. True to my word, I refused to take any responsibility for the creature that gnawed all through the night three feet from my bed. Aileen took the rabbit outside on a lead every day, then every few days. Then summer came to heat our house, and the rabbit's odor became stench. My

mother cleaned the cage occasionally, but bitterly, making loud banging noises.

"If you want it to stop smelling, you should help," my mother said.

"It's not mine," I said, from where I was reading on my bed. "I never wanted it."

My mother rose from where she was kneeling, disinfecting the empty cage with rubber gloves while the frantic rabbit, tied to the radiator by its lead, brayed and urinated on the newspaper she'd laid down. My mother began to laugh, almost crying.

"You think that's how it works, huh?" she said.

She untied the rabbit, led it back to the half-cleaned cage and shut it in. She peeled away her rubber gloves, dropped them to my floor, and went downstairs.

I pulled my blanket and pillow off the bed and went to my parents' room, which was freshly redone with thick-pile navy carpet, shining oak furniture, and our home's only AC unit clogging one window. I turned on the air, lay across the carpet below the high foot of the oak bedstead, and slept. When I woke, it was sunset. I refused my own hunger, my need to pee. No one came to find me. Finally, I released my bladder into the new carpet and fell back to sleep. A little after dawn, I woke with Aileen snoring near my head and my parents breathing evenly in the bed above. The pee had been absorbed into the carpet. Shadows shortened and the creamy wallpaper stenciled with wildflowers glowed. We lay there, the four of us enclosed in the cool womb of morning until Aileen leapt awake, shouting, "It's tomorrow, get up!"

We slept like that the rest of the summer. I was as happy as I'd been before Aileen was born, when my parents were only mine. Every morning, I woke early to enjoy the exquisite comfort of cold air, soft carpet, whole family. I was fond of books about pioneers in one-room cabins and thought perhaps the rest of the house was superfluous. When we filed out in the morning, the heat of the hallway was almost pleasant. I didn't bother stopping in my room and ran straight down to the kitchen for ice water.

Sometimes, at night, I heard my parents moving vigorously in the bed. Once, my father whispered angrily, "That's why I hate using these! Hold still!"

"Do you feel it in there?" my mother asked. "Pull it out."

"Quit squirming," he said. "You're the one who insisted."

I learned to put the pillow over my head when I heard my parents do anything but breathe.

By August, my room belonged to the vicious bunny. The foul odor didn't bother me as much now that I lived elsewhere. Aileen let it out to hop around every day and simply left its pellets where it dropped them. She wore an old ski mask soaked with magazine samples of Obsession to counter the smell. I'd evacuated what I needed to a suitcase I kept beneath my parents' bed. My mother was a great one for keeping things in suitcases, and she rarely unpacked after a trip. My father had bought her two oaken chests of drawers to discourage this habit, but there was still a green case in the corner of their bedroom where she kept her underwear. My suitcase contained books, My Little Ponies, and swimwear. Strangely, I didn't miss the other contents of my room. When I stood before the closed door one morning, I could hardly remember what was inside or why I'd cared about it. This stood in stark contrast to my intense desire to co-opt any little thing Aileen was gifted. Perhaps I was getting over my childish jealousies. Or perhaps I'd never cared about those things and only took from my sister out of spite. I'd always felt Aileen's existence had stolen something from me. Now caring so little about my possessions—including the ones I'd taken from her—was another way to diminish her.

I was getting over my childish jealousies. Or perhaps I'd never cared about those things and only took from my sister out of spite.

Amid these thoughts, an angry, scraping sound began behind the heavy, glass-knobbed door. The rabbit was flinging itself inside the cage hard enough to drag it across the floor.

In summer, no child thinks of fall. School and winter exist because adults insist on them. Aileen and I knew there were places where summer lasted, places you could collect seashells from warm beaches on Christmas Day. We'd never seen a real beach, but, a week before Labor Day, my father decided we

should. We'd nearly finished packing the car when Aileen said, "What about Bunny?"

My mother and father looked at each other, then made a series of faces that meant they were coming to a decision.

"It'll be fine," my mother said.

"I left him some dandelions," Aileen said. "And water. And I filled up his food bowl."

"Rabbits have a thick coating of fat under their fur," my father said. "He might lose a pound or two, but I wouldn't worry."

We buckled in. My mother turned on the adult contemporary station, and Aileen began to lip-synch "You Are the Sun, You Are the Rain." The everyday streets gave way to the ones we took to leave town, the landmarks flashing by—the Landing Mall, the fish market on Prospect, the 63rd Street Drive-In—until we accelerated onto a highway. I thought of a friend of mine whose father taught biology at the University of Missouri and who'd been given a pair of rats for her birthday instead of the rabbit she wanted. He'd explained to her they were difficult pets to keep because of their delicate digestive systems, their inability to go very long without food before risking death. I wasn't sure how often Aileen fed Bunny, but I was certain my father and mother had decided, without a word, to let it suffer and die. When we stopped at a motel in Paducah, I could hardly look at Aileen as she splashed by me in the rust-stained pool. My parents drank whiskey with ice and held hands. They looked different from how they did at home, playful and loose.

That night, in the springy bed next to my sister, I thought about what to do. I could say what I knew in front of Aileen and my parents: The bunny would be dead when we got back. I could demand we return to save it, though my parents would never agree. Aileen would be miserable, the trip would be ruined, I would be to blame. Why did I care if it died anyway? Its teeth were ugly, the stink intolerable, the eyes bloodshot and wild. I poured my hatred into that image, which helped me fall asleep. By the time I woke in the morning, I was convinced the rabbit deserved death. If it had wanted to live, it should've been easier, sweeter, more appealing. It should've been a dog.

The next day, as the sun set, we reached the Gulf and our oceanfront motel. As we left the parking lot and walked across the sand, I realized from my father's sighs and gasps that he'd never seen an ocean either.

"Look at it," he said.

The sun was behind us so that golden light touched the whitecaps. The clouds at the horizon line glowed pink. The troughs of the waves were dark, as if night had already fallen underwater. We removed our shoes and were surprised when the waves sucked our ankles into the sand; I had thought of an ocean as a giant swimming pool. We waded farther and my mother had to pull us back by our shirts, as she alone among us knew what power the waves could exercise. All night, I listened to them crash ashore. At home, cicada song lulled me to sleep, the high-pitched swell rising just above our roof. The ocean found a deeper route into me, and I felt I was moving in bed with the tide, being rocked by it. In the morning, the sun lit the white sand and the four of us ran into the water, holding hands. We sputtered out, threw ourselves down to catch our breath, went again. Life at home began to seem far away. The bunny was a problem for those who lived in that hot old house. We lived at the breezy beach, where the ocean tumbled us like sneakers in a washing machine. The sea held us with gentle care then, thrillingly, swept that care away. We slept together in one cool, modern room, where we could dribble ice cream on the carpet and play Slapjack on each other's beds. My mother wore her white silk robe with the dragon embroidered across the back. My father went shirtless. Aileen and I hugged before we crawled under the covers, and I pulled her close in the night, sniffing her dark hair for traces of her old baby smell.

I believed my parents would decide to stay. It was obvious, given how happy we were. So it was a shock when my father, Aileen, and I returned from the beach one day at lunchtime to find the suitcases packed and loaded into the car.

"Deanne," my father said to my mother.

"They've already missed a week."

"Oh please. That school is so shitty, I'd be surprised if—"

"Then what exactly are we going to do? Money and the house and . . ."

My mother sank down in the upholstered pink chair before the glass-topped desk we'd been using as a luggage rack. My father sat in his wet swim trunks on the edge of the bed designated as theirs. Aileen and I stood, dripping, in the entryway.

"Okay," my father said, after a few minutes. "Let's go."

When Aileen and I didn't move, he stepped toward us as if

he might trample us. We hustled out of the motel, our mother dashing toward the car with two towels to lay across the back seat so we wouldn't soak the upholstery. My father slid into the driver's seat without a shirt. He didn't put one on until a waitress at the motel restaurant back in Paducah refused to serve him without it.

The highways and streets became familiar again. The white screen of the 63rd Street Drive-In stretched like a huge flag of surrender as we took the off-ramp toward home. Buildings looked old and small; my daily world had shrunk to miniature. I felt squeezed into a space where I no longer fit. But only when I saw the empty eyes of our front windows did I remember the rabbit and feel sick.

Hot air expelled itself from the sealed house when my father opened the door. Though we hadn't spoken of the rabbit in two weeks, Aileen dashed up the stairs calling, "Bunny, Bunny, we're home!" It never occurred to me that she'd been missing it the whole time, or that she might really love the ugly thing. My father set down the suitcases and we stood listening at the bottom of the stairs. None of us followed.

"He's gone!" Aileen wailed. "He's disappeared!"

My mother trooped glumly up.

"What in hell?" she shouted. "Mark, get up here."

I ran up behind my father.

The rabbit *was* gone. Along with the cage and the newspapers beneath it. A large brown spot remained, where the rabbit's waste had made the floorboards rot. My room smelled like an animal had lived there, but not like a corpse.

"Shit," my father said. "Well, rabbits do have a habit of disappearing, sweetie. Maybe a magician—"

"Jesus," my mother said, interrupting. Aileen sobbed into her thigh. "Somebody broke in here. Girls, go outside while we check the house."

We stood on the stone porch. It was the middle of a work and school day, and nothing moved but tree leaves and dried grass. Often, I'd stared with longing out the large windows at school, across the blacktop playground, to the row of shops where adults came and went freely. I imagined the joy of deciding what to do and when. I fantasized about days of rich quiet instead of stinging words when I gave a wrong answer, march-

ing in silent, coerced lines down the hallways, and nausea at the cafeteria smell. But the stillness of our street was not peaceful. It was empty and waiting.

"Do you think Bunny's okay?" Aileen asked.

I startled, having forgotten she was there.

"I don't know," I said.

"Do you think we'll get him back?"

I sighed. "Why do you care so much?"

Aileen stepped away from me. Her dark eyes filled with desperation. I hated that she was forcing me to see her hunger for a thing she loved.

My mother stuck her head out and told us the coast was clear. I headed for the kitchen, hoping chips or cookies full of preservatives had survived the baking heat.

"Where is he?" Aileen wailed.

"I don't know," my mother said. "But the house is fine, so we're not going to find out now. I have to get to the store. You both need baths. Where are your book bags from last year?"

Aileen asked my father, who was perched on the kitchen stool, drinking a cold beer, to help her find Bunny. He gave her a look that said, if she kept pushing, he would give her something to cry about.

We climbed the back stairs to my room and toed the rotted spot, goose bumps rising when the floor crumbled like an old sponge beneath our feet. The window in front of us looked across the driveway we shared with the Daves, straight into their bathroom. When the twins lived there, I used to wave as their mother bathed them while menthol ash from her cigarette fluttered into the tub. Second Dave had installed venetian blinds. The Daves had keys to our house, in case we got locked out. And they knew we'd been out of town the previous week.

When it was time for bed, I took a pillow to my parents' room, but my mother stopped me at the door.

"Summer's over," she said. "Back to reality."

"It's still hot," I whined. "And the floor stinks."

She told me there was no air conditioning when she was a child. She told me her grandparents had a farm with an outhouse and that, when visiting, she slept in a crib beneath rafters crowded with spiderwebs. Her eyes were hard. Complaints to her were as useless as when I howled at the ocean for knocking me down. Aileen cried herself to sleep on her Smurfs comfort-

er, still wearing jelly sandals caked with sand. I shut my door and lay alone in the ambient light from the Daves' bathroom. The blinds were closed but the window was open; faucet water pounded into the tub. There were breath sounds and grunts. Lola screamed as she hit the water.

"Lola, baby, it's okay. You're okay sweetheart," Dave said.

He soothed and she calmed. He sang "Only the Good Die Young" as he washed her and she snorted cheerfully. I'd never seen him give the twins a bath during their seven years of life.

Maybe Bunny had also received this special, gentle treatment at Dave's hands. After the bathroom light flicked off, I couldn't sleep. I tried to imagine Bunny safe in the Daves' living room, but only the thought of Bunny's death brought me comfort. If Bunny had died, my parents would've felt guilty and been kind to Aileen, and perhaps to each other. The cadaver would've served as evidence of the strange ugliness that had invaded our house and could now be expelled.

The cadaver would've served as evidence of the strange ugliness that had invaded our house and could now be expelled.

I closed my window. Sweat beaded across my skin and I imagined I was the rabbit, suffocating, waiting for rescue.

We heard nothing about Bunny for a long time. The Daves didn't have her. Aileen had asked, at my suggestion, but Dave said, "No, sorry, sweetie." Second Dave laughed and said, "God, that's all we need." Our carpenter neighbor nailed a few boards over the rotted ones, and my floor was then carpeted in the same blue as the master bedroom. Aileen told her first-grade class she had no pets. The weather cooled and my father worked late to earn back the money and goodwill he'd squandered taking unscheduled vacation time. He bought a new living room set, a new television, and a new set of dishes to replace the ones my mother had smashed. He didn't seem to enjoy any of these purchases, but required enthusiasm from Aileen, my mother, and me.

In late spring, I was very ill with pneumonia. The days were longer but still freezing, the sun bright and harsh through the uncovered windows in our living room. I'd been prescribed a

chalky white liquid to swallow, four tablespoons every four hours, and resisted it so strenuously my mother gave up and told me I could take it or not, since it was my life, not hers. I was in the kitchen, lingering over a spoonful of the awful medicine, when I heard a scraping noise from the open basement door. My mother, who was downstairs doing laundry, began to curse. I threw the spoon in the sink and started down the steps. From the landing, I saw her chasing a dingy, bounding animal. Only when I came closer, ignoring her shouts to go back upstairs, did I realize this was Bunny.

"Help me get him back in his cage, if you're going to be down here," she said.

The cage was under the stairs, in a small room where coal was once kept to heat the house. We sat there during tornado warnings, listening to the transistor radio. I had no desire to force the rabbit back to its prison, but I did what my mother asked because she was my mother. I went upstairs, got salad greens, and made a trail—I'd seen Aileen do this—to the lightless coal room. Once the rabbit was close to the cage, my mother grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and tossed it inside before slamming the wire door shut. The creature seemed to give up and huddled in the far corner. We sat in the folding chairs kept for storms, and my mother pulled the string to light the single bulb above. She glanced into the shadowy corners of the room, as if she were considering the opinions of invisible people who stood there.

After a long time she said, "It's better Aileen doesn't love something so disgusting."

A little girl's voice rose inside me, asking, asking. Had Bunny been here all along? Did my father know? What would my mother give me not to tell Aileen? But another layer was growing over that girl. One that regarded both my mother's blank face and the rabbit's huddled form and wanted to know nothing of the how or why.

"We could give it away," I said. "Can't we give it to someone else?"

"Did you take your medicine?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"You need to go back to school," she said, and stood.

On our way out, she pulled the bulb string and shut the door

behind us, leaving Bunny in blackness. The cage began to scrape its way across the concrete floor.

I stopped taking my medicine. My fever returned and I stayed in bed, forcing my mother to care for me in her grudging, put-upon way. Some part of me understood why she'd imprisoned Bunny; I too had enjoyed the idea of power over the rabbit's life and death. And yet, I'd never had true power, not the kind my mother had. When Easter came again, I was pale and wheezing as I searched for colored eggs in the backyard. One could hardly believe I'd thrashed in the waves the previous summer, healthy and brown. I seemed to have developed the kind of disease I read about in my pioneer books, the kind that disposed children to lifelong weakness in the legs or eyes or, in my case, lungs.

When my mother was out at the grocery store, I dragged myself to the basement to see Bunny. If I turned on the light in the coal room, the rabbit went berserk. It ate the food I poked through the bars, then began to fling itself without cease toward the back wall, where it was darkest. Twice, I freed it, but it refused to leave the room and bit at me. Another time, I brought the butcher knife, resolved to kill it and end its misery. But it knew what I intended and let out an earsplitting squeal. No exit from the coal room existed for Bunny. Escape was beyond its imagining; it had been trained to believe that life was suffering inside one room or another.

Once I understood Bunny could not be saved, an energy returned to me. Every four hours, I trooped to the refrigerator and swallowed my white liquid. I recovered enough to return to school just as warm breezes stirred the unfurling flowers on the linden tree outside my classroom. But the light through the large windows seemed as harsh as it did at home, and I had to narrow my eyes to keep from getting a headache.

My father left when summer arrived. The stirring that had begun in him the previous year was heightened by the marshy hint of salt rising from the cattails that grew thick by the old, disused streetcar tracks near our house. He wanted more than my mother, Aileen, and me. I had sympathy for this; the ocean had changed me too. I no longer wanted our house, our neighborhood, the sickly child I had become. The following year, I

joined him in his bachelor apartment down on the Gulf after convincing my parents the warmth and sea air would heal my wheezing, aching lungs. When I left, Aileen followed me out to our father's car. I knew it was terrible to leave her alone with my mother and the still-imprisoned rabbit. I almost told my father what my mother had done with Bunny, and what she had rarely done for Aileen and me during the year of his absence—cooked dinner, brought us to school on time, cleaned the house—when it occurred to me: He already knew and didn't care. He'd saved his own skin, and he'd now agreed to save mine, but not Aileen's. As I fastened my seat belt, Aileen's eyes grew hard and furious.

"We don't want you anyway!" she screamed, and ran back to the porch.

My father put his hand on my shoulder.

"You can't let it get to you," he said, and put the car in gear.

My mother had become a hoarder. I had taken a week away from my law firm in Tampa to clean out her terribly overstuffed house so that a near-homeless Aileen could move back in with two daughters of her own. The ashes were inside a suitcase along with an outfit I wore to my first day of preschool and a pile of *Newsweek*s from 1989. BUNNY was printed in block letters on the box, with the name of the local vet below. Inside, a plastic bag contained the roasted and pulverized bones, their texture only a little finer than my mother's ashes had been. I was surprised she'd spent money on such a thing, rather than digging a hole in the backyard. Aileen came up behind me before I could toss the box in the garbage.

"Why does she have these?" she said. "Oh my God, did they have Bunny put to sleep while we were in Florida? Is that where he went?"

"Yeah," I said. "Mom told me, but she didn't want to upset you."

The ease of lying to Aileen always surprised me. Even though she knew, when it came to her, I was a liar.

"I'm the last to find out, of course," Aileen said, bitterly.

"Do you want them?" I asked.

Aileen shook her head. In the end, I tucked them in my bag and took them back to the hotel. I hadn't wanted my mother's ashes, but I took Bunny's home and set them on a shelf in a small

rabbit-shaped container. I understood by then why Bunny had been intolerable to my mother, my father, and me. For a long while, we had loved neither Aileen nor each other enough, and Aileen's enduring affection for the foul creature had shamed us. My mother wallowed in that shame, keeping Bunny alive while withholding true care. My father and I fled.

What I did not understand was the terror that filled me when I entered my house at night and saw the distant hall light glance off Bunny's white porcelain urn. Or why I could never bring myself to pick up that almost weightless object and discard it with the meat scraps and rotting bananas. What I did not understand was why I found myself howling with grief and pain when I came home one day to discover the container's shattered remains swept into a green plastic dustpan, the ashes indistinguishable from the grains of porcelain. My cleaning woman had broken it, she was very sorry, she would buy me another rabbit. If only I would tell her where it came from.

BOB HICOK

ROAD TRIP AND FALL

Typos. Fish for fiche. Lover for louver.
I am sorry when I meant to write
I am really really fucking eternally sorry
that the world isn't exactly round
or a place we know how to take care of.
Now it's too hot and/or floody and/or weird
that we drove ten hours from Waterford, Michigan
to Blacksburg, Virginia without getting a single bug smear
on the windshield. Distinct for extinct.
Used to be you had to go at your windshield
with a blowtorch and chisel after such a trip
because you'd murdered hundreds of winged, buzzy things
with the persistence of your zoom and desire
to get home and fall asleep on the couch,
bees and dragonflies and fly flies and mosquitos
and moths and butterflies. Now the air
is an empty apartment complex and how does noticing
turn into action on our part and how does action
on our part not deepen the wound
of the industrial revolution, which feels
as if I'm asking, how can humans
be soft? How can we bend? How can we evolve
from being a typo, a glitch in evolution
whose mouths are a million times bigger than our stomachs
and whose eyes are mouths that blink, that crave
everything they see and would devour the stars
if we were tall enough or could jump
into the dream of heaven? Myopic for inventive.
Lying for trying. Crying for sighing. In ten hours,
what's the volume of air we displaced,
and how was it vacuumed, pillaged of its nature,
emptied of the lives that give life
to bats and birds and the songs
that greet the sun? Mourning for morning.

And when I think that no one set out
to break the air, that it's an oops-a-daisy, a my bad,
I want to look deep into the eyes of nothing
and apologize, to kiss the sky and promise
to make it all better. I know: we invented the symphony.
The sonnet. Cinnamon toast. Salsa. The bonnet. The suspension
of disbelief bridge. The Clash. But also
the mortgage, the gang bang, nuclear waste, and not being able
to get out of our own way. We are Pandora's box
of unintended consequences. Erase us
for grace us, O Lord. And this
is the hopeful version of this poem.

BOB HICOK

ANYWAY

Flowers don't like dodgeball, never scream,
Pick me, pick me
for your team. I feel rejected, I guess, is what I'm saying

about beauty, which seems right: beauty needs to protect itself
from desire. I am beautiful on the inside

of a closet with the light off, is how I look at honesty.

Eden Eve, on the other hand, was beautifully naked
until god introduced the dress code of shame,
unlike my Eve, who eats apples naked all the time. She's beautiful

on the inside, the outside, and the middle
of a sandwich gets too much credit, I'm sure you agree
bread needs a publicist. But what do you need? Maybe

you can borrow and lean on the idea
that each breath is an insurrection, given the certainty
of death. If you're alive, you're a beautifully foolish

revolutionary throwing bombs at the grave. I like irises

most of all, and the sun, the word astrolabe,
and looking on the bright side
of pessimism: sure, we're all going to die,
but most of us aren't going to die
in Philadelphia, or December, or without love.

BOB HICOK

A POEM DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF JUNE 30, 2025

The baseball glove I jamb between my lower back
and the chair I'm sitting in, that reminds me
to sit up straight as a heterosexual flagpole
so my back doesn't hurt later in the day
when I'm older by a few hours, is a Rawlings
I bought decades ago but never used
to have a catch with my dad like Kevin Costner
at the end of *Field of Dreams*, not my dad
but his dad, not his dad but his character's dad,
and is black with Jose Canseco's name
printed in gold letters just above the heel,
which is odd, given that he's best remembered
for letting a ball hit him on the head
in the outfield, and my dad is dead,
and though my back is better since I've done this,
back trouble seems inevitable, a design flaw
of the species, like greed, or fart jokes,
or lust for power, which eventually
kills democracies and creates the need for them,
I'm not saying dictators are ugly, but can you name
an attractive one, one you'd like to fuck
or can imagine looking at every day
the rest of your life, in the morning
when everything seems possible, when your back
doesn't hurt and there's still dew
on the chance that it could be
the best day of your life, sunlight
pushing and pushing to fill every crack,
to find its way into your pocket,
and you're convinced it's opening day, the beginning
of a new season, until you remember
how old you are and how little you can do
to make anyone's life any better, even your own,
if you're me and you're writing this poem,
which is about to start crying, so let's leave it alone

BOB HICOK

THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

Stars are furious devices, therefore sunlight is angry,
therefore trees are aggressive, therefore war is inevitable,
therefore I live in a cave underground and dream
of creating a school of architecture known as stoicism:
stone buildings, stone windows, stone water from stone faucets.
I don't believe five-eighths of that. Yes, stars are nearly endless
nuclear explosions, and would be crazy hot sexual partners,
which sounds like a business arrangement when I'd only fuck
stars I love, or be fucked by them, and trees will show up anywhere
they can get a toehold, a root hold, for example, I saw a sapling
growing from a chimney, and war is inevitable, and I live in a house
with windows made of staying up too late hoping to see the moon.
War is inevitably stupid. War is destined to be raw
spelled backward. Let's look at things associated with men.
Beer. The penis. The beer penis. Rape. War. Mowing the lawn.
I suggest we try to be known for talking to horses. Really talking.
Which means really listening. Have you noticed that everyone
limps, that everyone is carrying a dead soldier on their back,
or a stone up a hill, or a hill up a mountain, or a mountain
up the sky? I'm saying we're all in the same boat. That the boat
is on fire. As is the sea the boat is on. As are the oars.
The life jackets. I'm trying to mix my metaphors
into a stew or porridge that will help keep us alive.
Don't kill me if it isn't working. Don't kill me at all.
Death should not be a human vocation. Yodeling, now there's
a worthy endeavor to run away from, or making pie,
knitting a sweater for the North Pole. And what
do horses say? Very little, which is a lot
of why I like them and keep putting them in poems. Plus
a horse in a poem is often the tallest thing
in the poem, or the fastest, and the least likely
to hold a gun.

MELLISSA SOJOURNER

QUEEN OF THE RODEO

In the last nine months, Norm had lost a kidney and then a brother along with that kidney. To be clear: his kidney had been cut out—pulled through his abdomen in a surgical bag—and then stitched up inside of his brother, and then his brother had passed anyhow, leaving behind a son and a wife, Misty, a woman Norm might have loved once, though it was hard to be sure.

The doctor had told him that his remaining kidney would increase in size, that it would claim some of the emptied space and take over the whole job of filtering his blood. "Without a problem," the doctor had said. "Just the same as before." Of course, the doctor had said a lot of things. There were slivers Norm couldn't remember about that day, and then there were sensations that refused to leave him: the lump of his skin mounding under the needle, the cool push of the IV, and those fateful drips of oblivion traveling into his vein. Sometimes, he still felt the oximeter pulling at his finger and the stupid wave of his hand as he passed his brother in the corridor, each of them flat-backed in their beds, monitors beeping off-beat, as if in competition.

A long summer had been spent repairing saddles, eating most of his meals from a can, listening to the awful startle of sheep shears buzzing up from the valley, the fluff of their coats lining the wind like dandelion seeds. It had been a relief to see those metallic trailers loaded up, the border collies nipping in circles, and the Peruvian herders on horseback, pushing south, headed for warmer, greener pastures. There was a splinter of fall in the wind, a dampened cool at the close and start of each day, a sense of impermanence. He'd loaded up his truck with camping gear—his bell tent, his duct-taped sleeping bag, the fancy freeze-dried rations fit for space travel.

Norm still had a box of his brother's things on the floor of the passenger seat—a collection of objects that held little meaning. Except for the arrowhead, which he had been carrying around in his pocket.

But whenever he tried to test his limits, head out of town for a spell, he'd get as far as the old train tracks, a division, a crossing line. Driving over it seemed to represent something akin to running away, so instead, he'd park and walk along the weedy trestles, kicking at other people's trash, mumbling every curse word known to man. Then he'd lie down in the bed of the truck, straining up at the night sky, following the blink of a satellite dish, the suicide dive of a star, and the next morning, like clockwork, he'd turn around, head back. Things had gone upside down, and all he wanted was a sign, a ghost light, a burning bush. Anything at all. He'd even take a slap, a punch to the gut, the zip of an electrical current if it shook him out all right, set him on his feet again. But Misty kept calling. Or he did. Or both.

Whenever he called, she always asked how he was feeling, searching his voice for signs of pain or fever. And he hated that part—that she asked, that there was guilt in the asking. But his donating the kidney had nothing to do with her, or with his nephew, whom he loved terribly. He would have given the kidney to his brother even if he had been the sorriest, loneliest, meanest prick on the face of the earth. And if his brother had been that way, things would've turned out the same anyhow. But instead, his brother had been enviable: a filament of light attracting people like moths.

He visited Misty and his nephew at least once a month. He drove east through cattle country to their little farmhouse, to that desolate parcel of land. He packed a bag of groceries, maybe a fresh catch or two, and often a small something for his nephew—a jar of marbles or the little Hot Wheels they sold at the grocery store.

Last visit, Norm brought him a BB gun in secret. They dumped out a six-pack of Coca-Cola and lined the empties along the fence line, hidden by elms. Norm taught him how to aim, how to hold his breath when he fired. But he could feel the boy's nerves run through his fingers. Even the triumphant sound of the first BB's *ding* against the can appeared to unsettle him. What he thought had been a good idea—a rite of passage for a ten-year-old in southern Colorado—turned out to be a grave miscalculation. He worried, with each attempt, that he was leaving his nephew in even worse condition than he had found him that day.

Afterward, Norm hid the gun and the BBs inside a sweatshirt and left it out there between the roots of a tree, reminding his nephew that the gun should never be aimed at any squirrels or birds. "A broken wing can kill," he'd said. Though from the way the boy had looked at him—the way he'd lifted his freckled nose, his soft chin, and considered it slowly—Norm knew that it had never occurred to him to go out there alone. He was so different from Norm and his brother, who would have woken in the night, snuck out of the house, done anything to get that gun in their hands as quickly as possible. But the boy, of course, was Misty's too. She was sweet and warm, and she was smart. But not so sweet as to seem helpless. You could sense there were rocks inside of her, and she could reach down and hurl them anytime she liked.

Norm had been trying to toughen his nephew ever since Misty let it slip that he'd been crying on the bus on the way to school so often that the driver had begun bribing him with gummy bears. The other kids on the bus would beat the backs of their seats, try to make him break, and chant, "Don't cry, Kent!" These were the kids of farmers, of drillers, of truckers.

Kent had been Norm's brother's name too.

Misty and Norm stayed out on the front porch together that night. After the BB gun debacle, Norm had cooked a supper of trout and red potatoes and then cleaned everything quietly in the kitchen while Misty said goodnight to Kent. The night had turned calm and cool as they sat in the rocking chairs watching the pasture go navy. His brother's ashtray was on the side table between them, the ethereal weight of his presence lingering like dew.

"I thought I saw him the other day outside the hardware store, walking down Sixth toward Pinehurst," said Norm. "You know that little alcove with the boarded-up phone booth? I even raised my arm for a moment."

Misty remembered something and smiled. "I've been there," she said. "Anyone of size in a ballcap—even a woman sometimes."

"Must be one heck of a woman," said Norm.

Misty nodded. "Sometimes good-looking too."

Norm laughed.

"But then I worry. What comes next when I stop thinking

I'm going to wake up and he'll be standing there at the closet, asking what I've done with his shoes?"

"Maybe that never comes," said Norm.

They kept on rocking through the creaking, pausing to talk. Some of the neighbor's cattle had wandered over and were calling to each other out there in the dark. There was no one to blame, really, for what had happened to his brother, for the illness and the failure of his body, and that made it hard—the grief never seemed to settle anywhere.

"I just keep thinking: If only we'd known sooner," she said.

Norm rubbed his hands together. Already he could feel the dread of leaving, of each of them being alone. "You can't think like that," he told her. But everything he said felt half-hearted. His words seemed to trail off, waiting for some final declaration. Without his brother and that center of gravity, his relationship with Misty had become slippery and undefined.

A cattle egret triggered the floodlights and froze just beyond the steps, staring balefully at them, blindly, or perhaps with utter clarity. He felt the sudden question of their proximity, of his lingering, until the lights blinked off, leaving them to shadows again.

Misty held her head, but Norm knew she wouldn't cry. Her face was freshly washed. She'd come out with her hair pulled back tight and her skin as pale as the flesh of an apple. They both sighed almost in unison.

"Are you working on something new?" he asked her. He'd seen her sketchbook on the table, the charcoal pencils. Her perspective drawings—renderings of cityscapes and famous streets, of narrowing rivers and shrinking landscapes—often ended up on postcards and memorabilia, etched in metal trinkets at tourism centers. Norm had always liked her drawings—the way the subject of her work slipped into a vanishing point, as if she had carved a portal, a tunnel to the center, a city beyond a city tapered to the point of a pin. Everything was there, the world as he knew it, but it was heading somewhere, gliding down the precise angular lines she had drawn with a ruler.

"Not yet," she said. "Oh, that reminds me!" She stood, brightening. "I saw something the other day—thought you might be interested. Maybe it's worth a call." She went inside for a moment and came out with a newspaper clipping and

handed it to him. At some point, the cows in the field gave up their lowing, and Norm collected his things and drove home.

The girl in the newspaper article was a promising rider whose leg had been shattered and then amputated after a tragic accident involving a rearing horse and an elk stampede. In one quote, the girl had said: "It would have been a sensational dismount if my leg hadn't given out." Norm liked her instantly when he read that. The accident had taken place a year ago, and the story was the obligatory back-in-the-saddle follow-up. A photo, mid-trot, spread across the fold of the paper. The portrait made it look as if everything had been settled and put to rest, made whole again. Of course, that wasn't how these things worked. When a leg was gone, it was gone for good, and everything that came after was a series of adjustments.

The portrait made it look as if everything had been settled and put to rest, made whole again. Of course, that wasn't how these things worked.

Norm reached out to the family, and a series of emails were exchanged. He sent them designs and sketches until they settled on a custom saddle that would suit her needs, that would fix what could be fixed. A few weeks later, he crossed the railroad tracks and headed three hours south to their property in Oklahoma. He left Colorado and the blue ripple of its distant hills and drove into the panhandle, through lonesome stretches of old abandoned mining towns in a region that had once been known as No Man's Land, an unwanted strip between states, just north of the 36°30' parallel.

He followed the careful directions down nameless streets, hung a left at a white church with a broken steeple, and then cut across a field tracked with tires. Along that grassy road, he came upon a line of barefoot kids shouldering black inner tubes. They squinted at his truck as he passed, kicking at the grasshoppers sawing in the daylight, failing to return his half-hearted wave.

Lange, the girl's father, was waiting for him at the fence line, undoing a padlock. The wind swooped down, worrying the stalks, and Lange's shirt fluttered like a flag. Norm could tell

from just a glance that the man was in poor health—his clothes and the cinch of his belt spoke of a previous body, the body of a better past. For a moment, a little match of injustice lit up inside of Norm. In one square mile there could be loss and sickness, there could be sun-scorched inner tubes and autumn nights—that was how the world looked to him now, heaped in contradiction, a shiny jewel just waiting for a thief.

Norm followed the father's rusty old truck into a patch of woods, tires thumping, bouncing over rocks and roots. A green tin roof sparked into view between the trees, the sun glinting against it as if through a magnifying glass. As the woods thinned, they broke open into a circular clearing where a log home had been whittled in place like a fairy-tale cabin. There was a small horse stable and a dirt corral and a chicken coop that trembled with feathered activity.

The fuel-rumble of their trucks coming down the lane must have alerted the girl, Amy. She came bouncing out to greet them, leaving the screen door banging at her back. Even at fifteen, she was as imposing as a woman. An impossibly long braid hung behind her like a tail, swaying with the up-down of each prosthetic step. She smiled, shook Norm's hand; her mouth was silver, stuffed with braces, and it was there that Norm saw the vibrance of a child shining through.

Amy's mother, Judith, fluttered out behind her, watchful in the background. A pair of gardening gloves flopped from her pocket. Norm *ma'am*ed and tipped his hat to each of them. Amy seemed to get a real kick out of that, swiveling around to smile at her mother.

As they walked toward the stable, Amy told Norm that her leg was made of carbon fiber and aluminum. "I'm bionic," she said. "At least one-sixteenth Terminator."

"*Amy*," Judith chided, as if she had been caught bragging.

Amy shrugged at Norm.

"Now you're just making me jealous," he said. And he thought of telling her that he was missing something too—even though it was small in comparison—but his age opened between them like a chasm, and he couldn't figure how to talk to her, how to relate.

They had set up a little projector in the stable with footage of her barrel racing. The screen had been hung on the back

wall between the stalls, and the bottom edge of it curled against the pile of hay. The four of them stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the old Amy churning up dirt with the speed of her turns. Norm couldn't decide if it was lovely or tragic. There was enough promise there to wonder if she really could have made it. Next to him, Amy's mother leaned and shifted, along for the ride, in perfect sync with Amy's movements. When it was over, Norm clapped, assuming that was what they had wanted—to see his own belief and conviction, a mirror to their own.

They all stood in the middle of the stable while Norm gathered her measurements. He wrote each number down in a little notebook as they talked about the rodeo circuit. Amy spoke of the riders as if they were royalty, naming their horses and hometowns. That was where she had been headed before the injury—entering teen competitions and performing at local shows. He let her chat away and took more notations than needed, even measuring the length of her outstretched arms. "For the reins," he said, with a shrug in his voice. She seemed amused by the attention, lifted a pinky into the air and, wiggling it, said, "You missed a spot." Turned out she had even called the reporter herself, set up the whole article. "There's no comeback without a story," she said.

Norm had never been much of a rider—his granddaddy had broken broncs and it had soured him—but when Lange led the horse from the stall, walking with the reins in his hands, the smell of its coat hit Norm like it always did, sweet and familiar. It was the same brown Arabian that had reared, that had dropped Amy amid its own, terrible panic. Blame was a funny thing, he thought, watching the horse nudge at the palm of her hand.

The horse's name was Pascal, and Amy sang it to him as she brushed the streak of white that ran down his nose. Pascal closed and opened his eyes, the rectangular pupils dark as doorways. Norm thought he could see a sadness there, a knowing, perhaps even a question of what was owed, and he felt hesitant as he reached out with the molding wire to touch him. Pascal's coat twitched, acknowledging Norm's fingers as if they were flies. But he stayed still after that. Norm got the shape of the horse's withers, carefully checked the prominence of his spine. When Norm was finished, Pascal kept turning his head

in Norm's direction as if in recognition, twisting, appraising, and Norm felt the rush of exposure, like it was visible—the missing thing inside of him, the traitor, the organ that hadn't been enough.

As Norm neared the state line, a few hours from home, he pulled off the two-lane highway and set up his tent at the bottom of an embankment where a river crossed beneath the road through a large concrete tunnel. The water burst out like a slide, and occasionally, he'd catch the sharp edge of a tail backflipping through. The land there was remote enough to imagine it might remain empty for a while longer—as empty as a place could remain when crossed by roads and trains and money.

He ate tinned fish, a bag of roasted peanuts, and a warm beer he found rolling around the truck bed. After he was finished, he pulled the arrowhead from his pocket and turned it over in his hands, longing for the object to spark with significance, hoping to feel the weight of its history, to feel some sense of belonging within its long and stoic viewpoint. It had been found by his brother one summer, dug out from beneath a dried creek bed with a stick. There had been a historic drought, and they had spent weeks crushing snail shells beneath their sneakers, climbing over mossy boulders shedding like lint, until the earth opened like a tomb, giving way to that secret offering—the bone-white arrowhead his brother had claimed and stashed like a treasure beneath his pillow. As Norm thought of this, his heart swung low, and he called Misty.

She answered after hardly a ring, so he knew she'd been holding the phone in her palm, doing nothing. "Hey," she said. He had to clear his throat when he heard her.

"Hey, Misty. Everything OK there?"

The speaker rattled as if Misty had set down the phone. Norm ran his finger along the serrated edge of the arrowhead. Across the line, he heard the crack and hiss of a can being opened. His brother had owned a fleet of vending machines, and in the shed out back, he'd left behind towering pallets of soda.

"Misty?"

It rattled again and then she was back on. "Sorry, Norm. You just caught me . . . well, just thinking about something, you know. We're fine, really. Kent is fine. I'm fine."

The TV blared in the background, and he pictured Kent sit-

ting cross-legged in front of it, picking at the dried spots of glue in the carpet. "Fine. Good," he said.

"Supper Thursday?" she asked.

"Sure thing." He'd cut his finger on the arrowhead while he was talking—a paper-thin line that he washed in the cool of the river afterward, though he could still feel his heartbeat pulsing at the tip of it. Lately, there were all these vibrations he had come to notice—sensations of absence, the ticking of his body like a clock waiting to chime. Sometimes he imagined his kidney had left a hole like dynamite through a mountain and time was moving inside him like a runaway train. There was the electricity of his nerves and arteries building new highways, pulsing with progress that he refused to acknowledge.

Lately, there were all these vibrations he had come to notice—sensations of absence, the ticking of his body like a clock waiting to chime.

All week, he'd held Thursday in his mind like a ticket. Misty greeted him at the kitchen's screen door with lipstick on. It had been a long time since he'd seen her mouth fully punctuated like that and it stirred him up a little, touched the pit of his stomach. He stepped inside, holding a pair of fishing poles, and was about to say something about the black sedan out front when a man emerged from the living room behind her with a jacket slung across his arm. The man was clean-shaven and well-dressed. He stooped as he spoke, as if in false apology for his substantial height. "Earl," he said, smiling wide. Norm felt that he'd seen his face before in an ad—perhaps in the *PennySaver* or on a bench dripping with bird shit. There were so many questions, a field of questions. A swirl of unexpected jealousy whistled through his ears and made him dizzy.

"Hey, Kent!" Norm called out. He lifted the poles in the air and smiled with his lips closed tight, acknowledging Misty and that man named Earl.

The kitchen was tiny, and Earl was taking up most of it with one hand stretched to the counter and the other resting on the back of a kitchen chair. Kent crept in like a mouse, ducking beneath the man's outstretched arm before coming to rest in front

of his mother, looking up at her for some final confirmation before he went out the door with Norm.

Down the steps and into the dirt, Norm tried to shake away the jitter of his insides, the narrowing of his thoughts. His words felt choked when he spoke: "The Sutters' dock sound all right?" Kent shrugged and tucked the pole Norm had given him beneath his armpit as they made their way across the field, which had grown high and needed tending. Norm had the jigs in his pocket, a couple of neon squiggly nothings. He could see the herd across the pasture, swinging the flies from their heads, walking in a straight line down the dirt road to the milking parlor. The land was as flat as a baseball diamond and sound traveled easily across it—farm sounds and bells, windchimes, and the jangle of an old trailer barreling down the road in the distance. Clouds of gnats hung in the air like a mobile above a crib; Norm and Kent wound their way around them, sometimes in opposite directions, then connected back together at the end of each circle.

"I don't know who that man was," said Kent. Norm stopped for a moment in the grass, brushing the sides of his Wranglers. Kent had read Norm's silence all the way down to his toes. "She made me clean my room. She went crazy cleaning everything." Kent began slashing at the grass with his pole, scaring up the little white moths that hid against the blades like flowers.

Norm considered the information as they walked on. The dairy farmer's pond was ahead, the surface dark and unmoving, stretched with the bodies of cottonwood trees and the red blaze of the barn. He had never asked about insurance money, or if there was any to be had. She was probably thinking of selling the house—it was a lot to maintain on her own, and Kent was young, too young to be riding a mower and hauling firewood, though he was older than Norm had been when he'd started. But the notion upset him, still—the idea of their moving. And he was hurt. She'd had every occasion to tell him.

"I'm sure your mother knows what she's doing," he said, consoling himself perhaps even more than his nephew.

"Yeah, well, she doesn't tell me nothing, so how would I know?"

"Your mother's trying her best; don't you forget that." The

words came out harsher than he'd meant them, and Kent rushed out ahead of him.

"I know that! You don't have to tell me! Don't you think I know that?" He dropped the pole and headed to the edge of the dock.

"I'm sorry, Kent!" Norm called after him. It was growing cooler, but sweat had worked through his shirt. He felt wet and foolish. Kent swiped at his nose with his sleeves for a while, and Norm set the lures on the rods and pretended not to notice.

The farmer had supposedly stocked the pond with catfish, but all they caught was bream, three of them, no more edible than toads. Kent caught one and then grew bored and sat with his legs swinging off the edge of the dock, kicking at the cattails. It hadn't rained in a while, and the water was low and frenzied with long-legged bugs.

By the time they were heading home, the sun was a pale orange, and the clouds were so low and gray they looked like steam from an old locomotive. They crossed paths with a snake, ink black and glistening, and Norm placed his hands on Kent's shoulders to stop him, and they stood together and admired it. The earlier crossness had gone out of each of them. It had been difficult to hold on to with the light on the water turning to gold. But the guilt was coming for Norm in the still of the evening. Here he was when it should have been his brother carrying those poles, thinking about Earl and the blush of Misty's lipstick.

He left early that night, cleaned the pot of elk chili and put it on the floor of his truck. The cattle line was crossing the road again, going slowly, so he stopped off at the end of Misty's long driveway and got out of the truck to sit beneath the grove of elms that stood together like strangers in an elevator. Though he felt uneasy about it, he watched their night progress from the outside. He saw Kent's bedroom light flick off, then the hall light dim, until there was only the glow of lamplight against the curtain of the living room, where Misty was sitting and reading, or praying, or staring hopelessly at the walls. He thought about the thousand cans of soda in the shed and what would become of them, and the empty vending machines dotted across the county gathering cobwebs and dust.

The BB gun was still there in the damp of the sweatshirt. He

rolled it out and considered it in his hands. He used the muzzle to dig a hole and dropped the arrowhead inside and buried it. He twisted at the sound of a twig, imagining things out there moving toward him, thinking of the cattle and their dappled heads like opera masks in the dark.

The machinery of the farm was churring in the distance. He could make out the square windows of the barn, the taillights on a retreating truck. Dark things swirled against the sky like kites, and he shot up at them, thinking they were bats, though they may have been shadows of his own demons flying above him.

For weeks he stitched away at that custom saddle like it would save him, placing those rivets, jittering beneath the big leather sewing machine, thinking of the girl and the giant swing of her life. It was a sympathy that bled through him, that tangled up with his own losses, with his own stalled-out story.

By the time it was finished and he was heading out to deliver it, the leaves along the roadside had gone dark and temporary, and the fields were freckled with the browned buds of wildflowers. He'd loaded up the saddle beneath a dusty canvas tarp, debated a big red bow—tied it, then untied it, fearing it too earnest, too laced with pity.

When he arrived, the family gathered around the tailgate, and he slowly unlatched the cover and then lifted it into the air like a bedsheet. Amy clapped and squeezed her parents' shoulders, carving little half-moons in the dirt with the blade of her foot. Norm went through all the adjustments—the counterbalance of weight in the saddle bag, a taller horn cap for turns, the custom stirrup. He gave Amy a jar of cedar oil and told her how to take care of the leather.

It was a sympathy that bled through him, that tangled up with his own losses, with his own stalled-out story.

Lange gathered up the saddle in his arms and walked off toward the horse barn, dragging his body through the dirt and weeds. Norm turned to follow him, but Judith placed a hand around his forearm, clasping and patting as she led him to the

porch, where a picnic table had been set with turkey sandwiches and vinegar chips.

He could sense the unframed hours of hospitality looming before him—an endless road, like one of Misty's perspective paintings that seemed to go on forever. How he had longed to reach that elusive center—the invisible heart, the final dot like a black hole. He flushed to think that once in high school, he'd written her a note on blue-lined paper, asking her about those paintings—a note that had never been delivered, a message that he'd crumpled and let disintegrate in his palm.

Around the table, Judith asked the usual questions. Kids? *No*. Wife? *No*. A series of dead ends. "Plenty of time for that," she told him. Turned out they'd had Amy when they were both forty-two.

"When she came out, the first thing the nurses did was count her fingers and toes," Judith said as she lifted Amy's braid from her back and let it fall again.

"It seems pretty funny now, huh?" said Amy, her silver smile gummed with potato chips.

When Lange joined them at last, Norm could hear a wheeze in his chest—a sound like a broken rattle. Amy sidled up close to him, and he put his arm around her and kissed the part in her hair. Judith disappeared inside, then carried out a bucket of water and a pile of carrots, fresh from the garden, and began washing them off and peeling them into ribbons. "The chickens go crazy for them," she told Norm.

Soon there was just the calm scrape of the peeler and the earthen smell of the carrots all around them. Time had gone slow and liquid, and Norm let the unexpected good feeling stretch out like a cat flexing its paw. When the wind blew, he could hear it in the trees, and the birds within them rang out like bells.

Amy begged Lange to tell Norm about the time he had gotten lost in the woods.

"Moonshine," Lange half-whispered to him.

"Stupidity," Judith said, rolling her eyes as she piled the ribbons into a glass bowl. Amy tucked her good leg up beneath her and rested her chin in her hands.

Norm could tell it was a story they were used to; it had the rhythm of practice.

Lange had been walking home, taking a familiar route. "The night was full black," he said.

"Blackout," teased Judith, smiling.

"Anyways," Lange continued, "I had this penlight I always carried in my pocket, but it couldn't light up a teacup. The forest just swallowed it right up. The sun had dropped so fast, but I had been wanting to revisit this place I remembered—a little detour on my way home, this beautiful rock clearing where you could see the river running below, all dressed up with stars." He looked at his wife, lifted his eyebrows. Her neck went pink.

"He took Mother there once," said Amy in a whisper. "It's in a different town."

"But of course"—Lange slapped the table, regaining their attention—"it was so dark, I didn't know my ass from Uranus."

"Lange!"

"Sorry. But I didn't! My feet were all scrambled, following the path this way and then that, doubling back, spinning around. I don't know if you've ever been lost like that, but it felt like the trees were stepping in on me. The dark is there your whole life, but it's only a few times you really feel it—how much it weighs, how it stretches the mind out."

Norm was nodding along.

"Somehow, I make it out to this vista, thank the Lord, but everything is all wrong. It's backwards—sky, river—all flipped, I swear it. I couldn't tell what was what! And that freaked me out something good. So, I start to run. I'm tripping, catching branches all over, and then *wham*, I trip right over a door in the earth, stopped me right in my tracks. Looked like one of those hobbit doors, just right there in the ground, all muddied up with leaves."

"A door in the earth," said Amy.

"Turns out I had discovered this old mining shaft. Months later, the city's marking up a trail and leading hiking tours right to it."

"How about that," said Norm.

"How about *that*," said Lange.

An hour had passed on the porch. The chips were gone, and the ice had melted in their glasses. Condensation fell down the sides like drops of rain. After Norm helped to clear the table, they headed out to the stable. Amy jolted out ahead with ex-

citement, her swinging steps bounding like mechanical skips. Norm trailed behind her parents, who walked together, occasionally reaching out, brushing fingertips. The chickens were retreating into their coop, and Norm could see the red glow of their heat lamps through the windows.

Lange scanned the field as they walked and turned back to Norm. "Sometimes we get a coyote," he said.

Norm stopped along the fence of the corral, leaning against the day-warmed wood, keeping to himself while they readied Pascal in the barn. The sun had slipped to eye-level, and the woods fell into a distant, piercing haze. He wondered if most of their days were like this. He knew, of course, that they weren't—the evidence was there before him—but it was easy to imagine the three of them waking each day to the same gentle pattern. He looked off into the woods, resting his boot along the bottom rung as a red-tailed hawk swooped overhead. The shadow drew a giant arrow across the field before shrinking away. His thoughts fell to Misty and his nephew, to cooking supper again in that quiet, temporary house and playing catch in the yard, taking up space like a ghost, like a remnant.

When the horse was ready, Amy called for Norm, waving him over. He jumped the fence and walked with his head down, showing his nerves like a boy. The ground was packed with the old marks of boots and hooves, and each step felt like crossing someone's feet in a dance. There was something about entering a corral that always made him feel bare and exposed, like a stage had been emptied around him and it was his job to fill it.

There was a little stairstep at the center—the kind used to hoist kids onto the backs of ponies—and Amy's riding prosthetic had been laid across it. It had been made to bend around the horse and would disconnect easily if she fell. Amy sat down on the step and began removing her walking leg. Norm turned to give her privacy, as if she were revealing something he had no right to see, but then she asked for his help, and he saw that she had no shame about it, so he stood in front of her, holding the riding prosthetic steady as she folded down the sheath and adjusted it over what remained of her thigh and wedged it in place. For her, it was just another day, glimpsing that leg. But to him it was visceral—the puckered end of her thigh seared into him like a brand. He swallowed the drop in his stomach and felt his

knees go weak. The confusion of that feeling would arrive again later, as he drove away—the shameful repulsion, the desire for life, all of it coming together like a clap of thunder.

Norm checked the saddle and then Amy climbed the steps and placed her foot in the stirrup and boosted herself over the top. Norm went around the horse and lifted her prosthetic leg to place it into the stirrup he had fashioned from a flag holder.

"Ouch!" she said. His heart tipped over. But then he saw that she was teasing, laughing at him.

"That's her favorite joke!" Lange called out from the fence with his hands cupped around his mouth.

"Just plain mean," said Norm, smiling with relief, shaking his head. He climbed back over the fence and watched Amy start off with a slow trot.

There would be times that Misty came out to the porch with her eyes pink, and he would know she had been crying, hiding it from him, though he didn't know why. And in his body, he was torn. He wanted to leave and he wanted to hold her. He wanted her pain gone more than his own. He wanted permission to make the best of things. "He's never coming back," he wanted to say, he wanted to shout.

But he knew that even next time, there would be no shouting. That instead, they would sit and watch the light of the sky press against the earth and extinguish itself until all that remained was the blue veil of the mosquito zapper glowing between them. Norm would tell her for the thousandth time that he was sorry, though at that point, it meant nothing. And she would tuck her knees to her chest and say, "What do you have to be sorry for?" And he would think of a boundless sky of reasons, only a handful of which had to do with his kidney.

Amy picked up the pace and was straight-backed, bouncing in an easy rhythm with the horse. Lange shuffled down the fence, coughing into his hands, but joy had spread all over him and Norm felt it too, felt it unroot something deep inside. But he didn't have a right to it, even though he had come there seeking that very thing.

"Look at what you've done for her—she looks comfortable again. By God, she'll never get off now," Lange said, placing a hand on Norm's shoulder. "We sure are grateful you reached out."

"Seems to be doing the job all right," said Norm, slapping

the fence with his palm, signaling the end. The wind kicked up, rolling in the dusk, and the treetops at the edge of the forest shivered.

"Are we keeping you from someone?" Lange gestured with one arm to the field beyond, to the meaningless whole that surrounded them, as if the possibilities were unlimited.

Norm didn't answer. He shook the man's hand and told him that he ought to be heading home.

Amy kept circling the corral, smiling as she went by. Even as Norm walked away, he could hear the hooves drumming the dirt, and it was a sound he could feel in his chest, like the beating of a heart or the wings of a duck on the water.

There was just enough light in the sky to see where he'd come from, a glow like honey along the grass. As he drove, the falling sun stretched down in saintly beams as if through the windows of a church.

Norm followed the same worn track of tires, windows down, his arm draped along the side of the truck, trying to make up his mind about where he was headed. He liked the idea of waking up to that rush of river water, to the certainty of its direction. Maybe he'd find an abandoned inner tube and float along for a while, basking in the morning shine like a turtle.

He was imagining himself being carried by the water when something dark and shapeless appeared in his rearview, rushing toward him. As he slowed, he craned his neck around to see it. When it drew closer, the light that remained fell upon it, gave it shape, and he saw that it was Amy, galloping toward him through the pasture. She overtook him, laughing and hollering like something wild, passing ahead of him into a field of barley, where he watched her with his breath caught up inside. She startled a flock of ravens from their roost, and they spread like ash, like a splatter of paint, dimming to pinpricks and then into nothing, as if entering a door through the sky.

She startled a flock of ravens . . . and they spread like ash, like a splatter of paint, dimming to pinpricks and then into nothing, as if entering a door through the sky.

What is at the end? he had written to Misty on that paper ripped from his notebook. *What is at the end?* he had asked of

her drawings. He had folded the note and carried it around; he had moved it from his pocket to his palm.

What is at the end? he wondered, as Amy grew smaller, as she continued away into fields that had turned cold and blue. He switched on his headlights, feeling frightened and young and undefined.

There seemed to be a window of his life that was closing, a blazoned thing he could see from the outside. But it was fragile. When he considered it, it felt like an egg, heavy but delicate in his hands. But about Amy, he was certain. One day, he'd flip on the TV and there she would be, all fancied up with a cloud of dust settling behind her. And then he would hear it building like a stampede, the great culmination: a cheer roaring across the foil-bright stands.

ANDREW ISRAEL REED

THE DUNES

Ask about the deviations
to the curve
scattered along
the minimum of action,
ask about the airborne
sand arcing at their crests,
their Hesperidian glow.

Though they say the ear grew
from an outstretched gill,
mine's a coastal dune.
The rain skips over
my lobes and channels,
hits the pine forest further upslope.

My trust breaks like sugar
under your festive well wishes.

Crabs climb from the piles
we'd scooped into hills.

ANDREW ISRAEL REED

CUTBANKS

1

Taller than my father
in those boots,
heels in, I knelt
on his leather toes, blew
spring water out my nose, ate prickly pear
and xamües, beetles with a crunchy carapace.

Thought he might beat me to death
when he led me away that night.

He stared into me,
leaned into me, fists in his pockets.
I could smell the tobacco on his breath when he said,
Let's go to the riverbed.

2

He walked me through the chaparral.

He blew smoke down my collar, took
ash from my hand,
the snot on my sleeve shivered
and rang with the pumice stones
with the voices of the grass
singing softly
under our machetes.

3

I waded into the birdsong.

We stood by the river,
climbed the escarpment.

We played as children do,
carved a doll's cliff dwelling
from the cutbanks.

Our hands walked together
and embraced as puppets.

4

I lost my little bell
talking last night through the window,
the sash glowed purple under our hands,
slid like satin into the stone walls.
He grabbed my little charm and pulled.

The sand swallowed the bell,
and then it swallowed the street,
the patio, and then our voices,
our window, our night.

5

His cousin had a party
and he disappeared before midnight

I slept in the field with the scorpions.

My cheeks shimmered like lizards' bellies
in the morning light.

6

He's from a place where it never rains.
He's from a place:
the last steppe of the pawn's campaign,
an arid edge that turns you back.

He came to the valley,
he stepped on me,
now my tail rattles on his key ring.

ANDREW ISRAEL REED

MESSENGERS

Angels make me make angels out of matchsticks.

They tell me to unroll their wax paper,
glue them to foam board, they say
that every side of the head has a face.

Their bodies spell out secret things,
each unfurls a letter: many X's and M's and A's.

No S's, though, so what they're trying to tell
me has nothing to do with Christmas—

something else,
something about an embattled prince,
riparian woods, martyrdom.

They're making me make more of them
so we should soon know why they visit.

MIK JOHNSON

MIKAYLA

Mama says one, *Mom* says the other.
I answer to both but they mean different things, like house and boat.
Bone, button, dragon, drone, sun-stroked raspberries
and cream-filled cartons. Water, lace, and gold-stained leaves,
books left open to pages
marked in red and blue and yellow. Braids of water
streaming to a lake, then an ocean. Cement jungles coated in petals
and purses, Jeeps, and pens. A bucket brimming
with tapioca pudding and Spotify playlists stashed in a cupboard
labeled *lifeblood*. A wall coated in wads of gum and candy wrappers
and unsaid feelings. Two diesels trucking picture books and books
of scripture. Fear water bottled alongside dream water, sometimes
cocktails of the two.
Is there a name that holds them all?
Named for my ancestors, Swedish for *Michelle*. I was given a title
to imbue me with the wings of matrons past
and the textures of places never seen. My dad does not remember it
the same way; he tells me he and Mom invented it, though
census records prove it isn't true. Yes, I was named.
Yes, I was called by that name all my life, still am,
but the girl at the library called me *Samantha*. In Argentina
the names of girls are like breadbaskets
ready to hold cakes and éclairs, air sugared
with the sound of *Florencia* and *Candela*,
Carolina and *Matilde*, though also weighed down by it,
by their motorcycles, men, by their laundry lines, music,
the passion of them and the patience of them at once a steak dinner
and a puff of fairy air. *Sophie* said my roommate as we hung our clothes
to dry, the sun hanging over us like a crimson disc, you could be a *Sophie*.
Mika was my professor's choice, because two *Mikaylas* were too many
in a class, the persona of that semester
like a birdhouse in a desert. *Mickey-Moo-Face* said my aunt,
Mickeruski said my uncle, and *Michelob* said Grandpa, though I know
I'm not a beer. The boy who wanted

to cloak me in his name. The boy whose name
I wrote in my notebook. The boy whose name
I stole when we married. Yes. Him. *Kevin* who says my name
and I hear a thousand colors
and the children we named, *Charles*, *McKay*, but perhaps
marsupial instead, and honeybee, chitter chat and purple speech,
banana peels on kitchen counters behind bookshelves made
of bent cards. Monkey bread served on platters made
of Lego bricks. Swings hung from lampposts. Flags hung
like hammocks. A hundred hundred ladybugs flocking to a frog
perched on a teacup. Sidewalk chalk etching out the portrait
of *Mona Lisa*, no, *Shakira*.
Is there a name that holds us all?

MIK JOHNSON

SPACING

I stand in water up to my waist
soaking in the warmth of yellow sun.
A gull squawks overhead.

And suddenly my sons crash around me
spewing water from their mouths,
throwing rocks with wrinkled hands.
A game of lake sharks.

The youngest is five, the oldest is six,
the space between them smaller than
two calendars.

My womb is open
and growling, like an empty throat,
ravenous for building bodies of hair and blood, flesh and bone.
And yet—

My heart is breaking open with the two already here,
like water coursing down a mountain stream,
enough to grow a forest
or flood it.

We wade out of the water,
my sons' fresh hands clasped in my scarred ones,
and I think about how much I'll grieve
when their hands start to look like mine.

MIK JOHNSON

ZERO FATALITIES

God, give me a real grief,
shrouded in yesterdays, confused by beauty,
and a heavy rain—deserved
after years of health. Give me blankness. Cold mornings.
But not yet.
Give me parched eyes,
wrinkled shirts, upturned earth
and a heart cloven by love—
but not yet.

T. L. KHLEIF

EVERYTHING YOU'VE EVER DONE WRONG

In the summer of 1989, I was fourteen years old, languishing in the heat and stillness of my small town on the New Hampshire seacoast. Behind my bedroom door, I listened to my Beatles tapes on repeat, letting the guitar lines and harmonies carry me to worlds wilder and more colorful than anything I knew. In the living room each night, my father watched the news of mounting conflicts thousands of miles away in the Middle East. My mother bustled over dinner in the kitchen. My brother spun around the streets in his Chevy Monte Carlo. The electric fans around our house fought a vain battle against the humidity. I waited for the long days to change.

Sometime in early July, the announcement arrived over the radio: Ringo Starr, the former Beatles drummer, would be sweeping through New Hampshire on a revival tour in August. What was more, the fairground was less than an hour from my house.

The news felt to me like a message carried down from somewhere beyond the quiet wooded streets and sleepy downtown. I had spent the last two years consumed by the Beatles—their music, their history, their posters and films—but had resigned myself to the fact that I'd been born too late to ever see them in concert. Now a feeling rose up in me, beyond yearning or desire. I needed to go. Some vital piece of my future, the person I was meant to be, was at risk of slipping away unless I answered the call. My parents might not understand at first, but I vowed to make them see.

For most of my friends, the question would have required a simple process of bargaining: a certain amount of chores, a pledge to maintain grades. A more daunting operation awaited me. My father and mother had immigrated in the 1950s and '60s to the US from Nazareth—a place we knew at home as "the old country" and that, in conversations with passing strangers, they called "the Holy Land" when saying the word "Palestinian" would have made things too complicated. They regularly kept

in touch with our relatives who still lived in Israel, but they hadn't returned there since my brother's infancy, before I was born. It was expensive, they said, and far; their lives were here now. Their knowledge of rock concerts extended mostly to the troubled headlines that reached us in the local papers: A crowd had gone wild in an arena somewhere in Ohio, spectators trampled; a teenager had bought drugs and overdosed in a bathroom at the Worcester Centrum or the Portland Civic Center. They had sought a quiet life in America, which did not include arenas full of screaming fans. "Why do you need to go?" they would say when I asked to see a certain singer or band live. "You have the tape."

Nonetheless, I tried my mother first. She always offered at least a spark of hope. She was a warm, even-tempered presence in our house. She loved music, even if she listened to more Farid al-Atrash and Abd al-Wahhab than rock 'n' roll.

But when it came to Ringo, she delivered the answer I'd both anticipated and dreaded: "Ask your father."

That summer, the First Intifada was at its height, and my father descended into anxious silence when the news delivered new reports of Palestinian protesters killed. The rest of the time, he worked in his study in the basement, writing journal articles and preparing syllabi for his sociology courses at the state university in town, dedicating himself to the orderly tasks of scholarship as the outside world veered off course. As always, my father worked with a feverish dedication, eager to feed his restless curiosity, to outrun some invisible clock that constantly seemed to warn him of falling short.

When I presented the request in his dusty office, he looked at me as if I'd asked him for a thousand-dollar advance on my allowance.

"Why?" he said, then returned to the pile of papers on his desk. "No concerts."

His word on such matters was usually final, I knew. But I couldn't help myself.

"It's just one night," I ventured.

He glanced up with surprise and affront. He was several years older than most of my friends' parents, his face always clean-shaven, his short hair gray for longer than I could remember. Behind the wide lenses of his glasses, his eyes flickered with warning that his patience, never particularly substantial, was about to snap.

"I don't want any concerts." He waved his hand, banishing the idea from the room. "You should be preparing for your classes next year. Stop wasting your summer. Enough."

"You'll see him some other time," my mother tried to assure me afterward.

"See Ringo Starr? Some other time?" I said. "See one of the Beatles *some other time*?"

My mom sighed. "We'll do other things together." My mother was a small, quick-moving woman with dark, gentle eyes and short brown hair she permed every six months. She steered through the routine and tumult of our household and her job as a bank teller in town with a cheerful energy I wished I'd inherited. She was more than capable of overruling my father, and sometimes did, but she was also careful to choose the arguments worth waging and winning. She seemed as eager as my dad to put the matter to rest now—as much to stop talking about the Beatles as for any other reason. My parents didn't disapprove of the Beatles' music, but by this time, they had come to view the swelling pile of Beatles memorabilia in my room, and my habit of dropping fragments of Beatles trivia into dinnertime conversation, as symptoms of some mild but unsettling affliction.

"There will be other concerts," she told me, wrapping up the conversation. "When you're older. We can talk about it in a few years."

But "a few years" felt as far away as London or Hollywood. In my room, my posters stared down at me—the band poised for superstardom in front of the London Palladium, bounding around New York as Beatlemania struck, long-haired and chastened as they embarked on *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* and their final chapter together. *Keep fighting*, they urged me, and I knew I had no choice.

I had carried the Beatles like a secret light within me ever since the afternoon I had first heard them—truly heard them—two summers before, when the animated movie *Yellow Submarine* had popped up on one of the UHF channels. I was twelve, floating between babysitting jobs. I watched the madcap plot and psychedelic musical montages with a distracted eye until, at some point, the first strains of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" came on.

The electric guitars that rose like a rumbling from the ground, the drums kicking in. It was a small TV set—the first color TV we'd gotten, just the year before, when my father had finally relented to our years of begging—but the sound had filled the room. Filled me. I stood up and danced around the mustard-yellow carpet. The thick brown drapes were drawn, and no one was home to see me, and all of that only offered further proof that this signal had been sent directly to me. Paul McCartney's voice rasped as it strained for the high notes, ever on the verge of cracking, as though he couldn't contain all that he needed to say.

Paul McCartney's voice rasped as it strained for the high notes, ever on the verge of cracking, as though he couldn't contain all that he needed to say.

In the following months, I bought every Beatles album and compilation I could afford from Tape World in the mall. At bookstores, I scoured every Beatles biography I could find, from the pulpy and reverent to those fussy with scholarly ambitions. A few years before, after seeing the movie *Back to the Future*, I had gone through a Michael J. Fox phase, papering my room with his posters and diligently watching every episode of *Family Ties*. But this, I already knew, was different. I stopped begging my mother for name-brand clothes from Express and The Limited and started wearing T-shirts with iron-on decals—one with a black peace sign, another with a sparkly Beatles lunch box. "You look like a hippie," my friend David said when I wore the peace sign the last week of seventh grade, in the same voice he might have used to point out that my fly was undone. "Maybe I am," I answered. I hoped I sounded like the defiant free spirit my clothes were meant to embody. Still, I couldn't help glancing around the crowded cinder block–walled cafeteria. Was anyone staring at me? Laughing?

Back home, I could shut out those questions as I listened to the tapes in my closed bedroom. Unlike other fans, I did not distinguish between periods in the band's career. Their early work, full of upbeat pop harmonies and innocuous sentiments—"I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "Please Please Me"—spoke to me as much as the plaintive acoustic songs of *Rubber Soul*

or the sitar-infused psychedelia of *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper.* The group sang of lost love, of friendship, of beloved childhood memories, of war and protest, in a breathless array of sounds and styles, as though to remind me that the world, and a single human life, contained more angles and dimensions than I'd ever considered. They felt everything I felt, and made lasting music about it; I hoped some of that power, whatever it was, would rub off on me.

I was secretly proud when the tapes began to squeak with exhaustion. I knew every hesitation, every ill-timed breath and blurt of laughter on the recordings. When Paul cracked up in the middle of "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" or when a backing vocal frayed off pitch in "If I Fell," a thrill chased through me, as if the band were passing on a confidence to me alone. We were caught up in a conversation that never had to end. When I listened to them, it didn't matter that I liked less and less the way I looked—my nose asserting itself too much, my frizzy brown hair never cooperating; that high school, in all its uncertainty, was looming ever closer and that, judging by my father and brother's nightly arguments, my decent but uneven grades would not be enough; or that the swells of feeling in me that promised some extraordinary but unnamed revelation were proving grotesquely, maliciously out of proportion with anything I'd been able to express or accomplish thus far. I kept a diary and had written a few poems. I loved the poetry of John Keats and the childhood stories of Roald Dahl. Sometimes I felt words sifting around in me like unformed music—but I was too afraid to shirk my homework to finish writing a song or a poem as some of my friends would do, too afraid, I understood even then, to gamble and come up with nothing.

But the Beatles knew nothing of fear or doubt. I studied their story as though plotting a secret map for my life. I knew how teenage Paul had practiced guitar for hours in the bathroom. I knew about Hamburg and the Cavern Club and the Quarrymen and Paul riding his bike to the church fairground where John's skiffle band was performing on the day they met. I could recite by heart which month each of their albums had first been released. Every February, June, July, and October, I quietly baked a Duncan Hines cake for each of their birthdays. "Is that for one of the *Beatles*?" my brother would say, leaning on the kitchen

counter in his cowboy boots and tie-dyed shirt. "No," I answered, not convincing anyone, "I just felt like baking a cake."

I had started, inevitably, to play guitar during that time—not so I could become a rock star (though I held out hope) but so I could enter the same place. That far-off continent, still hazy in my vision, where youth set the rules, where every disappointment or happiness or flash of feeling could be transformed into art. People who lived in that place cut school without worrying what their parents or teachers would think of them. They knew the music kicking around inside them would be enough to lead them to their proper destiny, and they weren't ashamed, even before any of their art showed itself to the world, to shape their lives around that certainty. They were brave, blessed, unquestioning of their own worth—the opposite of me—but everything I told myself, with hard work and with a bit of luck, I could become.

"What are you doing?" Sometimes my mother came into my room in the middle of these moments, frowning with familiar worry when she found me curled on the rug next to my black boom box. "Are you reading something? Drawing a picture?"

"I'm *listening*," I answered, clicking Pause on the tape player.

She nodded slightly, trying to make sense of the information as she glanced around at the room with its wooden bunk bed and narrow desk and yellow shag carpet. "But what are you *doing*?"

Before coming to America, my mom had looked after her father and brothers and stepmother in Nazareth, doing the washing and cooking while working as an elementary school teacher. She was beloved in our neighborhood and town, known for her baklava and the abundant meals she cooked whenever friends dropped in. She could whip together a rich pan of lasagna or a platter of *kibbi* in the time I might take to finish part of my math homework. She was always in motion, chopping or cooking or vacuuming or making bread for a neighbor. She could not fathom, as she saw it, sitting and doing nothing.

I wasn't doing nothing, I tried again to explain, annoyed yet brimming with unspoken triumph: She could not read the codes I was receiving from the music.

We had skirted this territory before. During my Michael J. Fox phase, I returned home from school one day to find that my

mom had taken down all my posters after discovering on my desk an outraged, unmailed letter I'd written to a teen magazine defending the actor's breakup with Nancy McKeon. She had laid the posters and pin-ups in a neat stack on my bed, not having the heart to throw them out. "You're obsessed," she insisted, more apologetic than angry when I came to her in a tearful rage. She let the matter go after she saw that I was less incensed about the missing posters than I was at the sight of my walls stripped bare. Once we had calmed down, and she saw that I wasn't about to flee to Los Angeles to stalk the set of *Family Ties*, she agreed to let me hang most of them back up.

Music at least made more sense to her than celebrity gossip. Yet even on days when she gave up and left me to my tapes and my boom box, a faint apprehension lingered in the air behind her. It was unhealthy for me, I could feel her thinking, to spend so much time alone in my room, dreaming of rock stars I would never meet. My mother was more at home in the here and now than anyone I'd ever met: Everyday life, with the demands and delights of family and work, visits of friends and neighbors, offered a constant stream of new discoveries and purposeful activity. She was not given to obsessions or to imagining other lives or to ruminating over album covers. "Do you really need those?" she would ask when I returned home from the local flea market with another frayed vintage magazine or mildewing Beatles solo record.

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But I would have taken a thousand such interventions from my mom in place of one from my dad.

"No more distractions!" he ordered one afternoon a few months before news of the concert arrived, sweeping the propped-up Beatles photos off my desk as I did my homework. He was in the thick of some new conflict over my brother's erratic report card and had imposed new laws on the house. I wanted to tell him that the pictures weren't distractions—that the presence of John, Paul, George, and Ringo gave me confidence to work through the thicket of math equations—but I

knew before I spoke how silly it would sound. When he was a year older than I was, my dad had left his home in Nazareth to attend a British Mandate school in Jerusalem, one of a handful of Arab boys selected for this track. In the years after Israel was established, he had tried without success to build a life under the martial law imposed on Arabs in the country. He had come to America in the early 1950s, during the height of McCarthyism, and had worked quietly and diligently on his master's degree, then his doctorate, then his career as a professor. I doubted he had ever needed photos of his favorite singers to help him do his homework.

My dad didn't often enter my room, but the rare moments when he did, I felt a warm wash of embarrassment as he surveyed my posters and stacked biographies and cassette cases. In my father's presence I often felt as though I were failing some test I hadn't known to study for. My adolescent preoccupations seemed to him just that—adolescent, beneath the dignified, worthy affairs of the world one should pursue: reading Milton, earning high grades, working for admission to a prestigious college.

Down the hall, meanwhile, my brother brooded behind his door as Guns N' Roses shook his boom box. He was three years older than me and strode around in a leather jacket and raced cars with his friends and seemed able to shrug off the disapproval of anyone claiming to have a say in his life. I liked to imagine I understood the secret conversations he was having with his music. At parties, I danced and shouted along with everyone else to the soft metal anthems of Poison and Def Leppard, the Escape Club's "Wild, Wild West," the party songs of Run-DMC. I loved listening to Tom Petty and Mötley Crüe in my brother's black Chevy as we rumbled over the wooded back roads and farmland outside of town. In those moments, my brother's cigarette smoke trailing through the open windows, my hair whipping around my face, I felt us both set free. All of it belonged to us—the woods, the farms, the roads, the ponds. We were far from our parents' house, with all the talk of grades, the cautious adherence to order. We were content to be the people that the blasting music and rushing air told us we already were.

July crept on. The town lay still, emptied of college students. I babysat and worked at other small jobs and hung around the

town pool with my friends. Most of all, though, I argued with my parents. On errands to the store with my mother, on walks around the neighborhood, at idle moments when the two of us were drying dishes in the kitchen over the rattle of the news from the living room, I recited the essential points. Who knew when the Beatles would go on tour again? The surviving members were already nearing fifty. The stars had aligned exactly right for once. Besides, I told my mom as I wheeled our cart down the supermarket aisles, there were no stories coming out of these concerts of anyone handing out tabs of LSD or biting off the head of a bat. These were old musicians, straight-laced musicians, musicians with families and children. And this, I repeated to myself back in my room, was Ringo! The tamest Beatle of all. The one who didn't write the songs and who got saddled with country and rockabilly covers and couldn't really sing but who, for all those reasons, somehow made you feel all right about the world—as if he were there to remind you that you had a chance in life too.

"Please, *hayati*," my mother said, "we can't keep talking about it."

But I couldn't stop talking about it. A spigot had been opened. "I don't want any concerts!" my father repeated when I asked him again, and the contempt in his voice, the easy dismissiveness, stung almost as much as the answer itself.

At the dinner table, I smoldered in silence as my dad spoke of history or politics or memories from his teenage years in British Mandate school. In years past, I hadn't minded hearing my father's old stories from his youth in 1940s Palestine. Now, however, these anecdotes seemed meant to spite me: They sprang from an era far removed from anything I knew, from a world that no longer existed. *I don't understand anything about you*, whispered some note in them that only I could hear, *and I'm not interested in understanding.*

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," he ordered one night.

"You're not talking to me," I answered. "You're talking to yourself."

I froze in horror as soon as I spoke. At my elbow, my mother tensed. Across the table, my brother, an old hand at dinner table arguments, blinked at me in warning. My father's anger could erupt like a thunderstorm, knocking down everything in its path. I never feared any physical violence from him. What

I dreaded more than anything was his disgust—the verdict, familiar by now, that pulsed through his fury: There was something wrong with me. The feeling was like all the doors in the world shutting at once.

I don't remember the specific events of that night. We might have shouted, slammed doors, as we had on other nights. I might have sat in my room, as I had on other nights, while my father stomped and fumed about the house and my mother tried to calm him down and the familiar desolation swelled in my chest. I made people angry, I caused fights, I was a burden to everyone around me; it would have been better, probably, if I hadn't been born. My father had never made these accusations outright—and as I would see many years later, never even considered them. But back then, I heard them echoing in his permanent air of tense weariness, in the rage that could flare up even when I hadn't argued or said anything rude.

What I remember most clearly are rancid afternoons staring up at the walls of my room while my tapes played. I was waiting for some grand, shattering, dramatic act to reveal itself to me, but so far nothing had come. Alone, my door shut, I turned up my boom box and dissolved myself in the music. The guitars exploded on "Revolution," and Ringo thumped out a stripped-down, driving drum solo on "The End." The songs affirmed everything I wanted to say to my father but couldn't seem to deliver in words. I tried to study. I tried to be a good person, worthy of the life I'd been given. I cared about events in the Middle East too, even if I didn't talk about them all the time. It bothered me, just as it bothered him, when people at school made casual jokes about "Palestinian terrorists" or the *Achille Lauro* hijacking, or when movies I otherwise loved showed babbling, bazooka-toting Arab villains. It was impossible to feel anything else. The news from the Middle East was a constant pulse through our house, like reporting on a relative with a chronic illness: You lived with the persistent sense that something was awry in the world—but you got used to the hovering unease and to events taking place far out of your sight.

I was tuned into his world, then, whether I liked it or not; yet he, it seemed to me, refused to tune into mine. I couldn't tell how much my father needed music, or if he needed music at all—or if he even understood why other people did. My father loved the sheer abundance of life in America: the thriving

research centers and vast supermarkets, the orderly functioning of day-to-day life, the friendliness he'd found in people, the ability, to a point, to reinvent oneself. "*American* ends with *I can*," he always intoned when my brother and I protested that we couldn't finish a chore or do extra homework. But there was a side of American culture—my side—that he eyed with suspicion. I still remembered the dreadful evening a couple of years before when he'd come upon a fake teen magazine I'd made for an English class project out of construction paper and pasted photos and penciled-in captions. "You're wasting your mind!" he roared with outrage and hurt. To my father, you got on in the world by never ceasing to work, never relaxing your grip, never letting chaos intervene. Pop culture, youth culture in particular, promised exactly the opposite: a world of glorified chaos, where teens reveled in their fervent impulses and bad decisions, ignoring how much could go wrong.

I still tightened up sometimes when he walked into the living room while I was watching TV. I'd just passed through a period of watching sitcoms like *Growing Pains* and other shows where fathers joked easily with their kids and merely shook their heads in amusement at their children's antics. "He's being rude to his parents," my father once remarked in disgust when he walked in on an episode of *Mr. Belvedere*. The intensity of his revulsion surprised me—*Mr. Belvedere* didn't tend to arouse strong emotion, even in me—but he may have picked up on a fact neither of us would ever say out loud: In some part of me, I admired these fathers, these ideal American dads, and might sometimes have preferred them.

Still, there were blessed periods when the demands of school and work slipped away, and my father's warmth emerged as if only waiting for a break in the weather. My dad had taught me to love Keats and other poets; the two of us sometimes read aloud together from a book of verse he had kept since his teenage years, delighting in the words as they took flight through our broad-windowed living room. In his study downstairs, amid his framed diplomas and old paintings of Nazareth, he still kept a collection of drawings my brother and I had made in nursery and elementary school. His graduate students adored him and often spoke of his empathy, his sense of justice and fairness—even if, I thought to myself, our house didn't exactly run on the same principles. At times, when the two of us were chatting in

the car about a book we both loved or setting up the charcoal grill in our sloping backyard, a fragile contentment would come over me. I was acutely aware that we were in a moment of calm and happiness—that, however elusive, this was our true life together—and I should hold on to as much of it as I could.

But that summer, as my tapes played louder, I spun vivid fantasies of getting to the concert by a series of increasingly daring means. I would lie to my parents about sleeping at a friend's house and then arrange a ride to the Kingston Fairgrounds. I would convince my brother to concoct an alibi and drive me there. I would secretly borrow money from my friends for the forty-minute taxi ride, or I would sneak out and hitchhike on the highway. But breaking the rules was my brother's territory, not mine. As the days went on and I filled up the pages of my diary, I realized I had no idea how to rebel—not in any way that counted. It was as though I lacked the basic chemistry for it, or the fear of punishment had scared the necessary will out of me, despite my furious journal entries and peace-sign T-shirts and half-finished protest songs. So much for being a hippie.

Every deserted stretch of pavement I passed on my aimless walks downtown, every shop on Main Street that closed by dinnertime, every gas station sinking in the heat confirmed the message: I was trapped. A portal had briefly opened to the world I hoped to join, and now it had closed again. There was only New Hampshire, the blistering summer, the slothful surrounding towns with dirt roads and lonely shopping plazas, and the low-slung brick high school at the bottom of the hill. At times that turned me queasy with shame, I found myself believing that my parents were somehow to blame for failing to have been born here. If they hadn't grown up across the world in a place I'd never seen—if they hadn't spent the sixties trying to arrange and settle their lives in America—they would know why I sat in my room listening and listening, why I played guitar and read Beatles biographies, and why it wasn't enough to have the tape.

I was trapped. A portal had briefly opened to the world I hoped to join, and now it had closed again.

"You're full of anger," my mother finally snapped in the

darkness of a movie theater one afternoon in early August. The two of us had driven a few towns over to escape the listless heat of the house. The auditorium was nearly empty, the feature hadn't yet begun, and I was crying quietly in my chair as we wound up yet another argument about Ringo Starr. The show was a week away, and I was still trying to change the inevitable. I no longer remember what movie we had gone to see—maybe some fast-dissolving summer comedy starring Dan Aykroyd or Tony Danza that my mother was only enduring for my sake. She had bought us popcorn as an extra treat. Nothing was working.

She was bewildered, exhausted. "What's the matter?" she said. "What's happening to you?"

I didn't know, and that was the problem. I felt sure, though, that she at least should have some clue if I didn't, that one of us should understand. It was a warped conclusion that only compounded my misery as I sulked in the dim theater, aware that I was acting like a brat. I knew I was disappointing my mother and all her careful efforts to ensure peace in our house. I was adding to the store of daily tensions. I was stuck in this place, in myself. I didn't know how to tell her any of that, and so I sat and seethed and said nothing.

A few days later, my mother called me into the kitchen. She and my father were drinking Turkish coffee at the table in their old blue demitasse cups.

"All right. Here is the agreement." She glanced at my father. "If tickets are left," she said, "your father will take you."

I must have embraced them. I probably burst out crying. Somewhere in my mind, I might have also felt a twinge of embarrassment—I didn't usually get what I wanted through relentless wailing and pleading—but I was too caught up in the tumble of emotions to care: joy, relief, and more than those things, a sense that I had been rescued from some long and undefined exile. At the table, my parents sipped their coffee through their own haze of exhausted relief. I could not fathom what had gone on in the last few days, what calculations they had made, how my mother had managed to convince my dad. Maybe it was the fact that this was, after all, Ringo Starr and not Guns N' Roses or some other band with big hair and chest tattoos. Maybe, in her practical way, she had weighed the question in the balance

and decided that worse things were happening in the world than a battle over one night's outing.

From his side of the table, my dad was smiling—happy, at least, to have achieved a measure of peace again and readying for his duty to supervise the event. I didn't ask why he, and not my mother, would be taking me. I was already picking out my outfit in my mind—jeans and a red-and-orange block print shirt that a true hippie might wear with pride—imagining, also, what it would be like to breathe the same air as Ringo for one night. The facts were presented as fixed, unnavigable: If I hoped to go, then we would go on my father's terms. He would steer us through the crowds and lights and blasting music and make sure nothing untoward happened.

As the evening approached, I tried to brush aside the questions that threatened to cloud my happiness. Would he run out of patience and make us go home early? Would we get into one of our nonsensical fights over my tone of voice or one of us snapping at the other? Would this event be ruined, as some of our rare outings or family vacations had been before?

The night of the concert, two massive searchlights wavered over the field and surrounding highway, as if to announce, even before we pulled into the dirt parking lot, that something far out of the ordinary was taking place here. Crowds milled about the grounds with an air of bright urgency, clogging the merchandise tables and snack stands. The fairground smelled of damp earth and hay, the sweet whiff of alcohol and smoke. Our late-acquired seats lay in the outermost block of folding chairs, but we were close enough to make out the rippling outlines of the curtain on the half-lit outdoor stage—and close enough, when the spotlights snapped on, to recognize the short, ponytailed man jumping around the stage in sunglasses and a shiny purple jacket.

"What's my name?" he shouted, as if to settle the question.

"Ringo!" we all shouted back.

I was too exhilarated, too much in disbelief that we had actually made it here, to summon the embarrassment required of all middle schoolers spotted at rock concerts with their dads. It didn't cross my mind that most people attending a Ringo Starr concert wouldn't feel particularly troubled by questions of coolness. Judging from the paunches and receding hairlines in the

audience, most of the crowd had been born sometime in the middle of the decades separating me and my father. But none of that mattered: Everyone seemed ready to make themselves young that night, lamenting time gone by or denying it ever had. When the first song came on, a solo hit of Ringo's that I recognized, the spectators near us swayed demurely in their chairs. A few danced in the aisles, and I might have imagined them spinning back into their previous bodies, believing for a moment they were sixteen or eighteen or twenty again. I stole periodic glances at my father to make sure I didn't appear too ridiculous as I muttered along with the lyrics. Normally, I was mortified to even watch other people dance in front of my dad—it felt like they were unwittingly exposing some piece of flesh they had meant to keep covered up, setting themselves up for some shared indignity.

But my dad was merely nodding along for the moment. So far, no one in the tame crowd had started pushing, no drunken fights had broken out, nobody had approached us selling bags of pot or PCP. The night was still early, and his vigilance lingered like the quick-darting mosquitoes around us, but for the first time I felt the possibility that it might lighten. When the opening note of "Yellow Submarine" sounded, I stopped caring how I looked. I rose to my feet, swaying with the others, as he continued nodding in his seat. The downbeat, the spare and steady thump of the drum—I knew this rhythm as well as I knew my own breath. I was hearing a Beatles song live. Ringo's voice was reassuringly off-key, just like on the tape. I sang along to every word and anticipated every pause, shouted "sky of blue" and "sea of green" with the spectators in my row in the call-and-answer section. In my own way, I was traveling back in time with them. Two years had passed since I'd discovered the Beatles, but it seemed to me much longer. I would soon be in high school, speeding further and further away from the familiar joys and constraints of childhood. What else would

The downbeat, the spare and steady thump of the drum—I knew this rhythm as well as I knew my own breath. I was hearing a Beatles song live.

I know about the world in another two years? Who would I become?

The summer air had not yet given way to the chill that soured the end of every August in New Hampshire. On stage, Ringo joked with the audience and waved his arms over his head and pulled endearingly awkward dance moves. The members of his All-Starr Band took turns chiming in on their own numbers: Clarence Clemons from the E Street Band tilted his gold saxophone toward the sky, Billy Preston played the rippling electric piano I recognized from his work with the Beatles on "Get Back," Levon Helm from the Band sang a plaintive version of "The Weight." I knew from my long Beatles education that they had all in some way left a mark on the history of rock. Joe Walsh from the Eagles sang a solo hit. Dr. John danced around to "Iko Iko" and played shivering piano solos. Billy Preston spun up and down the keyboard on "Will It Go Round in Circles." The fairground was vibrating with sound, and as the sun disappeared and the dim hanging lights enclosed the field, the music seemed to fill up the world. *Forget about your work,* it said. *Forget about school. Forget about everything you've ever done wrong, and come to the party.*

Beside me, my father was watching the audience and stage with the amiable curiosity of a social scientist performing fieldwork. As the first act unfolded, he seemed to take in something of the lights and noise and stubborn summer breeze. He was clapping along gamely, if slightly out of rhythm, the camera he used to document every family event dangling from the strap around his neck. I wondered if, like me, he was stealing the chance to escape into the sound and spectacle, and if so, where he was traveling right now. I knew only scattered pieces from his early years in America: the happy summer working as a counselor at a YMCA camp, the eccentric roommates in Ann Arbor and Baltimore, the butcher in Boston who had taught him how to cook a good steak. Every so often, a colorful Christmas card would turn up in the mail from one of his early friends from graduate school. The fifteen years between when he'd arrived in the country and when he'd married my mother remained a blank spot in my imagination. The picture I had gleaned was one of occasional joy, of relief, of possible hardship. "It was a lonely time for him," my uncle, who had

followed him to the States later, had told me once, but that was all I knew.

In truth, I couldn't tell what my dad was thinking at this moment, any better than I could tell at any other time. For all I knew, he might have been planning out the next day's work or remembering some curious new detail from one of his well-thumbed British or Roman history books.

But it didn't matter. At the intermission, the music was still ringing through me. As the other spectators circled around the porta potties and concession stands, I let myself ask if we might walk up to look at the empty stage. Suddenly anything seemed possible, and the idea of viewing the broad, elevated stage up close, the instruments and strung lights and multi-colored backdrop, had taken me over.

My father, his agreeable mood holding, wavered, and then surprised us both when he shrugged: *Why not?*

Along the stage, more microphones than I had ever seen stood in an orderly tangle—like trees, I thought, in some enchanted metallic forest. The blue intermission lamps threw a soft glow over the electric guitars gleaming in their stands, the barricade of amplifiers, the sleek black grand piano, the three enormous drum kits. I stood for a long moment and let myself take it all in. If I had ever carried a detailed picture in my mind of how the world should look, this was it.

My father unbuckled his camera from its leather case and snapped a photo. It was a habit I usually found embarrassing, especially when I was in the picture, but I didn't protest this time. I couldn't pull away yet; some impulse was anchoring me to the spot. "Wouldn't it be fun," I said instead, as if the idea hadn't been brewing in me all night, "if when the concert starts again, we could maybe watch the first song from here, near the stage? Just the first song," I said, "and then we can go back to our seats."

My father paused and weighed the question. The two of us hadn't argued even once. He didn't seem eager to start now. Always careful to follow the rules, he located a guard at the side of the stage and outlined our request. "My daughter and I would be very grateful," he said.

The guard, a middle-aged man with a dark brown mustache and biceps that bulged under his white T-shirt marked "Security," gazed between my father and me for a long moment. He seemed to make some slow calculation, then nodded.

"I can do better than that," he said. "I can take you backstage."

It wasn't backstage, exactly—rather, the outdoor path the musicians had to cross as they exited the backstage trailer and climbed onto the main stage. But the difference meant nothing to me.

I watched in restless silence as the other musicians bounded out of the trailer and past the rope barrier where I stood. Joe Walsh—whose proximity to me, I knew, would later impress my brother—Clarence Clemons, Levon Helm, Dr. John, and all the rest of them. I was never one to scream at concerts or dances or parties—the behavior struck me as an unforgivably girlie affectation, and one that I would never be able to pull off anyway. But when Ringo finally whisked past me, as near to my physical orbit as any teacher or supermarket cashier or librarian or postal clerk in town had ever stood, I let go and cried out his name.

I'll never know if he heard me. It seemed important, suddenly, to make sure he did. It would mean I had pressed into a moment of his life and altered its shape, and therefore I would exist forever somewhere in his experience. Some small but unbreakable connection would extend between us. So I screamed his name again.

Maybe he turned in my direction as he reached the steps, or maybe not; that's one more thing I'll never know. But the next moment, I no longer cared. I was short of breath. My heart was pounding. This night was enough. Some deep, long-running uncertainty had been settled. I embraced my father and then, without thinking, the security guard, and we all looked away before the stage lights went down again.

Later, back in our assigned seats in the far field, my father and I watched the end of the show. Ringo and the band were running through a string of his solo songs and the members' old hits. My father was smiling as if he'd pulled off a feat bordering on magic, like cracking a safe or shifting the weather. I was already silently wording the story I would tell my brother and friends about this night—emphasizing how close Ringo had stood to me, and shading in a few embellishments that weren't strictly true but that half of me already believed.

By the time the encore arrived, "With a Little Help from My Friends," everyone in the audience had climbed up onto their rickety plastic folding chairs. My father and I had done

the same—there was no other way to see the stage—my father navigating his way up slowly to spare his creaky back. I sang along to the chorus, half wondering, as he probably was, if the flimsy seats would give way beneath our feet.

We stayed perched there as the band members traded extended solos and the song wound toward its end. I knew that our balancing here was a small detail that would mean nothing to anyone besides my mother and brother. A lot of fathers probably stood up on chairs at concerts—or at least it was conceivable they had in their youth—and such acts were the well-worn territory of sitcom dads who learned, through their children's grace, to embrace their long-lost spontaneity. What I would remember was knowing my father was only standing up because I was, and that if I sat down, he would sit down too.

In a few weeks, school would begin, the weather would cool, and we would disappear inside an accelerated routine of classes, work, holidays, my brother's college applications. Life would return to what it had been. My mother would continue to worry that I spent too much time alone in my room. My father would still grow wary or irritated when I read too many Beatles books or watched too much TV. We would still argue and apologize and make the most of our moments of warmth and contentment. High school would pass faster than I could ever guess, I would leave for college, and I would never live at home again apart from summers and visits. I would come to love other artists and other music and make some music of my own, though for a while I would compare every new singer or band to the Beatles. My parents would grow older. My mother would still whisk about the house, only now with slowly graying hair. My father's hearing would falter and then nearly disappear; his manner would relax and lighten as he moved toward retirement and relinquished the burdens of steering his children through the world. I would wear for many more years than was dignified the gaudy, star-covered T-shirt I had bought at the Ringo Starr concert.

Across the field, the three drum kits rumbled, the band chanted the chorus again.

"What's my name?" Ringo shouted.

"Ringo!" we shouted back.

Beside me, my father carefully clapped along to the chorus, making sure not to jostle the camera around his neck. Even in

that moment of lightness, I sensed how unlikely it was that I would ever again stand up at a concert with my dad and sing along to a rock anthem. How little of him I knew, how much of him would remain out of reach. But how much of him was here right now, as we both balanced on our chairs and watched the lights pulse and flicker on the distant stage.

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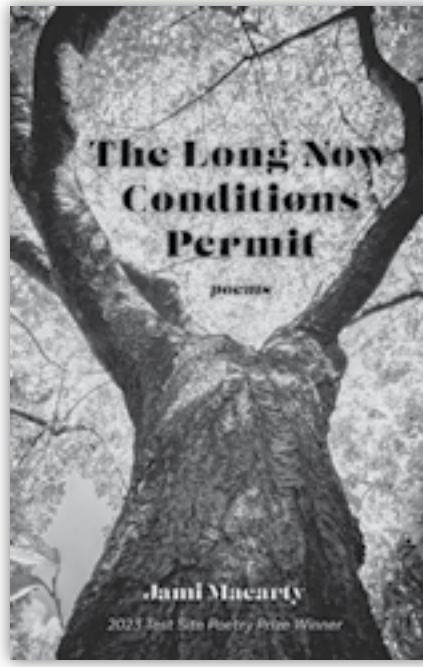
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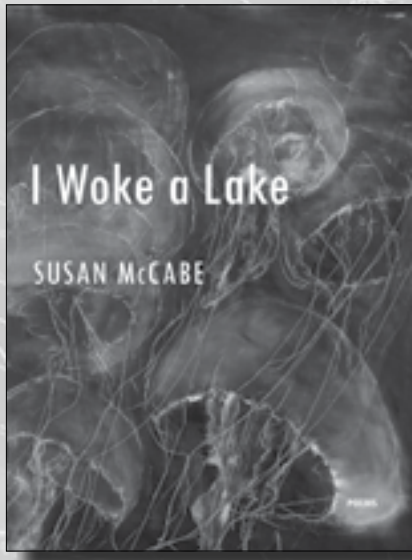
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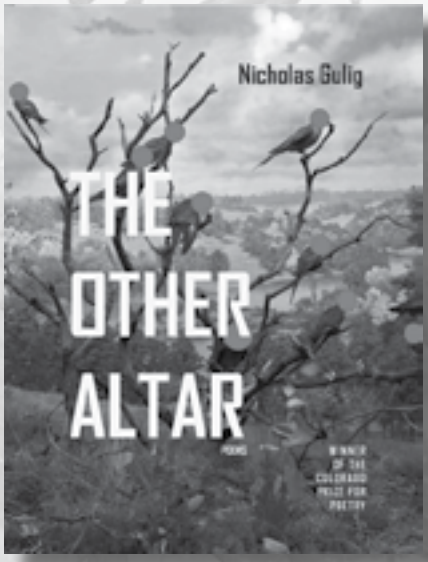
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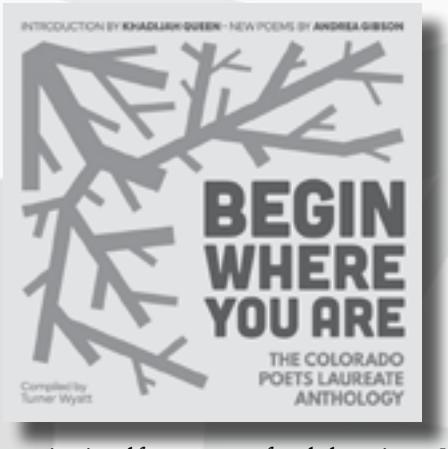
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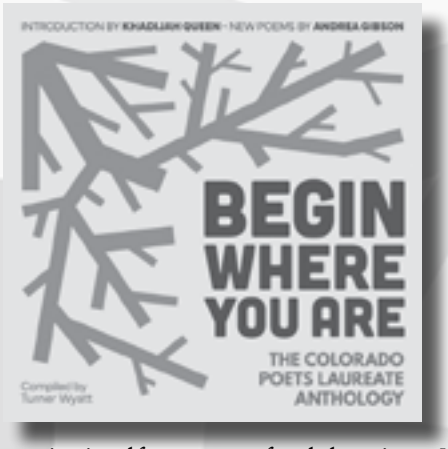
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