COLORADO REVIEW CR

53.2 • Summer 2026 $12.00



IN THIS ISSUE:

JOY CASTRO KENZIE ALLEN DAVID ROMPF AJ LEIGH
RENÉE BRANUM IRE'NE LARA SILVA JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY
YALIE SAWEDA KAMARA LANA REEVES ALEX MILLER DONIKA KELLY
ANGELA THARPE MALIA MAXWELL FATIMAH ASGHAR LAURA GROTHAUS
REYES RAMIREZ CAYLEE WEINTRAUB SARAH SOUTHERN LAURA VILLAREAL
BRITTNEY CORRIGAN TREVOR KETNER SUPRITHA RAJAN REBECCA MORTON

CR



CENTER FOR
LITERARY PUBLISHING
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

© 2026 by the Center for Literary Publishing. All rights reserved. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of the publisher. The views expressed in the stories, poems, essays, and reviews in this magazine are solely those of the authors.

Colorado Review is published three times a year
— in March, July & November —
by The Center for Literary Publishing
9105 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-9105
(970) 491-5449
creview@colostate.edu
coloradoreview.colostate.edu

Printed in the United States.

Indexed by *Humanities International Complete*.

Attention writers: Nonfiction submissions are read year-round; fiction and poetry submissions are welcome from August 1 to March 31. Submissions are received only via coloradoreview.submittable.com. Please check our website for complete guidelines.

Print subscriptions and copies (to US addresses only): $24/year, $45/two years, or $65/three years. Institutional subscriptions: $34/year. Single copy price to a US address: $12 (please indicate current or specific back issue). You may purchase print subscriptions and single copies on our website or by sending a check or money order to the address above.

Digital subscriptions and copies (to US or international addresses): $12/year, $20/two years, or $27/three years. Single digital-copy price: $5. You may purchase digital subscriptions and single copies on our website.

Subscription Services: W. T. Cox, EBSCO, Ex Libris, Harrassowitz, and Project MUSE.

ISSN: 1046-3348





COLORADO REVIEW

EDITOR IN CHIEF	*Stephanie G'Schwind*
FICTION EDITOR	*Jennifer Wortman*
FICTION EDITOR AT LARGE	*Steven Schwartz*
POETRY EDITORS	*Matthew Cooperman • Camille T. Dungy* *Donald Revell • Sasha Steensen • Felicia Zamora*
NONFICTION EDITORS	*Harrison Candelaria Fletcher • Stephanie G'Schwind*
BOOK REVIEW EDITORS	*Kristin George Bagdanov • Nicole VanderLinden*
MANAGING EDITOR	*Izzy Martens*
ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR	*Abi Nelson*
SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER	*Josephine Gawtry*
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS	*Charles Baxter • Dan Beachy-Quick • Robin Black* *Robert Boswell • Steven Church • Jorie Graham* *Michael Martone • Clint McCown • Antonya Nelson* *Alberto Ríos*
ASSOCIATE EDITORS	*Nick Botkin • Josephine Gawtry • Autumn Koors-Foltz* *Trent Kay Maverick • Kyle Mayl • Bel Mercado* *Abi Nelson • Andy Parker • Liz Ramirez* *Gwynnivere Riethoven • Natalia Sperry* *Sarah Stambaugh • Alaina Villoria*
EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS	*Aliza Anderson-Diepenbrock • Will Brooks* *Samuel Ellington • Mai Gokkaya • Calista LaMotte* *Tyra Lechner • Christopher Lyders • Meghan Newman* *Conrad Schaefer • Gabby Vermeire*
ADVISORY BOARD	*Ellen Brinks • Pattie Cowell • Kathy Hayes* *Deanna Ludwin • Neil Petrie • Bruce Ronda* *Steven Schwartz • William Tremblay • Felicia Zamora*

Friends of Colorado Review

DIRECTORS

RICHARD AIKEN • ROBERT BALDWIN

CATHERINE ACKERSON-BENDL

THE BENEVITY COMMUNITY IMPACT FUND

STEVEN BROMBY • JOHN CALDERAZZO & SUEELLEN CAMPBELL

SHERRY POMERING & PATTIE COWELL

KAEYLN RILEY & BEN FINDLAY • TIFFANY & MATTHEW FREEL

STEPHANIE & ARNE G'SCHWIND • STEVEN SCHWARTZ & EMILY HAMMOND

RYAN EVANS & CHELSEA HANSEN • THE RICHARD HENZE ESTATE

ROBERT & MAUREEN HOFFERT • TREVOR JACKSON • KIM KANKIEWICZ

EMILY SINCLAIR & JAY KENNEY • DENNIS & JULIE LACERTE

ELLEN LEVY • ERIC SUNG & SARAH LIN

GARY & DEANNA KERN LUDWIN • THERESA PAPPAS & MICHAEL MARTONE

NEIL PETRIE & JOANNAH MERRIMAN • PAUL & ANNETTE MILLER

ABBIE & JOHN MORRISON • ALEX & HILARY MORRISON

TANYA BEER & MATT MYERS • ALAN & BARBARA OLDS

DAN & LAURA RIEHLE-MERRILL • CHARLES & PATRICIA SMITH

LEIGH SOLO • BILL WEST

PATRONS

ROBIN BLACK • STEPHANIE & ZACHARY BROOKS

CAROL CIAVONNE • ANN & BOBBY DIAZ • DON DONAHUE

TOM & MEREDITH RIPA FARRELL • SUSAN HARNESS

KATHY HAYES • RUSSELL HOPKINS & NANCY KRAFT

JOHN & RACHEL NAWROCKI • DOUG PATMORE

SUE PENDELL • PAULA SILICI

DAVID & SUSAN THEIS • KEVIN WARD • ANDREW WEBSTER

SPONSORS

JANELLE ADSIT

GERALD DELAHUNTY & MARNA SHILLMAN

LINDA WOOLFORD

For information on becoming a Friend, write:
Colorado Review, Department of English
9105 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523
creview@colostate.edu

CONTENTS

	1	*Editors' Page*
FICTION	13	**RENÉE BRANUM** *The Drive Out*
	77	**JOY CASTRO** *A Word of Advice*
	90	**ALEX MILLER** *We Who Sleep in the Dust of the Earth*
	113	**CAYLEE WEINTRAUB** *Keepers*
NONFICTION	49	**DAVID ROMPF** *Pain Points*
	140	**SARAH SOUTHERN** *Resuscitated Fallow*
	164	**BRITTNEY CORRIGAN** *Dead Air*
POETRY	3	**KENZIE ALLEN** *Wildfire Summer* *Results from the Follicular Ultrasound* *Singing Solo in the Round* *Waiting* *Red*
	10	**IRE'NE LARA SILVA** *Tending My Brother's Grave* *They Run in My Veins*
	38	**ANGELA THARPE** *Onward & Up* *BOGO* *How Do I* *777*

45 **TREVOR KETNER**
goldfish (snack food)
a hubcap (gold)
no thoughts, head empty
goldenrod
65 **REYES RAMIREZ**
SCENARIO #100–999
SCENARIO #444–334
SCENARIO #722–103
69 **MALIA MAXWELL**
Footnotes
85 **JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY**
To the Sound of Saxman
Black Coffee
Por Siempre
Dulce
105 **FATIMAH ASGHAR**
[you]
129 **LAURA VILLAREAL**
Anthropocene Interlude: Pigeons
Pacific Chorus Frog
Anthropocene Interactions
We're Living in the Stupidest Part of History
135 **DONIKA KELLY**
What I Ask the Dream
Landscape with Tall Grasses
Grace in the River, Grace in the Bridge
148 **SUPRITHA RAJAN**
In the Languages of Rain
Malabar Daffodil Orchid
Villanelle: Migration Hour
157 **LANA REEVES**
Loophole
Other Lessons
In San Juan

170 **YALIE SAWEDA KAMARA**
In Vermont: Finding You, Finding Me.
"It Cries Out to Be Touched,"
176 **AJ LEIGH**
Persephone
177 **LAURA GROTHAUS**
Judas
Mother of Mercy's Guide to Abstinence Education
A History of Looking
Ecstasy of the Wasp
182 **REBECCA MORTON**
The Taxidermist
Rabbits Thread Through
I Look for Clown Inside the Winter Persimmon, Never
Clown Shakes Her Head, Not Everything, Rebecca.
Clown Speaks of the Wasp

188 *Contributor Notes*

EDITORS' PAGE

Caught up in the euphoria of first love and simultaneously wrestling with the push and pull between the secular and the spiritual, the teen narrator of Alex Miller's "We Who Sleep in the Dust of the Earth" describes a romantic encounter: "Desire transported us from the mortal realm to somewhere magical, where we were free to live and love without boundaries or interference, somewhere like the kingdom of God." In this issue's stories and essays, characters and writers are contending with the nature—physical and philosophical—of boundaries, barriers, and borders. In Renée Branum's "The Drive Out," a woman continually compelled to escape the confines of the city revisits a violent confrontation and reflects on the precarious boundary between witnessing and intervention. A young woman working with a captive dolphin plots to release her in Caylee Weintraub's "Keepers," a story that grapples with the enclosures imposed upon us—and those we impose upon ourselves—as well as the fraught relationship between the human and animal world: "I'd see myself reflected in her eyes and think, *That's me, there I am*." And in Joy Castro's "A Word of Advice," a woman observes, at an international dinner party, various barriers—language, class, and nationality—while considering the viability of her new marriage. In her essay "Resuscitated Fallow," Sarah Southern explores food heritages—in particular, Japanese soba-making—and the ways they move beyond geographic boundaries and are "borrowed, blurred, and blended" as "ingredients transcend borders." David Rompf's "Pain Points" contemplates how pain trespasses between mind and body as patients, doctors, and insurance companies occupy maddeningly separate territories. And Brittney Corrigan, in "Dead Air," suggests a way to permeate the wall between here and the afterlife (the ultimate border crossing): the recorded voices of the departed, in which "a pathway opens up between us: the dead and the living," one "impossible for death to scythe."

While border conflicts of all varieties continue to bedevil our species, there is one place of refuge we can always count on: art. Between the covers of this issue, we hope you'll find sanctuary in the fiction, nonfiction, and poetry we've gathered here for you. Welcome to the summer issue: Make yourself at home.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

I think about heat a lot. Rising temperatures. Summer's arrival earlier and earlier. My cheeks after reading the news. Unnatural cycles making me feel, as in Reyes Ramirez's poem—"i'm composed of crawfish boiling alive all day"—irritated at every unctuous encounter. I am snagged by Kenzie Allen's "I am absolutely absurd." Aren't we all *absurd* in the current moment? These poems make me want to reclaim the absurd, to wield absurdity as a mechanism to listen, to reimagine, to believe in a way of *moving with* collective sociopolitical, environmental, and existential grief.

I'm not sure what to do with all this heat and grief other than trust permeability. In this issue, the poets' visions collapse time, making past and future undeniably present. ire'ne lara silva writes, "when I am tending my brother's grave, I'm also tending / my own. these wildflowers are also for me." What we tend now, as a collective, matters. Jennifer Maritza McCauley writes, "The news seems to only know old blood and halved bodies." And yet jazz. And yet dulce in the teeth. These poets chart ways of moving *with*—with becoming, with the sensuous, with the mundane, with the more-than-human, with possibility.

Maybe we all need to be casting more spells, letting our magic parts out, to better break cruel cycles. After reading Angela Tharpe's poem, I walked around for days saying, "I curse you" to social media. "I curse you" to the news. "I curse you" to atrocious legislation. Curses until they became littler and littler, the very air melting them. In my absurd actions, I feel more connected. In the absurd, the quotidian sparks movement.

Fatimah Asghar writes:

> around us,
> nests of caterpillars cocooned
> chrysalises of their own becoming.
> like them, we were becoming.
> you & i, becoming.

Here, homecomings are possible, prayers to softness exist, and "if the angels are not concerned / with being pretty, then why / am i?" I find myself praying to the caterpillars before they cocoon, to softness, to round out my sharp parts. The angels are absurd, but so am I. Here I think of Donika Kelly: "And so: surrender." I surrender to the absurd as teacher, to softness as mentor. This connection keeps me moving with the heat. These poets know how to move, how to take us *with* them.

—FELICIA ZAMORA

KENZIE ALLEN

WILDFIRE SUMMER

Edge of the precipice. Valley filled with smoke.
And I, atop the hill, precarious. Roam the rock
like I belong to it. Stars blotted out. Sun red
and sore. Gray bruise on a map, billowed up and carried

over dells, dales, gullies, glens, over the rivers
across state lines, lines of being, the State
itself, the ground beneath, dredged mother—
pillow clutched to the mouth of Her, or pressed
from nose to collarbone, held for however long it takes.

What good, the witness? When it was my own
hands, too, my consumptive, my self-drowning.
I will drive back to the little for-granteds. I and my pen
improve no circumstance. Lung-slung, surrounded.
We make the bed. We slumber upon it.

KENZIE ALLEN

RESULTS FROM THE FOLLICULAR ULTRASOUND

Ambivalence is gone as soon as I find out
this is happening, something is happening,
I have a blazing star inside me and maybe

she'll tumble forth, set her own orbit,
trail cosmic across the sky like Skywoman
to plant medicines on this earth, heal

herself and whatever we thought was lost.
Or she'll perish the way of others,
not even yet she, not even yet

more than a cell, or the beginning of a cell.

But we're going ahead with it, the next
procedure. Why not love the possibility?

All I am given is a series of numbers, potentials
measured in millimeters, the thickness of a wall

uterine, perhaps the dire signal
of a *characteristic string of pearls*—

possibly this goes
further south than I'd ever imagined.

Even if the numbers line up, the system falters.
I am no grand machine.

I wish someone had told me
when I was someone else's child,

it is so difficult to want.
Had I ever really *wanted*?

For aught by you, what continents
would I have
rewritten, remapped, remade.

KENZIE ALLEN

SINGING SOLO IN THE ROUND

Seasons pass. The smoke trees with their little starbursts, pink blooms full of seeds, turn brassy gold, dying, dead. Storms come and the air heavies, impending rain, soon, full-blown fall, and another wait and all my having waited makes every reddened leaf a hazard sign. Sure, there are flocks of sparrows popcorn-bouncing on the lawns, the breeze is cool as night waters slipping over your limbs, your almost-weightless, but all the nearby spots of color, the flower beds in lewd mosaics, make stranger hues in the overcast light. *What good am I and even for this*, little missives to the unknown crowd up as tumbleweeds cling to a fence, nuisance to untangle, might as well leave 'em 'til spring. We'll end *the natural route* soon, move on to petri dishes, assisted implantation—though they still call it *harvesting*, what they'll do to my body. All I have left is ache. I walk the block ceaselessly in my long black dress, anticipatory or maudlin or both.

And on the sunny days, the cicadas, whose song I've always favored, scream oppressive, pull focus—not nearly far enough. Shoulder singe, burnt tops of my feet; I am not meant to be out in this heat, but, drawn to light like overlarge Atlas moth, I am helpless to fury. Plants weep though dry of tears, the internal parade of uterine spasms has already begun. One day to the next, like the rains, the buzzing drone to wet silence, hope shifts, dies, revives, unrevives. I walk. Solitude, head to toe, seems to suit me. Today, a little red line beside the ghost of a red line, a white line of untriggered dye on a white background that will (may?) remain white-squared for all my days. What am I still doing, here? Lawns littered with brown and yellow; puffy clouds I begin to hate for their lightness; light and more light coursing through the trees. I am an edge piece, a clock missing gears, I am missing all I haven't known to look for, swan-shaped garden ornament nowhere near water and sans cygnets—I am absolutely absurd. God, would that I could

waddle, bun in burgeoning oven instead of walking through the oven feeling my cycle turn. My body, making room for nothing and ready only to do the same again.

I leave my black dress behind. What is there to mourn? I walk the block, again. Shade, done up in patches, is momentary, mostly—I carry even the cool, I am so warm. The ache, I'm told, could mean something else. I hate the possibility, how wind might alter lifeless course into breeze, bluster, gale. I round the block; go another round. Why not. There are still some remnants shriveled on the stem, fuchsia now gray, melon now rust, berry now old, dried blood. I turn the hourglass.

KENZIE ALLEN

WAITING

Back on my widow's walk,
the season's crawl a slow bruise,

I turn my face to the distance,
the absence, the great sea.

Clouds raise their silvery skirts,
reveal pale ankles of slanted light.

Nothing comes for me but midmorning,
midday, midnight. I am unwelcome

in this house I have built. Not alone,
I eat, alone, I wend my path lonely.

Well-off enough, the knotted wood
sturdy, well-placed, the miters true,

and a railing I won't soon unhinge
even trying, the creak and moan

a matter of salt and my return
and return, my wandering circle,

wicked spell, the maze I make
with my bare, cold feet.

KENZIE ALLEN

RED

What you were dreading comes in a flood of red,
and, again, you know yourself
to be unburdened, uninhabitable.

I return to the ghosts,
the carnival.
A bag of pomegranate seeds
with the corner cut off,
handfuls of rubies,
little red jewels spilling out.
I have awoken to winter.
A diadem of open sky
at the mouth of the well.

IRE'NE LARA SILVA

TENDING MY BROTHER'S GRAVE

my youngest brother only asked one thing of me.
after I'm gone, he said, sprinkle wildflower seeds
on my grave, he said, as if he'd take care of the rest.

he didn't ask me to bring him cut flowers,
though I did— all of his favorites: lilies and roses
and peonies and those spiky blue ones he loved.

he didn't ask me to bring his favorite foods
on the Day of the Dead, which was also his birthday,
but I took them, too, at every opportunity.

the fried mushrooms I cut in half and added ranch.
for the tortilla soup, I added all the toppings—avocado
and cheese and tortilla strips and pico de gallo.

my first birthday without him, I took a slice of
birthday cake and a bright red bouquet of balloons
I meant to release but they got snagged in the trees.

I don't know if I'm feeding coyotes or birds or ants
but I can't help but imagine the earth growing richer,
growing darker, every time I feed his grave.

the first time I sprinkled wildflower seeds there,
a three foot dandelion, fierce and thick stemmed,
grew straight from where his heart lay.

I visited early this spring and it must have
looked like I was dancing as I sent more than
a pound of seeds in every direction.

I don't know if anyone will come visit his grave
after I'm gone. I don't know if anyone will ever
visit my grave—the one that waits next to his.

and so, this latest visit, it came to me that when I
am tending my brother's grave, I'm also tending
my own. these wildflowers are also for me.

IRE'NE LARA SILVA

THEY RUN IN MY VEINS

the coyotes are calling me the coyotes are in my blood
they run in my veins with the wolves howling and
howling my mother said i sang before i spoke
was i singing or was i howling no one knows how
difficult it is to shape my mouth to speak words

the
coyotes and the wolves all whined when i told them i
wouldn't be running with them this month that i had to
stay in the city that i didn't know how many more
moons it would be before i could shed my human face
and run

no one had to tell me what to do with the
fury in my veins even when i was a child
listening to the coyotes every night i knew my
place was with them moving in and out of the shadows
of trees an inchoate thing

but i wasn't free
not then not for many years and so i learned to
carry the wilderness and the night and the trees and the
howling inside me to shape my limbs my breath
my hands to shape my spirit to this work

giving
voice and language shape and color to inchoate
things furious visions furious language furious
breathing furious creating what other life could
there be for me with this animal heart
this animal blood

RENÉE BRANUM

THE DRIVE OUT

One thing I was always able to count on, which never seemed to go away, was the long drive out from town—a breakneck plunge between trees and sudden fields opening outward with the road all naked between, like a strip of flesh you weren't meant to see.

When I lived, for a time, in Iowa, I used to drive straight north from Iowa City. The road, at first, was straight as a lightning rod, a stiff dark line on a map like something made with a ruler. But then, the farther out you went, the road would curve inward on itself, like a dog trying to lick its back end, and you'd get, so easily, this lazy feeling of not really going anywhere.

Mostly, it was nice.

I knew a spot for swimming out there. A piece of river where the current slackened and the water went wide, like a yawn. I'd float and watch bits of driftwood try to outrun me. I'd let the current carry me down a ways and then swim upstream as if my life depended on it, until my limbs went all gooey and tired. Then I'd let my body go quiet, and the current would take me down until I'd start to feel my muscles waking up again, and then I'd go back to swimming like hell. I'd bunch my body up like a frog and spring forward into the press of water. And so it went. It was heaven. It must've looked pretty crazy to someone watching from the shore. But usually there was no one.

Afterward, I'd dry my bathing suit by rolling it up in the crack of the driver's-side window and letting it flap along beside me while I drove. It was like a very small flag. I watched people coming toward me on the road try to figure out what the heck it was, this green polka-dot banner, their eyes squinty and puzzled. I loved seeing it rise in their eyes: this little mystery they wanted to solve.

But I knew it was no sort of good deed, any of it: the driving, the swimming wild against the current, the swimsuit snapping against the window. I never pretended it did anyone any real good. Maybe me, I suppose. Maybe it's what kept me from do-

ing some stupid, reckless, ugly thing. Maybe, looking back, it was the only real sanity I had.

After my swim, I'd drive out a little farther to this old railway bridge that spanned the river. The trains didn't cross that way anymore, so you could walk across the bridge, one end to the other, without any real sense of danger. The bridge was the color of rust, and if you caught it during the right shade of sunset, then the arch and girders and abutments and beams and cantilevers would all come alive and start to glow pink. Like *real* pink. Like some kind of underwater coral getting woken up by a slant of sunlight hitting it just right. I always tried to get there for that, but I wouldn't make a big deal about it if I missed it. I once heard a local call it "the Pinking." It was a thing.

At one end of the bridge there was a tavern with metal siding and a rusted roof that was more or less the same color as the bridge but would never get the sunset glow in quite the same way. It was somehow immune. Inside, there was a refrigerator from the '60s that was packed full of only two types of beer. There was a huge-gutted man who played an accordion and a teenage boy who shook a tin can full of rocks, and that was music. They served food on little paper trays, and no matter what you ordered—catfish or chili dog or fried egg sandwich or corn fritters—it all tasted the same. It tasted like the inside of a very old oven. It tasted maybe even a little bit haunted, as if it had been cooked up by ghosts who couldn't quite remember what, in life, food used to taste like.

The food was definitely bad, but it was so cheap that it almost didn't matter, and if you waited around after dinner hour, the cook would sometimes just set plates of things out for anyone to take but that mostly everyone ignored, like stale bread left for unhungry birds.

I used to take boys out there. I mean: men. I mean: whoever I was sleeping with at the time, or thinking about sleeping with. We could never seem to properly woo each other when we were back in town. It felt like we were a pair of puppets waiting for someone's hand to bring us to life, shake us out. But driving together seemed to erase all that. And moving side-by-side through a world of green with our seatbelts clacking free beside us, it was like singing, like figuring out a private little song that only we could've conjured.

It was a kind of test, seeing how it might strike them: the two types of beer, the shitty food, the kid with the tin can full of rocks, the Pinking. I'd watch the shapes these men made out on the bridge, dropping things into the water below, bending toward me—all shoulders, all beard—and I'd try to guess what it was that set them apart.

One of them—it was strange—I'd taken him swimming at my swimming spot, and after we were done, I'd wriggled out of my suit behind some foliage and wrung it out sopping. He was there waiting beside the car, standing up very straight with his hands folded in front of him like a funeral attendant. Or maybe like a priest. Getting in, I'd planned to chuck the wet suit into the backseat because I feared the window-dry method, the flapping, would strike him as a little bit much, a little reckless and messy and strange. But he took the suit from me, cradled it reverently like a drowned bird. Then he said, "I know a trick," and rolled the suit up in the passenger-side window and let it flap there while I drove us out to the pink bridge.

And pretty much anyone could tell me: **That's not enough to love someone.** *And they'd be right.*

That seemed like a good sign. At the bar, he nodded his head in time with the can of rocks. He ate up a corn dog of significant size, every bite, and then said afterward, "It tastes like a cast-iron skillet that hasn't been washed in centuries." He chewed some more, thoughtful. "It tastes"—he paused, looking for the word—"historical."

"Correct," I said, almost beaming at him, and he looked at me, surprised, not knowing there were right or wrong answers.

And pretty much anyone could tell me: *That's not enough to love someone*. And they'd be right.

But when it came time for the Pinking, a shadow moved to cover the sun and everything went metallic and still. The birds held their breath and then tossed themselves down from high branches like boys on diving boards showing off. Nothing was pink. Even the rust looked gray. And the guy said, "Oh well." He said, "We'll have to come back another time."

And so, the next time, I showed him how to swim against

the current, and he looked good doing it—breaststroking and butterflying, his arms pinwheeling and throwing spray up into the air like a whale breathing out. He rose up and sank back, all sinew. Afterward, he offered me a pair of clean boxers to wear beneath my purple dress because I'd forgotten to bring a change of underwear and my suit was still not dry when we got to the bridge. I left it drying in the sun on the dashboard while we walked out to the middle of the bridge for the Pinking. He held me and breathed into my hair. "What type of underwear you got on?" he purred with mock sultriness. He asked me to pull up the hem of my dress to show him a little strip of plaid fabric against my thigh. I guess it gave him a thrill that I was wearing his boxers, like he was suddenly seeing them in a whole new light: against my skin that way. He got so caught up in the thrill of it that he very nearly missed the Pinking entirely.

The sun went to work on the bridge, and we blinked, and it was over. Down below on the water, sitting still like a lily pad, there was a little boat with two people in it: a man of late middle age with a yellow baseball cap and a beard so thick it took over his face, like a lawn in need of mowing. Sitting in front of him, a girl of maybe fourteen, limber and leaning back on the heels of her hands, looked up at us with her face open and round and sad as an empty plate. She wore a T-shirt that she'd snipped short with scissors so it showed a strip of slim stomach that seemed to hold onto the pink of the sky, the bridge, even long after the sunset had burned itself out. We looked down at them. It was just the two of us on the bridge, and they looked up at us, as if expecting we'd drop something down to them—a pack of cigarettes, a rope, or I don't know what.

The man's face was loose, slack, his eyes like dead coals, and he was plainly drunk.

"I know what you're thinking," he slurred up to us.

How could he know? I wondered, feeling a chill. *How could he possibly know?*

"I know you're thinking: What's a pretty young thing like that doing with an old fuck like him?"

It hadn't been what I was thinking, but I guess it should've been.

"I'll put your dirty minds at ease, though," he yelled up. He yelled for all to hear. "She's my daughter," he concluded, giving the news a kind of gentle flourish, as if it were the punchline

to a subtle, unexpected joke. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?" he said, leaning forward to breathe against her stringy orange hair.

Then the girl laughed. She opened her mouth and laughed right up at us. Two little cold, strained, and fearful notes: "ha" and "ha." Then, "That's right," she said, nodding, her voice flattening into something cruel. "I'm his daughter."

The girl's hair, her cheeks and forehead, were almost the color of sherbet, but maybe that too was a trick of the light. The boat passed beneath the bridge, then seemed to pause there in shadow. I held my breath, as if expecting something unfathomable and hideous to appear. Then, coming out the other side, we saw that the man had draped himself over the back and shoulders of the girl like a cape that had been fashioned from a dead bear.

The current seemed to pick up, the boat already getting smaller. And, right before the river turned and a curtain of low branches erased them, I thought I could see the man gather the girl's limp hair in his huge drunk hands and clumsily start weaving the strands into some kind of braid. He looked like a gorilla trying—with its whole mind and body—to do its very best.

The guy and I leaned against the railing of the bridge. We couldn't seem to look at each other. We couldn't seem to get back to ourselves. We thought that, surely, there was something we were meant to do or say, but we didn't know what. We didn't know what exactly it was we'd seen. I could feel the guy's boxers itching against my leg, and I scratched and tugged and wanted to be rid of them.

"Well, that was weird," the guy said, shaking his head.

He was right, it *was* weird: We looked around as if some nearby presence could tell us how to respond.

"Do you think she was all right?" I asked, or maybe he was the one to ask, to speak it out loud.

"Wouldn't she say if she wasn't?" one of us said back.

We shook our heads, loosening the water in our ears from our recent swim. I longed for the precision of that earlier time, when he'd proved that he could tell me, so exactly, what things tasted like. I longed for that version of him, now impossibly distant. And then we turned away, from all of it, and went back to the car.

It had colored us, though, that little scene, like a permanent dusk covering the bridge all over in that Pepto-Bismol veil. The drive home seemed long. After we got back, we couldn't seem to remember how to touch each other.

It's been five years since then, and I live in a different city now, a different state. I had to learn new ways to leave this city. I tried driving north, out of habit, but up there the city stretches out its arms like a goalie, and I'd end up in some strip mall parking lot, biting my nails and spitting them out the window, before driving back home in heavy traffic.

East. I finally figured out after months of doing it wrong: east along the Ohio River is the way to go. The river unspools just beyond your right shoulder like the backdrop of a school play. There's steam from some invisible factory that rises up behind the trees in choking white billows. You'd think, looking, that this is how clouds are made. There are huge barges, red and black and gray and green, that push up against the current just like I used to back in my Iowa days. There are towering T-shaped cranes that hold out their arms like a man about to dive, stuck all over with lights after nightfall like dust from crushed-up diamonds.

And out there, you can see blue herons standing at the road's edge and lifting a single spindly leg from a water-filled ditch as if about to walk out onto a stage. You can sometimes see—a rare sight—owls in fields with their almost-human faces swiveling toward you in such a naked way that it makes you want to tally up all your sins.

You go far enough, and the road narrows until you're hurtling straight through a corridor of green. You feel swallowed, held, like a bug inside a pair of cupped hands, a firefly maybe, learning the hollow, mounded shape of this new soft-walled cave, the springy flesh beneath little insect feet.

These days, my car shudders and reels when I turn on the air conditioning, so I keep it off. I let the air whip in and do clumsy things to my hair, like the man in the boat trying to drunkenly work that little girl's mane into a braid.

I do still think about them, about that girl. I picture the dusk lowering a path toward her like the arm of a drawbridge. I think of her years later propping her feet up against a porch rail to

paint her toenails and telling her best friend, "Well, thank god I got out of that fucking boat."

On one of my eastward drives, I found a lake out there. It's not a secret lake—a lot of people go there, bringing their dogs and families and radios and charcoal grills and kites and elaborate pool toys shaped like frosted donuts or dragons or ducklings or submarines—but the lakefront is so huge it doesn't ever feel crowded. There's a little shriveled-up tree near the water that looks like something out of the Bible, and I lie down under it with an arm thrown over my eyes until the heat and the smell of the lake water get to be too much to ignore, and then I charge out into it like I'm leading troops into battle.

> *I tell myself over and over:* **Nothing is missing, nothing is missing, nothing is missing.**

Here's how I swim these days: I sidestroke straight out toward the center of the lake, but very slowly, like I'm tiptoeing through the water. I move like a squid. Then when I'm far enough out, I roll over onto my back with every part of me underwater except just my eyes and nose and mouth, and I listen to my blood moving in me, the swish and pulse of it.

It is still my only sane thing.

Lying there in the water, I convince myself that this will be enough to sustain me, to keep the fear away. I tell myself over and over: *Nothing is missing, nothing is missing, nothing is missing.* And right then, with the water full of the noise of my own beating heart, it's as true as it ever can be.

Some days, I drive out alone. Other days, my passenger will be a girl, a good friend of mine. She has dark eyebrows and light hair. She wears flip-flops even during much of the winter. She holds beautiful grudges. She has an identical twin sister that she's not on speaking terms with.

She doesn't own a car, so whenever I take her anywhere at all, she acts like I'm doing her some huge favor. At gas stations, she buys me big silver cans of beer and oatmeal cream pies and

long leathery, meat-flavored ropes. She's from some nowhere place in northern Michigan, so when we get outside the city and the trees show up, all gorgeous and bony and achy-looking, she starts saying things like "We could be in Michigan right now," as if this were the highest praise she could give.

This summer, we've gotten into the habit, my friend and I, of driving out to the lake in the middle of the week whenever the weather's good. We walk out into the cold water together until it is up to our chins. After what she calls our "dip," we arrange ourselves in the sunlight and start drinking the beers we brought. We drink until we feel the sun rise into our stomachs and chests and even places you wouldn't expect, like our kneecaps and high glossy foreheads. We drink until we start to feel a little too full and fragrant, and then we drink just one more for good measure. Sometimes we bring stupid, senseless things to eat—cupcakes and miniature candy bars—that go soft and liquid in the sun until we have to lap them up out of their packaging like raccoons.

We talk about the things, back in the city, that we are getting away from by being here. We seem to have a real instinct for how to talk to each other. She tells me about the guy she's in love with, who, at forty-eight, is almost twenty years older than her. I tell her about my noisy, angry downstairs neighbor.

"He's too quiet," she says of her boyfriend. "He won't talk to me."

"He's just so goddamn fucking *loud*," I say of my downstairs neighbor. "It never stops. I don't think he ever sleeps."

We feel a lot of love and pity and resentment for the people in our lives, and the loving, the pity, the resentment—it all makes us glow, painfully.

Afterward, we keep our bathing suits on, damp beneath our clothes. It's cooler this way. And, in the gusts of hot air that greet us back inside the car, we half-believe we can see ourselves steaming, like a pair of branding irons plunged into a cold bucket.

There was a day in August when my friend and I drove out to the lake as usual, but when we got there, the road leading down to the shore was blocked off. There were sawhorses up, ugly and orange, across the road. A man in a bile-brown uniform told us that the swimming area was closed due to flooding, told us the

water was full of debris and treacherous currents, told us we'd have to turn around. "It's a safety issue," he hissed. He wore sunglasses that hid his eyes and shimmered in the heat, and I hated him, then felt guilty for hating him.

"There are other lakes," my friend said as I made a three-point turn. There was no talk between us of going back to town.

I thought then about the boy in Iowa whose boxers I'd worn, saying, that time we missed the Pinking, "We'll come back another time," and how that other time had felt so wrong—how, coming back, we'd sensed a darkness showing itself, clogged and murky, like a spider appearing suddenly in its web. And after, we'd felt all the good we'd been working to store up drain right out of us, and I don't think I ever went back to the bridge after that.

I sensed that something like that was possible, maybe even likely, a precariousness forcing its way into the day, but my friend had already found on the map a little blob of blue, a lake, that we forced ourselves to believe in. It would do for a destination. We drove over roads we didn't know that cut straight through miles of tattered and water-scarred farmland. The sun made a cone of sheen that swirled above the stalks of grain, the light like a corn-colored beard across the landscape.

We passed vacant, abandoned houses that had the slapped-together look of nests made from mud. Water towers sagged beneath their own weight. Boarded-up churches seeped ash-colored mortar next to crowded, cramped graveyards—as if every single member of the congregation had died, one by one, until there was no one left.

The heat was angry, the sky so bright it was chrome, blinding us right through to the back walls of our brains. A man in a truck at a four-way stop yelled at us through his open window. He yelled, "Fucking cunts!" with such careful enunciation that it would've been comical on any other day.

"But why?" my friend asked, stunned. "Why did he just call us cunts?"

"Don't ask," I said. "It's better not to ask."

Feeling foolish, we passed through a trailer park with broken boats piled up in gravel yards. The trailers had the look of abandoned train cars, containers that had been dragged here and left and were populated now only through a series of strange and unlikely misfortunes. We saw no one. Not a single soul on

a stoop smoking a cigarette. No one hosing down their car or walking up the drive to get the mail. Not even a dog.

The long road through the trailer park emptied eventually into a paved parking lot. There was only a single truck parked there, rust coating the upper lip of the wheel wells like a milk mustache. There was a brown sign with a yellow arrow pointing the way to a boat ramp, but it still felt like an elaborate prank. As if local inhabitants had gotten together one day and decided: "Let's pretend there's a lake here, let's get out-of-towners to come, we'll put up signs and, when people follow them, there'll be nothing there."

The dread I felt then was a tired, dead thing—familiar. Boring. It could teach me nothing. It could maybe even, with a little booze, be ignored entirely.

"Here we are," I said then. It was a completely stupid thing to say. There was still no sign of water. There was still nothing but trees growing very close together.

And the dread I felt then was a tired, dead thing—familiar. Boring. It could teach me nothing. It could maybe even, with a little booze, be ignored entirely.

"Let's go," I said to my friend. I wasn't sure right then whether I meant "let's check it out" or "let's leave this place and never, for any reason, come back here." Neither of us had moved yet. Then my friend grabbed the six-pack of beer from the floor of the car, opened her door, and stepped out into the heat like a sleepwalker.

The lake was there after all, like a coin pressed into dirt. The water was the color of a boot. The shore, when we reached it, was filthy with a whole tiny world of trash—condom wrappers like iridescent ravioli, chunks of green glass camouflaged against the algae, the ruby-bright packaging of individually wrapped cigars—all glittered dangerously like poisonous frogs in the deep jungle.

Each piece of gravel on the boat ramp looked as if it wished it could be cleaned. The stones wanted rain, even after all of the recent flooding. The water level looked high against the shore, but we didn't know what it was supposed to look like. There

was absolutely no hope of swimming; the water was pure murk, and smelled like a stack of month-old dirty dishes.

"Welcome to Paradise," my friend said dryly.

We found a skinny dirt path that took us out through the trees along the shore. The trees pressed up, drowsy and old-smelling, and the path seemed raw and accidental. We could see the water, here and there, through gaps in the trees, but it had no shimmer. The path wasn't wide enough for us to walk side-by-side, and so we moved single file—a small sad procession.

We started to hear voices rise, like the glow from some far-off burning—how you immediately know from the cast of the sky when something is on fire that isn't supposed to be. Like a barn in Iowa I once saw from the road, all ablaze with a man standing a little ways from it watching the flames outline every single board and plank. It shone with an outer-space light coming through the cracks, like a star was getting born in there and the barn was coming down around it. That's what these voices were like.

Nearing the water, the trees thinned, and the path spit us out onto a ledge of smooth dirt that overlooked a dim corner of the lake. We stood on that outcropping, looking down into a small swampy inlet about eight feet below us. The shore dipped back to create a kind of cove, and standing above the water, we could see that the voices belonged to two bearded, shirtless men sitting in two separate metal boats. We were slightly above their sight line, and they didn't seem to notice us. The brown water around the boats was littered with a flotsam of empty beer cans, turning and bobbing like tiny machines.

"I think I got fucking *sunburned*, man," one of the men said. "Do I look sunburned to you?"

He held his arms out in a cross to display his torso. He was startlingly, cartoonishly red. The color of poppies, of strawberries, of crabapple trees in bloom in the spring. His friend stared at him, his face slack and blank, and then he started to crack up. The laughter sounded like a noise coming up from the bottom of a well, rising through him like smoke in a chimney.

"Dude, you are a goddamned *lobster*, man," he said, catching his breath and wiping at his eyes. "You look like a fucking fire truck." He couldn't seem to stop laughing. The sunburned man's face was crestfallen beneath skin that looked painted on. "You look like Clifford the Big Red Dog's dick."

Then, as if riding the wave of his own laughter, the man put a paper bag to his face and breathed in hard. When he lowered the bag, his beard was all glisten, like we'd caught him feeding on some sort of wet light, like he'd opened a firefly and was lapping up its insides. It was almost a tender sight, the ring of paint around his mouth—like a child who tries to put on makeup and does a bad job of it. It nearly hurt me then to look at him, the squint that comes when the sun breaks apart the horizon like the shell of an egg—a tremble in my eye like the one the Pinking used to bring.

I tried then to inventory my reasons for coming here, for seeking so hard for some patch of crisp, unsullied, olivine-tinged water.

I came because, back in the city, the grid of sidewalks would start to get in my head, and I'd begin to measure all my movements in sharp corners. I'd feel like a bystander to my own life. And I'd need that good outer blur of the drive, the swim, to smooth myself out.

I came because the man who lived in the apartment just below mine thundered around down there all day, moving from room to room like a mastodon. At unexpected hours, I could hear him shouting, raging, the noise of his voice rising but never falling, and at night I'd lie, wakeful beneath a sheet, trying to fathom the source of his huge tide of anger coming up through the floorboards, somehow convinced that it would one day land on me.

I came so I could distinguish my bones from the water, could measure myself in swim strokes. I came to feel the smallest grain of some holy thing drift inward like pollen so I'd finally hear my stupid heart doing its work and believe, then, that I somehow knew what the very first hour of the world might've sounded like.

There was still that ring of brightness around the man's mouth as he handed the bag to his friend across the gap between their two boats. The sunburned man drank pure light from the bag until his face matched his friend's, a patch of bright frost coating the beard of each, like flocking on a Christmas tree.

Then something silver, gleaming darkly like the inside of a gun, moved through the air in a soft arc and landed in the water with a plop.

I saw, standing at the edge of the water, a girl of maybe nineteen wearing a yellow bikini top and cut-off jean shorts. She held cans of beer in her hands, a cardboard box full of beer at her feet. She was tossing them lightly with incredible grace, lobbing them underhanded, toward the two men in their boats.

"Come *on*, butthead. Don't throw them—your aim is complete shit."

"Come and get them, then." Her voice was sweet and solid, like a peppermint. "I'm not swimming them out to your lazy asses."

One of the beers landed in the bottom of the boat, right at the man's feet and started spraying a foamy yellow mist upward in a private little geyser. He reached down, swearing, and sucked the beer down to nothing through a seam in the can.

Then she threw a beer to the sunburned man, and he caught it, the noise of the catch so satisfying, like a smack on the rump of a horse, and he sort of grinned, his gums and teeth showing silver in his mouth.

"Beers from heaven," he said, holding it aloft like saying grace.

"Heaven, sure." The girl's voice went flat and sly with sarcasm. "*Heaven's* what it's called when I nab beer out of the truck while Fucktard Frank is unloading."

The two men cooed at her like doves, "That's my girl" and "Good girl" and "Isn't she a fucking treasure?"

Their approval seemed to strengthen her as she tossed the beers with more energy and speed, and the sunburned man caught his easily, setting them down in a little row by his feet, while the other man kept fumbling so they sank out of reach in the water just beside him. He squawked and swore whenever this happened, making noises like a hurt crow, pointing each fresh spell of anger back at the girl like a dart. There was an odd, familiar rhythm to it, like we'd stumbled upon a carefully rehearsed play. We watched—almost, weirdly, on the point of being soothed. My eye had time to linger on each one of them, like memorizing lines of a poem.

In my mind, I gave the men names—"Sunburn" and "Paper Bag"—but the girl was just "Girl." She had dyed hair that was softly orange, faded-looking, almost the color of a creamsicle, and I had a strong feeling that I knew her, watching her bend

to scoop beers out of the box like picking fruit in an orchard. I watched her face, the freckles across it thick as galaxies, a roundness to its edges even though she was very thin, a faint shadow of ribs laddering up her sides. Something pitched and staggered in me for a moment, a sickening, electric feeling, and the thought occurred to me that maybe she was the same girl that I'd seen pass beneath the bridge back in Iowa.

There was a moment when Paper Bag's silly, nonsensical, cartoonish temper rose up after failing to catch another beer, and I heard the girl laugh a wry, parched little laugh like a bell being struck. I remembered the girl back in Iowa, looking up at us from beneath the bridge and offering two twinned notes of laughing strain, and I thought again, certain this time: *It's her.*

She threw another beer out to Paper Bag, and it hung in the air like an oblong moon, dropping down to him and landing with a plop in the water beside his boat. The man's anger seemed to shift then. He rose up in the boat and sent it rocking. He still looked absurd, even after I sensed his danger—a lone man in a tiny boat shaking his fist comically at the sky because the weather didn't please him.

"I swear to god," he thundered, "you waste another one and I will come over there and beat you senseless."

His face turned as red as Sunburn's, and another beer flew toward him, light as a swan, then sank. He stepped lurchingly from the boat into the shallow water, and started moving toward the girl, cursing, the water shifting sluggishly to make way for him. "Worthless little whore," he was muttering.

He staggered up onto the shore, but she did not move. She was still laughing at him, her staccato little "ha"s thrown like pebbles. Her eyes gleamed, expectant, as if this were a game they played. Maybe it was. He reached toward her, one arm extended like he was pointing an arrow at her, and she did not look the least bit afraid. Then he grasped her upper arm, tight, pulled her close until their noses were touching. And still, she didn't show any fear.

"You're gonna get in that lake, and you'll stay there until you find every single one of those beers."

He dragged her toward the water, and she made a small noise of protest, a kind of squeal. He gave her a shove, and she fell forward into the murk of the lake, landing on her hands and knees in the shallows. He bent over her, grabbed her arm and

yanked her forward out into the water. Then, with one hand tight against her scalp, he pushed her face down into the shallows until bubbles rushed outward from the darkness beneath where her nose and mouth would be.

"Open your eyes, you little shit," he spat at the back of her head. "And start looking."

I bent down to pick up a large, smooth stone, a little smaller than a baseball. I had no idea what I intended to do with it, but holding it in my hand I felt ancient and angry.

"*Hey*," a noise escaped from me, feebly—air from a leaky balloon.

My friend stood beside me, and I could feel her trying to erase herself. Paper Bag's eyes were tiny and black as they focused on us, like the eyes of spiders seen up close, like maybe there were more eyes than just the two in his face. We could smell the stuff they'd been huffing, or I could at least, and it smelled like the inside of my grandfather's garage—clean and chemical, pure in its darkness like a drip of oil.

It was her—I knew it now. I looked at her face released from the water, and something lit up in me, horribly. I wanted almost, then, to kneel.

Then Sunburn rose up a little in his boat, as if to get a better look at us. The boat rocked slightly, sending the skin of algae trembling like the hide of some huge animal.

"Hi there," he said back to me in simple greeting, a little warily but not unkindly.

And I know it would be stupid to think you can hear someone say "Hi there" and think you know them at all, think you can see their heart doing its work in their chest. But I felt, somehow, the lightness this man must've felt as he drifted, settling his weight onto the water and relaxing into his own pull and buoyancy. I felt I could see back to the moment he'd dragged his little boat to the edge of the lake with his friend, letting the water lick against his knees while he pushed forward to feel the depths begin to open a little, the fish fleeing from the shade he cast. It moved through me like

I know it would be stupid to think you can hear someone say "Hi there" and think you know them at all, think you can see their heart doing its work in their chest.

a vision: the sun coating him, his friend there beside him in his own little boat, separate but close, getting lost in the ugly moist magic of the paper bag's interior. And I saw that this, this too, for him, was maybe the only sane thing.

But then the vision passed, and I was looking at the girl, and she was blank and silent, unreadable. I could see nothing of her life. Paper Bag still held onto her upper arm, but his grip seemed to loosen. His eyes, turned toward us, glinted hot like spent bullets, and there was a moment when I thought maybe it wasn't too late for us to just go on being no one to each other—the final moment when my friend and I could've turned away from it all, left it behind, returned meekly to the things we already had.

My friend laid a hand on the small of my back, as if to say, "I'm still here." I tugged down nervously on my T-shirt. I closed my eyes and opened them again. And then I saw, plainly, that these people knew, without any doubt, that I had no power, no power at all, to either help or hurt them.

I addressed the girl. "Are you all right?" I said to her. Paper Bag let go of her arm.

"Look," he said, his face still red, maybe even from embarrassment. "Not that it's any of your goddamn business, but we were just playing around."

Sunburn spoke, more gently. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "But that's just their way, these two. Sometimes they play a little rough."

My eyes would not leave the girl's face, would not leave, it seemed, even if I willed them to. "Can I hear it from you?" I asked her, my voice hideous in its gentleness, like when adults address the children of strangers. "Are you okay? Do you *want* to be here?"

She rose up out of the lake, and the water came off her in rivers. She stepped toward me, and there was the quickest flash, a fraction of an instant, pure fantasy, when I thought maybe that had been enough, enough for the girl to say, "Let me come with you," like we were in a cowboy movie or something, and we could carry her away from this place and all its ugly parts; we could usher in her new life together, feeling like actual heroes.

But when she spoke, her voice was sharp—a long smooth blade. "Fuck off, all right?" she spat out. "What's it to you if my boyfriend and I want to drown each other?" And then she put *her* hand on Paper Bag's upper arm possessively.

My friend was tugging firmly, insistently on my sleeve. But this wasn't finished yet, I knew. And some reckless, wretched part of me leaned hard into the ruin I was making of the moment. Like watching that barn in Iowa come down with a sweet crack, as if the earth were opening, just then, along some hidden prehistoric seam.

I spoke again. There was nothing in me but this: "I"—stuttering—"I just want to know that you're okay. Just tell me that you're all right, and we'll go," I said. My own insistence startled me, but I let it hang between us like a bad smell.

"I do not need to tell you *shit*," the girl said, her anger deepening, broadening, and already the fury in her voice made Paper Bag's previous rage look small. What she said then, each word a stone, was "Who the *fuck* are you?"

It was, I think, the question I most feared, and I stared down into it, going cold like a caught fish. And it was then that I realized something had shifted. It wasn't even that I wanted to help her anymore—it was only that I wanted to know if it had been her, if she had been the girl I'd seen all those summers ago. It felt so shameful, that need to know, but what could I do with it? Where could I put it?

"I'm sorry, it's just—I've seen you before," I confessed to her, my body again telling me to drop to my knees.

"Bitch," she said, and even that word, in her mouth, was somehow beautiful, like a perfect bite taken out of a fruit. It was like she was giving me a new name. "You do *not* know me."

Her anger was so pure, so correct, I longed to somehow breathe it in. Like air.

It came out of me then, like water. A horrible torrent I could not stop. "Please. I just—are you from Clinton, Iowa?"

Her eyes went small and dark, unreadable. The two men looked at her, as if waiting for some command. Her voice was terrifying, cold. "Bitch," she said again, the only name she had for me, "I told you: *You. Do not. Know me.*" She was livid, trembling. Her hatred felt glorious, like scalding water on my scalp.

"I was there." I shook. Quaked. "I saw you from the bridge, and I thought maybe you were in trouble, but I—" I broke off, confused.

I could only seem to dig in deeper, sinking, the mud of the

lakeshore below me rising up to cover over my eyes. "Look, can't you just tell me"—I was pleading now, asking her to save me—"is your name Bella?"

Something in her seemed to almost soften, briefly, when she heard this. She seemed to understand that I was asking for absolution that she had no power to give.

"That wasn't me," she said then. "I'm telling you, all right? That's not my name."

Paper Bag stepped forward, and I could feel my friend there beside me, the bodily grace of her, so solid and real. I could feel her coiled like a spring, poised to run.

"Okay?" Paper Bag shouted up at us. "Satisfied? She's fine. She's not your long-lost whoever. Now can you please leave us the fuck alone?"

But I wasn't satisfied. I wasn't. And I still couldn't recognize that I never would be.

I stood looking down into something unidentifiable. I remembered that once, as a little child, I saw a grown man on an empty soccer field tackle a small girl and tumble with her into the fluttering net of a goal. I watched in horror as her screams reached me, knotted in the air, and I somehow could not look directly at the private violence of it. I looked elsewhere, thinking, "Why is no one doing anything?" and wondering what the scene was asking of me. And then, the faces of the man, the girl, both surfaced, and I gradually began to recognize, in the little girl, an open panicked sweetness of laughter so wide and thorough it had robbed her of everything else. She was cackling, gasping out breathlessly, "Daddy, stop!" while the man tickled her and she kicked her heels down against the grass, giving herself over to it. And I felt a terrible swelling shame, realizing I'd mistaken joy for horror. But even then, I still wasn't sure exactly what I was looking at. I still don't know.

And I felt a terrible swelling shame, realizing I'd mistaken joy for horror. But even then, I still wasn't sure exactly what I was looking at.

My friend said my name in my ear, said, "Let's go," and I felt grateful for her, anchoring me back to myself. I half-turned to

follow her down the path, and as I did so my hand loosened and the large stone I'd been holding fell from my grasp and landed beside me with a loud plop.

The men and girl below were still watching me, and they saw the rock fall, understanding what it meant. Paper Bag started to laugh then. It was a hideous, open-throated laugh, rising to a noise, almost a yip, that a coyote might make.

"And what did you think you were gonna do with *that*?" he asked, taunting, bending to slap his moist thighs.

Sunburn and the girl seemed to freeze when they heard the laughter start. It rose into an even uglier register, and we all stood motionless, as if the laughter were a block of ice we were trapped inside of.

"Tell me," Paper Bag spat at me, the laughter drying up a little. "What were you planning to do with a fucking *rock*?"

And then, we all felt a shift, almost imperceptible. Like how dogs can feel an approaching earthquake in the pads of their paws, in a note of high, sustained quiver in the air. A very small gun appeared in Paper Bag's hand, almost like an act of tiny magic, but I supposed he must've had it in his back pocket all along, or tucked into the waistband of his jeans. Maybe he'd put it there hoping only to shoot at starlings along the shore with Sunburn, to practice their aim on the knotholes of trees. But now, because of me, it had become something else.

I stared down into the gun's pinhole mouth. It looked fake. It looked like a squirt gun painted gray, like the trigger was plastic and would squeeze down beneath this man's sausagey finger and the thing to come out would be a little squiggle of water and not a bullet at all.

I watched the gun, and for maybe the first time in my entire life, I wished I could be more afraid than I was.

Sunburn and the girl both produced voices, protestations, attempts to reason with Paper Bag that were as useless as rocks in their fists. He made no sign at all that he heard them. His eyes went strange, and he spoke to me, only to me.

"Come on," he said. "Pick up your rock. I'll give you a free shot."

He didn't even wait for me to hesitate or resist before he screamed the command again:

"*Pick up that fucking rock*!" he shrieked, and I knelt. I knelt,

finally, my knees greeting the quiet of the dirt, the roots clumped and struggling beneath me. I knelt and I wanted the kneeling to be for me, for the girl, but it turned out that, after all, it was Paper Bag I was kneeling for. I touched my palm to the earth, and there wasn't a single prayer left in me anywhere. The world brimmed around me, holding itself back behind the soft green of its walls. I stood back up very slowly, with my arm slack at my side.

"Throw it," he said then. "Try and hit me."

It was a game—a game to demonstrate my weakness, and I didn't know how to tell him how unnecessary that was. We'd all already seen it. We all already knew.

The girl was pleading, cooing at him, saying his name into his ear to try to remind him who he was. I heard something click, maybe the safety of the gun, if it was after all a real gun, or maybe it was the noise of my friend letting the six-pack of beer fall against the stone-riddled path at our feet, or maybe it was the clacking of the beads on the bracelet the girl wore when she grabbed at Paper Bag's wrist. She lifted his arm so that it pointed uselessly up into the high branches of the trees above our heads. He gripped the gun and swore at her, and they struggled, twisting—a kind of slow-motion dance; they bent and dipped together gorgeously, and I was lonely looking at them.

"You stupid cunts," I heard the girl say, and I realized that she was addressing us, my friend and me. There was such sorrow in her voice. I think she felt a genuine pity for us.

The girl gripped the man's wrist, and the gun wriggled like a living thing, like a snake, bright and innocent, groping for a place to sink its little measure of poison.

"Get the *fuck* out of here." The girl's voice came clear like a faucet turning on, like a thirst being quenched.

"Run, goddammit." She told us what it was we needed to do.

"*Run*" is what she yelled.

And then, what we both did, my friend and I, in the exact same instant: we turned away and we ran. We gave ourselves up to it. We left them there, the gun high in the air, the girl's hand still clasping the man's arm like a dangling handcuff. We left all that behind, like waking yourself up from a dream that isn't going well. We ran.

There was no noise behind us, no squeak of gun or mutter of

water. Only that one word she'd given us, still pumping through our legs like heat, like sunlight, like blessing and curse: Run.

Afterward, in the car, my friend and I couldn't seem to look at each other, didn't know anymore what we were meant for. But the road was there leading us back, and so for a while we just drove. We passed through a patch of countryside near enough to the miles-distant blink of cellphone towers that we could dial, call. I held my phone out to her, shaking, and she took it from me as if it were something that could be split and shared, like a bread roll.

"911?" she asked me, wanting direction. It was an ugly, naked question—just those numbers, raw and reaching—a senseless code for rescue. But I nodded, gripping the wheel like I still thought I knew how to save us.

"What should I tell them?" my friend asked. And there was nothing in me then. We didn't even know where we were, didn't know the name of the road we were on.

"What was the name of that lake?" I asked her, and she looked on the map, her finger moving with its own little life.

"New Harmony Lake," she said, flat, grim. I hated that it was something we might be able to laugh about later, once we'd started to feel lucky again, saying that word *harmony*, disbelieving.

"Tell them that," I told her. "Tell them where it happened."

Already *happened*, already something that was no longer happening, back there where we'd left it.

She began to punch the three numbers into her phone, looking down at the screen.

"What else?" she asked after a breath. "What else should I tell them?"

She wanted me to tell her what had just occurred, what might still be occurring, and I couldn't. It wasn't in me. The words weren't there.

"I don't know," I said, my voice rising. I think, maybe, I was yelling. "Just try, okay? Just try to tell them something useful."

She gripped the phone, still looking down at the faint, daystifled glow of it. "I'll never understand what you were thinking," she said, and her voice, I realized then, had been livid all this time. "You could've gotten us killed."

To hear it said like that, so plainly—to receive the blame so squarely—was strange and almost freeing. It gave me a raw, twisty feeling of vertigo. For a flash, I thought I might even need to pull the car over, empty my already empty stomach of its emptiness.

"They were just playing around. Anyone could see that. There wasn't any danger until you . . ." She trailed off, shaking her head, and I could feel something ending between us.

I would go home. I would shut myself back in with the ever-present noise of my downstairs neighbor. I would listen hard to try to make sense of his limitless rage. I would listen with my whole mind to the shatter of things, and I wouldn't have room for anything else.

The air in the car went smooth with heat, almost pink, and I knew it would be our last drive together. I heard myself say to her, with a terrifying certainty, "That's not how I saw it. That's not how I saw it at all."

When I lived, for a time, in Iowa, I saw things: crows at night spreading themselves out like an even darker shade of darkness; stars so clear and distinct, they seemed to hover above their own names; the road in folds of silver and purple, bright and loud like a horn. Once at the river, I saw a single shoe drifting downstream, which I scooped up, turned over, put back.

I let the mosquitos love me with their mouths when there was no one else. I dreamed at night that I built a small dam across the mouth of a creek with smooth stones. "You were with me in the dream," I used to tell the boys I drove out with, even if it wasn't true. In between the drives, the boys, I waited. I found quiet places to drink alone, even though the drinking alone sometimes yielded bad things.

In downtown Iowa City, there was a bar called the Deadwood, where the floor was fully carpeted and smelled like the inside of a coffin someone had dug up. It was a sad place, a sinister place even, but there was a kind of weird, tarnished grace to it—a sweet sense of forbearance, like when a little kid knocks over a full glass of milk and his parent just calmly sops up all that spill in a dish towel without even a faint trace of anger. That was the Deadwood. The light in there was soft and forgiving, like certain basements. If the people drinking there saw and recognized each other, day after day, they treated it like

a coincidence, a little quirk of fate, like seeing the same set of faces over and over again on your morning bus ride.

Inside, the air was always a little damp, a little warm, as if someone were plotting to put us all to sleep. And people did do a lot of sleeping there. Next to the bathrooms, there was an old photo booth that used to produce narrow greasy strips of black-and-white pictures but had long since stopped working. There was no "out of order" sign, nothing so straightforward, and the bartenders never once interfered when golden-faced college kids sometimes fed dollar bills into the machine expectantly. These youths flitted around the edges of the room like stray beams of light, their movements somehow both anxious and brave, until, approaching the bar, they'd pipe, so sweetly, so brokenly, "The photo booth doesn't seem to be working."

Of course you can't expect it will always be this simple, the bar swaddling you with its strange ease. You can't expect to just be lulled forever.

And, in a small benevolent act of consolation, the bartender would pour them some pineapple juice in a tiny glass with a little splash of bottom-shelf tequila in it. And the college kids, so flagrantly underage, would be thrilled to death.

But mostly, the broken photo booth was used as a sort of "nap station" by the older regulars who found themselves lulled by the balmy temperature, by the thick, heavy, inadvisable drinks they ordered: White Russians and Brandy Alexanders, hot toddies dense with honey, pints of dark foamy beer. It was understood that if the little black curtain of the photo booth was pulled closed, whoever was inside did not wish to be disturbed.

A couple days after that evening on the bridge, when I'd seen the man and the girl drifting downstream together, I was at the Deadwood, killing time. I'd always been good at killing time, ordering drinks that were slow and sippable, pulling the local newspaper toward me across the bar without hurry, turning each page so that it rustled like a sluggish raking of leaves.

Of course you can't expect it will always be this simple, the bar swaddling you with its strange ease. You can't expect to just be lulled forever.

I looked down into the little closed world of the newspaper, and the headline stabbed like neon. It was something almost unwieldy like *ADOLESCENT IOWA NATIVE KIDNAPPED*. I don't remember the exact phrasing. I remember a very small yearbook photo, almost impossibly small, black-and-white, that I squinted into as if it were a peephole in a fence. No, I couldn't be sure it was the same face I'd seen looking up at me from the water. I couldn't be sure, trying to imagine this tiny smudged child's face tilting upward, a slenderer neck with the two notes of harsh laughter scraping her throat like cut glass. I didn't know. I put a hand on my stomach as if it could tell me something worth knowing. There was nothing in there except the drinks I'd been working on.

I read the whole article, making my eyes go over and around each word, like a line of ants mapping their way. The girl had been taken from her eighth-grade classroom in the middle of the school day by a man claiming to be the girl's father. When the teacher challenged the man, he'd pulled a gun out of his back pocket and pointed it at the teacher's chest. The gun turned out to be a squirt gun painted gray but, I guess, was convincing enough in a pinch. He drove away with the girl in a gold El Dorado, and they were last seen heading west out of Clinton, Iowa. The girl's name, I remember, was Bella.

I drew a map in my head. Yes, driving west from Clinton *could* bring them to the bridge, to the boat the man could've found loosely docked near an empty patch of riverbank, to the moment of the Pinking, to the passage beneath us into whatever frightening shape could be made of a life in these circumstances. It was *possible*. But I couldn't seem to bring myself to believe in it, not fully, not enough to make it real. Not enough to give myself a task in all this, a purpose, even if it was one as feeble as calling the number printed at the bottom of the article.

I think I was maybe a little more drunk than I remember. Maybe one of the regulars had been buying me their somnolent cocktails. I think maybe I even *did* try to call, ducking into the empty photo booth, pulling the little black curtain closed behind me, dialing on my cell; then getting a busy signal and taking this, stupidly, as a sign that someone else had better, more useful information; convinced maybe that the police would laugh at me when I stuttered through it all: "I don't know . . . I'm not sure . . . He said he was her father . . . I had a kind of

uneasiness about it." I could hear the cops snickering, the one on the phone with me cupping his hand over the mouthpiece and murmuring "*female intuition*" to the others. I could hear, ringing all through me like a tin can full of rocks: my uncertainty. So I hung up. Maybe saying, "Not now," returning to my drink, wanting to burrow back into my ease, wanting to build some kind of bravery from scratch and then, *then*, I'd be someone who could make things happen.

Or maybe I wasn't thinking hard enough about any of it, and it just got swallowed up by whatever else was there, kicking around in my mind.

Maybe I was thinking about the boy who'd held my bathing suit so gently, like an animal he hadn't meant to kill, before rolling it up in the window to dry.

Maybe I was already itching for my next drive out—my plans, my hopes, going against the grain of the weather, the storms that were beginning to bloom out over the river, the thunder making its huge mechanical noises like vast cranes lifting shipping containers and setting them down sloppily, the sky going cornflower blue like some liquid bruise coming up beneath skin in patches that showed lit-up veins where the lightning seeped, weary, slow enough to pause in its crackings, pinned briefly against the sky—an old threat we'd all learned to ignore.

ANGELA THARPE

ONWARD & UP

& to the guy
on the Beltline
who called my boyfriend
the n-word
for being in his way
instead of just,
say,
biking around him

I curse you
very much

& to the guy
in my building
who protectively
puts an arm
around
his girlfriend
when I join them
in the elevator,
takes her hand,
huddles closer,

to the guy who
cranes his neck
away from me
like I am a bomb

I curse you
just a little
because
your skin is
also brown
& to be scared

of your reflection,
well,
that's probably
curse
enough

(plus I called you creepy,
which made your girl . . .
friend look
at you,
reconsider)

& to the Black boys
on the stoop,
supposedly scary
in number,

to the boys who asked me
where I got my
ice cream
from,
who asked me—
hope making
their voices
lilt—
it's free?

to the boys who,
despite all the
curse-worthy
creepy creeps
in the world,
still believe
in
free
ice cream,
in
strangers who are there
to let you know,

I bless the hope
in each of your
foreheads

may it
somehow
keep in you

may it never
stutter

ANGELA THARPE

BOGO

& coming home
from the coffee shop
a man looks you in the eyes
& you nod in recognition
as you do
for all
Black people
who see you
who you see
except when you nod
this man
asks you
if you like smoothies
then starts digging
in his bag

& you wonder if there's a world
in which he pulls out
a perfectly good smoothie
a world in which
there is no catch
where you simply
close your eyes
pull through the straw
the best smoothie
you've ever tasted
you who likes smoothies more than most people
you who drinks a smoothie most days

but we are not
in that world so
you preemptively stop
his backpack digging
wave your hands
tell him
no thank you
& you're in a hurry
but his eyebrows trip
he brings out something
anyway
tells you he owns the smoothie shop
just down the street
me and my wife own it
he amends
so that you know
that he is
in fact
just trying
to give you
a perfectly good smoothie
buy one
get one
free

ANGELA THARPE

HOW DO I

& at the grocery store
which I can no longer
afford
somehow
there is a sign that says
If your hands are full,
pay with your wrist!
threatening if not for
the Apple watch clad there
in the ad
on my own
wrist
I am drowning in gadgets
somehow
Siri is seducing
my boyfriend
answering his calls
with a sultry *Mmm hmm*
as if they've just
woken up
together
she suggests a place to eat
I heard it was good
Mmm hmm
lying on my bed
she goes through
my messages
gives me a summary of each
even though
texts by nature
are quick to read
my arms are full
& so is my wrist
out of memory
somehow

ANGELA THARPE

777

& my mom loves to gamble
to take risks
to put in 20 & leave with 200
she's bold like that
modeled in college
sold vacuum cleaners on the side
pretty enough to move them
to move anyone
but she wasn't always lucky

one night, she said,
a group of guys
surrounded her
in the parking lot
this was back in the '70s
when there was no one to tell
she closed her eyes & waited
but some man
interrupted
walked her to her car

an angel, she said,
a nightmare turned
angel numbers
as if this was the way
it was always going to go
777
an empty chute
spilling gold

TREVOR KETNER

GOLDFISH (SNACK FOOD)

in the house the specific shape
of a cup or the recurring
sensation of a lover's body hair
on the tongue i think constantly
of how much shit i need
all the fucking time another depression

meal centered around cheap canned fish
strange ruins teetering on the edge
of the world thrown against sky
two horns sliding across one another
and german had already become part
of our dreams like a tide

TREVOR KETNER

A HUBCAP (GOLD)

poison in the milk and maybe
the apricots the summoning of silicone
plants venom sacs the loamed ground
this year was so fucking long
the accident the break the sheerness
of the stick-and-poke tattoo one gets

before starting hrt from a friend
who's been on hrt for years
who is too drunk for this
but it's nice to hear them
in the house the black knot
a tiny god makes of himself

TREVOR KETNER

NO THOUGHTS, HEAD EMPTY

the final moments descending into laguardia
the dip over the water growing
closer until it disappears beneath us
and trains teeter toward their destinations
teething on a river's green edge
after years of sex with men

missing sex with women when looking
at something fake we sometimes see
something beautiful in spring i walk
briefly beneath the george washington bridge
the little red lighthouse and looking
down sand glimmers the brightening field

TREVOR KETNER

GOLDENROD

women dancing the inexhaustible moon pouring
each one some night in tiny
glasses a white circle paradigm emotional
a matter of distance as far
as i know it's possible none
of them are extant anymore proof

of the sanguine gut not proximity
but absence night at the center
of the hill rustles shimmers flickers
a gold painting from 1955 green
desert apricots yellow window yellow desert
squares reconciling both tongue and tooth

DAVID ROMPF

PAIN POINTS

1.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism declares that pain and suffering exist for everyone, everywhere.

Cicero, in *On the Ends in Good and Evil*, writes that Epicurus deemed pain to be the greatest evil, a sentiment often misattributed to St. Augustine, who considered pain a test and a teacher compelling us to acknowledge the frailty of human nature.

Under glaring white light, a courteous medical assistant asks, "How would you rate your pain today from zero to ten?"

"A four this morning when I woke up, an eight in the waiting room, a three while sitting here," I say. "So, make that a five."

With no-nonsense efficiency, she taps her keyboard, recording my answer in the medical ether.

The question began to wear on me, becoming a test in its own right as it gnawed at my patience. My pain often oscillated, spiking and subsiding within seconds, and while the capital of pain was located in my spine's lumbar region, its mercurial intensity revealed itself as a mighty beast spitting fireballs through my flesh, simmering in retreat for brief periods before rising again with renewed aggression. At other scattershot times it marshalled foot soldiers to attack my hinterlands, from the buttocks to the legs and feet, from the lower left quadrant of my body to the right. "On average, it's a six," I said in another appointment. I figured an average bore the illusion of mathematical validity and proved I was attentive to my pain's erratic nature, inviting it to teach me something about myself, but one skeptical nurse asked me to revise my answer to reflect how I was feeling *right now*. Yet over the course of five years I found it increasingly difficult to pin a number to a timestamp of the occurrence.

The well-intentioned request to rate the pain shooting through me seemed coldly impersonal, anti-humanistic, and also very

familiar. This is America, I thought, a country and culture that prefers quick and easy assessments of the world around us. We want numbers before narratives, scales before stories. Make it short and sweet, brief and bitter. We relish the speedy ranking of almost every aspect of life. Five-star scales on Amazon purchases, Yelp rankings for everything from handymen to lawyers to tacos. Three stars for the best Michelin-reviewed restaurants. Stars, or lack thereof, for our doctors. In casual conversations we ask how you would rate your plumber, your professor, your gym, your mobile service, your flight, your date. It should have been no surprise I was asked to rate a phenomenon as individual and universal as pain, and though it is subjectively experienced, a number transforms pain into a relatable concept. Two empathetic individuals will understand that a nine signifies terrible pain even if they could never know how each other feels such pain.

Still, choosing a numerical rating as a snap summary of volatile and nuanced sensations seemed an endeavor empty of meaning and utility. I could not reduce the vexing wild ride of my pain to a static, pared-down, one-dimensional number excised from the intricacies of the human condition, a number divested of my body. And just as we are more than our afflictions, I was certainly more than the sum—or average—of any reported levels of my pain. Repeatedly confronted with the question, I could not help thinking about the extent to which numbers are affixed to all of us, and for entire lifetimes. Our date of birth, social security number, driver's license number, passport number. Our teeth, our vertebrae, our days are all numbered. Mobile phone numbers confirm our identities and bestow permission, access, confirmation. When you call your insurance company, you will likely be asked, as I was *ad nauseam*, to first provide your member number to an automated system. We are numbers before we are patients.

"Pick a number for this moment," another flummoxed medical assistant implored.

"You can choose for me," I said, channeling the frustration with my pain into deference for the professional. "Whatever you decide will be accurate at some point during this appointment."

She typed something into her computer, but I did not ask what number she chose.

A secular ignoble truth: We cannot detach ourselves from the tyranny of numbers, which cleave to us long after the end.

2.

I had reached the severe stages of spinal stenosis, with ligaments clogging the canal within the dorsal bony arches of my vertebrae. Nerves were being squeezed and pressured, triggering sharp pain and spasms, often with swift and dramatic fluctuation. A prestigious clinic describes the condition with a layperson's metaphor: It's like a door being slammed on an electrical cord, wedging it against the frame. Eventually the pressure damages the cord, affecting its conductivity. The door was closing at my vertebrae numbered L4 and L5. Scientific studies have identified a variant on chromosome 2 associated with a genetic predisposition for stenosis, and the variant itself has a number. Aging is another likely cause—those numbers that have only one way of being halted.

"It's really tight in there," the orthopedist said as he viewed the MRI scans of my back.

A ten on the pain scale was presumably reserved for the most excruciating pain imaginable: an amputation without anesthesia comes to mind, as do the ferocious migraines that have banished my friend Julie to bed for days. ("Sometimes it was so bad," she once told me, "I feared I was having an aneurysm or some other brain event that would explain the pressure I felt, like a steel band tightening around my forehead.") A ten seemed beyond me and beyond the raging beast, a status for encounters with a colossally surreal form of suffering, a pain so intense, as one scale suggests, you will shortly go unconscious. I could not utter a ten for myself, at least not yet. I feared being seen as the confirmed kvetcher, the dreaded drama queen on the patient schedule. Many of the medical professionals who had asked me to rate my pain were women who had given birth—in my mind, an inconceivable ten. How could I claim the pinnacle of pain in their presence? As a person who strives for integrity through words, I recoil at the possibility of being disbelieved.

Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, a cultural and philosophical study of physical suffering, said that "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt." She goes on to write that the doubt of others "amplifies the suffering of those already in pain," an effect that seemed, to

me, especially pertinent in a doctor's office. If your healthcare professional doesn't believe you, who will? I suppose, above all, I was afraid of being doubted. As I wrestled with rating my pain on demand, the potential doubt of others led me to mistrust the very existence of the problem that was causing pain.

Other factors compounded my troubled stance. Throughout most of my life, I've benefited from a freakishly high threshold for pain. I've had cavities filled without Novocain, to the dismay of nervous dentists. While dealing with back pain, I had two epidurals without general anesthesia, whereas my sister, who also suffers from stenosis, could not bear the injections into her spine without being knocked out. My self-perception—as someone who could withstand pain more than others—naturally and perhaps subconsciously steered me away from the top of the pain scale. I also descend from sturdy Upper Midwestern stock and immigrants who labored in boarding houses and copper mines with hardly a whimper. Through years of cancer, dialysis, and heart failure, my father never muttered a word about the assaults on his body. For better or worse, whether by choice or conditioning, our people, with few exceptions, have maintained a stoic grit in the face of woe. If they suffered, they did so in silence. Bellyaching about pain, about anything, was a frivolous appeal for attention that distracted from earning a dime and shoveling massive heaps of snow. Which isn't to say I come from an unsympathetic lot; rather, we are subdued and forbearing in our worldly struggles. Perhaps, in earlier eras, such steadfast stoicism was an acquiescent front for the futility of complaint when complaining got you nowhere—or in trouble, when silence was the safest course of action.

For better or worse, whether by choice or conditioning, our people, with few exceptions, have maintained a stoic grit in the face of woe. If they suffered, they did so in silence.

Cicero himself admired the Stoics, for whom pain was merely a sensation to be endured, not an evil per se. (The infliction of pain is another matter.) No one in my family had formal education in philosophy, but everyone understood endurance as a buttress for precarious survival. For the religious among them,

endurance was a God-given blessing. If their quiet strength was ever a charade, it was one born of dignity as a foil to pain.

Or perhaps our fortitude could be traced, like stenosis itself, to hereditary links. Studies have shown a significant genetic basis for pain sensitivity and tolerance. Maybe we are a long line of characters who feel less pain and withstand it longer than others, and maybe my backbone became the test for the limits of this biological advantage.

3.

As a prevalent evaluation tool in medicine, the pain scale seems to involve a simple task without controversy, but the simplicity of the assignment—pick a number—belies the difficulty for patients in choosing between a four and a six, or an eight and a ten. Without a point of comparison, how do we gauge our discomfort to a hypothetical common denominator of discomfort? Does my long-lingering backache deserve a ten while migraines incapacitate my friend Julie?

The Numerical Rating Scale, the NRS, is the most widely used pain scale, but there are at least eleven others. Visual analog scales (VAS), such as the Wong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale, ask patients to describe their pain by selecting from a display of pictures: happy faces (for "no hurt") to a frowning face with tears streaming down the cheeks ("hurts worst"). A third variety, called categorical scales, uses words and preformulated descriptions of pain, and sometimes colors and numbers. One day, I began wondering how pain could be rated for infants and, sure enough, I came across the CRIES scale, most often used in neonatal intensive care units. Health care professionals monitor and score a baby's crying (from zero for no crying or a cry that is not high-pitched to two, a high-pitched cry indicating the child is inconsolable), facial expressions (such as a grimace with eyes squeezed shut), sleeplessness, oxygen levels (babies in pain have decreased levels of oxygenation), increased high blood pressure and heart rate. Each of these areas has a zero-to-two scale associated with it. Several years ago, the U.S. Department of Defense introduced its own protocol for measuring pain in active soldiers and veterans. The Defense and Veterans Pain Rating Scale employs the typical zero-to-ten scale along with colors and images of facial expressions, but it also includes questions to de-

termine pain's impact on a patient's daily activity, sleep, mood, and stress. An Air Force press release stated that the DVPRS represented a "cultural change" for patients and physicians.

Although pain scales, regardless of the type, don't pretend to proffer verifiable facts, the use of numbers comes with a sheen of objectivity, a ring of truth. Numbers, it is said, don't lie. A classmate in graduate school once whispered to me, during a student presentation, "Reciting numbers makes a person *seem* smart." The doctor's office, however, is one place where numbers can lose their grip on quantitative rigor, slipping from the realm of science to art, from aspirational exactitude to fickle approximation. Or succumbing to spheres of sugarcoated avoidance: Eula Biss, in her essay "The Pain Scale," writes that her father, a physician, explained how one of the pain scale's functions "is to protect doctors—to spare them some emotional pain. Hearing someone describe their pain as a ten is much easier than hearing them describe it as a hot poker driven through their eyeball into their brain."

Trying to rate pain with numbers is not like measuring an earthquake's magnitude on the Richter scale, a logarithmic formulation. Whether it's a jolt along the San Andreas Fault or the rumblings of an active volcano, sizing earthly convulsions results in a number universally understood by geologists, even if laymen experiencing the same motion will describe it in varying subjective terms. A 6.0 earthquake is not twice as powerful as one measuring 3.0 but rather *one thousand times* more powerful. A 9.0 earthquake is always—*always*—one hundred million times the magnitude of a 1.0 tremor. These are airtight axioms carved in scientific stone. The pain scale, on the other hand, is no such calculus. No one can be hooked up to an apparatus for measuring and recording pain in the way people are monitored for heart rhythms, blood pressure, and nerve conductivity. The pain scale distills a complex story of pain to a hazy, unsatisfying sketch of suffering.

4.

At times it seemed a trick question: How would you rate your pain today? How *would* I if I could, if I wanted to?

Or an existential question suggesting I had the freedom to define my pain and decide on its meaning in my life—*here, right now.*

The numbers themselves posed an inherently existential quandary. After all, what did a six mean? Greater than five and less than seven: That much is indisputable but also, ultimately, unhelpful. What was my expertise for choosing? In the cool, still air of my medical appointments hovered an unspoken implication that patients possess an innate proficiency for pegging their pain on a commonly known scale.

That a self-determined appraisal, this act of free will, would be reviewed and considered and digested by authorities—those empowered by specialized education and training—who would come up with a holistic treatment of the patient.

That this number was a pivot point for rallying ideas, resources, medications, decisions, and solutions (because wasn't pain a problem that needed to be solved?).

That without this number—whatever number was chosen—my medical profile would be rendered deficient, that I would be disadvantaged without it.

But what happened to all the numbers I did report, whether averaged or modestly low? Who, if anyone, was looking at them? No one—not once—followed up with questions about a trend line for my numbers. Were they being dumped into the cloud and crunched for some greater scientific purpose—greater, that is, than attempting to treat my ever-narrowing spinal canal?

I envisioned those numerical morsels as a code for my pain's pattern, an encryption only I could decipher and translate into nonlinear narratives no one wanted to hear, at least not in full, even if time permitted the luxury of listening.

Where would the numbers go after I was no longer a patient? Or no longer alive?

Were they erased from the outer limits of big data, discharged upon death?

Maybe the query was part and parcel of the Augustinian notion of pain as a teacher: Contemplate the question, answer it—or don't—and see if you can learn anything profound about yourself or the world or pain itself.

5.

Aggravating the challenge of choosing a number are the many manifestations of pain and the speed at which they travel through us. The McGill Pain Index consists of seventy-eight

words patients can choose from to describe their type of pain. Among them: flickering, drilling, tugging, crushing, burning, wretched, nauseating, dreadful, terrifying. Pain pounds and throbs, spikes and spreads. It can prick at a pinpoint or radiate in rampages through muscles and bones, piercing, it seems, our very soul, despite what any Stoic said about the soul being untouched by pain. St. Augustine, believing physical pain imposed its greatest suffering on the soul, wrote: "Pain is a suffering of the soul arising from the body. The wounds of the soul are more hidden yet they cry out more loudly."

The body's nerve-pain signals travel between half a meter to forty meters or more per second, depending on the type of pain. Light blazes at 186,000 miles per second; seismic waves, on average, tear through the earth at two to eight miles per second; a bullet from an AK-47 rips at 2,350 feet per second; and sound waddles through air at 1,100 feet per second. Despite its leisurely rate, pain is fast enough to zip from the spine to the feet in less than a second. A level four pang in the back can become ancient bodily history as it sets off for the toes, creating a newborn universe of agony piercing the outer limits of pain for nanoseconds, months, or years—it's anyone's guess. This is one of the paradoxes of pain: Its intensity cannot be truly measured, but its velocity can be clocked with relative precision.

6.

What have I learned as a participatory student of pain? As a patient in America? Perhaps most alarming of all: The pain scale carried no weight in my insurance company's approval of a steroid injection that could deliver relief. After my doctor submitted an authorization request, a reviewing physician took several days to respond with follow-up questions, none of which addressed my self-reported extent of pain. After submitting her answers, my doctor asked for an expedited review. She had studied my MRI. She saw me flinch as she examined me. I had already been waiting a week for the approval, each long day now marked by a fresh penetrating pain in the joints connecting my lower spine to the pelvic bone. At times, searing spasms stopped me in my tracks. One evening, while carrying a dish from the kitchen, a convulsion sent dinner to the floor. But since my condition was not life-threatening, the insurance company said it could not accelerate its review. Instead, at least another

three full days were needed to consider my doctor's additional information, which had been submitted on a Wednesday morning. By Friday afternoon, still no response. Another weekend would pass without knowing when I might be treated. Angry and desperate, I called my insurance company and tapped my member number, birth date, and telephone number into the phone before I was allowed to speak with anyone. "This delay is frustrating," I told the person whose title was patient liaison. "I'm at a ten on the pain scale."

Finally, I had said it. A ten. I would no longer shrink from the possibility of being doubted. I did not use an average; the liaison would have no interest in my finespun calibrations. I cast aside my diminishing threshold for pain and shed all traces of my virtuous ancestors. Begging for an immediate decision—from the entity I was paying more than five hundred dollars in premiums every month—was not beyond me.

"It's not a delay, because we have no guaranteed time frame for approvals," the liaison said. I could hear the practiced script in her response.

"I'm talking about delay from the patient's perspective," I said. "From a patient who is in extreme pain. The delay seems inhumane."

For this she had no response and our conversation ended abruptly. Sometime later I received an email asking me to rate my satisfaction with the phone call, with ten being the most satisfied. I had no issue with choosing zero, but I knew it was just another number that would vanish into the void. No one would inquire why I had given the low rating or whether anything could be done to improve services.

Clearly a patient's input on his pain wielded no influence in the insurance review, a process that seemed predicated on doubt and shaped by corporate self-preservation. And it was clear the pain scale would not bolster a diligent doctor's advocacy for her patient. In the insurance industry's so-called criteria and coverage limitations, nowhere is the pain scale mentioned. "I can report your level of pain in my

Finally, I had said it. A ten. I would no longer shrink from the possibility of being doubted.

notes for the insurance company," my doctor told me, "but it's not a requirement or qualification." In other words, the degree of pain seems to play no role in the determination of insurance coverage or how quickly authorizations are issued.

After ten days, the request was approved. While the initial epidural brought some relief, my doctor believed I needed a second injection, and I agreed. When she sought approval for the additional procedure, the insurance company wanted to know the extent of any improvement in my pain, expressed as a percentage change after the first injection. But the company hadn't taken into consideration my level ten pain to begin with, and now the reviewer was asking for—demanding—a number to judge the progress of my pain, a number that would be received in the context of doubt and could, in theory, be manipulated or downright fabricated for the goal of securing approval. My savvy, strategic doctor told the reviewer my pain had improved by fifty percent and a second injection would surely build on that success, moving me closer to total pain relief, even if temporary. Who could deny me that?

The pain of fighting for relief within a bureaucratic, profit-centric—rather than patient-centric—establishment? I consulted the McGill Index: exhausting, suffocating, miserable, sickening. If this wasn't a ten, what was?

7.

What else does a ten feel like? Cruel, vicious, suffocating, punishing, torturing, killing—the traits of tormentors and persecutors, villains and criminals: pain personified. Pain as an alien enemy battling the body and the mind from the inside out.

But what does a ten *look* like?

On the subway one day, a young woman sitting alone suddenly cried out in pain and grasped her neck with both hands. Her eyes bulged and terror contorted her face, which turned bright red. It was one of the most disturbing scenes I've seen on New York subways. No one offered to help or console her. I don't believe this inaction came from a lack of compassion—I've observed kind and compassionate acts throughout the city—but rather from the potent shock of witnessing pain, which is usually invisible, become exposed and embodied. The woman's sudden look of horror, the reddened face, the scream: There was little room for doubt. Her public pain stunned our collective nerve.

I felt a disconcerting paralysis in myself and sensed it in those around me. Later, I was awash in regret—and shame—over my hobbled inclination to help. When the episode had passed, the woman's hands fell away from her neck and she relaxed into her seat. From ten to some lesser number: It happens more than we realize, these unpredictable, often inconspicuous flares of pain in our compatriots. At the next subway stop, she exited the train and disappeared into the throng.

Going about my business in New York, or wherever I traveled, I became overwhelmed by the probability that I was surrounded by people who had some degree of pain. On the bustling city streets, we walk among those who, if they were asked, are feeling a ten—or an eight, or a four, or an always-morphing average of pain that skips around like a ball on a roulette wheel.Who in the market, at the barber shop, on the bus, in the post office, at the ramen counter—who among us is in pain, and how much? Was the man on the escalator a ten? The elderly woman in the coffee line: Did she have a five in her hip, and if so, would it spiral without warning to a ten throughout her thin body? An eight for the taxi driver whose gloomy frown did not seem caused by traffic? The police officer on horseback, the museum guard, the wailing infant (definitely a two on the CRIES scale), the young woman weeping on a street corner at noon, the other patients sitting in my doctor's office—who would report a one, who a ten?

Walking along Manhattan's pulsing avenues, passing through Grand Central Station, riding a packed elevator: Each step in the public domain became a curious and daunting submission to the First Noble Truth, big time. Pain for everyone, everywhere. A constant density of human suffering. Strangers became less strange; they became extended family, with pain binding us in our lineage. Pain was our stifled dialect. One morning I saw a woman trip from the steps of a crosstown bus and tumble to the pavement. I ran to her, knowing the fall must have hurt badly. I helped her get up and asked if she was all right. Straightening herself, she smiled and said she was fine and thanked me for my concern. She walked away with a slight limp, stoic in expression but not in bearing.

The pain scale had sparked my rebellion against numbers and now, as I gazed upon my fellow denizens, pondering their pain, I loathed any further numerization of human beings, la-

mented the urge to attach yet another digit to individuals whose names I would never know but whose pain I might be familiar with, if only we could share our stories.

8.

Pain bolted downward and sideways but never upward to my brain. Or rather I never *felt* the physical pain of stenosis in my head and brain, although that is where bodily pain is processed, whether it originates from a sprained ankle or a fractured shoulder. An elaborate causeway of chemical and electrical interactions sends neurotransmitters from the injury site up through the spinal cord to the thalamus and other parts of the brain where, in a feat of neural wizardry, pain is registered and interpreted. In short, the brain determines how we feel pain depending on the injury or stimulus. The conscious, thinking, perceiving I—the I who chooses salad over steak—has no say in the matter. My brain, in stealth mode, decides for me, without checking in. It is an astonishing authority for an organ that cannot feel pain itself.

My brain, in stealth mode, decides for me, without checking in. It is an astonishing authority for an organ that cannot feel pain itself.

My mental health did not escape unscathed by stenosis. Cramping and stabbing pain often thwarted a good night's rest. In the fog of lost sleep, I could not read, write, or think with adequate focus and acuity. My energy waned and my mood, despite the hand-me-downs of Midwestern vigor, teetered. I was not depressed, exactly. I had become demoralized by the unyielding nuisance of pain. I mourned the loss of an undervalued normalcy of life, of the unthinking carefree liberty in having no pain. I worried that the pain would never subside, that it would deepen and permeate, become chronic and disabling; that yoga was ineffective; that acetaminophen and naproxen were destroying my liver and kidneys; that surgery, with no guarantees and myriad risks, might be the only way out. The beast in my back became an infuriating, full-time occupant of my mind.

How would I rate my mental health during this time?

To help their patients describe distress or anxiety, cognitive behavioral therapists use the Subjective Units of Distress Scale.

SUDS: an apt label for my brain's murkiest moments under pain's influence. Fuzzy-sudsy-headed instead of clearly, sharply alert. SUDS spans a whopping scale of zero to one hundred, and I was there for it, mentally floundering, slowed by the whiplike vagaries of pain. If I had to provide a woozy-headed guess, I wobbled in the cloudy midlands of SUDS, sometimes drifting, briefly, to the perilous northern cliffs.

Let us catalog the tools for appraising mental anguish: SUDS, the PHQ-9, the GAD-7, the Beck Depression Inventory, the Hamilton Rating Scales for depression and anxiety. Need there be so many options for estimating *Darkness Visible*, as William Styron called his book about a long battle with clinical depression? So many pain scales for mind and body? "Mysteriously and in ways that are totally remote from normal experience," Styron wrote, "the gray drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain." Could there be—should there be—one grand, unified, scrupulous approach for evaluating the totality of pain, with or without numbers? Or maybe we need to admit that the size of pain, like the size of the entire universe, is unknowable.

9.

My problem with the pain scale extended beyond the solipsistic, beyond its bearing on my medical care and the (mostly) gentle nudging to concede an integer to the numerisphere.

Despite its accepted legitimacy, the pain scale has fallen victim to flagrant abuse, as my upstanding pain physician confirmed. People involved in litigation over their injuries might be prone to exaggerating their pain as they—advised and prompted by their lawyers—eye hefty payouts from settlements and court-awarded damages. The greater the pain, the juicier the financial judgment. In lawsuits, everyone should be fairly compensated for the suffering caused by others, but the temptation and lawyerly pressure to overstate pain for a windfall is not uncommon; some studies have suggested that thirty percent of personal injury claims show exaggerated pain, and one study of litigants in particular found that more than eighty percent of plaintiffs had "nongenuine abnormalities." Malingering and magnified pain in legal claims has led to the development of several "symptom validity tests" to detect overblown self-reported symptoms. This, the Greek chorus chants, is the unvirtuous

America, where money warps and sensationalizes pain, fueling a financial euphoria that does not erase, as Buddhists say, the persistent suffering caused by ceaseless desire.

Or some patients might merely desire some paid time off from work.

And others, as I heard from more than one doctor, exaggerate pain in an attempt to secure prescriptions for opioids, a practice known as narcotic-seeking behavior.

Whose ten should be doubted? Though I had blurted mine—with conviction—at the patient liaison, any doubt or disbelief she might have held wasn't open to persuasion because doubt or disbelief about my pain did not exist for her at all. For her purposes, a number was irrelevant. Her singular bias was for protecting her company's wealth. The outcome I sought would have been beneficial for me (less pain) and detrimental to her employer (a dent to the profit line). Any ethical reckoning on her part would be far less consequential than opioids prescribed for a questionable ten.

10.

Five years had passed since an initial MRI showed a moderate but manageable stenosis. Now my spinal canal was being choked, the nerve endings compressed. The condition has no remission; the constriction and the pain would only worsen. I was nearly two thousand days older and tens of thousands of dollars lighter—a zero-sum game in which appointments, expenses, opinions, prescriptions, and yoga sessions of bird dogs and modified cat/cows had not alleviated the pain. There was one path left. Or two, counting the alternative of taking no action and accepting the likelihood of lifelong reduced mobility, permanent nerve damage, and pain soaring to the highest echelons of every pain scale in the land.

Like St. Augustine, I have my own compendium of confessions: While searching for a surgeon, I devoured the copious online ratings that are now ubiquitous for doctors. Ratings everywhere, ratings for everyone. I filtered and sorted profiles with at least four stars on a five-star scale. I read hundreds of patient reviews for dozens of spine specialists, and I cross-checked the ratings of their medical schools and assessed the prestige of their surgical fellowships. In a notebook I kept a short list of candidates, with

averaged rankings inked next to their names. I had surrendered, in the end, to rating mania.

But this is America, I told myself, and this was spine surgery.

In the OR, I was put to sleep in seconds with propofol, which blocks the nerve endings for pain perception. In this state of induced unconsciousness, I could not feel the scalpel slicing into my back or the instrument tunneling through my spine. All pain, mine and everyone's, became suspended in ephemeral nothingness. Afterward, the worst of the postsurgical soreness was blunted for five days by oxycodone, and then by heavy-duty muscle relaxers and super-charged Tylenol. During this time, if someone had asked me to rate my pain I would have answered: What pain?

In the months following my surgery, the stenosis symptoms faded. The incalculable achievement of modern medicine had landed one of its miracles squarely on my back. The beast, for now, had been evicted from mind and body.

Only days after walking out of the hospital, I began receiving regular automated follow-up questionnaires about my level of discomfort. How was I feeling at three, six, nine, and twelve weeks after surgery? A year later? I answered only one such survey because I wanted to be done with thinking about pain, finished with guesstimating its depths and range. I did send an email to my doctor, who now, more than ever, dwelled in the stratosphere of rankings. I thanked him for his care and for the surgery's success. Knowing he would want to quantify that success—for his own esteem, for the record, or for a narrative he could pass on to the next patient—I told him the pain had been reduced by at least ninety percent. In an online review, I sang his praises and awarded him five gold stars.

Ninety percent less than what rating on the pain scale? Although my back and whole body now felt better, my psyche remained stubbornly resistant to stamping a number on pain. Yes, I had pronounced a ten to the patient liaison, but was it the worst imaginable pain? An imagination is more expansive than our bodies, more galvanizing than any neurotransmitter; I had imagined, wrongly, that my ten would hasten a decision. And if it had been a ten, how long had it lasted? Long enough to say it, long enough to square off with bureaucratic lunacy?

A year after my surgery, an email survey asked me to "think

about your pain level and what you can do each day. Is the current state of your condition acceptable?" I could have chosen only yes or no before clicking Submit. There was no space for an explanation. The word itself—*acceptable*—struck me as another oversimplification, another egregious attempt to obscure and circumvent. Eight or ten. Acceptable or not. Is any pain, any decline in the quality of life, acceptable? Answering the survey would mean I had become complicit in reductive forces. I didn't want any part of it. In any case, responding would have been pointless—if I'd said, *no, this is not acceptable*, who would have called?—and so I deleted the email.

Now, despite minor residual pain, I can walk unhindered, swim smoothly, bend backward and forward, and toss a ball for the dogs, meanwhile perceiving the ambient and eternal pain that marches ahead of me on the sidewalk, lingers on the stoops of a brownstone, trembles beside me on the subway, and though proof and measurement are impossible, this confluence of pain, this infinite and enveloping pain, belongs to all of us.

REYES RAMIREZ

SCENARIO #100–999

the sun grafts sea water to my dermis 'til i'm sausage skinned
& molasses blooded. heat is a bad fuck, a gun firing
engine exhaust from 7 cylinders into my mouth.
every chicharra squeals of thirst. every dog
barks at once. sound itself is both the dam & the river.
i'm a concrete home where heat enters through the front door
& flames lick each windowsill's lip. i'm tired y'all.
i'm composed of crawfish boiling alive all day.
their attuning claws are my nerve endings mid-surrender.
to say i'm hot is like describing a galaxy as really big.
when i breathe in, bread becomes toast becomes burnt.
when i breathe out, a glacier topples. whoever's fault this is,
i'll spoon feed them their mother's ashes,
glowing horseshoes right out the smelter, ghost pepper
ground with rattlesnake blood. that still wouldn't be fair to me.
i'm a solar flare the sun spit into a nebula of gasoline,
a lit match tossed onto a heap of cotton soaked in tequila.
my skin splits like a chorizo birthing magma & fat.
my mind's a radiator broadcasting during a bayou city summer.
to say i burst is like prefacing a bomb as loud.
a pale worm convulses into cigarette ashes mapping
the trajectory of a broken rocket. they name my final form
according to its shape: inkblot.

REYES RAMIREZ

SCENARIO #444–334

i taste an anesthesia injected via metal idol into
the left flank of my cumulus gums fattened taut
by the infection that surged at my tooth's root
like floodwater obliging an oak to rise beyond
its rainfall of legs. algodón blooms in my jaw.
behind my eyes a grip of steel wool shivers
along balloon skin. *i can feel the absence of feeling*
is how i explain this to my unborn child whom my delirium
has conjured as a toothless woman.
i don't understand she asks in garble.
the clouds in my head are arguing with each other
using tuning forks i repeat but she's moved on.
tooth 19 squeals breathless as it's plucked with pliers
from its birthplace. a leaf frozen in sugar
cracks in half under the right foot in my skull.
a bouquet of sea tides bludgeons the copper obelisk
built unfathomably ago & dedicated to the saint
of ambient air in evicted homes.
i swallow. i'm song without mouth.

REYES RAMIREZ

SCENARIO #722–103

everything in salt like a uniform of grief
    on the trees on the roads on anything edible.
my saliva glands cringe then weep. to swallow spit
    is an admission of guilt. i admit to feeling hopeless,
which is a nasty habit because hope is the first & longest
step to building a home. my tongue, pierced
immaculately with thumbtacks, scratches against
the barnacles of my cheeks. i speak in ocean waves.
my thoughts are sandcastles built before the high tide.
salt is another word for infertility
    to be spread over the dirt of your enemies. i used
    to sprinkle salt on everything i ate.
    bread. broth. meat.
    now i cannot limp without cracking
    a sheet of ice. blood briny. my skin bark.
    i'm the flavor of a turtle shell. diamonds drip
    from my bowled hands as i cry shards of rose quartz.
i bite into a snowball & my teeth roll like dice.
there is no difference between a mound of sand & my dreams.
i'm so hungry i fantasize rice in my sleep.
years become grains of salt in an hourglass.

if i cannot eat handfuls of salt then am i
truly hungry? everything i drink is a cousin of the sea.
i piss mercury into a mirror hosting my abstraction.

MALIA MAXWELL

FOOTNOTES

Whatever comes before or after men is a
footnote; my life has taught me this by now.

—T Kira Māhealani Madden,
Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls: A Memoir

[1] an unadorned page
turns all the more quickly

---

[2] in the mouth of a ferry

[3] in the woods
moss like a wave of sequins
on ancient pines

[4] the roof of a parking garage

[5] what space opens in the night

[6] I kiss her then

[7] there too

---

[8] dawn is slow to come

[9] what I cannot bring

[10] looking for warmth

[11] the news warns of algae
white as snow and bubbling
like fallen fragments of a star
of the moon of kings of coffins
in the tall grasses

[12] in the belly of a burnt redwood

---

[13] slick with mist
water singing
water
slipping into
water

[14] we surface slowly squinting

[15] a handful of strawberries

[16] a prayer

[17] bring ringing

[18] thighs carved with hills
soles stained
with sweet-smelling earth

[19] as in red rooms red-throated birds red
nails red dreams red thread
with which to mend a seam red
of fresh blood

[20] I cannot bring my own mouth
to kiss the crest of a wave

[21] fraying rope shapes a path
through the tide pools

---

[22] eventually

[23] the diaphragm

[24] swans cast
against the horizon
pull back the moon

[25] as in the nearshore

[26] as in a rising wave as in the curl
of a fern straightening as in the first
of a seedling dressed in sun

[27] the margin
unfurls its tongue

[28] perfecting seaglass
in the tumble

[29] in tide pools

[30] mouths hands breath
breath

[31] how am I to count or name

[32] the tide swallows
even the guide ropes

[33] as in soft rain chattering
rain the sound of petals twittering
beneath the thick drops
falling like the sky is ripe with them

[34] pray before the Earth-Eating Woman

[35] to kiss the water
I must let it rise

JOY CASTRO

A WORD OF ADVICE

Slender, gorgeous, immaculately groomed, and exquisitely clad in clothes she called *pieces*, Severine was one of those women around whom I immediately felt hopelessly clumsy, as if I'd slid back through a portal to my sixth-grade self in Corpus Christi: nerdy vice president of the electronics club, soldering circuit boards during lunch hour or staying after school at the library to read biographies of women scientists while other girls swirled and spun in cliques of pink. And although Severine wasn't exactly a forty-year-old mean girl, she'd already demonstrated—at previous social occasions, such as the very first evening I'd met her—her particular preference for being the undisputed center of attention, as if every dinner party were also covertly a beauty pageant, every man a judge, and my own quite modest charms (curiosity, wit, a propensity toward merriment) somehow a clear and present threat. Fortunately, I didn't have to see her often. She was only the wife of my new husband's best friend from back in his university days in Vienna, and we only got to Europe once or twice a year.

I couldn't believe that sentence was even a thing I could say. *We only get to Europe once or twice a year.*

Since that devastating night when we'd first met, a night my soul wore like a scar or a Girl Scout badge, I'd automatically ceded pride of place to Severine whenever we went somewhere with our husbands, because I knew and feared her type. Corpus Christi'd had them too. They only put their knives away when they felt safe, and they only felt safe when certain they'd been crowned. Unless Severine had monopolized the attention of every straight man present—which, luckily for her, was rarely a challenge, as she really did look like a model and was also well-educated, well-traveled, and well-read—she never seemed content, and typically she would cavil about some small thing until all nearby swains were eagerly leaping to remove the source of her discomfort, at which point she would relax, lean back, and smugly bask. Not my own way of navigating the world, perhaps, but it seemed to work for her.

Yet this was a very large dinner—nine couples of similar ages—at Plachutta Wollzeile, and the nine husbands, who all knew each other from back in the day, had moved on from toasting the ostensible reason for the occasion: our recent June wedding back in the States (a simple affair on a friend's back deck with two guests and the officiant; it wasn't a first wedding for either of us). Our flutes of prosecco had quickly emptied and then emptied again. The starters and serious wine had arrived, and the men had begun to debate at steadily increasing decibel levels the intricacies of Champions League soccer, which they called football, while the nine wives collapsed into triads of women who didn't really know one another, handing our phones back and forth to show photos of our children or dogs and exclaim.

When Severine slid into the long banquette next to me, I quailed. Her conversational gambit was mostly to complain, a habit I neither valued nor shared. It was her wont to carp about the temperature of whatever room we happened to be in, the service in whatever upscale restaurant or cocktail bar, the trying conditions of her job as an art museum publicist in Bern, the fact that her husband did not want to get a kitten, and the many other slight hardships of her life. I always found it difficult to focus and keep nodding and not tell her to shut up.

Her husband, rather dashing himself, never seemed to mind her social contortions but instead looked on with aloof amusement, which is what I too had learned to perform after that disastrous first evening out with them, three years ago, when he, whose English comprehension was quite good, had apparently laughed too hard at my quips, and she'd proceeded to avenge herself by complaining and flirting her way to the center of both men's attention—an evening that ended in a blistering late-night hotel-room tête-à-tête with my then not-even-fiancé that included a shattered vanity stool and an offer to drive me immediately to the airport and put me on the first flight home if I could not control my jealousy.

As it turned out, I could.

We'd seen Severine and her husband occasionally since then, each time we were in Europe, and it had always gone smoothly, if not (from my perspective) particularly well. Now all nine husbands were talking with increasing heat about the relative chances and merits of Barcelona and Liverpool. Next to me,

Severine pushed sea bass bones to the side of her plate, her pretty pink mouth set in a pout.

"So," I said with what I hoped was a bright smile, trying to think of something to say.

Another barrier between us was language. Her English was fair, while my command of German remained embarrassingly limited. In it, I could order water, ask my way to the bathroom, or say *Excuse me* if I needed to push through a crowd, none of which made for scintillating conversation. So we stuck to English, which constrained our choice of topic, because hers was—so far as I knew—only the desultory schoolgirl English almost any European automatically acquires. Alas, on previous occasions we had already covered where I was from, how old I was, and whether I had children.

(Yes. Two. My new husband had none; I was his first tentative foray into the arcane realm of parental concerns—but luckily for him, mine were both grown; I'd had them very young. Severine and her husband had no children: Their entire and not inconsiderable income went to regular vacations in Bali and Biarritz, beautiful cars, the exquisite care she took of herself, and a large country home near St. Moritz that I had not yet visited. My new husband had shown me a few of the Instagram photos she liked to post, often featuring herself curled prettily on a leather sofa or a teak bench outdoors amidst clusters of pink roses.)

Bright blue irises, wide and edged with a thin border of black. I could see why men would enjoy looking into them.

"So," I said again. She'd turned her large eyes upon me and was waiting. Bright blue irises, wide and edged with a thin border of black. I could see why men would enjoy looking into them. Her lashes were long and curved and precisely mascaraed or perhaps semipermanently dyed.

I smiled, relieved, as my mind lit upon something.

"You've been married twelve years now," I said brightly, as if it were a compliment.

She nodded, her moue unaltered, and shrugged and waved her fork.

"Well, do you have any marriage advice for me?"

She gazed at me, and then down at her nails, all buffed to a pearly sheen.

"Possibly," she said. Her thick pale hair slid like a veil of ice across her cheek—ice on a warm day, shining with a thin pool of melt. She looked back up. "Why did your first marriage disintegrate?"

I blinked. I'd expected a platitude in an eighth-grade vocabulary. This was rather pointed.

I paused.

Though she'd said my first marriage, she actually meant my second. No one at the table except my new husband—for legal reasons—knew about my first, which I'd been lucky to escape, at night, with a toddler in tow and a baby on my hip. It wasn't the first time I'd run away in the dark, though it had been my first time as an adult. If seventeen is adulthood.

The thing about running away is that it opens a door inside you. After that, you always know that it's possible.

But that story was far too complicated for my new husband's nice middle-class friends in a Western European country with a solid social safety net and free university education or vocational training, depending on one's exam scores. Everyone at the table had enjoyed the former, whereas I had finished paying off my student loans only to start paying my children's.

"Well," I said.

I took a sip of the really excellent Sankt Laurent. The restaurant had grown warm. Waiters in black tie were bringing the Tafelspitz. I wasn't sure I could stomach boiled Austrian beef, whether or not it had once been the emperor's favorite.

My former husband and I had been great friends, I explained to Severine. The very best of friends, really. He'd helped me raise my children; I'd always be grateful. But after almost twenty years, that's all we'd been—just friends—and I'd wanted more from life before it ended. Though I wasn't young anymore, I wasn't old yet, either. I shrugged and smiled and tried to affect a sexy European nonchalance. Brigitte Bardot. Anna Karina. Sophia Loren.

Severine did not return my smile.

"But did he gamble away your money?"

"What?" I laughed, trying to imagine my sweet ex-husband—muscular and gentle, with the sleeves of his comfortable flannel shirt rolled up—posturing at a roulette table in Royale-les-

Eaux. (Obviously, there were other ways to gamble one's wife's money away, but my mind tends to leap for the picturesque.) "No," I said.

Severine frowned. "Did he have affairs with other women?"

"No, of course not." I laughed again, startled. "Really, there was nothing like that. Nothing dramatic." I smiled, but I felt sad. He hadn't wanted the breakup. Sometimes I still wept with remorse on my knees in the shower, helplessly gulping as hot water rinsed away my tears and snot. My regrets were nothing I wanted to share with Severine. "He was a good man," I said. "A wonderful man, really. Like I said, we were each other's best friend."

Divorce had cost me that. His passionate and younger new girlfriend didn't appreciate the warm way we hugged each other hello or our long conversations over coffee or dinner, so we'd stopped having them. I didn't have a best friend anymore.

I sipped my wine. I was, however, having quite a lot of very good sex.

"That's it, then," said Severine. She pushed her hair back.

"That's what?"

"You were selfish."

I set my glass down. I sat very still. I'd learned young not to flinch when struck. My breath came just a bit shallowly, perhaps, and my eyes took everything in, like a camera. *This is just something that's happening. The edges of my vision are just framing this shot. I am just hearing these sounds.*

"Pardon?" My voice sounded ominously soft, even to me. *Selfish*? My path lay littered with selves I hadn't become.

Severine shrugged. "Like you said, there was nothing wrong with your man. He was a good person. You were friends. He paid attention to you." She glanced around the table. "Most married women cannot say that."

I looked at the women around us, holding out their phones at each other, displaying the various proofs of their happiness.

Severine's blue eyes swung back to me. "So that's my marriage advice," she said. Her perfectly groomed brows arched higher. "Don't be selfish this time."

Her voice was very flat and quiet. Not unkind. Not even personal. When she turned to look at her handsome husband, who was opining loudly about Bayern Munich at the end of the table, the lamplight rinsed her face, and I saw for the first time

at the corners of her mouth faint permanent grooves, crushed down in misery.

I thought of her lush pink roses and teak bench and everything she didn't post for public view.

What did I know about these people, anyway—this particular clan, this whole echelon and their ways? What did I really even know about the man to whom I was now legally conjoined?

A lot, I'd thought. Everything essential. I'd softened my hand around him like a cup made of milk, light and cool, the gentlest cup in the world, a soft cradle, a crucible of silk, like the delicate art of painting on feathers. I'd thought tenderly about the way they crave being touched, men, the way they cannot afford to say they long to be touched as if we held the most fragile and vulnerable and precious and delicate thing. A sparrow, a wood thrush, a wren. A butterfly, cupped so lightly no dust rubs from its wings. That was the way I held him: the way you hold a tripwire, the way we hold our breath. I thought I'd known everything that mattered.

That was the way I held him: the way you hold a tripwire, the way we hold our breath. I thought I'd known everything that mattered.

But maybe not. I watched him laugh at his best friend's remarks. I remembered the shattered vanity stool.

Severine's husband, perhaps feeling the weight of our gaze, turned his attention to me. He clapped my new husband on the shoulder. His voice rang loudly down the table.

"So my friend tells us you're quite the storyteller!"

Small conversations stilled.

It was true. *My sweet Scheherazade*, he'd said. I'd lain in the dark, sweaty and spent, glowing, taking it as some high-end compliment, not thinking then about Scheherazade's fate had she failed. The swift scimitar. Her lovely, replaceable body severed from its troublesome, singular brain.

"Tell us a story," Severine's husband commanded, as my children had begged so many times. Stories had been a way to keep them well-behaved: at the laundromat after the fascination of tumbling fabric wore thin; at the free clinic, crowded and hot, among dozens of other children and exhausted mothers, waiting for vaccines; on the Greyhound bus, escaping. At

the edge of their cots, night after night, to divert them from the yelling and crashing in the apartments around us in the neighborhoods I could afford. Stories as distractions, as tools for survival, as feints. No wonder the first fairy tales, collected by men, were actually authored by women: nursemaids, grandmothers. Anonymous, lost to time. Anything to keep the little ones quiet.

Yes, tell us, the other guests were saying.

I looked down at the littered bones on the plates around me.

"One evening," I said, "the sultan was served the sweet white meat of a lobster tail for dinner. The royal chef had neatly removed the flesh from its bony shell and arranged it elegantly on the plate." I cleared my throat. "Delighted by the sweet and delicate meat, the sultan insisted on having it every night thereafter, not knowing exactly what it was but finding the taste and texture divine."

My new husband and his friends smiled at one another, pleased. They'd all tasted lobster.

"One day the sultan was walking along the beach, and a large lobster crawled out of the sea. 'What is this extraordinary creature?' he wondered aloud, crouching to peer at it, marveling at its antennae, its great red claws snapping the air, its curving, sensitive tail. His attendant rushed over, excited. 'That is a lobster, Your Greatness,' he said eagerly. 'These are the creatures whose tails you devour with such delight each evening.'"

I took a swallow of Sankt Laurent, stalling, groping for the next thing that could happen, trying to trust the way stories worked. You opened yourself, and then you opened your mouth.

It was a terrible story to tell, though, laced with Orientalism. Telling a story with a sultan to a table of white Europeans was morally vexed—to even possess the sort of troublesome brain to which such a story could occur.

I went on.

"'What?' cried the sultan. 'A lobster? Bring me my sword!'"

I looked around the table. Seventeen expectant faces looked back. Severine's pout, however, had deepened.

"Eagerly, his attendant brought the gleaming royal sword, kneeling and presenting it with great pomp to the sultan, who promptly grasped it, swung it high, and beheaded the attendant, leaving his bloodied corpse and head on the sand."

A ripple of startled laughter circled the table.

"The sultan turned to the lobster and bowed low. 'Forgive me,' he murmured, 'for allowing such ignorance in my court. Whatever you are, you glorious and majestic creature, you cannot be a lobster. I bid you farewell. Go in peace.' And the sultan walked away down the shore, never to return."

Severine's husband burst into laughter, applauding. "Well done!" he cried, and the others followed suit, clapping their hands and glancing at one another, amused. Beside me, Severine frowned.

"Wait," I said. "It isn't over."

From the other end of the table, my new husband cocked his brow at me. I drained my glass. It really had been an excellent Sankt Laurent.

"The lobster," I said, "scuttled over to the severed head of the dead attendant." I raised my own brow high. "Faced for the first time with the delicacy of freshly slaughtered human flesh, the lobster found its taste and texture divine."

Surprised laughter erupted.

"Okay," I said. "That's the end."

My new husband and his old best friend turned to each other, chuckling, and resumed their conversation. Severine fingered her knife.

Inside me, the camera tilted and swung, swooping in a strange careening tracking shot around the table, and then pulling back for a larger, wider pan around the elegant noisy restaurant. Quick montage. Glimpses of all the diners talking loudly in languages I didn't know.

Outside the restaurant, cool darkness coiled. Quiet streets. Trees breathing the damp air. An unknown land unspooling away in all directions.

I grasped the strap of my handbag and tapped Severine's arm, murmuring the word for *bathroom*. She slid sideways on the upholstered bench. When I rose, I looked down the table at my new husband, who glanced up and gave me a nod. Smiling, I excused myself.

JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY

TO THE SOUND OF SAXMAN

For Charlie Parker

Saxman sounds sugary on my streetcorner, his sound a tendril of thin tenor. It scoops up Kansas City's moving air and gloats its autumn musings.

I am alone, watching black sky spread out, skinless; the holiday ornaments scream about savior. The news seems to only know old blood and halved bodies.

The Plaza lights are going up, beadstring by beadstring and the saxman plays on in short staccato or fulling sound; he's playing a tune I'm not used to. It reminds me of the last thing you said to me which I bit back, let pool under my tongue, something about:
What would you like to talk about?

Because I know what you want to say. It'll be as mean as new candy, so I'm not going to hear it.

The jazzman's noise is spiraling and spinning and I'm about to cry, not for you maybe, but for this saxman I'll never meet, the story I'll never inhabit, the song I'll never understand, and that is far more wearisome to think about than the knife-sharp,

ending words

you will say next.

JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY

BLACK COFFEE

After Sarah Vaughan's "Black Coffee"

Don't fool with me, moon-boy.
Don't twirl the long parts of my hair.
Don't wrench me down to
night-unrest or plunging fall.

I told you I'm fine alone, without
your voluptuous light.

I can't sleep. Oh, your livening
brew.

I'm talking to the shadows . . .
Lord lord how slow the moment goes
when all I do is pour.

*

Hey, dulce.

It's a new holiday morning and I still remember
the horn-rims of your glasses or the way
you'd claim that I wasn't talking to you
or the white in your beard-front.

I'm so weary of waiting for faces that
aren't mine in gray mirrors that feel like mine,

and I feel the burst of twinned ghosts
flowing from your mouth when you
tell me there's nothing left to talk about.

Just run from me, dulce.
Don't shake for me sweet.

I'll be just fine,
this is the finale
of another
closing time.

JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY

POR SIEMPRE

I want you to see me, fresh

where the sun
shivers quick, I want you to relay the sharp secrets you refuse to tell me and I want you to speak songs to my stomach.

I wanted you, terribly, and the bed revolts and aches from a ghost that has never slept in my spaces.

I miss you terribly, though, images of you are relegated to square-shaped screens, filmic pieces, and little flicks of wanting, oh bello, I want to know what fulls in your vast and capacious mind.

I'm sorry, I don't sin right. I don't know how to push down the desire that blooms and fears and waits, but baby I can't wait in line for you if it's a long one, though in dreams, I would.

Because that's how I feel. It's too big and too wicked and too heavy and too engulfing and too flattening and too repetitive and
please please please please

don't ignore me, gently.

I'm terrified I'll walk through your door and see you on
the other end,

grinning with dark beard and I'll want you por siempre and I'm afraid I'll be stuck with your

enormous, glorious thorn and maybe the problem is that has already happened.

JENNIFER MARITZA McCAULEY

DULCE

Sweet film of bubbling sugar, splayed on chaplets of blossoms,
you are something I want to taste en la mañana or whenever
you'd like, preferably, now, so I can lick the sweat from your
bottom lip and tell secrets to your gleaming teeth—that's how
close I want to be, baby.

Let's gulp down something soda-tasting, something fizzy and
fresh and ready to down.

I love you, the language drips from every crevice and pore and
I want to drench you in my words until you can barely, just
barely

swallow my air, right?

Right, mmm, claro, oye, vaya, never nos vemos, come on.

cut me down to sweet sliver, stick in my teeth,
ay mi precious, precious

dulce.

ALEX MILLER

WE WHO SLEEP IN THE DUST OF THE EARTH

Part I: The Meaning of Life

Marcy Martin was my best friend growing up because she lived in the house next door and also because she rode her bike faster, bit harder, and wrestled in the dirt better than any boy I knew. We played with G.I. Joes in my bedroom and Barbies in her bedroom, and what I learned was that both were fun in their own ways. When we were really young, she liked to play house and would make us hold hands because that's what she said grown-ups did. After we got too old to play house, I didn't hold her hand again until we were about eleven, at the ballpark behind the chain-link fence at left field, where we hoped one of the high school boys would crank a fly ball out of the park. I don't know why, but I reached over and took her hand and held it, and she didn't make fun of me or punch my arm, just stood quietly as afternoon gave way to evening, and sometimes I think that might have been the best moment of my life. I often wonder if Marcy and I could have become more than just friends, but I'll never know because the summer before junior high she got cancer and died. Afterward everyone acted real gentle and tried to reassure me when what they could've done was *shut the fuck up*. Even after I started feeling like a real person again, I wasn't quite myself. If the preacher at church told us about someone who passed away, I sat up straighter in the pew and tried to imagine who they were and what their life was like and how awful their family must feel. And just by dumb coincidence over the next few years all my grandparents passed away—pop, pop, pop—one after another until funerals and grief and the plate lunches the church women's group brought to our house became as familiar to me as anything else in my life. Back in those days I figured if our short time on Earth held any meaning, it was in saying goodbye.

Part II: Glorious Love

The Bible says something about how the Lord giveth and also taketh away, and while I am no longer religious, I give credit

where it is due. Even as so many people I loved departed, new friends arrived. The first was Chip Sterling, youth pastor at the United Methodist Church in Summertown, Tennessee. In Chip I saw a better, more confident version of myself. He was taller and better looking, and in his Vans sneakers and distressed jeans he projected an aura of alt-rock cool. He wasn't afraid to speak earnestly about faith or shed tears while leading us in prayer. He listened to contemporary Christian music and wore T-shirts from DC Talk and Audio Adrenaline concerts. Chip was everything I wanted to be. I worshipped him, a little, even though I knew from his own Bible lessons it was a sin. He was a true believer, the kind who prayed on his knees until at last he felt the grace of God. Chip made me feel the grace of God too. Chip often said the only true freedom was in submission. I didn't understand this, but it hardly mattered. Chip said it. And I believed in Chip.

The youth group met Sunday afternoons in the basement of a church that had stood since before the Civil War. The room was paneled all in wood, and the aging planks were stained a deep shade of yellow, one that transformed the light of day into an ocher haze. I attributed this phenomenon to the spirit of God. It was in this gold-hued chamber that I first laid eyes on Chrissy Henderson. She sat in as a visitor to the youth group one Sunday afternoon in the spring of my junior year. Chrissy was no beauty—sallow complexion, bony elbows, a face marked by acne. But something about her spoke to me. Maybe it was the Jars of Clay T-shirt she wore tucked into a pair of bootcut jeans. Maybe it was her leather Jesus sandals or the black lace choker around her neck. Chrissy made the skin fall right off my bones.

Chip noticed me staring. He winked at me before leading the youth group in prayer. Mostly he said the usual stuff about faith and obedience, but toward the end he went on a tangent about lust. Chip admitted he had once been on fire with lust, but at his lowest point God brought him back to the church. Lust was the secular world's greatest temptation. Chip pronounced *secular* with a particular emphasis, like a dirty word. He said the love of God was beautiful and perfect, but the secular world corrupted it. The secular world turned everything to garbage. Chip's words moved me. If he hated the secular world, then I would too.

After the prayer, Chip led us in a familiar exercise in which he posed hypothetical moral dilemmas. I zoned out. I'd never

been one for class participation, and anyway the answer to every question was to pray for some poor sinner. My mind wandered to the new girl. I imagined taking Chrissy to a Jars of Clay concert. I imagined her becoming so consumed by the spirit of the Lord that she whipped off her shirt and threw it on the stage.

Chip challenged Chrissy with one of his hypotheticals. What would she do if a friend confided in her that she was gay? A tough question for a newbie, but Chrissy answered with calm and confidence. Chrissy said she would tell her friend there was nothing wrong with being gay—that's how God made her—and what right did anybody have to criticize God? Chrissy's answer went off like a bomb, a psychic EMP blanking our obedient little evangelical minds. The youth group erupted in vicious argument. A contingent insisted Chrissy was wrong and possibly a heretic. The way to handle a gay friend was to rat on them to their parents and let God sort it out.

Chip raised his arms, beseeching us for silence. He led us in another prayer, asking us to trust in the Lord, even when we failed to understand his plan. Chip spoke beautifully. He saved the youth group from anger and acrimony. In my eyes, he stood shoulder to shoulder with Christendom's great heroes.

Usually when I prayed I thought about God. I imagined him like a Greek sculpture of Zeus—an older man still strong and barrel-chested, draped in flowing robes and backed by a sky roiling with hurricane clouds. But on that day I saw only Chrissy. She floated in the cloudscape, clad in her crisp T-shirt and sandals, frizzy hair writhing sensually amid the storm winds. Her figure cast a brilliant light, shimmering with gold and spirituality. Though she smote me with heavenly brilliance, I didn't look away. Chrissy radiated pure love from the heart of the universe.

The next day I made up my mind to call her. This took some scheming. During a lull in American history class, I hit up my friend Jennifer Rattenberger for Chrissy's phone number. Jennifer scrawled it on a page in my spiral notebook but not before warning me that Chrissy was homeschooled and her family was extremely weird.

I waited to call until after dinner—my best chance at privacy—because that's when Mom and Dad would settle on the couch to watch *Seinfeld* and *ER*, and my little brother, Branson, would bug off and play with toys. Over dinner he told a

boring story about a science-class lesson on four-leaf clovers. I told him he was bound to find one if he searched the yard. I really worked him up, told him he'd have good luck for seven years, and if he caught a leprechaun, he owed me a cut of the gold. Branson adjusted the wire rims of his glasses. He said if he discovered leprechaun gold, I'd never see him again—he would move to Mexico and buy a villa.

Once Mom and Dad were sufficiently mesmerized by the TV, I snuck the cordless phone off the cradle and tiptoed to my room. I sat on the bed, stared at the keypad, and summoned all my pubescent courage. A man answered—friendly and good-natured, but fake. His tone changed when I asked for Chrissy. He turned gruff—fake gruff—and barked questions. Who was I and why was I calling? He muffled the phone and shouted for his daughter. He said *some boy* was on the line. His tone was accusatory, as if I were an inmate calling from the county jail.

Chrissy took the phone from her father, and when she said *hello?* her voice slid through the receiver like silk. I spoke rapidly and explained I'd met her at youth group. In the background, her father told her she could stay on the line for five minutes. Chrissy talked slowly, with the skepticism of one who didn't receive many phone calls and even fewer from boys. I cut to the chase, asked her out to the movie *Rounders*, starring Matt Damon. I was counting on Matt Damon to seal the deal. Chrissy breathed deeply into the speaker, producing a noise like Darth Vader. She said she couldn't go on dates—her parents didn't allow it.

Chrissy believed God was love. That was all that mattered. Heaven was a world of love.

"I guess your family is pretty religious," I said.

"They're insane."

Chrissy told me she was religious too, but not like her parents. Her life wasn't ruled by some dumb commandments from the twelfth century BC. Chrissy believed God was love. That was all that mattered. Heaven was a world of love.

I stood in my room with the phone against my face. Out the window, Branson scampered across the yard. He knelt by a thick patch of grass, worked his fingers through the blades in search of a four-leaf clover.

"My parents want me to stay in Tennessee forever and give birth to about seven babies," Chrissy said. "They're in for a surprise. I'm going to run away to the College of Wooster in Ohio to major in gender studies."

I told her I didn't know anything about Wooster, but anything was better than being stuck in Tennessee. Chrissy breathed ominously into the phone again. She asked a series of rapid-fire questions: Did I play sports? Was I planning to go to college? Who was my favorite biblical figure? I assured her I played basketball (but left out the part where I wasn't any good) and intended to go to college (never mind my failing grade in trigonometry) and my favorite person from the Bible was Samson because he was crazy strong and tore apart a lion with his bare hands. Chrissy considered my answers before issuing her verdict—she would ask her parents about the date.

"Don't get your hopes up," she said.

As the call ended, my door swung open, and Branson burst into the room. He'd found a four-leaf clover—green and delicate, one of nature's true miracles. He grinned proudly and jabbered in a decidedly un-Branson-like manner. What a good day, he said, and lucky.

Friday evening I watched a fiery sunset while waiting for Chrissy outside the big movie theater in Columbia. A busted panel van pulled up to the curb, brakes squeaking as it lurched to a stop. The passenger door opened, and Chrissy climbed out, smiling shyly. Over her shoulder I glimpsed her father—a man-sized toad hunched over the wheel. He cranked the van into drive, and his departure was like a dark cloud giving way to the brilliance of the sun.

Chrissy and I chatted about how excited we were to see the movie, then abruptly ran out of conversation. Teenagers jammed the lobby. Everybody was loud and having a lot of fun. Chrissy and I stood awkwardly, unsure how to act on a date. She smiled pleasantly, and I smiled back. A good start, but we couldn't just smile at each other all night.

"Here, let's try this," I said, dragging her to an arcade cabinet. The game was *Twin Cobra*, and the idea was to pilot a helicopter over a generically Middle Eastern landscape and blow up Saddam Hussein's army of tanks and fighter jets.

"Father never lets us play these," Chrissy said hesitantly, as if

I'd suggested popping into a strip club. "He says they're a waste of money."

"It's fun." I slipped a quarter into the slot and pressed Start, then gestured for her to take the joystick. "Dumb but fun."

I stood behind Chrissy and cupped my hand over hers, holding it to the joystick. I showed her how to pilot the helicopter and avoid enemies. Once she got the hang of it, she took over the controls while I shouted instructions. *Keep shooting! Use the bomb, Chrissy! Vaporize them!* She survived several waves before running out of lives, and when she finished and stepped away from the cabinet, she was ecstatic.

"I love it!" she said, flushed and out of breath. "That's the most fun I've had in my life."

This struck me as an extreme reaction, but I rolled with it. In my best impression of an actor in a romantic movie, I told her we could have even more fun tonight, if she trusted me. Moments later, she trusted me as I led her to the back row of the theater. She trusted me again when I draped my arm over her shoulders, and again after the lights went down and I kissed her with my tongue. We kept at it, off and on, for the entire movie, and the experience was transcendent. We alighted to a higher plane of existence, a paradise of infinite love, high above the secular world in all its misery and squalor. Once the credits rolled, I figured she was officially my girlfriend, and we'd get married someday and have kids—probably a lot of them. Before we left the theater, she brought her lips to my ear and whispered she loved me.

The following days were endless and marked by longing. Chrissy's parents wouldn't let us see each other during the school week. They didn't trust my intentions—which was smart of them. Chrissy and I became the Orpheus and Eurydice of our small Tennessee town, only if Eurydice had a telephone and called Orpheus every day to complain about life in the underworld. We spent hours on the line. I told funny stories about high school, and she complained about her weird homeschool Bible lessons. Often, our conversations turned toward God.

On Monday Chrissy explained her entire theology: The love of God is the most powerful force in the universe. To be a Christian, one merely has to love. That's why she hated it when *so-called Christians* invented bullshit rules. More than anything

in the world, Chrissy wanted to color her hair purple, but her parents considered it satanic. When Chrissy pointed out that the Bible did not condemn fun hair colors, they sent her to her room as punishment for her *secularism*.

Tuesday we discussed Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Chrissy insisted Mary Magdalene was Jesus's girlfriend. Chrissy grew up in the Church of Christ, which recognizes no saints, but she thought if anybody deserved sainthood it was Mary Magdalene. Chrissy said she wondered what it would be like to have sex with Jesus. She thought about it all the time. She said she wished she were having sex with Jesus right now.

By Wednesday we'd had enough of talking and hatched a plan.

The crux was for my pal Jennifer to invite Chrissy over to study. Chrissy had to pull some strings to get out of the house on a weeknight, but she prevailed, and when she arrived Jennifer took her down to the basement, where I waited on the couch. Chrissy ran to me and jumped into my lap, and we promptly made out.

"Y'all behave," Jennifer said. "This ain't no brothel."

Jennifer sat on a threadbare recliner and turned on the TV with a remote. She flipped channels until she found VH1, where Sarah McLachlan played a concert. She performed hits from her *Surfacing* album. She played "Sweet Surrender" and "Adia."

"Who is this?" Chrissy asked.

Jennifer and I exchanged glances.

"*Sarah McLachlan*," Jennifer said. "The most famous musician in the world."

"I like her voice," Chrissy said. "Sounds just like Rebecca St. James."

Jennifer's dad came downstairs briefly to deliver a Papa Johns pizza. Chrissy loved it and declared it the best pizza she'd ever tasted.

"All my parents ever buy are Tony's frozen pizzas from Kroger," she said.

Pretty soon Chrissy and I made out again. And it was just like when we were at the movies. Everything around us—the music on VH1, Jennifer frowning disapprovingly from the recliner—faded to static. Desire transported us from the mortal

realm to somewhere magical, where we were free to live and love without boundaries or interference, somewhere like the kingdom of God.

"I told you not to be gross," Jennifer said, flipping on a light switch.

Chrissy laughed and pulled up the collar of her shirt to hide her face.

Jennifer told her we had a surprise for her.

"I don't love surprises," Chrissy said, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. "Last time my parents surprised me, we drove to Kentucky to visit a replica of Noah's Ark."

I presented Chrissy with a small cardboard box. Ceiling lights illuminated its glossy surface. The box featured a photo of a woman showing off her hair in the color Galaxy Purple.

"No pressure or anything," I said, "but if you ever wanted to color your hair, tonight's the night."

Chrissy took the box and hugged it to her chest and smiled through tears. And so we got to work. An hour later, after the dye had been applied, given time to penetrate, and rinsed, Jennifer and I waited as Chrissy blow-dried her hair in the bathroom. The dryer whined loudly and ominously.

"How crushed will she be if it looks bad?" Jennifer asked.

"Are you familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"What if she blames you and hates you and never speaks to you again?"

"You're a great friend," I said.

Jennifer assured me it would be fine. She'd colored hair for dozens of people. Or at least a couple.

The blow dryer ceased its whining. The bathroom door opened, and Chrissy came forth, purple hair spilling over her shoulders. Honestly, she looked beautiful. I remember the scene as if witnessing it from afar—Jennifer in the recliner with her legs folded beneath her, me on the couch, leaning forward in awe, and Chrissy standing resplendent before us. The basement lights cast her in stark chiaroscuro, her face obscured by shadow while her hair blazed

The basement lights cast her in stark chiaroscuro, her face obscured by shadow while her hair blazed in color and light.

in color and light. A Renaissance painting brought to life. *The Adoration of Chrissy.*

The next day in the cafeteria, Jennifer dropped the bad news. Chrissy's parents didn't approve of her new look. She was grounded—indefinitely—and our relationship was done. No more dates, no more movies, no more phone calls. Chrissy wasn't even allowed to call to inform me of the grounding. The Hendersons blocked my number, and if I tried to contact their daughter again, they would alert the police.

The news rattled me. I felt nauseated and didn't finish lunch, and I couldn't concentrate on school for the rest of the day. Trigonometry was the worst. The teacher stood at the blackboard saying words like *sine* and *cosine* and *tangent*, but all I could think of was Chrissy. Later at home, I felt so bad that I went to my dad for advice. But the timing was wrong. He sat hunched in the dim living room and glowered as Dan Rather delivered the evening news. Ever since my grandparents had passed away, Dad spent a lot of time alone watching TV.

"Bill Clinton is a disgrace." Dad gestured aggressively at the screen. "It used to mean something to be a Democrat. Social Security? The Great Society? Now this bozo from Arkansas wants to kick everybody off welfare. William *Jefferson* Clinton took everything good about being a Democrat and turned it to garbage."

Next I turned to my mother. She sat outside on the porch swing, drinking red wine and reading a paperback copy of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. When I told her what had happened with Chrissy, Mom put on a show of sympathy, but I saw right through it. Pretty soon she told me to look at the bright side: Now I had more time to study trigonometry for the SAT.

Part III: My Personal Savior

The important thing to know about my parents is that they were completely useless. I went to my bedroom and lay down and looked at the ceiling. The ceiling didn't make me feel better, so I closed my eyes and imagined Chrissy, which made me feel worse. I supposed I would never speak to her again. The finality of it overwhelmed my adolescent mind. I loved Chrissy and no longer knew how to be happy without her. Despite our

great love, she had been excised from my life swiftly and with apparent ease. Humanity is a cruel species, with bitter hearts hardened by quiet tragedies. A love as true as the one Chrissy and I shared never had a chance.

I went to the garage for my bicycle. I needed to feel the wind on my face, a fresh breeze to sweep away sorrow. I pedaled for miles with no clear destination. The metallic chirp of the bike chain accompanied me as I cruised down tree-lined roads. Eventually I found myself in front of my family's church. Chip Sterling perched atop a stepladder to paint the window shutters. My brakes squeaked as I came to a stop. In my darkest hour, a light shone—the light of my hero Chip.

I wheeled my bike up to the church. Chip rested his brush on a paint tray and climbed down the ladder. I told him it was nice of him to volunteer at the church. He laughed and told me it was part of his job. He was the church's youth pastor but also the maintenance man. Chip said he didn't mind manual labor—just another way to serve God. I tried to be cheerful and not let on about my recent heartbreak, but Chip was no fool. He looked at me seriously and asked if I was OK. I glanced down at my feet and muttered something about Chrissy.

"So it's girl trouble." Chip rubbed his paint-flecked chin and looked to the church. "Follow me. I've got just the thing."

He ushered me up the front steps and into the sanctuary—darker and emptier than I had ever seen it—and downstairs to the fellowship hall, where he ducked into his closet-sized office to change out of his overalls. He emerged as the Chip I knew, in distressed jeans and a crisp black Newsboys T-shirt.

In each hand he clutched a dewy can of Miller Lite.

"If we're gonna talk about girls, we gotta drink."

Chip handed me a can. The metal was so cold it burned. We sat facing each other in folding chairs, and I watched wide-eyed as he cracked open his can and took a swig. Was this a trick? A test of my virtue and loyalty to Jesus? I took my first-ever sip of an alcoholic beverage. I tried to be cool, like I knew what I was doing. The beer tasted bad in an alien way, incomprehensible to my innocent palate.

"Wow, that's good," I said.

Chip asked what was up with Chrissy. I spilled my guts, told him the whole story about making out at the movie and talking

for hours on the phone and coloring her hair purple. Periodically I paused to sip beer. I hoped it would get better as I drank, but it didn't.

"Her parents will never let us see each other again," I said. "I don't know what to do. I don't want to live without her. I love her. I love Chrissy."

Chip nodded sagely. He told me he had once felt the same way about a girl. When she dumped him, she ripped his heart right out of his body. But the breakup set him on a new path. God's path. If she hadn't dumped him, he never would have become a youth pastor.

"She didn't understand servanthood," he said. "God always comes first. Some women can't accept second place."

I told him I hadn't given up on Chrissy. Maybe we still had a chance. Maybe God would intervene if I prayed more. Maybe the big guy would cut me a deal. Chip told me not to worry. Everything happened according to God's plan. Everything. Why were we drinking beer in the church basement? Because God willed it.

"I believe God has big things in store for you," he said. "Bigger even than Chrissy."

Chip's wisdom was undeniable, but still it rubbed me wrong. Chrissy was my destiny. I wanted to run away with her to a place where no one would find us, where we could be free and our love would remain perfect and beautiful forever.

Chip burped and said he'd be right back. He went to his office and returned with two more beers. He gave me one, and I drank from it even though I hadn't finished the first. The second beer also tasted terrible. Chip drank and stared into the distance. He rubbed his eyes like he might cry. He told me his girlfriend left because he wouldn't have sex with her. And it's not that he hadn't wanted it. It's just that, for him, God makes the rules. But his girlfriend wouldn't listen. She called him all sorts of names. She wasn't pure, like Chip. Chip kept himself pure because he loved God so much.

I wanted to run away with her to a place where no one would find us, where we could be free and our love would remain perfect and beautiful forever.

"I'm not as strong as you," I said. "If Chrissy wanted to have sex, I'd do it. I mean, I love God and everything, but I'd do it. I'd have sex with Chrissy right here on the church floor."

Chip laughed. He said maybe it was God's plan for me to have sex with Chrissy on the church floor. Then he asked if I wanted to do something cool. He suggested playing Dungeons & Dragons. I wasn't a fan of the game, but I was a fan of Chip, so after he fetched the rulebooks from his office, I dutifully rolled a handful of dice to determine my character's ability scores. I intended to play as an elven ranger, but Chip said the best class was paladin. He said it forcefully, like when a suggestion is more than a suggestion. I rolled a paladin.

Chip disappeared upstairs for a few minutes and returned in a choir robe. He told me not to call him Chip anymore. He was Grizzlor, the dungeon master. Chip launched right into the D&D session—I awoke in a lair of elemental evil, a blood-soaked chamber where cultists worshipped a fiend of the underworld. My quest was to root out the cult. It was my sacred duty, as a paladin of Lord Jehovah. Over the next hour, I explored the dungeon, found treasure, and fought demon-possessed cultists. Chip made a lot of ominous pronouncements about *darkness* and *the beast*. Actually, it was the most boring D&D session I'd ever played. Too much math. Every dungeon master has their own style, and Chip's was anal retentive. D&D is meant to be a fun game of high adventure, but with Chip it was all about calculating THAC0 and rolling initiative. Long about my thousandth saving throw, my mind wandered. I started thinking about Chrissy. Maybe later I'd bike to her house and throw pebbles at her window. Maybe we'd run away together, forever and for good.

"You stepped in an acid trap," Chip said. "Roll for damage."

I wished Chrissy were there in the church, playing with us. I would bravely fight off hordes of devil cultists to save her. And if they overmatched me, Chrissy would cast a spell to whisk us to the astral plane, where at long last we would be alone and could do whatever we wanted, because nothing matters on the astral plane and time doesn't exist.

"The door standing before you is locked," Chip said. "Perform a dexterity check."

"How did you cope after the breakup?" I asked. "Everything sucks without Chrissy. Everything is terrible. From now on, every day of my life will be the worst."

"It was hard." Chip reached for a figurine of a busty female warrior and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "After she left, I got even closer to God. I read the Bible from cover to cover and devoted my life to Jesus."

"So it all worked out for the best."

"I don't know." Chip kept rubbing away on the busty warrior. "Sometimes I think I made a big mistake. Like my whole life is a mistake. A fucking joke. What am I even doing? I live in a studio apartment. The world's shittiest apartment, with roughly a thousand cockroaches per square foot. Every night I go home and smash cockroaches, and I think about my old friend Benny from high school. Benny works for Goldman Sachs. Benny makes more money than God. He bought a house last year. It's beautiful. He's shopping for a boat. Sometimes I think becoming a youth pastor was the biggest mistake of my life."

Never had I seen Chip so low. Always before, he had radiated joy and confidence, like a vessel illuminated by the glory of the Lord. Now his light had been snuffed out, and I didn't know how to help him. All I had were hackneyed words of encouragement: "Chip, you're awesome. Everybody loves you. We'd be lost without you. You're the greatest youth pastor of all time."

"The greatest youth pastor of all time wouldn't make a kid drink beer." Chip chugged his Miller Lite. "The greatest youth pastor of all time wouldn't play Dungeons & Dragons."

"But we need you." I took a big gulp of beer to show him how much I liked it. "You taught us the secular world is filthy and vile. You taught us to trust God."

"God really screwed me over. I've been thinking about quitting the church, going back to college to learn computer code for the internet. Have you heard of HTML? They say there's a ton of money in it."

"Money is the root of all evil," I said. "That's what you taught us. All we need is love."

"Well, I tried love, but it didn't work. And you know what else? Christian music sucks. DC Talk? *Sucks*. Audio Adrenaline? *Sucks*." Chip slung off the choir robe. He tugged at his Newsboys shirt and pulled it over his head and threw it to the floor. "The Newsboys suck! You hear that, God? Your music sucks!"

"Calm down!" I said, staring at Chip's naked chest. His skin

was pale, and his nipples stood out like pink flowers. "This isn't even you."

"Oh, it's me all right. The new me. Chip the computer programmer. Chip 2.0. Silicon Valley Chip. I will make so much money. I'll get a nose ring and tattoos. And I'll play Dungeons & Dragons whenever I want." Chip grabbed his beer and took a slug. He poured the rest over his chest and crunched the can and slammed it against the wall. "And I'll listen to the best music. Nirvana and Radiohead and Black-*fucking*-Sabbath."

Chip's sudden transformation was hard to take, and harder still thanks to the three-fourths of a beer I had consumed. I didn't like everything I saw. Secular ambition? Love of money? His attitude toward women, in particular, seemed problematic. Even a kid like me might have taught him a thing or two about being a good boyfriend. Chip had never appeared so flawed, so fallen and human. I felt closer to him than ever. This lost man flailing before me was no longer my mentor or spiritual guide. He was something better. A friend.

My new friend Chip farted audibly and fondled his beer-slicked chest. He marched to his office and returned with a fresh can of Miller Lite. He cracked it open and held it aloft for a toast.

"To the secular world."

I lowered my beer can and frowned.

"But I still believe in love."

I told him I wanted to be with Chrissy and had a plan. I would study hard all year and pass trigonometry with an A. Then I would apply and get accepted on scholarship to Wooster, the one place in the world where Chrissy and I could be together. We would hold hands and walk across the tree-lined campus. We would fool around in my room in the coed dorm. Ours was an immaculate love—innocent and pure—and at Wooster no one would interfere. Our love was stronger than the entire secular world and all the armies of Satan. At Wooster we would be free and happy forever.

Chip considered my words.

He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"Brother," he said, "that's beautiful."

After that we said our goodbyes, and I wished him good luck on becoming a website programmer, even though secretly

I hoped he would stay with the church and remain a youth pastor forever, since he was good at it and had taught me so much about God and his perfect love. I hopped on my bike and rode home in no particular hurry. Night had fallen, and I lowered my chin into the collar of my windbreaker to keep out the chill. I pedaled hard up a steep slope and pulled off the roadside into gravel at the summit. The hilltop provided a grand view of a highway. Cars and trucks and motorcycles sped into town and out, headlights blazing against the dark. I wondered if I would ever see Chrissy again. I wondered when Chip would depart for Silicon Valley. Cars on the highway kept coming and going. Going and coming. The truth, I guess, is everybody leaves eventually. Tires shushed against asphalt, and the sound made me sleepy. I wished to be home in bed with my head nestled on a soft pillow. Maybe I would dream about someplace warm, a mossy garden full of all the people I'd ever loved, standing barefoot in beds of clover, a garden where all are forgiven and welcomed with open arms. More than anything I wanted to see Marcy. I wanted to hold her hand again and tell her about all the trouble I'd gotten myself into since she'd been gone. A truck sped along the highway, sending the rumble of its engine echoing off the hillside. I followed with my eyes until the truck disappeared over the ridge, until even the light of its high beams vanished. Heaven is where we find again all the people we have lost.

FATIMAH ASGHAR

[YOU]

in the hammock in brazil, i showed
you tobacco as i had learned her. you,
a smoker, but not knowing her like this.
puffing without inhaling, the smoke
spiraling softly to the sky. around us,
nests of caterpillars cocooned
chrysalises of their own becoming.
like them, we were becoming.
you & i, becoming.

+

oh mother, of a land i cannot return to.
oh father, of a family i do not know.

oh country, oh border, oh law: renounce
the land of my father to have a shot at entering

the land of my mother. give up the unknown
for the chance at return. oh mother. oh father.

oh choice, oh end, oh begin, open, open, open.

+

in the wild of the jungle, i confessed
i was at a door, banging, that would not
open. *there's no way into kashmir*

i can see. months of meetings
with every organization
& being told no. my dream:

to be important enough to cross
a border. to be so important
i could go home. there was no

way in. in my shadow, in the dark side
of the mountain, i ignored a family
alive & waiting for a home where

no one would remember my name.
my father's call in the redwoods.
what about my kin why

only your mother's at atheel's wedding
she vowed *i used to think freedom*
was the choice to have it all. i realized

freedom is the ability to say, it is you, it is
this one choice, that i choose.

+

i prayed for love & saw a horse carrying
me to a cottage. we rode horses through
a jungle & river & i chose you. you, picking
the fattest book at the library to read. threading
the name of my mama's land into your flag.
hanging up a duvet as a painting. you; leather
bikers' jacket, you; doing sit ups while the dog
jumped on your chest. you; who i chose.
you; standing at the shrine to bad boys.

+

what i chose—my father, after years of pining
for my mother. you, after years of pining for the
ones who claimed to love me. writing the book
when i didn't know where it would lead. saying
i didn't know. a friend over the project. myself
over the friend. you over me. & finally, me over you.

+

you made homecoming
possible. you opened
the window when it was
stuck. you went through
& held out your hand. you
helped thread part of the needle.
we walked in the village
& no one would talk to me.
you said, *this is my wife. yes,*
this is my wife.

& i believed.

+

when you called me wife
everyone beamed & said
mashallah. the soft praise
to god, protecting us
golden threaded & following
as we walked the streets,

i think everyone here loves love
you said, dimple in your cheek
laugh rasping the field between us.

+

oh, your rasp.
your scratched
voice, my little

charmander.
in your throat,
running, the child

in you, fire-born
& wild.
voice smoked

dipped in
mezcal, like it
was made to burn.

+

in the best of the dreams
i wake & we are still ours.

you are not the past, not
something i'm trying to forget.

mundane, we pack for another
trip. *where are we going?* i ask

& you do not answer.

+

when you chose her, i was
in the house alone. the door
wouldn't open. i banged
& banged. i said no & still
you brought her in. the window
was stuck. i couldn't open it.
the smoke rose. *wife*. what a small
word. thinning to air.

thinning to fucking air.

+

then, after you left, my body
hollowed. my me left.

i was a body, without you
as i had been before, but

felt wrong. i forgot how to eat. i didn't
sleep. but i sat, kuripe in my palm.

stilling the war in my mind.
you, who i would have given

my voice just to keep
our little lie, our little life.

+

in islam the angels are
terrifying, horned & black-winged,

scaled like dragons. power,
like love, will make you throw up.

+

when you came, the glass on the altar
broke. i pulled cards & claimed

expansion. when you came, i woke.
years of dusted living blew off my bones.

when you came, i prayed for softness.
let him be someone i can love for a long time.

+

for a while, the prayer held & then
it didn't. i shot the arrow

& missed. i had to root in the woods
& make sure i didn't kill something

else. in the spell of love, my sight
blurred. in the spell of love, i had

no aim.

+

if the angels are not concerned
with being pretty, then why

am i? the red on my lips
smearing the glass

on my teeth, on your cheek
in the photos, marking you.

mine, until you wash it off
mine, until you leave.

+

the first time i met love, real love
i got on my knees & apologized

for my life before. every mistake
i'd made illuminated by its light.

it came through the earth,
my ancestors lining up one

after another, a long curve
of those i'd forgotten & those

whose names i never knew.
the mountain's jagged light.

the mountains, saying, *you are ours.*
all the love i thought i'd met before

just guesswork, an approximation,
a broken compass, a struggling poem.

no human could give me that, only
Khuda, a field so bright i wondered

how i could never meet it before.
irresponsible, my tiny heart

breaks, how i mistook my small
flame for wildfire.

+

once, i knew you & then i did not.
simple. once you knew me

& then i was a stranger. once
you held the part of me that

i did not let others see & i held
yours. once, i kept your secrets.

i cradled you in the soft side
of my mountain, i took the sun

so you could sleep. i convinced
the stones. i gave them my honey.

i whispered *please*.

+

under the sun nothing is safe.
on top, the mountain witnesses

all & still stands. the heat loud, a sun
in the north & the south & the west & east.

in sight, there is nowhere for darkness to hide.
even the soft turn of my wrist, loud

& written down, accounted for. even
you, back towards me, moving

on your own, singing a song
i do not know, a song i cannot hear.

+

when you left, the sky went out.
when you left, i was in my own

gorge, i had a mountain to climb.
when you left, i couldn't find

the candle. when you left, my friends
couldn't see my eyes. when you left

hours slipped & i lost where i was.
when you left, a valley of shadow

opened & called my name, a valley
of tears allah either did or did not see.

to open your heart, it needs
to break, my teacher said. oh.

oh. every thorn is breathing
in the wind. can't you see?

im wearing my skin inside out.
im breathing with my blood.

CAYLEE WEINTRAUB

KEEPERS

For a second, my face pressed flat against the concrete floor, I think Sasha might hold me here forever. This, despite her knowing me from the time she was a calf. This, despite the trust we built through training exercises and illnesses and long nights staring at each other through aquarium glass. But when we came to the end of our routine, she grabbed the back of my wet suit in her mouth and would not let me go. I heard one loud gasp—mine, or the audience's, or both—and then everything went dead. Now she has me pinned at the bottom of the pool, and I haven't felt pressure in my lungs like this since the day you asked me to marry you and I couldn't say yes.

Bubbles fizz around my face and my mouth fills with sour saltwater that makes my whole sinus cavity burn. She holds the skin between my shoulder blades and each of her two hundred teeth dig into me, and all I can do is let out this mangled animal sound I didn't know was inside me. I thrash and hit and claw, but none of it matters because Sasha is so strong. My nails connect with Sasha's smooth gray skin, but it makes no difference. I reach for anything, for everything, pulling at the collar of my wet suit, my vision tunneling to blackness and little sparks floating everywhere in front of my face. No one understands how strong a dolphin is until she wants you dead.

And then you appear.

In the blue-dyed water of the Dolphin Amphitheatre, I see you for the first time since you left Florida. You stare at me, your face hovering in the water. Lying there at the bottom, my body so useless in her world, I see you gathering your things in the early morning when you thought I wasn't awake yet. I see the quiet, concentrated look you got when putting together one of your favorite puzzles on a Saturday morning. I see you the way you looked in tenth grade, acne dotting your face like flecks of fish food, before the two of us had to face the world. My lungs burning under all 130 pounds of her, I see your mouth moving, saying something I can't understand.

Maybe she's playing. Maybe this is what she would do if we

were in the ocean and I were one of her species. But as her teeth needle my back, sharp and unrelenting, I realize she wants me gone. Somewhere far above me, there are muffled noises. The water sloshes with movement. I grab at my throat and it's hard to see anything, even myself or Sasha, just darkness. And you.

I scratch her again, hard enough this time that little geysers of blood, hers and mine, float in the water. Sasha shakes my body from side to side, the concrete floor burning my face like a road burn. You always told me to be careful working with the dolphins, that they are unpredictable creatures, and I brushed you off. Maybe you had a point after all.

But it's my fault. I pushed Sasha too far. I have a tendency to do that, as you can attest. It was the trick she always struggles with—you know, the one where she explodes out of the water and jumps through the ring. I forced Sasha onto her side when she didn't want to be, and that's what made her snap.

And now, down here on the floor of the aquarium, my lungs burning, you tell me to be with you. You tell me we can get married and have this forever. We are twenty years old, and the world can be ours if only we want it badly enough. We can live in an apartment until we save up enough money, and then we can think about kids. We can get out of this godforsaken state with its mosquitoes and heat and hurricanes. It doesn't matter if we have everything figured out, because we have each other. I stop struggling.

Dylan, maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I was wrong to let you go. I'm going to die from a dolphin attack, and all I can think about is you.

Something jerks in my body. My training kicks in like an instinct. All those hours of zookeeping safety courses seemed pointless until right now. I hit Sasha on the nose as hard as I can, in the place where her sensory organs converge. Her bite loosens enough for me to swim to the surface. I push the water away from me, kicking my legs in a stir of bubbles. I stretch toward the surface, away from her and your voice that haunts those depths, everything in me burning.

The whole time we were together, I never knew what I wanted. I couldn't pick which Fleetwood Mac album to listen to on our beach drives or if I should go to college or what we should have for dinner or if I wanted a future together. But as I reach toward the rippled surface of the amphitheatre pool, I know. I

know with the kind of sharp and piercing clarity you always wanted from me. I know I want air.

Since my near-drowning three days ago, Seaside has slated Sasha for death. I try to explain to Angela that Sasha has bad days. What mammal doesn't? I try to explain that despite her aggression, she is still the dolphin who rested her head in my lap when she was sick, who built seashell castles in her enclosures to soothe herself during bad storms, stacking cockles and whelks one on top of the other. But Angela won't hear it.

"Isn't there another option?" I grab her arm as she leaves her morning meeting. It's a quiet day, low attendance, since what happened. The moon jellies ebb in their exhibit.

"I don't want to do this. I don't want it to be this way." She holds her hands up as if surrendering them to me. "Why are you even here? I told you to take off."

I follow her through the staff entrance to the back—the behind-the-scenes, as you always called it. I know I should hate Sasha. I know she betrayed me. But for those few moments when I held her dorsal fin, I felt my muscles stretch and strengthen. I felt who I could become. "Please don't do this."

"She almost drowned you, Mia." The tanks' filtration system hums as Angela pulls frozen fish out of the fridge. You always liked this back area, with its endless tubes, battery backups, and off-display parts of the animal pools. You said it was like lifting the curtain to see Oz. "I watched you nearly die."

Angela came with me in the ambulance last Friday. She held my hand while my whole body shivered and they fed me warm fluids through an IV the way we would for an animal in distress. My throat was raw from swallowing so much water, and the doctors kept telling me I was so lucky. *Fish girl*, the nurse called me. *All you need is some stitches.* I didn't have the energy to tell her that a dolphin is a mammal—one of us—and not a fish. And I didn't have the energy to tell her I didn't feel lucky because all I could think about was Sasha and the fate that would befall her.

"She can't be rehabilitated. We can't let her stay. It's too dangerous. I told you if this happened one more time, then that was it. This is it." She gives me a stern look I can't hold.

When Sasha first became aggressive, I thought it was because she was going through a rough patch. Or maybe she was having

teenage angst like any mammal. But her condition advanced too quickly for it to be anything normal. She snapped at children who tried to pet her during her brief stint at the Swimming with the Dolphins event. She charged at visitors who took pictures of her against her will. We took her off display for a few days, but when we put her back in the main tank, she was vengeful. She held tight to Lexi, biting into her arm until I hit her with the shark prod.

She has zoochosis. That much is very clear to me now. I discovered the term during one of my late-night Googling sessions when I couldn't sleep. It's a kind of depression and panic associated with capture. It's how I felt the moment you tried to decide my whole life.

"She could make it in the ocean, maybe," I say. "A release." She has spent half her life in captivity, since I rescued her as a yearling. Most dolphins lose their natural instincts—their ability to hunt, to sense danger, to interact with other dolphins. But Sasha's instincts are more intact than ever. She's not like the Four Seasons—Summer, Spring, Winter, and Autumn—our captive-born show dolphins. The ones we sell as stuffed animals and on T-shirts in the gift shop, who love to be hugged, touched, trained.

I did that a lot after you left. I swam out in the ocean until I imagined myself falling off the edge of the planet, like I still existed in a world where the earth was flat.

Angela puts her hand on my arm. "You know she wouldn't make it there. We're euthanizing her tomorrow. It's the kindest thing to do for her."

I never should have brought her here. I found her on one of my dives through the open water near our apartment. I did that a lot after you left. I swam out in the ocean until I imagined myself falling off the edge of the planet, like I still existed in a world where the earth was flat.

She was starving, and her pale gray body was sunburned because she had been floating at the surface for so long. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her against my stomach the way I would a spare air tank, or a drowning child. She was too weak to fight against me, and we weren't too far from the shore, and I swam with her until the ocean gave way to sand.

I loaded her in the back seat of my shitty Prius you always

worried would break down, wrapping her in that old, crusty gray towel in the trunk you always wanted me to throw away. She had pneumonia. Dr. Mel couldn't tell why she was abandoned. Weakness, maybe. Or something deeper. It didn't really matter to me. I know the reasons for leaving are never simple, whether it is a pod of dolphins or a human being.

I spent all the nights I would have spent with you rubbing aloe on her sunburned skin. I changed her IV regularly. I made sure the port for her liquid diet went into her stomach and didn't get infected.

Those nights with Sasha were the only thing that helped after you left and I found remnants of you everywhere. Strands of your hair clogging the shower drain. Your favorite brand of wheat bread growing green mold in the bread box. I slept next to Sasha's tank, the water reflecting beautiful swirls across the tile floor.

Now, Sasha rests at the bottom of her isolation tank. I dump in some frozen sardines. Their scarred silver eyes stare up at me. She comes to the surface and rests her head on the edge.

We've already forgiven each other. I know when she pulled me under, it was because I overstepped. Whenever I snapped at you, it would take weeks for you to forgive me. Not Sasha. There is a simplicity in our relationship, a sudden violence followed by complete reconciliation.

"I knew I'd find you here," Lexi says as she grabs a bag of lettuce from the fridge. I have always thought Lexi exceptionally beautiful, like a storm coming in over water, or the arc of a wave. Angela comes in close behind her and gives me an exhausted look.

"I can tell she's upset," I say.

"You're projecting." Angela pulls a bag of frozen fish from the freezer.

"She's frustrated."

"Girl," Lexi says, "she tried to kill you."

This morning, I checked my back in the mirror and saw a long triangle shape of stitches that pulled my skin together where Sasha's two hundred teeth broke skin and tendon.

"Mia. You need to take this seriously," Angela says, holding a feeding bucket. "You know this is the right thing to do. Tell her, Lexi, please." Water trickles through the filters. Shirley the manatee looks at me through the glass. I wave to her.

Lexi raises her eyebrows. "I'm worried about you." She puts

her hand to her face. "It happened so fast on Friday. You were there, and then you weren't."

"I'm fine. Really." I bend to grab the blue feeding bucket and wince at the way the movement pulls at the stitches and my sore muscles. Lexi rolls her eyes and takes the bucket from me. We look into the dolphin pool.

"You're better off without him, you know," Lexi says, talking about you, of course. "You don't need anyone except this mess right here." She points to me, and I try to smile.

I trail my fingers in the water and watch the ripples spread outward. Sasha rubs her head against my hand. But I see her eyes narrow and turn upward the way they do when she gets impatient, so I pull back. She swims down. I wait for a few minutes and, as always, she circles back around to me and offers her head again. It's not that hard, really, to know what another creature wants, deep down.

I update Sasha's behavioral log in my waterproof notebook. *Anxious, aggressive. Exhibits pacing tendencies. Loss of appetite.* You always used to narrate my actions as if we were in a nature documentary and you were Sir David Attenborough: *The wild Mia is angry. Observe her sitting on the couch in silence. The male will bring an offering of chocolate.*

Those nights we watched Blue Planet together were perfectly numbing. My head on your shoulder and the deep sea on the screen. You used to tell me I was everything you ever wanted. That after your dad left when you were fourteen, the same age mine left too, you wanted to make a family that wouldn't break. Some part of me wanted that too, you know, even though, like Lexi says, I'm not supposed to need anyone. That's what made it so hard.

I bend to rub Sasha's face, thumbing along her thick nose, and it feels as smooth as a fresh-shaven cheek.

I know what I have to do.

I dress in your black hoodie and drive to Seaside. I'm not sure what the right clothes are for a dolphin rescue, but I figure black is the most discreet. You probably wouldn't believe that I—who takes an hour to decide between my blue Seaside keeper shirt or my green, who obeys every speed limit—would break into my place of work at night. But I'm trying to become someone you won't recognize.

I switch off the ignition and look around the empty parking

lot. A discarded popcorn bag rolls across the parking lot like a dead jellyfish washing ashore.

There have been other euthanasias at Seaside before, but never for violence. There was Sally, our fifteen-year-old arthritic manatee. Laila, the pilot whale scarred too deeply by a passing boat. Benjamin, the sea turtle born with no flippers: a floating shell.

My phone buzzes in my pocket like a thrashing thing, and I jump. It's my mother. She's been calling every day since you left. Asking if I've heard from you. What she's supposed to do with my wedding dress. She'd already started making it. When a daughter is with a boy for four years, it seemed safe to assume it was a done deal, but apparently not. I could hold my breath underwater for four whole minutes, and still I felt more suffocated when her measuring tape was against my waist. Feeling you and her and everyone else choose my life for me while I stayed there silent, unable to speak.

I'm still trying to untrain myself from you. I still wake up at the same time as your alarm, even though there's no sound. I still search for your Irish Spring soap scent, and wish I had a more advanced olfactory system that could detect you even from thousands of miles away.

I keep thinking about the day we met. The man o'war day, when you were on the beach doing one of your 1,000-piece puzzles you were always doing, and there I was with red welts on my calves, crying, snot dripping down my face, another problem to be solved. You called the ambulance and my mom, then waited with me while the tentacle venom burned my legs.

"Isn't it kind of hard doing a puzzle at the beach?" I asked, sniffling. I imagined lost pieces buried in the sand. Little grains getting in between the edges.

"I mean, yes, actually. But I think it's better than being stung by a man o'war."

After the hospital and the paramedics, we went to the diner where you worked, and my wet hair dripped onto the fake leather bench seat. Your hair kept falling in your eyes. We had AP World together, we realized. I sat in the back, and you sat in the middle front. Your favorite era was the Roman Empire. I loved the Mayans. There was a piece of cheese on the corner of your mouth, but I said nothing because I didn't want to embarrass you. And you said I never loved you.

You set me up on the couch in my house with a blanket and a glass of water until my mother came back from her night shift.

You were so careful with everything despite the fact that our whole house was in disarray—the way you put the blanket on me, the coaster you put the glass of water on. You stayed a few more hours to fix the leaking sink. Then you came back with a proper tool set to fix the back patio door that didn't fully latch. *A man that fixes things without asking? Marry him*, my mother said. You wanted to fix all the pieces of my life, and I let you.

I loved your steadiness, your worry, always, about whether I was taking care of myself, even if it got annoying sometimes. *Did you make it back home safe? Did you remember to lock the door?* In a way, what we had was one long rescue mission.

I scan my pass and let myself in through the employee entrance. I pass the otter enclosure—Allison, your favorite, is a mother now. She has three pups who float on her stomach. She opens her eyes and glares at me in the dark from the fake rocks at the top of her tank, thinking me a threat.

And Alfred, the nurse shark, is slowing down these days. You were right about him going blind. The cataracts sit on his eyes like silver coins. I stand in front of his tank and put my hand against the glass. "It's okay, old man," I tell him. He gets anxious at night because he can't see. He hovers in the water.

I stop in front of Queen, the leatherback turtle who permanently scowls. You always said she was the Grumpy Cat of Seaside, and it's true. She floats in her tank, looking disgusted at sweaty families and children with blue popsicle-stained mouths.

The red-eared slider turtles see me and start swimming toward the glass. I throw them a few pellets left over in my pockets.

Remember when we got drinks with the other keepers and we decided what animals we would be? We all agreed you'd be a turtle, so deliberate and sure. You said I'd be a seahorse, and I know you meant it as something good, but all I could think about were the leafy sea dragons that get stuck to the filters of their aquarium and die there. Who can, with one strong current, lose one of their fins or even a piece of their tail, they are that fragile. I never saw myself that way until you said that. And the sad part was that no one, not even Lexi, disagreed with you.

I look into the dolphin pool. The emergency light on the battery backups bathes the room in red. Summer, sensitive to noise, stirs in the water, making small waves.

"Shh," I tell her. "I'm on a rescue mission." I open the frozen

lunch box filled with sardines I brought to distract the Four Seasons while I evacuate Sasha.

She is at the very bottom. She circles listlessly, her nose scarred from rubbing against the concrete walls day and night.

The signs were so clear she needed to be set free. I knew it a long time ago. But I kept putting off the realization because I didn't want to face your pile of clothes on the chair next to my bed, your collection of perfect coquina shells still lined on your nightstand.

I lure her to the surface with food. But even when she surfaces, she looks up at me with complete apathy. She lets me slide the water sling under her belly, her skin smooth against my hand. She thrashes for a moment as I pull her out of the enclosure and onto the deck, where I have the pushcart dolly we use for animal transportation days.

She isn't as heavy as I expected, and I strap her down to the cart. She doesn't move, not really. Her whole body is the pale gray of an aged nickel.

"I'm sorry." Her head has shrunk from lack of fat. If she hadn't been starving herself for the last few days, it would be impossible to pull her. But she's light enough. The cart clicks down the animal evacuation path we use for hurricanes. My arm aches, but I know I have to do this. I know I have to make this right.

We come out by the parking lot in that small side area where you used to pick me up after work. It's then I hear the sudden screech of the Seaside alarms. I forgot Angela had them installed since some teenagers kept sneaking into the aquarium at night and skinny-dipping. The security lights turn on and the fish startle in their tanks. "Fuck," I tell Sasha.

I pull the cart faster toward my old shitty Prius. She stares up at me, and I wish she could tell me what she feels. Do you remember that night we went kayaking in the bay? In the distance were soft, persistent calls of a baby osprey. I felt such sharp grief, suddenly, even though I wasn't sure what I had lost.

You reached out across the kayak. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, and you took it the wrong way.

"Why don't you ever just let me help you?"

I didn't know how to tell you what I was feeling, how to put it into words. And you were always pushing me to make myself understandable when, Dylan, sometimes I don't even understand myself.

The shine of a flashlight strobes over us.

Angela, probably. She lives in a trailer right next to the aquarium—our built-in night guard, she always jokes. I lift the sides of Sasha's sling and put her in the back seat where she barely fits. I have to fold her tail to close the door. She thrashes for a moment before settling down. I put the seatbelt over her, just in case. I collapse the cart and throw it in the trunk, where it makes a loud metal clang.

The flashlight beam sweeps over me. "Hey!" Angela calls. "Hey! Stop!"

I turn on the ignition and hit the gas. A wave of crushed shells spits out the back wheels. I drive through the exit, hitting part of the gate on my way out. If you were here now, you'd tell me I'm making a mistake. You'd tell me I'm being stupid.

But instead, I press on the pedal hard, and I tell Sasha, "I'm taking you home."

The waves crash, and Sasha stirs in the back seat. Her eyes shine like pearls cut from the muscles of oysters. I load her on the transportation dolly again, pulling her over the thick sand to the Seaside boat we use for rehabilitation releases. I stop to kick the wheels that keep getting jammed up. And then I hear sirens behind us, loud and wailing.

"How'd they find us?" Angler's Cove is secluded and far away from any public beach. Seaside alone has access rights to the docks.

Sasha's tracker, I realize. We tag every Seaside animal. Months ago, I put Sasha's microchip just behind her dorsal fin.

"We have to go, Sasha." When I turn, I see the red-and-blue flicker of police lights. Hear the sirens as they pull up on the beach. Sasha bends back and forth on the sand in distress. "Shit, shit shit."

I push Sasha onto the boat. Her body thrashes in the sling, and I feel her pulling against me. But once she's on the hard plastic of the boat floor she goes still, like she knows she's a secret.

There's no boat key. I know, I know, I never think ahead. I don't envision the future. You've told me many times before.

The police shine their flashlights on us, and I hide beneath the bow, pressing myself against Sasha. "Police! Come out!"

The flashlights scan the shore, and I watch my shadow absorb Sasha's.

"What are we going to do?" I look into her dark brown eyes, but there is an abyss between us.

The hard plastic of the boat presses into my knees. I crawl to the steering wheel column where the cables hang down. Once, when we were caught in a storm while we were free diving, the boat died. You told me to step aside while you rewired it, even though my father took me out fishing every weekend when I was younger. Our old clunker stalled out plenty of times, and I learned how to jump start just about anything. But I still let you do it because that was our relationship: you fixing things, me letting you.

But I still let you do it because that was our relationship: you fixing things, me letting you.

I press the wires together now, intertwining the copper strands, and the propeller spins. The boat rumbles.

"Stop! Don't move!"

The engine roars to life, and I hear three sharp clicks and the sound of metal hitting metal. I look behind me as I drop the motor down, and there are the police shooting at the propeller. "Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit." Sasha's eyes widen, or maybe it's just the glint of my reflection in them.

I hold tight to the steering wheel. The boat jerks a few times, but then I find my footing, and I take us to sea.

We're back where I found Sasha two months ago, near that sandbar close to No Name Key. Maybe I should have left her there and let life take its natural course. I thought I was doing a good thing by helping her, which is probably also how you felt about me.

We bob in the water. Small scratches on Sasha's belly bleed onto the floor of the boat. I hold your hoodie to a bad scrape on her abdomen. It's small, maybe the width of my pinky finger, but her blood is deep and red. Her eyes are two chips of playground tar.

I open the sliding panel of the boat specially made to release animals directly into the water with minimal struggle. I push

Sasha until she's right at the edge, the way I've done with other releases. I pet her back, feeling her smooth skin.

For a moment, I think about bringing her back with me. I think about holding on to her the way she did with me at the bottom of her enclosure. I remember her as a baby, how she rested her chin in my hand when she got tired, how the aloe absorbed into her sunburn, how I'd see myself reflected in her eyes and think, *That's me, there I am.*

Sasha reaches around and bites my hand hard. In her thrashing she slips through the opening and into the water with a splash that soaks my whole body. Always when I think I know her, she reminds me I don't.

She disappears into the water before she surfaces again. She turns in circles the way she does when she's anxious. She sticks her head out of the water and stares at me, as if waiting for me to give her a cue.

Your hoodie lies on the floor of the boat, covered in fish juice and dolphin blood.

"Go," I tell her. "You wanted to go. Now you can go."

And looking at her in the water, all at once I feel this ache that comes from a place deeper than I knew existed in my own body. My throat constricts, and I can't breathe. She stares at me, and the shine of her confused eyes and the smell of low tide and rotten things is enough to remind me of . . . to remind me. I'm thinking of you. I can't stop.

You proposed after one of our long dives. It was calm on the water, and the tide was low, so it smelled just like how it does now. We were eating patty melts you took home with you from the diner.

"Marry me." You said it so soft I thought you hadn't said it at all. "Marry me," you said again, your eyes turning down at the edges the way they did whenever you looked at me.

"Stop it," I said, because I thought you were joking.

"Please, Mia." It sounded like you were speaking underwater. You waited, eyes wide and clear, and rubbed at your chest as if I were holding you under. "I know it's scary. But we'll do this together. We love each other. We can have a life together." I saw you putting the pieces together like our future was some kind of puzzle that, with enough time, would fit together.

"Dylan, I—" And I felt something jerk inside me so strongly I almost moved my whole body.

"What if we try? We could make it work. I know we could." I felt the cold ocean water dripping down my back and the burn setting in on my shoulders. "I love you. That's what matters. We can move together. We can start somewhere new. We can get out of here. We can go to Boston or New York or anywhere but here, and it will be okay, because we'll be there together." Your face was wide and drowning, and I saw how much you wanted it. But it wasn't me, Dylan. If you're honest, it was the life you pictured in your mind, and the space I filled in it.

"I—"

"I know it's a lot to spring on you. But I think we're ready. For something new together. I can't keep working at the diner and going to Bluebeard's every Saturday and coming home and waking up again. It's killing me."

"But Dylan—"

You reached into your pocket, and there was your mother's ring. How long had you been carrying that around? You held it out to me, palm upturned, the same way we signal the dolphins to come over. "All you have to say is yes, and we can be happy. I can make you happy."

I imagined the life you laid out for us. The swell of the tide was loud, the call of some distant future I knew I was supposed to want.

"Dylan, I'm—" The truth is that I didn't know. The truth is that I have never been able to decide on a single thing in my life. That was what I realized then. I've never chosen anything for myself.

"Mia." Your eyes flooded, and I could see what I was doing, that I was taking away from you the future you'd put together as carefully as one of your puzzles. "I can take care of you."

I stared at my hands. "I think—" And it was hard to say. You didn't understand. You've never had trouble saying what you want. You've never had your free will stuck in your throat. And I was afraid, Dylan, that I would do it again. That I would let you decide. "I can't—"

Dylan, I didn't know how to explain it to you then, but I was watching myself disappear from my own life. It was so easy to let you choose everything. Like when I couldn't decide what to do that lost year after high school, and you put in an application for me at Seaside. Like when I couldn't make up my mind if I wanted to repaint our kitchen seaglass green or

a light yellow, and you got so frustrated with my months-long deliberation that you painted the whole kitchen green when I worked a night shift, and I felt like I was inside a glass bottle. Like when I waited for you to come back from work each night, sitting on the couch alone in our apartment, even though I never wanted to be that—someone who waited, someone who couldn't live without another person, but somehow that was exactly what I'd become.

You presented me with the pieces of a life you'd created and expected that I would step inside of it, and Dylan, I was afraid I would.

You presented me with the pieces of a life you'd created and expected that I would step inside of it, and Dylan, I was afraid I would.

I am terrified of the shapelessness of myself.

Sasha studies my face now, and my eyes are hot. I thought she'd swim for open water, but she stares at me with this pathetic look, her dark eyes flicking back and forth. I make the motion to dive and she does it. Normally, it takes three or four tries before Sasha does anything, but not now.

I turn on the engine while she's still underwater. I put the boat into high gear. But I hear her clicking. She leaps in and out of the waves. I give her the command for "stop," but she keeps following. She gives up only when I hit the shore and the water runs out.

On the beach, Angela waits with the police. They tell me to raise my hands, and I do. They tell me to lie down flat on the boat, and I do.

When Angela sees that it's me, she throws up her hands. "For fuck's sake."

She explains to the police that she knows me. They still take me to the station where they file the report. Angela says she won't press charges.

"Take a week off," she says, diving weights beneath her eyes. "When you come back, you'll be on cleaning duty for a year."

You still have your location shared with me, and I track your profile the way marine biologists track sharks, even though I tell everyone (my mother) I have no idea where you are. I wait to

see when your profile turns active, a bright green dot. Do you track mine too? It feels like we're signaling to each other at the bottom of the sea.

Angela stripped me of my title as keeper, but she keeps me on because I know all the animals and their habits maybe better than I know my own. I keep Allison and her pups' cage clean. I wash the filters in Alfred's aquarium. I hose shit down the drain.

The other keepers call it the Great Dolphin Heist. I almost laugh.

I track Sasha on the GPS system, even though Angela tried to lock me out by changing the password. I read about Sasha on online forums. She's become something of a legend in the local waters. There was even a newspaper article about her. Fishermen report that she comes close to their boats and allows them to pet her. They throw her food from their bait buckets and she catches the fish in her mouth—her old tricks. Kayakers report how she swam alongside them for an hour. Some say she pressed her head to their extended palms.

The pod has moved to their breeding grounds in the Gulf without her. Sasha won't follow them, and I'm afraid if she doesn't she'll starve out there. Yesterday I drove to Angler's Cove and saw her swimming in the same place I released her.

She's gotten even thinner. Her back is covered in bite marks from other dolphins. I know I shouldn't, but I dump frozen fish in the water for her to eat. She peeks her head above the surface and stares at me like she's waiting for a hand signal for what she is supposed to do next. She always follows me back to the shore as far as she can until the water gives way to land. I worry that one day I'll find her beached.

I tell her she can go anywhere now. I've even driven the boat after the pod to guide her to their breeding ground. But it's no use. She follows me back as far as she can, clicking at me.

I've been reading a lot about captive animal releases and their success rates. By every definition, Sasha's is a failure: She barely hunts on her own, she has been rejected from the pod, she shows signs of emaciation. Some scientists say that certain captive animals are trained too well to ever return to the wild. Their human imprint is too strong.

Tonight when I visit Sasha, she swims to the dock and rests her head on the ledge. She stares at me and clicks.

"I don't have anything," I tell her.

She puts her head back underwater and swims around the

dock. Small shiners leap from the water, and she tries to grab a few but misses. She turns on her side and shows me her belly, smooth and shining and rippled by her ribs.

I stare at my phone screen. I know I shouldn't, but I do. I don't know what I want to hear—your voice, maybe, or your breath.

"Hello?" you say. "Mia, is that you?"

I have imagined talking to you for months, and now that I have you on the line, I can't say anything.

"I think you're there? Is that you?"

I wonder if you've been talking to me in your head all these months the way I've been talking to you. Or if once you left, I disappeared from your life altogether.

"Are you there?"

I am here, and tonight is a new moon, and the water is so black there is no horizon. Sasha glides underwater, and I hear the faint sounds of her squeaking. She swims so far out that I almost can't see her anymore. I want her to keep going. I want her to never look back.

"It's me," I say.

"Is everything okay? Why are you calling?" You pause. A breath. A hold. "I don't like how things ended between us. I can't stop thinking about it. It was a mistake. A huge mistake."

Sasha's fin cuts through the water. I squint to see her, and in the dark, moonlight reflects off of her body. I want to yell, I want to hang up, I want to tell you my heart. I want everything all at once.

Sasha stops in the open water in the same spot she always does. I open my mouth to speak, to tell you I'm different now and more sure of myself, just like you always wanted, but then I stop. I move my phone away from my ear. I rest it on the dock.

Dylan, this whole time I've still been waiting for someone to tell me how to live.

There's a sudden pressure in my body like when Sasha pulled me under, or maybe it's more like a release. It swells inside me like some kind of vestigial organ. In the distance, Sasha hovers, as if she's come to the edge of an enclosure only she can see, or she's pushing against a door that opens only from the inside.

LAURA VILLAREAL

ANTHROPOCENE INTERLUDE: PIGEONS

A friend tells me pigeons create the worst nests
and I wanna defend them, but I don't
know whether they're skilled builders or not,

though I'm surprised by the impulse
to speak up for a bird everyone calls a rat
of the sky, even I avoid them on the street.

One evening, as the sky pinkened, a pigeon with a yellow band
on her leg landed on our apartment porch looking weary.
I offered some water and pumpkin seeds

then looked up what the band meant
and found out there's a lot of money in pigeon racing.
I briefly considered training pigeons to support my poetry

or quitting poetry altogether
to be the best damn pigeon trainer in Texas.
I've always liked cheering others on. Online

it says, pigeons are released gradually further away from home
when in training. They finetune their compass.
Like us, sometimes they need a break

or get turned around, but they are expert navigators
even without training they can fly home
using earth's magnetic field. They're anything but birdbrained.

After a few minutes, she flew off, refusing any hospitality.
Her flight looked determined
like a marathoner at the last stretch.

I wondered what her trainer looked like
on the ground as she prepared for landing
from her pigeon perspective. V-shaped vision, green grass,

and a cowboy hat wearing person in blue jeans?
I know, I know. I shouldn't imagine
everyone as Big Tex, but you were thinking it too.

I bet she was ready, after the seemingly endless journey, to rest
in a pigeon hole. I write too much about home and leaving
so maybe it's time to give up writing and go where the real money is.

I heard once that Nikola Tesla fell in love with a pigeon. He said:
"I loved that pigeon as a man loves a woman, and she loved me.
As long as I had her, there was a purpose to my life."

I think I get it sometimes, human-bird relationships,
like PigeonBlog—a true interspecies collaboration.
Pigeons with tiny GPS-enabled-data-tracking backpacks,

mapping local pollution. Harbingers of air quality,
proof that we can collaborate
to improve our world

with other species
instead of ruining the place
they too call home.

LAURA VILLAREAL

PACIFIC CHORUS FROG

I too have thought about jumping
in front of a car. Like you,
I was chasing my own shadow
and stopped when we stood
sorrow to sorrow. Finally,
able to know the difference
between road and forest,
my direction changed.
You can guess what happened,
but let me try to explain anyways.
In a study to test homing ability,
a symphony of you were kidnapped and marked
then abandoned away from your home.
About 66% made it back to the pond.
Maybe the others thought it was a chance
to start new. No one knows for sure.
Did you grieve those who didn't return?
When did you stop waiting for them?
An article online says you can live happily
in an enclosure if given the semblance of sun.
I want to believe it, I do,
but it's common for happiness
to be mistaken for survival,
we settle on what is almost real.

LAURA VILLAREAL

ANTHROPOCENE INTERACTIONS

June 2025

A young woman chitters as if calling a cat
at a dragonfly who refuses to pose for a photo.
"I wish dragonflies were smarter," she says. Someone goes off trail,
stomps new seedlings, just so they can touch
a troop of mushrooms. A child chases
ducks off the grass, back into the water's refuge
while the child's family laughs and films. A father
points out in awe a fern beginning to unfurl to his son,
who chimes: *Booorrr—riiinnnggg!* Discarded
flowers from the pollinator meadow dapple the trail.
"What? You're just gonna leave it?
You'd walk past litter and not pick it up?"
someone asks their companion.
"I don't know," their companion replies.

LAURA VILLAREAL

WE'RE LIVING IN THE STUPIDEST PART OF HISTORY

Everything that can happen has already happened,
so why deny the likelihood of it occurring again?

The U.S. wrote most of the playbook,
but plagiarized from colonialism,

changing the methods just enough
that they look different

but amount to the same cruelty.
At times, amounting to more

using notable and horrific creativity.
We have to give the U.S. credit for that,

but should deduct points
each time an average citizen gets duped

into thinking: *it won't ever happen to me*
or, *I didn't think they meant my favorite neighbor.*

If you're not in the top .01%, you were born
with a slot machine body.

And it is true, the house always wins,
you should know that already. Why continue

to gamble when you'd be better off
burning down what your livelihood paid for

before they repo what little you own
that hasn't been made digital or subscription based,

including the bridge on your back.
Did no one tell you what happens when they cross it?

Even parasites have their place in nature,
is something I once said as an insult

but unfortunately, literacy was guillotined first
so it was understood as enthusiastic encouragement.

Our planet felt death-certainty pang in its gut
when generative AI was used for mundane tasks

like writing term papers or emailing underlings
instead of locating cancer early and removing

microplastics from water or finding ways
to distribute wealth equitably in perpetuity.

Let me be clear: Rally your friends.
Eyes on your own paper.

You'll need to barter in radical kindness
and ready a community rebuild.

I've heard the neon lights burn brightest
before everything goes Vantablack.

DONIKA KELLY

WHAT I ASK THE DREAM

Who was I and where did this dog come from
Whose dog is this
Little dog who are you
Young and supple and gamboling like a lamb
Are you a lamb little dog
Little god
And who made you
Do you know who made you
Me I made you
In my mind which is an eye
I made you out of memory and future
Conjured you because I miss my friend
Who is dead who was old
Whose eyes recognized little
But when they recognized me they lit from inside
As if by a fire which is a soul perhaps
Alchemy of water salt electricity
He was a conductor
My friend
Of life
I am conducting you now
Dream dog
Fawn and apple headed
Glossy and young
And gamboling as I said

As a lamb would in spring
Born from my mind into a field
The afterbirth which is also my mind
Tossed into the hay which is also my mind
I can make anything
A field a dog hay while the sun shines
As long as we both know it won't last

DONIKA KELLY

LANDSCAPE WITH TALL GRASSES

Jen says, *it hasn't rained in 8 weeks*,
and suddenly this dust makes sense.
There should be Virginia creeper, Doll's Eyes,
more wild ginger and creeping Charlie.
Still, what's native persists: roots
arc out, grasp the dirt, roots
like a hand holding on. Roots
we can't see but for the evidence
of this grass standing: two kinds of rye,
sedges, bluestem: everything brown now,
waiting for relief. Relief will not arrive
this season or the next, for both
are the seasons of ending, of the lengthening
night. And so: surrender. The seed heads
dried to rattle, blade and branch sturdy enough
for what feeds or will. Nothing can bloom
all year. But there, if you attend: spring
and the green light of summer humming
in the blistered sedge.

DONIKA KELLY

GRACE IN THE RIVER, GRACE IN THE BRIDGE

after Ross Gay

Let me begin, as I often do, in observation:
first the woodpecker, its striped wings folded
close to its body, its red head mining
a tree; then the squirrel remodeling,
at the end of a season, its drey balanced
in the fork of another tree, its nest
subject to the limb and the wind, and I
want to say, *Aren't we all?*; and closer
to the point: the deer, grazing, at 3 a.m.,
our neighbor's trailing vines the very morning
my mother went in to have a pump installed,
a machine taking the place of the slowed
muscle of her heart, one chamber rendered
quiet, an empty room through which the machine
pushes her blood, no longer a pulse
but a thrum, powered by batteries that look,
to my eye, like the ones we used to power
the old camcorder that recorded me
and Dee and Spud and Noodle singing, "This
Is How We Do It," off-key but earnest,
warbling *South Central does it like no-*
body does, right there, in South Central LA,
days after the song came out. I noticed
the early morning deer before I knew
she would survive, had prepared for months
for her to die, whispered,
    She's a small piece of leather
        but she's well put together,
in the backyard, Chuck on his lead in the sun,
both of us watching the chipmunks dart
from beneath the deck on which I sat,
or else I stood at the window, finding

faces in the branches, each one indelible,
none of them hers, until I shifted,
the branches resolving into a tangle
of bark or unbrushed hair.

SARAH SOUTHERN

RESUSCITATED FALLOW

2026 AWP Intro Journals Project Award Winner,
Selected by Christina Rivera

The farmer holds the bowl like a prayer. His left hand grips the rim while his right sifts freshly milled buckwheat flour, releasing a cloud of fine gray dust. It settles on the wooden table and collects atop his shaved head, behind his ears, deep in the creases of his work-worn knuckles.

He adds water a few drops at a time, coaxing the buckwheat from dust to crumbs, combining the mixture into a shaggy pre-noodle dough. The texture isn't quite right, so he reaches for a handful of flour, tossing it into the bowl, scattering wispy particles across the kitchen like falling ash.

With practiced rhythm, he releases dough from the bowl onto the table and flattens it, moving his fingers around the edges, pushing outward. He grabs a rolling pin and begins thinning the thick, finger-dented disc with every push and pull. The farmer pauses for a moment, wiping perspiration from his powdery forehead with a blue terrycloth towel wrapped around his neck, tucking it back into his stained T-shirt.

In smooth, precise strokes, he slices dough into thin strips and gathers the noodles in both hands like a priest offering the Eucharist. He places them in a pot of boiling water to cook for a minute, transferring the noodles swiftly to an ice bath to preserve the firm, chewy texture of Japanese soba. Ladling the chilled noodles into porcelain dishes, the farmer moves from the kitchen to the counter where his guests sit, delivering their lunch, watching them savor the work of his hands.

The farmer is Akiya Ishibashi, the owner of Juu-go, a soba shop located along the Philosopher's Path in the northern Higashiyama district in Kyoto, Japan. Though the sole preparer of Juu-go's buckwheat noodles and porridge (sobagaki)—the only two dishes offered on Juu-go's minimalist menu—Ishibashi rejects the moniker of *chef*, identifying instead as a farmer.

Before grinding buckwheat and layering his kitchen in a floury sheen, before gripping the porcelain bowl and kneading the coarse dough, Ishibashi tills his land.

Beneath the warm Japanese sun, the farmer plunges hands into freshly turned dirt and plants hulled buckwheat seeds (groats) into composted soil. He tends the rapidly rising crops and harvests the ivory flowering plants. He then threshes the husked seeds from the chaff, producing buckwheat groats that will either be returned to the ground for the next planting season or milled into flour.

On his Instagram account, @15_soba, Ishibashi reports from the field, documenting plot drainage and reflecting on germination rates and soil conditions. He writes about delayed sowing periods and applying additional homemade compost and fertilizer to bolster growth, while considering every aspect of temperature, weather, and yields, as well as areas of personal negligence and improvement. Ishibashi's attentiveness to the cycle of planting, harvesting, milling, and cooking connects food preparation with preservation: the preservation of an ancient tradition, of an ingredient, of the land.

Buckwheat asks little of the earth, thriving in poor, rocky soil at higher elevations where other crops can't survive. Thought to have originated in China, buckwheat was likely introduced to Japan through ancient trade, gaining popularity as farmers discovered its short maturation window and nutrient-dense properties. The hardy plant, more closely related to rhubarb and sorrel than wheat, was made into porridges, blended into rice, and considered the food of the poor. The practice of creating noodles from buckwheat, a meal that is both satiating and nutritious thanks to its protein content, dates back a few hundred years, enduring through periods of decline when "enlightenment trends" looked down upon old methods and techniques. Today, soba is considered Japanese soul food—nourishing and ancestral, simple and extravagant—and is especially popular in the Nagano Prefecture in the center of the main island. Often a featured dish for New Year's Eve, soba is enjoyed as a symbol of good luck.

Variations abound as the ingredient can be served hot or cold, plain or elevated, submerged in rich broth, or topped with seaweed, raw eggs, or shrimp and vegetable tempura. Ishibashi serves his soba plain with horseradish, soy sauce, and a side of cold dipping stock called dashi. In his version, the noodles are piled on a plate unseasoned and unsauced, honoring the buckwheat's inherent freshness, texture, and flavor.

In Higashiyama, we are miles removed from Kyoto's bustling city streets, tucked away in a tranquil, Zen-like neighborhood shaded by cherry trees. My husband and I sit at the end of a counter, facing Juu-go's kitchen. It is technically too early for lunch, but we are hungry nonetheless, after riding a bus and train and walking another mile to the canal we followed to the soba shop.

When my husband received unexpected military orders to Yokosuka, Japan, I leapt at the chance to not only visit him but journey to Kyoto so that we could wander along the Philosopher's Path, so we could sample Ishibashi's preserved buckwheat dishes. I wanted to experience the story behind this place, the passionate farmer eliminating food waste, reconnecting with his food heritage, and subtly revolutionizing an ancient dish.

I trust the wisdom etched in his eyes, lingering deep in his knuckles from years of milling buckwheat and feeding strangers.

Ishibashi's shop has a minimalist design: a two-story building with a wall of windows facing the verdant trees and canal. Inside, a wooden counter with chairs for only six guests divides the room in half. We sit on the far left side. To our right, two women chat in Japanese. On the opposite end sits a lone man who scrolls on his phone and sips sake.

"Arigato-gozaimasu," we say as the farmer pops open Asahi Super Dry and pours the ice-cold beer into glasses. Our stomachs rumble as a fragrant, earthy scent wafts around the shop. I've reserved two servings of the sobagaki porridge, soba noodles, and beer, but Ishibashi leans across the counter, double-checking the meal I selected months prior.

"One sobagaki is enough to share," he says. "You just need one."

I trust the wisdom etched in his eyes, lingering deep in his knuckles from years of milling buckwheat and feeding strangers. When he presents our first course of sobagaki minutes later in a steaming ceramic dish, I understand his caution. The morel-colored porridge is substantial, thick, and unassuming. We use chopsticks to pull bite-sized pieces from the sticky sub-

stance, roll them in buckwheat kernels, dip them in horseradish, and place them on our eager tongues.

I've never tasted anything so *of the earth*, reminiscent in some ways of my childhood memories of eating oatmeal or Cream of Wheat on wintry mornings with melting butter and brown sugar. Always, I've associated porridge with frigidity, with sleep-ridden eyes and cold feet. Yet here we are on a humid June morning, eyes rested, feet warm. Sobagaki isn't winter porridge. It's familiar but something else entirely: spicy and nutty and somehow complex in its simplicity, piping hot and still refreshing.

Everyone has ceased chattering and scrolling. Glasses clink and chopsticks clang and lips slurp, and the farmer, now situated behind the glass window separating shop from kitchen, prepares the second course of soba in his big bowl, left hand on the rim, right hand combining every moist clump into a smooth dough.

In his food memoir *Buttermilk Graffiti*, chef Edward Lee travels across the U.S., observing how immigrant and impoverished communities adapt their culinary traditions to new landscapes. What emerges may not be "authentic" to an original dish, but the use of available ingredients and adjustment to new environments reflects a deeper authenticity: the human impulse to work with what the earth offers, to make something nourishing from what is at hand.

With any time-honored cultural cuisine or practice comes a question of authenticity. Food influencers post viral reels guiding millions to previously unbusy holes-in-the-wall, promising authentic dishes and experiences across Japan, across the world. But simply preserving cherished food is a poor marker of authenticity, as all dishes and ingredients inevitably morph and evolve. Lee writes, "[Authenticity] implies that there is a right and a wrong. It implies that tradition is static and that there can be no evolution. It implies that a culture can stand still."

On his culinary journey, Lee visits West Virginian gas stations to sample a "West Virginia hot dog," a regional specialty that includes a boiled wiener, yellow mustard, bean-less beef chili, and cabbage slaw. Cabbage slaw, known and revered now as a local staple, rose in prominence during the Great Depression when ingredients were scarce and survival required creativ-

ity. Like buckwheat, cabbage adapted well to the rocky terrain. An abundance of cabbage led to cabbage slaw, which can still be found throughout the state, especially on hot dogs.

Lee writes, "As modern cooks, we are spoiled. We can take a recipe out of its native environment without the tedium of having to find a person who will teach us. We have removed the culture from the foods we consume and replicate. For most of human history, it has been quite the opposite."

This is an issue not only with modern cooking but also with modern eating. In the era of fast-paced reels and viral food content, location-specific dishes are often hyped and decontextualized, detached from the people and places that provide sacred and significant meaning. Cabbage slaw isn't authentic because of a trend; it arose from profound food insecurity. Its endurance reveals how recipes evolve through hardship, becoming records of survival as much as sustenance.

While Ishibashi preserves a four-hundred-year-old soba tradition, planting and harvesting his own crops as ancient farmers did, he also innovates and adapts. To be a modern farmer means adjusting to climate change and microplastic-ridden soil, integrating new methods for sustainability in a rapidly shifting world.

While modernization distances kitchens from farms, Ishibashi straddles both spheres. Soba isn't the final stage of planting but an ongoing continuation as food scraps are composted to feed seedlings, which are harvested, dried, and milled to create soba noodles. This commitment to progress and sustainability earned Ishibashi a Michelin Green Star, awarded to restaurants "that uphold outstanding sustainable and eco-friendly culinary practices." His mission is not to make *the most authentic* soba or even *the best* soba, but to live in a reciprocal, harmonious relationship with the land. He says, "In tilling the field on my own and working with buckwheat berries, I feel I am really coexisting with nature."

Ishibashi presents our soba with instructions: *Taste the noodles on their own first.* Before mixing with the dashi, soy, and horseradish, taste it plain to discern the flavor, allowing the earthy notes to linger on the tongue and their story to permeate every

cell. We hold our chopsticks awkwardly and gather up the cool noodles, slurping because slurping signifies appreciation here.

Once, I talked to a sommelier who said that becoming attuned to tasting notes in wine begins with developing a flavor palate, something that can be enhanced only by eating (that is, not just drinking). To identify subtle hints of blackberry or kumquat, the taster must know the specificities and complexities of a blackberry and kumquat—*what does a blackberry taste like when ripe, what does a kumquat taste like when pureed?* I think about this advice often when trying new foods, recognizing that my ability to prepare my palate, to appreciate unique ingredients and identify undertones and finishes, requires consistent engagement with flavor.

I summon every food memory I can muster as I taste Ishibashi's soba noodles, boiled and iced just moments ago, harvested and milled so recently I can still taste the sun and soil. Memories rise of summer storms and turned dirt, of just-picked garden vegetables piled high on a kitchen counter. *Petrichor* is the word for the fragrance that arises from the earth after a long-delayed rainfall, a particular scent of dustiness made damp. Like flour hydrated with water. If petrichor has a taste, I'm convinced it's Ishibashi's soba—*earthen, damp, fresh, cool*. Resuscitated fallow.

If petrichor has a taste, I'm convinced it's Ishibashi's soba—**earthen, damp, fresh, cool. *Resuscitated fallow.***

I take another bite, this time adding horseradish and soy sauce, delighting in the increased complexity of soba paired with the tang of white root, the umami of fermented soy. I scoop more noodles and dunk them in the chilled dashi, the rich stock Ishibashi simmers for hours from homegrown vegetables. Behind the counter, the farmer rests from his labor. He rubs the terrycloth towel across his forehead, crosses his arms as he surveys our slurping satisfaction.

There's something uniquely intimate in eating a dish while chatting with its creator. He knows we're new to sobagaki and soba and provides guidance, ensuring we receive education, not just satiation. He chats casually about his farm and expansion

plans, about plot irrigation and Japanese weather. The farmer moves back and forth from guest to guest, switching between English and Japanese, refilling sake cups and water glasses.

The many iterations of soba speak to the noodle's versatility and the influence of time, change, and creativity on even the most preserved traditions. Before visiting Juu-go, my only experience with soba came from the Whole Foods grab-and-go section, stale and congealed, more convenience than cuisine. At Juu-go, we are not only served a meal but guided by a teacher who invites us to taste with intention, then steps back to witness our wonder.

Across the U.S., Edward Lee discovers overlapping food cultures where food heritages aren't necessarily distinct but borrowed, blurred, and blended. Ingredients transcend borders, adapting over time to changes in modernity and culture.

He writes, "Our food traditions are the last things we hold on to. They are not just recipes; they are a connection to the nameless ancestors who gave us our DNA. That's why our traditional foods are so important. The stories, the memories, the movements that have been performed for generations—without them, we lose our direction."

When I tasted the sobagaki so reminiscent of and still distinct from my childhood Cream of Wheat breakfasts, when I slurped soba and was transported to a rain-drenched North Carolina garden, I reconnected with long-buried sensory memories. I thought I'd forgotten them. But in savoring Ishibashi's traditional and yet modern dishes, I remembered. Flavor jolted me from present to past and back again.

As plates empty, the farmer pours hot water into the chilled dashi we've dipped our noodles into.

"Now you sip," he says. And despite the growing heat outside, I wrap my hands around the porcelain cup and breathe in the warmed broth. My stomach fills as I sip deeply of this complex stock, enriched by root vegetables and cabbage. In this moment, I think about returning home to my city apartment. I have no land, no available earth to sink my hands into. But in the corner of my refrigerator, tucked away to keep it alive, I have a sourdough mother. I think about how I'll rehydrate it, how I'll make bread, how I'll resuscitate something in my own way.

As we leave, the farmer clears away plates and cups and empty beer bottles. He wipes down the counter, stacks the dishes by the sink, collects all the remaining food waste. Back at the farm, he'll add it to the compost. Daikon tops and abandoned horseradish will break down and decompose slowly in a nutrient-rich soil that will feed future crops and, in turn, future customers.

SUPRITHA RAJAN

IN THE LANGUAGES OF RAIN

La lluvia es una cosa que sin duda
sucede en el pasado. Rain
is something that, without a doubt,
happens in the past. Cae o cayó.

Falls or fell. Perfects
the past continuing without
color through leaves in a book
my mother and father lean over,

yet from which they never read.
How could they recite
the sound of what
they do not understand? Il pleut

des voix de femmes
comme si elles étaient mortes
même dans le souvenir. It rains
the voices of women

as if they were dead
even in memory, voices
like those of my sisters falling
drop by separate drop

from far off and tucked
away places to meet
as a single ripple
on a perfectly blank page.

It is the life that we wanted
but did not exist that returns
unnameable beneath
the scent of rain. Und der Regen redet

in der Sprache, von welcher
ich glaubte, niemand kenne sie
außer mir. And the rain
speaks in a language that

I believed no one knew
other than me. Die für mich
bestimmt sind. That was meant
only for me. But I look up

from the pages of a book
I have spent how many years
reading to see c'est vous aussi
qu'il pleut. It is you also

that rains. La mojada tarde
me trae gouttelettes
weitergetrommelt, கலந்தனவே.
The wet afternoon

brings small drops
that drum further and further,
mixing completely
with the air I breathe.

யானு நீயு
மெவ்வழி யறிதுஞ்?
You and I, in what way
do we know each other?

What does it matter who
our fathers and mothers were, our sisters?
போலப் பெரும்பெய
லுழந்த விரும்பிணர்த் துறுகற்.

Like a dark jagged rock
weathering a heavy downpour,
I stand motionless and look
up at you, my face

cool under the skies of a country
that belong to neither one of us,
and think of you thinking of me
in all the languages of rain.

பசலை யார்ந்தன குவளையங்
கண்ணே. I grow
pale with desire, my eyes
becoming that beautiful blue

of purple water lilies or the sky
just before it rains.

The text written in Spanish, French, and German is taken, respectively, from the following works: Jorge Luis Borges's "La Lluvia," Guillaume Apollinaire's "Il Pleut," and Günter Eich's "Botschaften des Regens." The Tamil text, along with related intertextual references, comes from the Kurunthokai. *All translations are mine.*

SUPRITHA RAJAN

MALABAR DAFFODIL ORCHID

Some lines written many miles from Silent Valley, Kerala, where the Malabar Daffodil ground orchid, once considered extinct, was found again by K.S. Manilal and C. Sathish Kumar in 1982. Though resembling the European daffodil (Narcissus), the Malabar daffodil orchid (ipsea malabarica, pachystoma malabaricum, spathoglottis malabarica) is close relative to ipsea speciosa (Sri Lanka, prev. Ceylon) and belongs to the family orchidaceae. The locals call it കുന്നുകാന്തി.

She is what endures
neglect—species of
the actual, the beautiful
hidden on mountainous slopes among grasslands
and shola forests
where she yet survives
far from the borders
of tea-stained soils, the sounds of hands
plucking. We had thought she perished
into the habitual
fires that extinguish themselves

all ash, persisting only as
a residue
on charcoal drawings of her form
or as thinness pressed
from head to coffee-colored root
where her long-brewed
appetites lie suppressed—
a mute
insensate thing
stored in the cabinets of foreign herbariums.

But all these years, she had burrowed
at the foot of silent valleys and built
from the heat
of her tubers, a house intimate
with its own mysteries—weatherless
and still—

her yellow blooms appearing, if
appearing at all,
as brightness
leaning in a brief
rush of winter wind and rain. So

delicately stitched
to her slender stem, she
opens her petaled mouth
but partially
like an eye waking
or a yellow-browed bulbul
about to take flight
into sheltering canopies.
It takes
patience to open
just this much,
to hold her star-shaped face up
to a sun
that will also one day be
extinct
and feel a hovering heat possess
by transpiring
while all day long
bee and beetle climb her red-streaked lip to drink
from the both
of her sex, deep inside her mouth
where the light
enters and breathes
around the slim column of indefiniteness
that defines her
a ring of sepals and petals
which like all names
misnaming her
flame
to be pulsed with earth again.

And when
she finishes with the work
of opening, will it matter
if the sole praise she knew

is the fingerless touch of a dying sun,
or if bee and beetle scatter
from their backs
the seed of her future form,
leaving her to continue
in damp root-rooms
unknown, unseen?

But opening
is one phase in a life
devoted to discovery.
There is the history
we unearth only when we
fall apart—the afterlife
of all that went unmentioned or remains
unmentionable
coursing through underground channels
until it surrounds
like water pooling around ankles
in a flooded rice field.

Wreckage brings
its own reckoning:
she holds
the shadowless cold
just as she once held
heat and rain. There is
no place for her not flooded
with past conflict, past want, grief for things
no longer, no place
not a homecoming for her soiled face
to swell and bud
into lordless colonies. Heaven is this

downward spiral
and she is committed to
descent, to the work of mending
only she can do—
feeding
her daughter roots to make
from solitude and singleness

her sequel.
It is
endless this work
of taking herself
to herself.
And endlessness
is all the proof she needs
she exists.

SUPRITHA RAJAN

VILLANELLE: MIGRATION HOUR

The earth is round and the page is flat.
Whatever falls from earth to page falls in a curve
like an ellipse, a beaded bracelet

on a wrist and makes the shape of what
was left behind . . .
how could all existence leave
only an empty space that sound omits . . . ?

I lean forward and trace the transit
of earth to page as if a curve defined grief
and cupped the vacancy I left

behind . . .



What has my hand described? The complete
half of a whole or the fugitive
form of something hidden yet deeply felt,

a regret curling inward like a child at rest?
No . . . I have another idea of
what this could be . . . It is the line dividing east

from west, the meridian marking a point
on earth that measures the relative
distance between me and those I cannot meet.

Or it is the curve traced by a plane as it leaves
one point on earth and arrives at its opposite.

Or it is the turn of a roundabout
that a motorcycle fails to weave
and crashes on its exit west.

Or it is the hull of a capsized boat—
the family lost, but all travelers survive.

Or it is an arc delineating the past
left unspoken, yet still counts as fate.

Or it is a tree nest carved by a barbet
out of which four fledglings fall and two are retrieved.



Or it is a beaded bracelet, the dots
connected on a map that lead to a reef
where the remains of a life persist intact.

Or it is the horizon searched at night
for sibling stars drifting far from the other's light.

Or it is the bent spine of a body wrought
to contain a formlessness that fluctuates.

Or it is a line that circles back to repeat
the incommensurate nature of my grief.

The earth is round and the page is flat:
whatever falls from earth to page falls in a curve
like an ellipse, a beaded bracelet
on a wrist and makes the shape of what

was left behind . . .

LANA REEVES

LOOPHOLE

After Texas SB 8

An act relating to the way your arms
  encircled me my waist
in the back of our four-wheel bent-bumper
  heaven your clear-eyed

question my permission not an utterance or
  an exposition but a place
to shelter together. An act
  relating to your right thigh as it lay

swung across my left knee like a bulwark or
  a defendant. An act relating
to the legs happened burst
  every skittled pack of sugar-fix such force

they wedged between the seat cushions
  for months afterward except one
stuck to the nape of my neck like a sweaty
  kiss a purple one. An act

relating to your thumb rubbing the bruise away
  and other kinds of vanishing.
Bring action against any person who
  brings action against your form

or mine or our reliance or stupidity
  or in those months afterward
when we sat on the floor of that god-awful '70s elevator
  smelling antiseptic

and you took my hand in yours in injunctive relief
  bring action against any
person who said what for or why
  and who is to say what is

a violation of my permission or what kind of permission
  what kind

LANA REEVES

OTHER LESSONS

We open with the vowels. First,
        Ā, ah, that wonder-tone, strike understanding,
lightning to the
        family tree. The low echo of the engines
of fishing vessels finally ceas-
        ing, their nets halfway to the surface &
ballooned like jellyfish, letting loose
        sand & silverbullet aku, shocked still before
dance travels up their bodies, thrumming once,
        twice, shaking themselves free
to disappear. Then *Ē*. Ehh, & every
        thing ancient & with a burden rolls
& lies down, is permitted to
        put up feet, mountain-faces turning into the pillow.
& so on, like this, through
        the vowels, through the alphabet
of place. It is difficult
        to translate, so let us show you
the classroom. In the back left corner
        are the instruments, ravaged by use.
A familial presence, but each of them
        unknown to you. You would not

know, for instance, how to play
that pair of rocks, that tone click like a sweet
drip from the gutters of
there are no gutters here. You face
the instruments & must imagine
what sounds might erupt from each if
you still had knowing hands
to caress them to life. Like this:

or this:

In our classroom,
there is a map unlike any
you've ever seen. Not a map
of land, but a map of water & none
of the water is named. When asked where are
we from, we answer
with: a backyard bucketful—a grand
mother tear—small, cupped,
nearly drowned me—bowed with shadows
that bob & bloom
familiar, like blood—from one place to a
future, lapping mystery no one
brings to heel. We sing in our class-
room. Ring only with the language

we decide is worth keeping.
So that it becomes *This land*
is your land—this land is
your land—from Honolulu, to—
or becomes *O beautiful—shed—*
dream—dream—
from sea, to shining—

LANA REEVES

IN SAN JUAN

After Bad Bunny

we sing about taking más fotos as we rinse
our memories in the holy delta streets,
licking moonlight from clear plastic rims
among jelly-colored houses wobbling
in heat turned stripe with strobe
of La Placita, our hips swaying figure
eights above the blue-stone dewy
from humidity & spill in paraíso
where lo que le pasó
to Hawai'i hasn't happened
yet, guzzling two-buck water & parcha
nectar like greedy hummingbirds from fast-
deteriorating straws on an island
like any other with caves & crannies & holes,
potholes sunk like graves into warping
gravel roads, mirage & foam
of friendly language barbed by slang
only the locals know—here is what I know—
plumeria kitsch, molasses afternoons,
white high-rises strewn along the coast
like coral jeweled by jagged silhouettes—
& here is what I don't—my inner ear
popping to pressure of the accent
of another, rougher ocean,
the delicious glint in eyes when I reveal
my islandness—o ever-peripheral
spectacles of joy, we are
healthy asterisks
threatening Americanness
like satin-silver U.X.O.s—
though theirs so much more volatile
than mine—repenting times
I melted at the feet of beet-red
mangroves & conjured home,

imagined to know this place,
listed each skittish lizard
& drip-beaked bird of prey
by ʻōiwi names they do not answer to—
the bombs buried in the beaches
of our chests do not tick synchronously—
&—still—we—siblings each
swallow fire—bated breath
before the upward blow—cyclones
spinning lyric from our throats—
we burn together for
this steam & raucous
noise—the army
of our feet
drilling,
bearing down—
our almost
almost free
& wick-like
faces

here—

here—

in the dark—

BRITTNEY CORRIGAN

DEAD AIR

I'm driving home with my teenage son when "Dreams" by the Cranberries comes on the local alternative radio station. My son is in the passenger seat, earbuds in, listening to music I've likely never heard. Dolores O'Riordan keens through the car speakers. Her distinctive voice. Her untimely passing. And my son says, *I know this song.* I hadn't even realized he was listening. A thread extends like a suspension bridge between the me I was in college and the me that is a mother here in this car. Something from long ago suddenly present, but changed. I wonder aloud: *How many times each day do we, does anyone, hear the voices of dead people?*

In 1860, Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville (d. 1879) made the first audio recording of a human voice: a ten-second fragment of the French folk song "Au Clair de la Lune." It was recorded on a device of his own invention, the phonautograph, which visually traced sound waves by etching them onto paper coated with lamp black, a fine soot collected from oil lamps. The recording was made seventeen years before Thomas Edison's (d. 1931) phonograph but could not be played back until 2008, when it was scanned into a computer and converted to a digital audio file.

What was the first voice to be heard on a recording after the person had died? It's a question with an unknowable answer. Not the anonymous voice of "Au Clair de la Lune," with its 148 years of silence. Not the first phonograph recording in 1877, in which Edison recited "Mary Had a Little Lamb" onto a sheet of tin foil. That recording could be replayed only a handful of times and certainly did not outlast him. What must it have been like the first time a ghost voice drifted into living ears? I try to imagine that shock, that wonder. The soundable immediacy of what was once lost. Now, our days are filled with the voices of the dead: on radio, video, the mobile devices in our hands.

When did it become anything less than astonishing to hear a human voice that no longer lives?

On a single, particular day, I hear: The voice of JFK (d. 1963) in a snippet of documentary. The voice of Jane Goodall (d. 2025) in a public radio tribute. The voice of Heather O'Rourke (d. 1988) while searching YouTube for a clip from *Poltergeist*. The voice of James Earl Jones (d. 2024) in a reel on social media. Prince (d. 2016). Amy Winehouse (d. 2011). Marvin Gaye (d. 1984). The voice of John Lennon (d. 1980) as he sings about his loves. A pathway opens up between us: the dead and the living.

In the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, all possible outcomes are inevitable. Schrödinger's (d. 1961) famous cat in the box is both alive and dead. Each possibility splits into its own parallel universe. There is a universe in which the cat is curled up, asleep. One in which the cat is clawing the box to get out. One in which the cat's body is cold and still. Likewise, there is a universe in which a particular voice is living. A universe in which that voice is lost. A universe in which that voice is detached from the body it once inhabited, looping over and over for anyone who might listen.

My son and I drive past the Starbucks, the appliance repair shop, the gas station. O'Riordan's voice rises and crests and lilts past the French bakery, the grocery store, the pizzeria. My son, who hasn't answered my rhetorical question, is bobbing his head, but I can't tell if it's to the Cranberries or some other song in his ears, inaudible to me. "Dreams" was the Cranberries' debut single, released in 1992. The year I met my husband (still living). Now my ex-husband. After thirty years of hearing that same voice nearly every day, I can go weeks without even hearing it in my head. According to O'Riordan, "Dreams" is about falling in love for the first time. Now another man's voice, dear and tender, is sweet in my ear.

After thirty years of hearing that same voice nearly every day, I can go weeks without even hearing it in my head.

I remember: Dolores Mary Eileen O'Riordan of Ballybricken, County Limerick, Ireland, drowned in a hotel bathtub due to alcohol intoxication on January 15, 2018, at age forty-six. My birthday is fifty-three days after O'Riordan's, both of us born the same year. In this universe, on this day, at this time, I am fifty-three years old. Older than O'Riordan will ever be. The Cranberries issued a statement following her death, a glimmer of consolation: "Dolores will live on eternally in her music."

The phonautograph recording of "Au Clair de la Lune" was converted to sound by the First Sounds research collective, a group of audio historians and scientists who "strive to make humanity's earliest sound recordings available to all people for all time." Led by David Giovannoni (still living), they used high-resolution scans and specialized software to make the visual sound waves audible. I listen to the recording on YouTube. It is nearly unintelligible. Static crackles, and the oldest audio ghost—child? adult? male? female?—is muffled, as if singing surrounded by wind. *Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot.* The smallest, strangest lullaby. Haunting. A shadow of a voice, by the light of the moon, raised from the long dead.

The smallest, strangest lullaby. Haunting. A shadow of a voice, by the light of the moon, raised from the long dead.

My son and I drive past the pet store, the dentist office, the rundown motel with the vintage neon sign. O'Riordan's voice warbles and trills, a spectral birdsong. In this particular universe, on this specific day, it's autumn, and the trees flare yellow, red, orange, gold against the blue sky. There is a chill in the air, but not so much that we can't have the windows partway down. On porch after porch: pumpkins, skeletons, billowing ghosts. In another particular universe, on this specific day, my son sings along to "Dreams" with me. His voice warm and uninhibited, a tendril of sound floating out across the neighborhoods on a beautiful October afternoon.

A much-cited pop culture myth claims that the first broadcast to leave the solar system was Adolf Hitler's (d. 1945) opening

speech at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. In his only novel, *Contact*, Carl Sagan (d. 1996) imagined that this high-frequency broadcast, powerful enough to escape Earth's ionosphere, might be the first human voice aliens would hear. But our planet has been emanating radio and TV signals into space for over a century, and even that 1936 broadcast would have grown weak before it reached systems beyond the Milky Way. Still, I wonder how far the voices of our dead could travel, what they might say about us, long after our species has vanished. Faint ghost voices, nebulous and broken, drifting among the stars.

Dolores O'Riordan's vocals were rooted in the sean-nós singing style of Irish folk music. Long phrases, highly ornamented and melismatic melodies. Sean-nós singing is traditionally in the Irish language, unaccompanied and often emotional: love songs, laments, lullabies. The first recordings of sean-nós music were made in 1905 in County Waterford. Forty-five years after "Au Clair de la Lune." Twenty-eight years after Edison's "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Though the origins of sean-nós singing are unknown, it is thought to be over seven centuries old. Seven hundred years of loss, of love.

Edison's phonograph, at the time of its invention, was considered by some to be a form of immortality. Capture a voice, disembody it, play it back into the electric air. A perceptible but invisible presence, impossible for death to scythe. Lesser known than the phonograph, or the telegraph or kinetograph, was Edison's interest in using science to create a device that could contact the dead: a spirit phone to detect and record the voices of those who had passed on, the residue of their personalities still present in the physical world. While the Spiritualists were holding séances, Edison was drafting an unnamed machine that might someday make audible the voices of the dead. What would he think of us today, ghost voices knocking at our consciousness wherever we go?

When my son was very young, two of his grandfathers died. He does not remember them. He's seen the pictures, but it's only the photographs that are familiar, not the people themselves. He's watched the videos, but the two voices call up no memories, spark nothing in my son's heart, no matter how many times I play them. My father-in-law (d. 2010) holds my son at his first

birthday party. My stepfather (d. 2013) leads us in a song on Christmas Eve. Their voices are fresh in my head, as if they are standing right next to me on an ordinary day. My son shrugs, loses interest, turns away.

How does a day of no consequence become a day at the center of the universe? The day of an accident, a diagnosis. A death. In the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, the universe is continuously branching. Each possible outcome of a quantum event generates its own separate world. This branching occurs regardless of observation. We don't need to open the box to check on the cat. The observers are conscious of only their own specific branch, unaware that infinite others exist. Infinite, inevitable possibilities. Infinite ways of being.

My son and I drive past one house, another house, another. Lawns covered with leaves: yellow, red, orange, gold. O'Riordan's voice wisps and chimes through the car speakers. I am transported back to 1992. To my sophomore year of college, far away from home. To a new love that would shape the next three decades of my life, would bring me children, would bring me joy, would bring me the deepest pain I've ever known. I think of O'Riordan in the hotel bathtub, her nose and mouth fully beneath the water. I am sad, and I am nostalgic, and I am grateful. My son looks over at me from the passenger seat and smiles.

On a single, particular day, I hear: The voice of Matthew Perry (d. 2023) in an episode of *Friends*. Freddie Mercury (d. 1991) and David Bowie (d. 2016) singing "Under Pressure." The voice of David Lynch (d. 2025) in a retrospective about his work. Patsy Cline (d. 1963). Janis Joplin (d. 1970). George Michael (d. 2016). A recording of Sylvia Plath (d. 1963) reading her poems. When I talk to my partner about how many of these dead voices intersect my days, he says, *It's a fucking miracle*.

In another particular universe, the science of the cosmos is my life's work. Black holes, planetary science, the birth of stars. But in this universe, these wonders come to me in books, in podcasts, in the voices of scientists and science communicators. Sometimes in the voice of Carl Sagan: *For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love*. His voice still

here, like the visible remnants of dead stars. I think of Sagan's laughter, recorded on the Golden Record in 1977 and launched aboard the Voyager probes. The first intentional messages meant to survive beyond our solar system, now travel through interstellar space.

My son and I pull into our driveway. A flurry of birds at the feeder. The Japanese maples drenched in yellow. The neighbor's house decked out for Halloween. O'Riordan's voice trails off, all instruments falling away except the kick drum and the snare, her sean-nós vocals growing fainter and fainter until I silence the radio along with the engine. My son says, *Perfect timing.* We gather our things, get out of the car. I wonder which voices of the dead might come to me next: a loved one recently passed, an actress from my parents' generation, a singer who transports me to another lifetime, a leader who changed the world for good or for ill. I imagine my son on some future day, hearing my voice after I am gone. How will he hold that ordinary, extraordinary moment? But it's O'Riordan's voice I carry with me as I walk toward the house: *Oh, my life is changing every day, in every possible way.* At the doorstep, I put my arm around my son's shoulders. And on this particular day, in this lucky, miraculous universe, he leans his head against mine as I unlock the door.

IN VERMONT: FINDING YOU, FINDING ME.

for J.A.

Slack-jawed July ripens you and I from friends to kin—tenki,
mi brɔda.
We talk God & mamas on the Gihon River; blueberries soak
our tongues the hue of midnight rain.
You teach me to breathe kind & deep & tell me the story that
got you to your own heart. I watch
how you swim, Joshua, make tacit & true the upstream
sojourn from organ to soul.

We talk God & mamas on the Gihon River; blueberries soak
our tongues the hue of midnight rain.
If we weep into each other's hollow & laugh into each other's
Black, then this is a song.
How you swim, Joshua, make tacit & true the upstream
sojourn from organ to soul.
I find you here—the light pulling itself from the stubborn soil
of evening. Grace.

If we weep into each other's hollow & laugh into each other's
Black, then this is a song.
Mi brɔda, your breath is a beckoning: the wind pushing the
crepuscule to exaltation. Aurora.
I find you here—the light pulling itself from the stubborn soil
of evening. Grace.
You become an aubade: a goldfinch warbling into the walls of
August's yawning mouth.

Mi brɔda, your breath is the wind pushing the crepuscule to
exaltation. A beckoning: aurora.
You teach me to breathe kind & deep & tell me the story that
got you to your own heart. I watch
how you become an aubade: a goldfinch warbling into the
walls of August's yawning mouth.
Slack-jawed July ripens you and I from friends to kin—tenki,
mi brɔda.

Author's note: "tenki, mi brɔda" means "thank you, my brother" in Sierra Leonean Creole (Krio).

YALIE SAWEDA KAMARA

"IT CRIES OUT TO BE TOUCHED,"

I.
Kalashnikov says of his creation, as if
speaking to the groan of an aching child

or lover, at once imbuing the AK-47
with unending flesh and breath.

In the Izhmash factory, the welders of wood
and metal are women whose hands are acclaimed

for their nimbleness and unmatched accuracy
in assembling the body of a weapon.

Here, the assault rifle is referred to as "the product,"
a term that conjures the image of fingers

multiplying parts to create the whole, a fiery
and unnamed amalgam, brought to life by those

whose sons might one day learn the cold curve of the
trigger as predator or prey.

II.
On a nearby training ground, a new recruit mimics the
sacrifice of a tired parent laboring at dusk.

He becomes proficient in undressing and redressing the firearm
in 15 seconds, swiftly yet cautiously,

so as to avoid startling the newborn. He even learns
how to clean it with a rag wrapped over his eyes, inducing

a visibility that only the sleep-starved know.

III.
In Toronto, the former child soldier recalls the time

before South Sudan: "We were told that it was
our father and our mother," would this not render

him a boy growing into a bullet shredding air
in search of family?

IV.
At a shooting range in Virginia,

the gun collectors take a break from pulverizing targets.
With their thumbs hanging from their Levi's belt

loops, they extol the AK's virtues—how its sleek design
makes it possible for even the hinterland's simplest to caretake.

In a country with a name that, to them, sounds like
a magic spell, men have learned how to soothe

the machine's throbbing throat: by pulling a motor
oil–drenched shoelace through its barrel, relieving

it of caked black powder and restoring its voice.
Afresh, the bore sings a staccato ticking

whose cadence is as furious and living as freedom
chants cleaving a people from colonial rule.

On the Mozambican flag, this gun and the mattock lean
against each other while resting on an open book.

V.
The former child soldier further reflects, recounting
his own complex nostalgia: he remarks on

the gun's lightness and the ease with which he carried
both his own and that of a slain boyhood friend.

And as with death, music never trails too far behind:
"When you fire it, you enjoy the beat of the bullet,

the rhythm of it." There is always rhythm.
There are always targets. There are always mistakes.

On Google, the reader learns that her accidental
search for an AK-74 is not a typo, but rather a portal

to another "product."

VI.
If you love the AK-47, then you will fancy the diaspora:

Poland's PMKM or PMKMS Underfolder or
The Tantal wz. 88 or

Romania's PM md. 63 or
PM md. 65 or

the AIM-G or
the AIMS-74 or

The former Yugoslavia's M92 or
M70-B1 or

Hungary's AKM-63 or
AMD-65 or

The former East Germany's MPi-KMS-72 or
China's Type 56 or AKS or AK-47S or

Egypt's Maadi AK-47 or
The Russian AKM Khyber Pass clone

but you will most certainly adore
America's M-16, whose maker reportedly received
a dollar for every one of its million manufactured rifles.

VII.
Of his creation, he speaks of his motto and talks of design:

"Everything complicated is useless and
everything useful is simple . . ."

Researchers estimate that annually, there are 250,000
AK fatalities; however, there seems to be no conclusive data

on the frequency of near brushes. In Saint-Seine-Denis,
a police officer confesses: "Some of us are asking ourselves

whether it's worth getting fired at by AK-47s for
a salary of 1,600 euros a month." In Knoxville, Tennessee,

a man takes aim at the heads of Little Caesar's employees
after a 10-minute wait for his pizza. On Twitter,

the San Francisco Police Department circulates the
image of a woman brandishing her AK out of the
passenger side

of a Cadillac. "At least she's wearing a mask," a tweet responds.
At the Jason of Beverly Hills store, the .32 carat white diamond

studded AK-47 pendant hangs from an 18-karat
gold necklace, and can bang against the base of
your sternum

for $5000. A baby models a $20 powder pink onesie
with an emblazoned gun and bullet holes that span

the length of her infant
chest. The text on the soft
cotton reads:

"Kalashnikov, AK-47. When you absolutely
have to kill everything in the room."

Who will hold the baby
that cries out to be
touched?

AJ LEIGH

PERSEPHONE

2026 AWP Intro Journals Project Award Winner,
Selected by Han VanderHart

My mother in her garden at dusk, watering, pruning, plucking, planting peonies, pansies, tomatoes, and mint. My mother napping on her plastic lawn chair, bronzed baby oil, belly up beneath the noonday sun. My mother as a doll: crooked teeth, cocoa eyes, olive skin, chestnut hair, tiny hands and feet. My mother after work at dawn, steeping sun tea, kneading dough, pouring coffee. My mother at Christmas, laughing into chardonnay and honeyed ham, slicing her finger on the serrated knife. My mother tucked into her romance novels, episodes of *All My Children*, the life she wished she'd had. My mother, face down on the bathroom tile, bleeding palms and cracked glass, vodka halo pooled around her head. My mother thrashing in her hospital bed, choking for air as the nurses wheel her away. My mother as a child eating dinner in the dark, cold green beans from a can. My mother, daughter of a man fleeting as a phantom and heavy as a curse. My mother as The Mother Wound, fingers caked in soil, salt of the weeping earth. My mother as a sunflower, face open and tilted upwards, swathed in shadows, reaching for the light

LAURA GROTHAUS

JUDAS

In Dürer, Giotto, and Carracci,
your mouth on the mouth of the Holy One.

Frescos, countless. Gold leaf and virginal blue.
After my first kiss, all looked

sleek, reddened. Slip of tongue and gum.
Slick and shining as the armor Caravaggio paints

at the center of his garden portrait,
where Christ leans away from your grasp.

Brow furrowed. Eyes half-closed. Mid-flinch.
Judas, I am leaving today, leaving my lover anxious

for me to return. Loving her like honey hived in my chest,
while she frowns at rows of nearly dead daffodils

waiting for next year's three weeks of gold.
Caravaggio, who sneezed in the cabbage, licked the thistles,

full-lipped the neck of Cecco, holed glory, ate of Peter,
paints Christ's fingers folded into each other,

touching his own body with pensive tenderness.
You stare wide-eyed into Christ's face as you pull him closer.

Your breath on his skin. Him turning his cheek.
Carravagio licked the tip of the brush to make the light catch

the pucker of your mouth beneath your beard,
while Christ's lips part to reveal a crevice of warm dark.

Proof of what? Faith is that which requires no proof.
Trust that the warp is there beneath the weft,

the canvas there beneath the paint.
My lover's face bewilders me with beauty,

though I've learned it into ordinariness
and can draw her mouth from memory.

LAURA GROTHAUS

MOTHER OF MERCY'S GUIDE TO ABSTINENCE EDUCATION

We were asked to arrange
sexual acts by order
of increasing intimacy:
chaste kiss, deep kiss,
kisses between your hips.
Told: *You'll do it*
if you really love me. If
you really love me, baby,
thou shalt glove thyself
in brick and thorns,
keep thine fire in thoust
fireplace lest the risen loaf
tumble and be burned.
We knew desire as
another form of loneliness,
but listen: we have bitten
to the bone. The prayer
is a residue of glutinous articulation.
We run a finger over God's lips,
saying, *Hush*. Saying,
Now you'll listen to me.

LAURA GROTHAUS

A HISTORY OF LOOKING

I said to God, *Listen, I'm through with eyes,*
with orbs of delight, all that mud,

windows into souls,
and the apples of my mind's pie.

I've put on my skin costume,
know my implications.

And with a level stare at the frame before me,
I said, *Spare me your oily metaphysical quandaries.*

I had been distracted by painting after painting.
But here was the frame, so like my body.

Ribbons of leaves in relief floated like sloughed-off skin.
Gilt petals coiled like a bowel's lavish twists.

Beneath my gaze, it flexed
as burnished vines became spine and sphincter.

Listen, God, I said, *I'll make a deal with you.*
You wanted me to love you, but to love

is to be eaten alive, you gluttonous beast.
The frame looked like wreaths of braided tongues.

Listen, I said, *teach me to be hungry.*
And the frame glinted, just glinted.

LAURA GROTHAUS

ECSTASY OF THE WASP

Did it with a moth,
which reeked like sleep.
And beetles
into foul shit,
had you leave them
on their backs,
legs kicking.
Bees got hot for fur
stupid soft. But
orchids, jesus
h christ,
a smooth ride.
I kid you not.
Thick-stemmed,
warm and fat,
studded with dark eyes.
My first orchid—
I didn't guess
until I saw yellow
on my legs. Then
everyone knew,
and they asked
about the stamen.
Did it quiver,
what did it
smell like.
You can go on
wanting
to hate yourself
for wanting,
but my body
could crack open
just to feel it again.

REBECCA MORTON

THE TAXIDERMIST

at the children's museum was standing in a
plexiglass box, there was no blood. I've been
accused of cruelty, too. I repocket your phone
when it clunks to the floor. *Thank you, Clown,*
you say, knowing me then. Tomorrow it will
snow, March is horrible. I can't keep rabbits
from the pale hostas, though I'm tasked with
trying, and I don't say no. I set the table with
bone china and steak knives. Once, I went to
the ocean. Plovers gathered and that was
enough. For three years I knelt in the tide.
Waiting.

REBECCA MORTON

RABBITS THREAD THROUGH

the wrought iron fence, tomorrow's fern the only
evidence. Do you remember when I unlatched
the gate? The red moon split open, three deer
bedded down in sedge. Still, I have done things I
wish I hadn't. Wildfire sky, a sparrow to the
year's only monarch, certain silences. When I
asked, you took your fists to the untempered
glass. When I tried to sign the forms, the whole
room keened. With each discomfort you look
away, will never know how many chrysalises I
can shade from midday sun. All the muzzles I've
sewn shut: Clown of threshold and solace.

REBECCA MORTON

I LOOK FOR CLOWN INSIDE THE WINTER PERSIMMON, NEVER

see the brittle-spun sheath. She said, *Despair is held*
in the fetlock of a red roan mare. I miss her

so much. Daisy just waits by the back door all day,
low growling at the silence. I don't iron

my button-downs anymore and people at work
are noticing. What am I supposed to do when

my wife reaches for me? *This is not how other people are,*
Rebecca. Other people don't think of the rushing

train as a threshold. Each time she spiders through
the window, sinks her teeth into the snail-shell

cartilage of my ear, I touch myself. Unlike
all the nights I am hinged open, performative:

just a tongue pressed against a pelham bit.

REBECCA MORTON

CLOWN SHAKES HER HEAD, NOT EVERYTHING, REBECCA.

She sharpens her expensive pencil,
The infinite patterns are dogs and turtles and hats.

Her hands palms up, the fatty skin at her
thumb becomes a dollhouse collection:

my childhood dog and turtle, my father's hat.
They float and spin. *Well?* Clown says.

I stretch the skin hat over my ears,
shoulders, waist. I step into the skin cocoon.

The outside blinks, dims. *You're in there*
now, Clown says, adjusting the cocoon

like it's a wool coat. Tucked
inside the stench of curdled milk,

I walk to the commuter train.

REBECCA MORTON

CLOWN SPEAKS OF THE WASP

pale echinacea
overgrows the
roses
rosesroses
Rebecc
a sentinel
Rebecc
a sighthound
elm grove
drought elk
Nothing
I whisper in
her wife'sear
Nothing helps
just
manage the
groceries
I know
more than
most about
thesting
how
her skin
reddens knots
my
hands ice
I could
palm the welt
won't
I did

not ask for this
did not
choose smoke
ash at the fire
road again I
twist-off the
cold cream lid
tuck
her in bed
I am
nightmaresleep
I curl-up on
the floor
allteeth

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

A Haudenosaunee poet and multimodal artist, **Kenzie Allen** is the author of *Cloud Missives* (Tin House, 2024). The recipient of a 92NY Discovery Prize, the James Welch Prize for Indigenous Poets, and the 49th Parallel Award, she is a first-generation descendant of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin.

Fatimah Asghar is a poet, filmmaker, educator, and performer whose work includes an Emmy-nominated web series, a National Book Award Longlist book of fiction, and a critically acclaimed book of poetry. They served as the co-producer and writer of "Time and Again" for *Ms. Marvel* on Disney+. Their second poetry book, *Daughter of the Mountains*, is forthcoming July 2026.

Renée Branum's fiction has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Lit Hub*, and elsewhere. She received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in support of her first novel, *Defenestrate*, published by Bloomsbury in 2022. She teaches creative writing at Southern Illinois University.

Joy Castro is the author of four novels, a fiction collection, a book of essays, and a memoir. Her fiction has appeared in venues including *Ploughshares*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. She is the Willa Cather Professor of English and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Brittney Corrigan is the author of the poetry collections *Daughters*, *Breaking*, *Navigation*, *40 Weeks*, and *Solastalgia*. She was raised in Colorado and has lived in Portland, Oregon, for over three decades. Her short story collection, *The Ghost Town Collectives*, won the 2023 Osprey Award for Fiction from Middle Creek Publishing.

Originally from Cincinnati, **Laura Grothaus** now lives in Baltimore, the land of the Susquehannock and Piscataway-Conoy. She's at work on a novel and a collection of poems. Her collaborations have spawned theatre about desire, workshops

about memory maps, and more. You can find her online at www.LauraGrothaus.com.

Yalie Saweda Kamara, PhD, is a Sierra Leonean–American writer from Oakland, California. Kamara is the poet laureate emerita of Cincinnati, Ohio, and the author of *Besaydoo* (Milkweed Editions, 2024). She is an assistant professor of English at Xavier University. For more, please visit her website: www.yaylala.com.

Donika Kelly is the author of *The Natural Order of Things*, *The Renunciations*, and *Bestiary*. A recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, she is a Cave Canem graduate fellow and Pushcart Prize winner.

Trevor Ketner is the author of *The Wild Hunt Divinations* (Wesleyan University Press, 2023) and *[WHITE]* (University of Georgia Press, 2021), a National Poetry Series winner. They have received fellowships from Yaddo, MacDowell, Lambda Literary, Poets House, and The Poetry Project. They hold an MFA from the University of Minnesota.

AJ Leigh is a fiction writer, poet, and visual artist pursuing an MFA at Florida International University in Miami. Her work appears in *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *From the Belly: Poets Respond to Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons, Volume III, Rooms*.

Malia Maxwell (Kanaka Maoli) is a writer from Seattle, Washington. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. Her writing has been supported by scholarships and fellowships from Bread Loaf Environmental and the Vermont Studio Center. Visit her at maliamaxwell.com.

Jennifer Maritza McCauley is the author of *Scar On/Scar Off*, *When Trying to Return Home*, *Kinds of Grace*, *Neon Steel*, *Recognition* (forthcoming, 2027), and the poetry collections *Versus* (forthcoming, 2027) and *Tumbao* (forthcoming, 2029). She is an assistant professor of English at UMKC in Kansas City.

Alex Miller is the author of the novel *White People on Vacation* (Malarkey Books) and the story collection *How to Write an Emotionally Resonant Werewolf Novel* (Unsolicited Press). His stories have appeared in *Flyway*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Moon-Park Review*. He lives in Denver.

Rebecca Morton is a queer poet based in Chicago. She is the author of the forthcoming collection *Clown* (Tupelo, 2027) and the chapbook *Afterbirth* (Small Harbor Press, 2024). Her poems appear in *Smartish Pace*, *The Offing*, *Sugar House Review*, *Foglifter*, and elsewhere. A poetry reader at *The Adroit Journal*, she holds an MFA from Eastern Washington University.

Supritha Rajan is presently an associate professor of English at the University of Rochester. Her first poetry collection, *Fabula*, will be published by Unbound Edition Press (2027). Her poems have been published in such journals as *The Threepenny Review*, *New England Review*, *Literary Imagination*, and elsewhere.

Reyes Ramirez is the 2025–27 Houston Poet Laureate. He authored *The Book of Wanderers*, *El Rey of Gold Teeth*, and *Cerveza Songs: Houston, TX*. Reyes has been honored as the 2025 Anne Frydman Translation Prize winner from *The Hopkins Review*, a 2023 Dobie Paisano Fellow, and more.

Lana Reeves is a poet and composer from O'ahu, Hawai'i. Her debut collection is forthcoming from Penguin Poets in 2027. Her work can be found in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Gulf Coast*, *Poetry Online*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Meridian*, and elsewhere. She is currently a Harold Stirling Vanderbilt Fellow in Nashville, Tennessee.

David Rompf has contributed to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Harvard Review*, *The Common*, *The Missouri Review*, and many other magazines and newspapers. Several of his essays have been selected as "Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction" in *Best American Essays* and *Best American Travel Writing*.

ire'ne lara silva, 2023 Texas State Poet Laureate, is the author of five poetry collections, most recently, *the eaters of flowers*, win-

ner of the 2025 Juan Felipe Herrera Best Poetry Book (ILBA); a comic book, *VENDAVAL*; and two short story collections, *flesh to bone*, which won the Premio Aztlán, and the *light of your body*. http://www.irenelarasilva.wordpress.com

Sarah Southern is an essayist and educator whose work explores the intersections of geography and innate, biological wisdom through the lens of fermentation. Her essays have appeared in *Terrain.org*, *Relief*, and *Washington Square Review*.

Angela Tharpe is a writer and teacher living in Atlanta, Georgia. When she's not writing or getting ready to teach, you can find her overwatering her houseplants or going on a walk in one of Atlanta's many gorgeous parks. Her culture blog and other work can be found at angelatharpe.com.

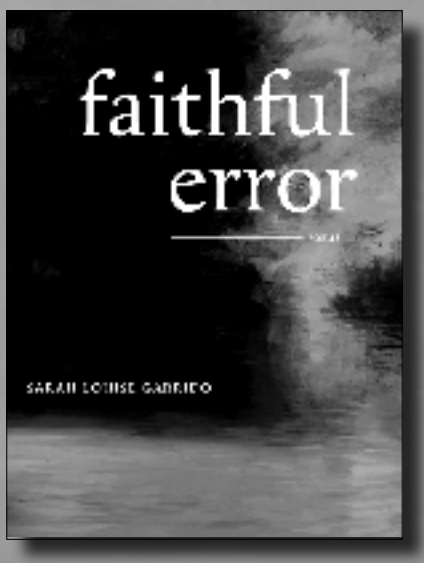
Laura Villareal is a poet and book critic. Her debut poetry collection, *Girl's Guide to Leaving* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), was awarded the Texas Institute of Letters' John A. Robert Johnson Award for a First Book of Poetry and the Writers' League of Texas Book Award for poetry.

Caylee Weintraub is from Bokeelia, Florida. Her work has appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Terrain.org*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and others. An alumna of Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference and *The Kenyon Review*'s Writers Workshop, she is the editor-in-chief of *the tiny journal*.

New from The Center for Literary Publishing

Faithful Error, by Sarah Louise Garrido

The Mountain / West Poetry Series



"It is so good to be reminded of what only poetry can do by Sarah Louise Garrido's *Faithful Error.* This book is full of life, of questions, of attention, of the marvelous errors that lead us again and again into, and out of, and back into belief. It is genuine in its questioning and its love of the world. It is funny and smart and kind and humble in all the right ways. I really loved reading this book and am grateful it is in the world.

—MATTHEW ZAPRUDER

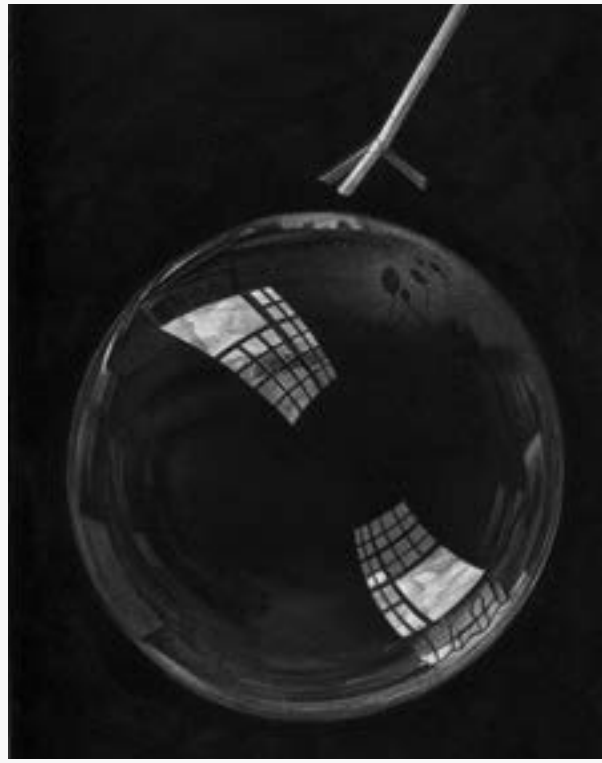
"This is a book about becoming—in crisp language and sharp images that refresh us to the joys and pains of longing. Both patient and urgent, the speakers exist in worlds that function as backdrops to the drama both enacted and, at times, endured. *Faithful Error* demonstrates how one can be faithful to the outcomes of our errors while receiving a kind of trust back, or love. That gift is what makes these poems thrum in every line."

—CHRIS DAVIDSON

Available June 2026
Distributed by the University Press of Colorado
Orders: 800-621-2736 or www.upcolorado.com

university press of colorado

ep;phany



EPIPHANYMAGAZINE.ORG EST. 2004

FICTION, ESSAYS, POETRY

ep;phany



CENTER FOR
LITERARY PUBLISHING
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Photograph by Mario Scheibl on Unsplash