

COLORADO REVIEW

CR

53.3 • Fall/Winter 2026

$12.00

IN THIS ISSUE:

RAE ARMANTROUT

IRA SUKRUNGRUANG

BRET SHEPARD

ISABELLA PIEDAD ESCAMILLA

PRITIKA PRADHAN

OLIVIA WOLFORD

CAROL CIAVONNE

JIHYUN YUN

PETER LEIGHT

JOHN CONSTANTINE TOBIN

ALYSSA FROEHLING

MOLLY ROGERS

JOSEPH DONAHUE

BENJAMIN EVANS

ZEA EANET

JILL KHOURY

KELAN NEE

SARA SCHAFF

PETER BALAKIAN

KIMBERLY GREY

GEORGE QUASHA

KHALED MATTAWA

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 froma 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

PROUD MEMBER
[clmp]

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	*Kadra Guillermo*
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	*Aliza Anderson-Diepenbrock • Nick Botkin* *Will Brooks • Samuel Ellington • Mai Gokkaya* *Autumn Koors-Foltz • Calista LaMotte • Tyra Lechner* *Christopher Lyders • Trent Kay Maverick • Kyle Mayl* *Abi Nelson • Meghan Newman • Conrad Schaefer* *Sarah Stambaugh • Gabby Vermeire • Alaina Villoria*
EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS	*Eva Greene • Easton Lane • Alyssa Love* *James Mead • Sophia Reichert • Eric Siegel* *Dominica Steele • Laura Therien • Arielle Walsh* *Courtney Zenner*
ADVISORY BOARD	*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	27	**PRITIKA PRADHAN** *Becoming*
	52	**JIHYUN YUN** *See, Creature*
	118	**ZEA EANET** *Sister Heart*
	141	**SARA SCHAFF** *Alone in the World*
NONFICTION	7	**IRA SUKRUNGRUANG** *As If Floating*
	78	**MOLLY ROGERS** *An Uncommon and Grievous Calamity*
	170	**KIMBERLY GREY** *The Theater of Meaning*
POETRY	3	**RAE ARMANTROUT** *Nod* *Understandings* *Persons* *Ghost Poems*
	18	**BRET SHEPARD** *Midnight Sun* *Plastic Forever* *Storm*
	23	**ISABELLA PIEDAD ESCAMILLA** *Replica* *Phytophotodermatitis* *Babyland*

45 **OLIVIA WOLFORD**
The Deer Collector
The Hole
The Cottage
48 **CAROL CIAVONNE**
In the Great Hall
Landscape
Direction
67 **PETER LEIGHT**
American Plan
American Sides
American Free Range
American Trouble
71 **JOHN CONSTANTINE TOBIN**
Elegy for Each Alternative John Divine—
74 **ALYSSA FROEHLING**
Immaculate Conception Diptych
96 **JOSEPH DONAHUE**
Sparkles from the Wheel I
110 **BENJAMIN EVANS**
Deep Fade, on One
In the Holding Cell
133 **JILL KHOURY**
[Corset]
[Black PVC Bodycon Dress, Fishnet Tights]
[Cottagecore Kneelength Babydoll Dress]
Hypotheticals
137 **KELAN NEE**
Wood Pile
Harvest
Grave Robbing
161 **PETER BALAKIAN**
Caravaggio/The Dead Bodies
175 **GEORGE QUASHA**
From "Lightning Strikes from Below" (Preverbs): 7, 9, 10, 14, 17

180 **KHALED MATTAWA**
Psalm Under Siege
On Empathy
What Follows What Comes Next
To You, Ever in Purity in Night's Stillness, One Last Time

185 *Contributor Notes*

EDITORS' PAGE

"If I could adequately describe," writes Molly Rogers in "An Uncommon and Grievous Calamity," a magnificently quirky obsession of an essay, "all the things that make up this story, each one on its own and also how they fit together, then I am certain I could understand the secret constellation, the hidden meaning behind this story." It's what we naturally endeavor to do to make sense of the inexplicable. We look for the story, search for the words, make the connections, grasp for some meaning. Sometimes narrative and language are up to the task; sometimes all we can do is retrace our steps through a long string of words. But as Rogers finds, in her yearslong attempt to understand a stranger's bizarre Sunday-night errand, "The problem is not a lack of words. . . . The problem is that the words don't add up." In "As If Floating," Ira Sukrungruang too finds that words fail him when his young son asks "why there were such things as 'ours' and 'theirs,'" coming up with nothing more than "Because." Kimberly Grey, in "The Theater of Meaning," looks beyond language—to a murmuration of birds—in the wake of a former lover's suicide, arriving at "the suspicion that meaning might not belong only to words. Perhaps the world arranges itself through proximity—through attention—through bodies leaning toward one another until a structure appears, briefly legible." In Sara Schaff's "Alone in the World," a man learns, after he becomes obsessed with a wealthy family's beautiful nanny, that we should not always trust the stories we imagine about others, while the narrator of Zea Eanet's "Sister Heart" tells others—and herself—an almost convincing story about her faith in order to be near the object of her affection. And a daughter who cannot quite live up to her mother's expectations, in Jihyun Yun's "See, Creature," laments: "I'm here, Mother, singing toward you in all the languages of my failing."

And yet: In Pritika Pradhan's "Becoming," a young girl discovering her talent for writing finds that "so much meaning could be contained in a single word if you looked hard enough. Any ordinary thing could be given the beauty and meaning it did not have."

There is no shortage of beauty and meaning in ordinary—and extraordinary—things in this issue: birds in formation, a stray cat, an octopus, a nun's face, a Barbie doll, the way the kitchen light illuminates a young girl's hair as she does the dishes. And a single Dixie cup. Each thing contained by words.

Welcome to the fall issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

In his fourteenth-century text *The Record of Transmitting the Light,* Sōtō Zen master Keizan Jōkin says, "If you want to reveal the sky, do not cover it up. It is empty, tranquil, and originally bright." That original brightness feels hard to come by in these days of drones and poses, and yet that's exactly what poetry provides. Not always tranquil, empty in the true sense of filled with unfettered possibility, brightness rings out as poetry's capacity to see clearly, unflinchingly. Sometimes such attention arises out of an encounter with a ritualized landscape: "Take my wild. Take / these furs off my skin. Sun / nocturnal, midnight blood" (Bret Shepherd, "Midnight Sun"). For as Carol Ciavonne reminds us, also from this volume, "[We] move in the landscape as your mind moves. As the landscape / permits you to think. Its own mind allows it" ("Landscape"). Sometimes poetry's attention is more immediate, about *not covering up the sky*. Khaled Mattawa: "Surprised the / victim of geno- / cide has become / a genocider?" ("On Empathy"). Or Alyssa Froehling: "I already have a mother / & laughter. A sister / & distance. A best friend / & revenge fantasies. / I need someone / who can metabolize / anger, use it as muscle" ("Immaculate Conception Diptych").

The poetry in this volume of *Colorado Review* offers a vivid range of unflinching attentions, both formal and thematic. And it's time, it's high time, for something (god help me!) of Eliot's "historical sense" that seems needed these days. You'll find it in these poems. From Peter Balakian's ekphrastic witness in "Caravaggio/The Dead Bodies" to Benjamin Evans's searing "Deep Fade, on One," the long poem is alive and well. So too are serial formations in such ongoing projects as George Quasha's many-booked axial "Preverbs" or Joseph Donahue's luminous excerpt from *Sparkles from the Wheel* (a title from Whitman). Yet sometimes the sky needs a punctum. Witness Rae Armantrout's razor-sharp "Nod": "They say earth / is holding tryouts / for the afterlife— // a cattle call, / a cull." Or an unflinching diagnosis (see Peter Leight's ongoing "American" subjects). Election season's upon us, the world's weary of war and chaos, and we're on an edge that's not actually the sky. May the poetry in this issue sharpen your gaze: "For a shattered time / we have eternity. / It's the "yes, you here," / not the sky you reside" (Khaled Mattawa, "Psalm Under Siege").

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

RAE ARMANTROUT

NOD

They say earth
is holding tryouts
for the afterlife—

a cattle call,
a cull.

*

Pumpjacks nod
dreamily
in the L.A. smog.

People are searching
for a tipping point.

*

They say our attention span
is shrinking,

the window is closing;

our pupils pinned
to what?

RAE ARMANTROUT

UNDERSTANDINGS

To understand:

to rephrase
in a way that
takes less time,

to miniaturize;

to change each bit but
be somehow the same.

A butterfly
will demonstrate.

RAE ARMANTROUT

PERSONS

Baby in a shopping cart
yells, “Ha! Ha! Ha!”—

not laughing—
triumphant.

*

Attention changes

the values
of the inputs

and so changes
how attention regards

the tokens.

*

Restocking
the detergent aisle,
a worker mumbles, “I’m
a good person.”

RAE ARMANTROUT

GHOST POEMS

1

Is it true
that I'm less
interested in your
"Night Philosophy"
now that you
have gone dark?

(These books
like a dead person's clothes
in a bedroom closet?)

2

Poems on the sense
that "something" is "there"

where there "isn't."

The fleeting sense
that a parallel
"exists"

between two "conditions."

Vanishing on contact,
it leaves a white page
"behind" "it."

All poems
are ghost poems.

IRA SUKRUNGRUANG

AS IF FLOATING

"So, we are going to war, then."

It's morning. My mother talks to the air. Channel 7 news blares from the TV, the volume turned near max. The onsite reporter speaks of F-16s and gunfire with conversational casualness. News about war is delivered as if it's the norm of our lives. Common as the weather forecast. The reporter stands at an intersection in eastern Thailand, near the Cambodian border. In her hand is an index card of notes she consults—the evacuation of towns, military targets hit, civilian casualties. The sky is blue above her, so blue and bright, that it is easier to imagine children at play at a park and not soldiers patrolling borders with semi-automatics.

Around my mother whirl scraps of paper, reminders and dates and phone numbers. On one piece of paper is the news of her best friend's husband's death. Every time she looks at it, she makes a sound of a thought hurtling into her brain. "Did I tell you John died?" She has. Several times. On another scrap of paper is a grocery list. *Bread, rice, fish sauce, rice, batteries, bread*. On another, the date of my departure, underlined three times. December 17. My mother is ninety. Her memory slips in and out, like the game we used to play when I was a boy—she tickling my sides, saying, "I'm here," then raising a blanket over her face and saying, "I'm gone."

Here and gone. This is how days unspool for her.

I sit outside on my mother's porch. The screen door lets me hear the news. A stray kitten curls up on my lap, Gray Boy. The strays around my mother's house are named by color. Sandy. Tan. Night. My mother's home is the perfect rest stop for them. They yawn on the patio table. Nap in a patch of sun in the driveway. Chase lizards up the banana tree. Most mornings and afternoons, they end up here because there is always a bowl of clean water and trays of dry cat food, not to mention the twenty lovebirds chittering about in the enclosure my uncle keeps, which, for the cats, is like watching Food TV.

At night, the cats wander the world.

The sky lightens, and the doves are loud with their coos. Gray Boy has found comfort in the warmth of my lap. He curls tight into a ball and drifts in and out of sleep. He is like anything young, wanting to be awake so as not to miss moments of excitement but struggling to keep his eyes open.

I pat Gray Boy, distracted.

I think about my mother. I think about the days I plan to spend with her before leaving for home. I think about the totality of days I have left to spend with her. I think about my son, nine, and eight thousand miles away, how I am missing his face and touch. I think about home—here in Thailand and over the ocean in Ohio. So many landscapes between the two, so many borders and boundaries, both physical and metaphorical.

I don't think about war. I think about war.

"Crazy," my mother says. "They're all crazy."

On the TV, the Thai National Anthem plays too loud and too clear. It must be eight. My mother grunts to stand. She sings along. Gray Boy lifts his head at the sound of her voice and then nibbles on my finger.

My son's best friend traverses the world without care. He believes everywhere his body occupies is his.

My family moved from Florida to Ohio and found a neighborhood without fences, where lawns yawned into other lawns. It was one of the reasons we chose to move there. Our eyes could travel without disruption, large expanses of suburban green in every direction. It felt like communal living. Like trust. Like there was nothing to hide, no secrets between friends.

That's when I noticed him. Wandering from backyard to backyard. Always alone.

He sat on someone else's grass and picked someone else's dandelions. He swung on someone else's swing. He sifted sand in someone else's sandbox.

I watched him.

So did my son, four at the time, in a new place and without friends.

One day, my son waved at the boy. The boy, in someone else's yard, waved back.

Before the current demarcation of southeast Asia, most of the mainland of this region was under the rule of the Khmer Em-

pire. There were still borders—borders forever mark human existence—but from 802 to 1431, the land that made up Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam existed as one.

But empires eventually crumble. The need to obtain, to possess, to own, to expand gives way to colonialism. Southeast Asia became the apple, ripe for the plucking. Save for Thailand, who prides herself on having never been colonized, her surrounding neighbors became the territory of French Indochina until 1953, when Cambodia and Laos declared their independence, Vietnam following a year later.

The French, however, left behind confusion and resentment. Their cartographers marked the border between Cambodia and Thailand via watershed lines and the Dangrek Mountains. Their 1907 "Annex 1" map is central to the ongoing feud between the two countries. Along the Thailand-Cambodia border are ancient Hindu temples, part of the Angkor period, and according to the Annex 1 map, Preah Vihear, an eleventh-century temple, rested on the Cambodian side of the border to the dismay of the Thai government, who argued the map was never officially approved. In 1962, the International Court of Justice upheld Annex 1's drawn borders, reiterating that Preah Vihear and the other temples on the border were Cambodia's.

Preah Vihear sits dramatically on a steep cliff, almost two thousand feet above sea level. The temple resembles the famed Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. In some photographs, the green of the land is deep and otherworldly, the temple nestled among clouds, as if floating. It is a place where mythical beings roam, where Lord Buddha would come to meditate under the expansive limbs of a bodhi tree and converse with the birds. To seize such ancient beauty is like having possession of a priceless gem that holds the secrets of the planet.

But why should anything beautiful be owned? Why fight over a landmark that symbolizes peace and unification?

The cliff line where the temple resides is Thai territory. For decades, the only paved road to the entrance of Preah Vihear was on Thailand's side of the border, which none of the cartographers took into consideration. Imagine having a home with one door, but to access that door you had to walk through your neighbor's house, and your neighbor despises your existence.

When my son started playing with the borderless boy, he did not cross over into other people's yards like his new friend. While his friend swung on the neighbor's swing, my son sat at the border of our property, watching. My son did not run through people's lawns to get to his new friend's trampoline. Instead, he moved along the strip of land the city owns between backyards. I taught my son about boundaries: that he had to ask for permission to go onto someone else's property, even to retrieve the ball that rolled away. I pointed to the houses around ours, nearly identical, and told him those houses belonged to other people. This, I said, pointing to the green of our property, was ours. My son, always inquisitive, asked why there were such things as "ours" and "theirs," and for the life of me, I couldn't give him a good answer. So, I simply said, "Because." There are many questions my son has asked for which I don't have good answers.

My son, always inquisitive, asked why there were such things as "ours" and "theirs," and for the life of me, I couldn't give him a good answer.

I was being overprotective of people's spaces. I grew up in Chicago, where city blocks were divided into territories. Cross a street and you were on Latin Kings' ground. On the other side of the overpass, the city blocks belonged to the Satan Disciples. But my protectiveness went beyond gang boundaries. In working-class neighborhoods, you protected what little you had. What was yours was yours because you earned it. When so much had already been taken away—like the factories and the warehouses and the jobs— this was something no one could take away.

For a Thai immigrant family, this need to protect what was ours extended even deeper. My family never felt like we belonged. Our only comfort was the bounds of our house, a chain-link fence keeping us safe from outside forces. Here we could be what we wanted to be. Eat what we wanted to eat. Talk how we wanted to talk. Pray to whomever we wanted to pray. This tiny lot was ours and ours alone. For this reason, I was enormously protective of our home. Too protective perhaps.

On Halloween, after the young trick-or-treaters had gone to bed and the teenagers would rove in packs looking for trouble, I would park myself in the middle of the driveway with a base-

ball bat and a few dozen eggs, my eyes scanning the night for any trespasser who'd come to do our house harm. I imagine, now, how I must have looked—cloaked in black, frayed-brim baseball cap pulled low over my eyes. Muscles tightened, senses heightened, I flinched at every sound, my head jerking left and right. At any moment, something could happen. I expected it to happen. Almost wanted it to happen. *Come on, motherfuckers,* I said aloud. *Try me.*

I must have looked like an idiot.

If you asked me who is right or who is wrong—Cambodia or Thailand—I would tell you the same thing my mother says: "They're all crazy." In the matter of war, I can't justify any act of violence from either side, especially from two Buddhist nations, especially when it revolves around the issue of land, which most wars are about.

I ask my mother what's to be gained.

She looks over her reading glasses. A red rubber band divides her left lens in half and holds it in place. She doesn't remember why Thailand and Cambodia are fighting anymore, only that they're fighting. Only that they have always been fighting. Her lack of an answer isn't about her loss of memory. It is about an unending conflict where time has washed away cause. What remains is the residue of distrust. Two enemies peering at each other over the border. Waiting for one side to give reason for the other to strike first.

The summer before I went off to college, my friend Elan and I used to sit on other people's lawn furniture, smoking. We kept our voices low, discarding our butts on the ground. We knew what we were doing was wrong, dangerous even, but wrong and dangerous were highs we sought, our way of bending the world to our needs.

Once, after stopping at the convenience store for cigarettes and pop, Elan and I got tired of walking and decided to hang out in someone's backyard. We popped open our colas and lit our cigarettes and talked about girls. We always talked about girls. It was dark out, though in the city it never truly got dark. The orange haze from the streetlights draped over the night, June bugs and moths bumping into the glass dome.

A back door opened. A flashlight blinded us. We put our hands up to block the light.

"What the fuck," Elan said.

"What the fuck," someone said. A deep voice, muffled, as if filtered through a beard.

"You mind turning that off," Elan said.

"You mind getting the fuck out of my yard."

"What the fuck." Elan blew out a stream of smoke.

I leaned forward. Ready to haul ass out of there. I wasn't like Elan, who was fearless in the face of adversity. But that summer, I had become complacent because after smoking in other people's backyards without getting caught, I assumed I never would.

Then a metallic click.

"Didn't you hear me?" someone said. "You deaf?"

I couldn't see. The flashlight's beam made my head hurt. I turned away. Looked at Elan's face.

His eyes widened. He threw his hands up, cigarette in between his lips. The light made his face ghostly white. "All right," Elan said. "No need to get stupid."

"Go," someone said.

Elan nodded. "We are." And then he met my eyes and whispered, "Now."

I picked up my pop and pack of cigarettes and walked into the back alley, never looking back, Elan's shuffling steps behind me.

When we were clear of the house, Elan said, "Fuck."

I did too.

"You believe that shit?" he said. "Guy had a gun."

"He had a what?"

"A gun."

"A what?"

"You heard me."

I really didn't because I'd arrived in a world where language held no meaning. "A what?"

Elan tossed his cigarette in someone's yard. "So, where do we go now?"

In Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's book *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, she follows her friend's husky, Misha, as he wanders about Cambridge, Massachusetts. Though the thought of my own dogs roaming busy streets sends me spiraling into terror, Thomas discovers that Misha travels through spaces without much trouble. In fact, the husky has a whole other life, covering

over a hundred square miles, with many friends (and mates), always returning home to become the faithful pet.

It's easier to tail a dog, but a cat—they move without notice in the night.

At my mother's house, when I can't get to sleep, I hear them. The strays. They scamper across the roof of the house, their steps rapid taps. They roll around in play in the hushed tumble of grass. They torture the lovebirds into a frenzy of complaints. They meow to the moon. Their eyes glow between buildings.

My mother's house is in a neighborhood of independent student housing. She lives less than a mile away from Chiang Mai University. Her sister owns a three-story dorm on the property, near other three-story dorms. These dorms cast my mother's pink home in shadow.

I imagine the journey the strays take, the hunts and kills they make. I imagine them slinking under fences and clawing up trees. They bound eight-foot obstacles with ease. They make friends with other humans, who, like my mother, feed and leave them bowls of water.

One time, my mother put out a lost cat notice for a particular stray she loved. She and her sisters hung the notices at the convenience stores and on light poles. The cat was the color of white gold, which was his name. He had light gray eyes. Because of his unique color, my mother decided that White Gold was good luck. A few days later, a woman returned White Gold back to my mother. Apparently, he had journeyed five miles away, and she found him gazing quizzically at the koi in her pond.

White Gold curled around my mother's legs in greeting and then meandered to the swing set in the yard, nimbly jumping onto the wooden seat of the swing without so much as rocking it. My mother tried to pay the woman for her kindness.

The woman refused to take the money. She said White Gold often made visits to her neighborhood. She'd see him walking along fences and rooftops, making friends with the other strays in the neighborhood. She thought he had a girlfriend.

"It's impossible to keep cats," she said. "They do as they please."

My mother told her she didn't *want* to keep him, that White Gold was a stray she'd happened to fall for.

"A stray with a name?" The woman laughed. "Doesn't that mean he's not a stray?"

My mother shrugged. Maybe White Gold was hers, she told the woman. Maybe not. Maybe she was never meant to keep something so beautiful.

The first movie my son saw at the theater was *Raya and the Last Dragon*. I hadn't a clue what the movie was about. I only knew it was PG and made by Disney. I was surprised and elated in learning *Raya* is based on Southeast Asian lore.

Quick plot summary with spoilers: The land of Kumandra was once a unified nation, living peacefully with dragons. Then the Druun, an evil entity, ravages the land and turns people into stone. The dragons create a magical gem to ward off the Druun, but in dispelling the evil, the dragons disappear. Because of greed and fear that the Druun will return, the gem severs Kumandra into five territories— Fang, Heart, Spine, Talon, and Tail— the borders created by a dragon-shaped river.

I love this movie. My son loves this movie.

He stayed still and quiet, mouth slightly parted throughout. I stayed still and quiet, mouth slightly parted throughout.

Here was this biracial boy—half Thai, half Caucasian—and his first movie reflected half of who he was. I was near tears afterward.

At the end of the movie, the five nations put their differences aside, the people who turned into stone come back to life, and the dragons return in rainbow flight. Kumandra is united once again. A real happy ending. A real fiction.

"Did you like the movie, bud?"

"I liked Tuk Tuk," my son said, referring to Raya's animal companion. "And the dragon was super funny."

I agreed.

Then my son asked, "Is the movie like Thailand?"

I shrugged. I told him some of the clothing and cultural references were inspired by Thailand. But the real story is a bit more complicated.

"Why's it complicated?"

I didn't know where to start, so I didn't. "Because."

Our fenceless utopia didn't last. One by one, our neighbors put up wood-slatted barriers that grayed with age. I thought it might have been because of the pandemic, the need to keep people away. Or it was racially motivated, our neighborhood

filling with families from a variety of countries and cultures. But secretly, I believed much of the reason the fences came into being was to keep my son's best friend out.

There were whispers about him, the boy who did whatever he wanted, who went about wherever he pleased. Whispers about his parents, who were good people but worked long hours, so they couldn't watch him. He was infamous on our block. Once, he wandered far from home and was missing for hours before the police found him going up and down a slide in someone's backyard. Though he was told to never do it again, he was proud of the picture the police took of him in front of the squad car, smiling wide, holding up the peace sign, while emergency lights flashed behind him. He immediately showed my son the picture, bragging about the experience. When I asked him what happened, he looked at me blankly and shrugged.

Our fenceless utopia didn't last. One by one, our neighbors put up wood-slatted barriers that grayed with age.

When two neighbors reinforce the stone wall between their properties in Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," I imagine the speaker of the poem as Frost himself. He challenges the utility of the wall. "He [the neighbor] is all pine and I am apple orchard," Frost writes. "My apple trees will never get across to eat the cones under his pines, I tell him." To which his neighbor responds with the iconic line: "Good fences make good neighbors."

> '*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
> Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offense. . . .'

To which the neighbor responds again, "Good fences make good neighbors," as if this were a steadfast rule that should never be questioned, as if to say: This is how things are and shall always be. The neighbor's response is like the terrible answers I give my son to his wonderful questions. This is the world. This is my side, and that is yours. Because.

Now my son's friend couldn't go where he wanted anymore. He glared at the fences as if they were insults. Once, I caught him kicking a corner. Once, he was told to stop throwing stones at the fences.

Eventually, we decided to put up a fence of our own. For our dogs, we rationalized. We were tired of multiple walks on wintry days, putting on and taking off leashes and lacing up boots and wearing puffy coats. Instead of a wooden fence like our neighbors, we chose black metal to give the illusion that there was no fence, to retain our original vision of the neighborhood.

"Why are you getting a fence?" I overheard the boy asking my son.

My son smiled. He loved his best friend. They spent a lot of time together during the COVID years. Even though my son was seven at the time, he moved like an adult, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder, like a father would a son. "Because," he said and nothing more.

My mother takes care of the strays but does not want to own them. Not because of the responsibility. But because she knows they will someday be gone, like White Gold, like her memory, like her. Whenever I call from the States, she updates me on the cats. "Do you remember Night? He disappeared. I really liked that cat." There is nothing in her voice that indicates sadness. It's a voice I've come to associate with Buddhism. A voice that communicates: *It is what it is. What are we to do?*

Gray Boy has become part of my morning routine. He climbs on me and settles onto the cliff of my stomach, purring lightly in my arms before falling asleep. The other cats come and go as they please. They are older, and their nightly excursions grow longer and longer. Until they never return.

Sometimes the cats come back with wounds, like this morning. The corner of Gray Boy's right eye is crusty and oozing. He blinks and blinks. He purrs fiercely, kneading my stomach with his paws. He is insistent on burying his head in the crook of my elbow, pushing and pushing to get underneath it, as if looking for a hole that leads to another universe. I still his head. Find the scratch. It's not deep. I tell my mother, who is inside the house watching updates on the border conflict. Ten Thai soldiers have been killed in a deadly skirmish. Two hundred thirty-six thou-

sand civilians are displaced and in shelters. Generals are finger-pointing and laying blame.

My mother brings medicine. I hold Gray Boy under his chin and make sure he doesn't pull away. "This is why you shouldn't leave," my mother says to him. "You go away, and you're not in your territory anymore. You fight. I hear it. I know." My mother goes on about cat fights and injuries over the years. "This is your house. Stay here." Gray Boy meows, as if he understands. He purrs, appreciative of her cleaning his wound. He's quick to drift to sleep.

The TV is loud. The news goes from one conflict to another. On the screen now is the US/Mexico wall that separates San Diego from Tijuana. The wall is imposing, reinforced with razor wire. It extends from land to beach to ocean. On the Mexican side, graffiti artists have used the wall as a blank canvas. It would be nearly impossible to climb over the wall, and even if you managed, you would be met by Border Patrol, armed for conflict.

Except.

In the ocean, the wall simply ends.

Imagine spending a lazy day on the beach, the sun hot on your bare skin, so hot you decide you need to cool off. You enter the water, the waves lapping over your toes. You walk farther and farther out. Eyes looking north and south. Ocean and more ocean. In this dream, there is no wall. No border. No one to impede your summertime excursion, your beach day. You keep walking, the water warm, caressing the back of your legs. And when the water is deep enough, you begin to float. Then you let the current pull you gently south. And then you turn the corner and find that you are not in another country. You are simply in an ocean. This world is yours.

"Crazy," my mother says.

BRET SHEPARD

MIDNIGHT SUN

Thaw stain spreads tundra
when we take ourselves off

for each other, bare blood.

Come apart together. Bled
blood, shared blood. Cold

how we clothe to be tundra

animal. Take my wild. Take
these furs off my skin. Sun

nocturnal, midnight blood.

BRET SHEPARD

PLASTIC FOREVER

I felt for you here:
in the intestines
of the caribou.

Felt in the broken
CD bin years ago
at Stuaqpak,
the plastic forever
warped from hands
shoplifting into it
like it held life in song.

Felt in the snowbanks
holding igloo form
late spring. I wanted

to claim you from
one place when you
no longer claimed
yourself. The end
of arctic: it is a self
before melt exposes
exposure to need.

———

Ice sings in a voice lost
to it years ago. It could
be inside my cold ear
now, a voice ice took
years ago, to say truth
is all any have to fall
through. What the ice

claimed is that arms
hold more of a ledge
if its cliff is a form
of death. Ice is never
complete, so never
is it completely clear.

———

I felt for there here
long enough to know
the metal was the bullet
Raymond put through

Raymond. Melodic as
bullet through barrel,
to be of gun is to find
your own skin in how
tundra disappears.

It was Craig singing
with his hands against
my face months after
his parents died. Even

tundra where Bobo
killed himself, the grave
abused, the winter
steals the body faster.
My friends believed

afterlife was a song
we replayed at lock-ins
all night long. I hear
it in every snowstorm,

in every classroom,
in every gymnasium
I walk into and close
my eyes to the beat
basketballs make new.

The voice is Lauren
singing to all those
who stopped shooting
basketballs to listen
to her voice that died

in childbirth. A life
creates plastic forms
hoping they never leave.
Here, forms of voices
sing in the ice breaks.

BRET SHEPARD

STORM

Storm lost is what I am late. Storm opened.
Storm arrives to force away the lightness

lit along tundra. The mind seasons storm
heavy. For Arctic waves to crest whale-size
bodies. For August storm to breach the beach

and find tundra skin slapped cold into wake.
October taken thick with storm, to feel

storm against the mind, to know it heavy
with the heft of snow packed over hours
to bring near-death silence. To know its force

outside the window, I stick my head out
to yell at James Willie as he walks January

night's storm with his headphones to cover his
below zero conversation alone
drifting toward the Arctic Coast Trading Post.

Storm outside Barrow High to rip open
baggies of drugs Harry and Nels carry

to breathe invisible storms of being
here. The creation of storm to see more.
Torn open, I need to hear something back.

March storm vacates for us. Storm to exit
our dark, then find each other midnight sun.

ISABELLA PIEDAD ESCAMILLA

REPLICA

Dire wolves are back
according to anyone
who doesn't recognize
the frailty of DNA, the way
it erodes: embroidery
floss splintering
between hands, strands
of lip gloss caught between
teeth. Replicas become
rarer by the day: identical
twins wishing each other
happy birthday, cyanobacteria
splitting in neon
lakes. God punishes
exact replication; He remolds
the world to end
what can't evolve. The day
my mother was born,
my grandmother's cow
had twins. The first
calf woke and stood,
blind from infection,
he felt his brother's
warmth and wet hide,
but not his stillness.

ISABELLA PIEDAD ESCAMILLA

PHYTOPHOTODERMATITIS

Since I was young, I wanted
to be a geneticist. The first
time I surveyed a berry
field, I watched sunscald
burn blueberries yellow
and I knew the marine
layer offered little to protect
me. Later, I kayaked
through Elkhorn Slough
and tried to hear the seaside
daisy and purple needlegrass
eat through the woodland
strawberries that left
everything below its runners
hungry for light. I measured
celery stalks until my hands
burned with phytophotodermatitis
and I knew not to cry
as I picked blisters that covered
my palms like stained
glass. I have always
known my hands
did not inherit
the carefulness I thought
I was owed.

ISABELLA PIEDAD ESCAMILLA

BABYLAND

Rebecca asks if I'm religious and like all obnoxious
people I say it's complicated, but what I

mean is, of course. I tell her what I remember

about Our Lady of Fatima. How I'm not sure
if the Virgin predicted the children would die

a year later, or if her lack of intercession

killed them. It's hard to know. The only place
I've ever really wanted to go is Babyland General

Hospital, where all Cabbage Patch Kids are born—heads

popping out from automated cabbage. There's a baby bottle
labeled imagicillin, which is not only phonetically

unreasonable, but also implies children drink penicillin

via bottle, which is fucking wild. Even plants know
when soil's nutrients won't sustain life for much

longer; they cue their deaths with divine precision.

In the greenhouse, I sprig St. Augustine
grass—here, life, rhizomatous, the fertilizer

line leaking crystalline rivers. I touch the running

water wall when I know I shouldn't. My guilt
says I should go to church because Jesus saved

me from dying in a highway car accident. I say

He owes me one. My younger cousin Rebecca has
lymphoma and she's almost dead. The sores are crawling

up her throat. Rebecca, eighteen years old and born

in a grove of walnut trees. Rebecca with the pale blue
eyeshadow she's been wearing since she was

a toddler. Glitter gel smeared with sweat, there's Rebecca

in my mind. In my girlhood, I was always envious
of that refracted light. I copy her now. I cry. My glitter

makeup everywhere, the dish towel, the

cat fur. Rebecca, if I'm going to start rewriting
memories, that's us in the Babyland Tripadvisor

photo from 2008. We are those two little girls so happy

to finally have arrived at Babyland. We are the believers
in the Miracle of the Sun. We know the light

shifts through Mary's hands.

PRITIKA PRADHAN

BECOMING

They were learning to write stories that year. For Vidya it was the culmination of her education: all four years of it, half the length of her life, almost her entire memory.

The first year had been spent forming letters under the guidance of elderly Anglo-Indian nuns, whose age and origins were considered suitable for teaching English to very young children. Vidya's earliest memory was of pale bony fingers, their joints creased like raisins, enfolding her dark straying hand and guiding it back within the lines of the copybook. Once corrected, she learned to inscribe her letters precisely within the margins, their loops and curves swelling to fill her vision, but falling into place when she drew back. She loved how the shapes of words sometimes looked like what they meant: the wavy swings in *tresses*; *beautiful*, with its rounds and rising stems, like a bouquet of roses; and above all, the dips and swells in *undulate* (a rare word she found in a dictionary), which mirrored the movement in its meaning. The second year, she learned to string the words into sentences, which left little time to get lost in a single word but made you move on to the next; it was a different kind of pleasure, prolonged and effortful. The third year, they proceeded to write short paragraphs on set topics (favourite flower, favourite holiday), but you could write your own sentences. Vidya spent a long time tweaking her lines, choosing the best words and substituting them with better-sounding new ones. Now the class had finally progressed to writing whole stories, in which the odds and ends of the past years had to be chosen and fitted into one scooping whole. The entire four-year process seemed to come together like a story. But Vidya worried that the culmination—the writing of the story itself—might take several attempts; you didn't just have to choose the best words, but you also had to ensure they fit between a made-up beginning and end that must look natural and complete. Sometimes she wondered if it could be done at all. And even if you managed to do it, how could you know it could not be done better?

Vidya was frustrated by Sister's directive. "Write what you know," Sister Aquin urged the class. "Write about yourselves. You have four weeks."

What a waste, Vidya thought. Surely the point of a story lay in telling something interesting and new—something other than what was already there?

She did something rare for her: She raised her hand. "Please, Sister, what it is to write?"

The words had sounded all right in her head, but spoken aloud, they lacked some basic, worldly sense.

"It is *What may I write, Sister?* As I said, write what you know. You can write about your home if you like."

Vidya did not like the idea of writing about home. There was no story there—things just happened. "Please, may I write a fairy story?"

"Do you know any fairies, Vidi-ya?"

There were titters from the front bench. These were the class princesses, the smart, pretty girls, with *so fair skin* and *so good English*, as her mother had marvelled on seeing them at the school fête. They were rumoured to speak English at home the way her family spoke Oriya—naturally, not like something learnt from a book. Even now, they seemed to float above her; in their laughter there was no special malice, just general amusement at a backbencher making a fool of herself.

But Sister called for silence, and the laughter seemed to have softened her.

"All right, you can write a fairy story. But it must be your own. Don't copy it from a book."

"I won't, Sister! Thank you, Sister!" Gleeful at winning this concession, Vidya did not notice the titters anymore. She had a firm idea about the kind of stories she wanted to write, and none of them were about herself. Her life was not very interesting; only school gave it shape and purpose. Every morning she was awakened by her mother in the bed she shared with her parents and sent to the bathroom to wash herself, while her parents busied themselves with their own preparations in what was called the *drawing room*, though no one ever did any drawing there. Her mother, in her floaty maxi, pressed the individual pleats of Vidya's school uniform and her father, in his bathroom towel, polished her shoes. "See how Mummy and Baba work for you," Mummy said, looking up from her iron-

ing, "so study hard." Vidya found this unnecessary, for she too was determined to excel. And Baba would grin, his teeth white against the rough, dark skin of his face: "Don't worry, tikimi, I've polished your shoes brighter than anything!" This too was embarrassing, because his efforts belonged in a jolly English story about rich, orderly families. Here, they would not survive the trip to school. Everything spoiled when she got in the auto-rickshaw contracted by the ambitious parents of their suburban housing colony to take their children to the city's best schools, an extravagance that was balanced by stuffing the auto to twice its recommended capacity. To get in, Vidya had to climb up the seat to hunch herself into a recess at the back, a luggage space repurposed to hold the smallest children, where she sat cross-legged beside two other girls similarly folded. As the rickshaw filled with more children, she retreated into her mind. The driver pulled down the entrance flaps, which swelled outward with elbows and knees; they slowly deflated as the rickshaw wended its way to the city schools, pausing every so often to disgorge a child. Vidya tried to imagine all this in writing and failed. Even if someone managed to write it up, she could not imagine anyone wanting to read it.

But everything changed when she arrived at school—now *this* felt like being in a story. The gates opened like the pages of a book, and you entered a richer and more ordered space, a grand world governed by specific rules. You stepped into vast velvet stretches of lawn shining in the sun, with the convent in the centre, looking like an English castle magically transported to Pune. Even the grass looked imported: a thick rich green, very different from the straggly bits that dotted her colony's playground or sprouted between the concrete squares of the parking lot. Though there was enough space to stretch and run, gardeners stood guard like sentinels, holding arcs of rubber tubing that sprayed the lawn with shattering jewels, to be directed at girls who threatened to stray onto the grass. Vidya never strayed; she accepted the rules that made possible all this beauty.

The same rules dictated her lack of place in this world. She was not among the class princesses, the first rank of the chosen; how different they looked from her, and how like each other, with their fair skin and their uniforms enlivened by colourful hair clips and smart touches from abroad. Some of them actually were foreigners or half-foreign, daughters of visiting mis-

sionaries or businesspeople, with real gold hair and pig-pink skin. They were selected to be Butterflies in the annual school play while Vidya was relegated to the Trees, her naturally dark skin (the nuns explained) rendering unnecessary the regulation brown dye. So she knelt on the stage, with her convenient brown face, green cellophane leaves hanging from her shoulders, while the Butterflies fluttered and twirled around her in their rosy tutus and dupatta wings of sequined gauze. These were the girls about whom stories were written. Words grew about them as naturally as flowers. For herself, she could find no words. Watching their beauty, she learned her lack of it.

But now her lack suggested possibility, something she could make whole. The idea came to her a month ago, following an encounter with the foremost of the princesses: Mia Ford, half-American, with golden curls pulled back in a velvet headband (obtained, the girls whispered, from Disneyland in America). Mia was the class monitor, universally admired for performing her duties with ladylike grace. One day between classes, when everyone was supposed to wait for the next teacher in silence, Vidya forgetfully happened to ask the girl beside her about homework.

Instantly Mia materialised before her. Vidya had never imagined she would attract Mia's notice and tried to think of some smart greeting. But Mia's perfection was paralysing, her pink-and-white face entirely regular and unspoiled by emotion. When she spoke, her voice was extremely sweet.

"Come, I have a place for you." She stretched out her hand.

Confused but grateful, Vidya placed her hand in Mia's, observing how that small white hand made her own hand look large, the fingers thick and stumpy, their joints already wrinkled and almost black. What had Mia meant? Would Vidya miraculously get to sit with her and the other princesses on the front bench?

Mia led her ceremoniously to the front of the classroom. "Stand there, please, with face to the wall." She pointed to the dustbin corner, reserved for offenders.

The class burst into titters, the loudest coming from the princesses. Vidya, her eyes smarting, lowered her head to concentrate on what had just happened. She had made a mistake in understanding. She had heard the sweet, inviting words but missed the real meaning. Words weren't just there to say what

you meant—they could also be used to hide something deeper. Was there a way to learn this?

Vidya was still thinking hard when the reading period began and she was allowed to return to her seat. This time Sister did not read aloud to the class but handed each girl a book of her own. "You are big girls now, in your fourth year," she said by way of explanation. Unlike the books of previous years, which had large alphabets and words with illustrative animals, the new books were printed with entire blocks of text. The effect was intimidating, but in a few moments Vidya became aware of no longer trudging through the words one by one but skimming their tops, feeling strangely at home. She was wonderfully not herself anymore but a fantastical being in the story she was reading. The story was familiar—the sooty girl transformed into a princess, one of several Disney films her parents made her watch to improve her English—but this time, instead of wanting to be the girl, she found herself thinking of the kindly magical giver, the driver of miraculous transformations: rags into a silver gown, pumpkin into coach, rats into liveried coachmen. Each change made visible a hidden meaning that was not mean or mocking but generous and true, shining through the black words. It was like watching the goldfish in the school aquarium, which floated in a way that suggested not movement but suspension in a golden state of grace—its tail a rippling, undulating glory, its gills gently breathing with ease.

Each change made visible a hidden meaning that was not mean or mocking but generous and true, shining through the black words.

From that moment, Vidya understood that though she was not beautiful, she could write stories that were. And when the assignment was announced, she recognised her opportunity. She would create a princess superior to the ones in class: a princess like the transformed cinder-girl, with golden hair and blue eyes, but also possessing the magic powers of the fairy godmother. Vidya felt some extraordinary feat was called for, beyond the requirements of the assignment. She scoured the school dictionary for grand words with which to endow her princess, like the godmother bearing gifts. Her princess would have *tresses* like

amber; she would be *gorgeous*, *judicious*, and *virtuous*, and then—what?

Though Vidya was confident of finding the best words, she stalled when it came to writing what happened next. Action required a change in her princess's faultless state, which she could not bring herself to imagine. As her heroine was already perfect, living in a perfect world, there was nothing for her to do, and nowhere to go.

At home Vidya's parents watched her as she stared at her notebook, balancing her chin on the eraser end of her pencil but writing very little. A week went by and she was still stuck on the first paragraph.

"Don't spend too long on story-writing. You should do your sums," her mother scolded. She preferred that Vidya spent more time on maths and science, solid foundations for a prosperous, well-settled life.

"Let her write, Mummy. It will help her English," said her father. Vidya's convent English was a point of pride; its alienness and artificiality attested to its value. To preserve it, her parents instructed her to speak only English to the neighbourhood uncles and aunties, regardless of the language they used, Hindi or Marathi or Oriya. No one objected—her staunch English was indulged and even admired.

Despite this relentless cultivation, Vidya felt she was in a poor place for writing. You couldn't really write fairy stories in the little housing colony, with its garish green blocks of flats and great streaks of monsoon mildew running freely down the sides, like the hair dye the aunties tried at home when they began to go grey. Inside, everything was segmented and always the same, with families living in one shared bedroom and bathroom and the funnily named *drawing room*. Nothing happened to break the routine of home. Fathers and children went to work and to school in the morning, and the mothers kept everything running in the meantime. Occasionally there were visitors, relatives or (in her family's case) young men from her father's village in Orissa, come to give exams for city jobs. But these comings and goings never yielded anything worth writing about—they effected no change and were simply part of the routine.

More promising was the recently completed shopping *pla-*

za in Pune city centre, full of smart new things from abroad. Vidya, who had known only the bazaar near the colony, with its boxlike shops and evening carts selling local vegetables and handmade toys, begged her parents to take her there, and at last they agreed. Leaving the colony behind, they walked into a vast white-lit space, its glass roof bleaching the sun. It was bounded on three sides by glittering shops with exotic, foreign-sounding names: *Lakmé, Da Milano, Louis Philippe*. The whole basement was taken up by a single giant store called a *supermarket*, which seemed to sell everything.

In the supermarket, among American breakfast cereals and unseasonal fruits, Vidya found a section devoted exclusively to toys. At its centre was a glittering installation: deep pink boxes arranged in a pyramid. Each box had a window, and from each window a doll looked out at her. They were nothing like the dolls in the local bazaar, which were thick-limbed things built like babies, with fat faces and blinking glass eyes. These dolls looked like miniature adults, elegantly elongated. Each had golden hair and wide-open eyes painted in progressively paler rings of blue. Together they smiled unblinkingly at Vidya, their painted pink lips parting to reveal slivers of white.

Vidya had heard legend of these dolls at school, though she had not seen one till then. It was as though the fairy, whose perfection she could only vaguely see in her mind, had broken free and become real. If she could have one of these dolls, just to look at, she could write a perfect story.

Dragging her father to the display, she pointed to a specimen in a poufy pink gown with dots of glitter regularly spaced.

"I want—that." The thing was too magnificent for words; she would find them later.

The box announced: *Happy Birthday Barbie*. Her ninth birthday was a week away. She had been too old for a party for some years now, but her parents still gave her a gift.

Baba sighed. "Do you know how much it costs, tikimi?"

Mummy checked the price. "One hundred and ninety-nine rupees."

The reprieve of a rupee felt like a sly saving grace. It was still a shocking price, but Vidya reasoned this was a onetime thing. Having got the doll, she would never ask her parents for anything again.

Baba laughed. "We shall see."

Mummy frowned. "Don't say that. It is I who will have to find the money from the budget."

Baba winked, as though joining Vidya in a play of their own making. "Next week, perhaps, if you are a good girl."

He spoke like a father in a fairy tale: too good to be real. She was terrified something would thwart her at the last minute. So it was a miracle when Baba stood by his word and took her to the plaza on the day itself, after her birthday puja and homemade cake. The doll was still available, like an unexpected happy ending.

Getting the doll proved surprisingly simple and quick. Baba pointed it out to the store attendant, who simply reached over and brought it down as though it were an everyday thing, instead of the fulfilment of Vidya's dearest wish.

"*Two hundred rupees*," Baba said, his eyes comically wide.

"One hundred and ninety-nine," she insisted stoutly.

At home she placed the doll before her, staring at it in silent adoration. Inside the box, the doll looked pristine and upright, an appearance achieved by a surprisingly messy arrangement of knots and ties that Vidya had to negotiate to take it out. Outside the box, the doll seemed to shrink a little. Without the box's painted background (a garden with a palace in the distance), the doll began to look like any other object. Her golden hair began falling out of its shape, and her gown turned out to be in two pieces, a blouse and a skirt. But there were compensatory pleasures. Vidya had not known anything to have so many little details. ("So this is why they charge so much," from Mummy. "American capitalism, Mummy," explained Baba.) From her tiny painted fingernails to the silk bow atop her head, every little touch was a delight you could lose yourself in, momentarily forgetting the disappointing whole.

The idea of perfection filled her vision and blotted out the possibility of words. Nothing she could write could possibly match the vague beauty in her mind.

Vidya placed the doll before her and began to write about her princess again. This time the burden of expectation on her story had increased. She had counted on describing the doll's beauty

for her princess, but there was something dissatisfying about a beauty that diminished when taken out of a box. Vidya felt she must do better, put together little details (golden tresses, triple-blue eyes, rosy fingernails) into a beauty that remained pristine. So pristine, in fact, that once more she found herself unable to write. The idea of perfection filled her vision and blotted out the possibility of words. Nothing she could write could possibly match the vague beauty in her mind.

"Still playing with your doll!" her mother scolded when she caught Vidya still sitting and staring.

"I am not *playing*," Vidya explained. She was hard at work, and heartbroken by the inevitable failure of her writing.

"Anyway, put the doll away and move your desk to that corner. I have to put up the dada's desk here." This was the larger foldable desk set up in the drawing room for the young men visiting from her father's village as they looked for jobs. Because the drawing room was the only room in the flat other than the bedroom, it doubled as Vidya's study, which she had to share with whichever young man was visiting, the two working in opposite corners.

As her mother and father lugged the desk over, her mother huffed, "Remember to hide your doll when the dada comes. Don't go around showing it to everyone or it will go missing."

"Mummy," her father said, but he did not go beyond that. They never talked of his village; it was something to be left behind. The people in the village seemed to think the same, the young men looking for city jobs that would let them leave permanently. Her father explained that, as their parents had helped send him to school, it was time for him—now that he had a city job—to help them by offering a place to stay while they searched. Her mother viewed these visitors as inevitable but necessarily kept at a distance. She insisted Vidya respectfully address the guests as "dada," or elder brother, speak to them only in English, and otherwise have as little to do with them as possible or she would end up like them. But where these young men ended up Vidya did not know. After giving their interviews and exams, the young men respectfully took their leave, and were never seen or spoken of again.

The latest dada arrived three days after her birthday to sit the exams for the government bank. He was small and very dark,

even darker than she was. With his spindly limbs and wispy pencilled-looking moustache, he reminded her of one of the wooden puppets sold in the bazaar. After paying his respects to her parents, he settled into the makeshift study corner, where he sat hunched over thick textbooks with thin, closely printed pages, gently murmuring as if in prayer.

Vidya sat at her little table in the opposite corner, trying to write. It was the final stretch of the story month, with her story due the next week. Sister had assured the class that the imminent deadline would be a spur to writing, but Vidya did not find this to be true. She kept writing and rewriting her first paragraph, unable to go beyond, and finally fell to playing with her doll.

Occasionally she looked up and caught sight of dada staring at her doll. As soon as his eyes met hers, he ducked his head and returned to his books. Though he never said anything, Vidya guiltily wanted to hide her doll away. It was obvious he had never seen anything like it before. Looking at him made her feel a little like a rich girl.

On the morning of the bank exam, Baba insisted on taking Vidya along: "You never know, she might give the exam one day." Vidya had given exams at school, but this felt like entering the proximate but unfamiliar world of adults. She insisted on taking her doll, over her mother's remonstrations. "I won't let go of her, Mummy," Vidya said repeatedly, and indeed she clutched it firmly to her chest as she stood between her father's legs on the scooter, while he nimbly swivelled around the potholes and ruminating cows on the progressively deteriorating road, with dada hanging on behind.

The exam centre was a state college on the outskirts of the city. Vidya had expected a place like her convent school, but this building was old and square and yellow, except where the paint had peeled off to reveal rough grey patches. At her school, exams were a matter of ritual and ceremony, with students standing in hushed corridors till the bell was rung and the Reverend Mother enounced a Latin prayer. Here, crowds of people spilled shapelessly out of the building and onto the busy road, so that scooters and autos had to manoeuvre around them. Most of the candidates were young men, dressed like dada in bush shirts and trousers, but some were women, wearing the salwar suits favoured by the younger colony aunties. Everyone was bent over

their books and notes, buzzing beneath the noise of horns and whistles.

Her father looked entranced. "Look how hard they study, tikimi. You must learn from them." But Vidya could not see what there was to learn. Looking at the young men and women bent over their books was just like being crouched in her rickshaw alcove, unable to see beyond. As the bell rang and they made their way towards the building, dada among them, they looked like an army already defeated, shrinking as it withdrew.

With nothing to do till the exam ended, Vidya and her father began wandering around aimlessly. "Look, tikimi," he kept saying with exaggerated enthusiasm, pointing at the shops, though there was nothing worth seeing. The dark little stores were not like the glittering glass shops in the plaza, where you could see your reflected self faintly superimposed on the things you wanted. Here, the stores opened onto the street just like in the colony bazaar, except they sold books on banking or engineering or medical exams, not subjects she would ever want to study. Things were what they were; nothing could be made of them. She clutched her doll firmly in her hand, the plastic solid beneath the frilly silk.

The street ended in a small waste dump. Pigs rooted amid the muck with stray dogs, and in a dumpster overflowing with trash, more dogs and cats munched peaceably with a single spotted cow.

Immediately Vidya clapped her hand to her nose. But her father looked alert, almost excited. "Watch the pigs."

For a while, nothing happened. The pigs kept rooting and sniffing, their stained undersides dark and shiny against their hairy pink backs. Then the dogs, evidently fed up with the competition, began snapping and chasing the pigs, and it was a wonder to see how fast the pigs could run on their thin elegant trotters—on and on, around the mounds of garbage and behind the dumpster, till the dogs gave up at last.

That such joy could spring from muck was a surprise. Vidya found herself laughing and laughing. Forgetting everything, she brought her hands together and clapped.

Baba looked pleased. "This is life. This is what you should be writing about."

She smiled to keep him happy. Just because something was good for a laugh did not make it fit for a story.

The sun was high in the sky when they returned to the ven-

ue, shortly before the exam was due to end. A vada pav cart now stood at the entrance, its enterprising owner readying his stove for the returning flood of candidates. Her father bought two sandwiches, and as he turned to hand Vidya her food, he stopped short. "Tikimi"—his voice was so careful that Vidya immediately knew something was wrong—"where is your doll?"

She looked down at her hands: They were open and empty. She looked up at her father. Her throat was silent and full.

Without saying a word, they turned back the way they had come, slowing their steps as they searched. Vidya was thinking hard: Where had she dropped her doll? No one place came to mind, and she was forced to give every single thing her undivided attention. She took in the bookshops: one-roomed stalls that seemed constructed entirely of books—books lining the wall of the single room or piled high in columns that held up the corrugated tin roofs. In between the columns, squatting or curled up like an illustrated baby in a belly, was a lone seller, reading a newspaper or listening to the radio, uninterested in who was looking. These things stood apart from her, ordinary but enigmatic, part of an arrangement beyond her understanding.

Gradually the bookshops gave way to shacks of corrugated iron, with plastic sheets spread on the ground, piled with softening oranges and bananas buzzing with flies. If she looked hard enough, she could find her golden doll in this chaos. She concentrated hard on an orange, like it was a word, till it expanded into a world, unfolded into mountain ridges across valleys dotted by towns with red-roofed houses. So much meaning could be contained in a single word if you looked hard enough. Any ordinary thing could be given the beauty and meaning it did not have.

But when they arrived at the dumping ground, Vidya was suddenly afraid to remember. This was the likely spot, which had made her happily forget herself and bring her hands together, clapping and empty. She would never be happy again.

Her father was also trying to recall. "It must be here. Stay here—I'll go look." She watched him step into the field, carefully negotiating the heaps of trash, and disappearing behind the dumpster.

Left alone, she turned her attention to the waste dump. This time she could find no one thing to fix upon. The animals were

gone. In the distance things stirred—pigs or people perhaps, stepping out of their shapes, their edges undulating in the heat. Things lost their forms here, gave themselves up into the vast stretch of matter shimmering like a sea. The loss of her doll settled on her. No amount of heroic imagining could bring it back. So when her father returned, shaking his head and sweating, she did not cry. It was impossible for anything to keep its shape here. He seemed to be melting before her eyes, and the whole world was dissolving into a runny, silvery blur.

By the time they returned, the exam was long over, and dada was waiting, a lone speck in the distance. Her father tersely explained the situation—how ordinary he made her loss look!—and led them to his scooter, not once glancing at Vidya.

At home her mother was expectedly grim. "You lost your costly foreign doll while looking at pigs? We send you to a convent school, and you stare at pigs. You should go live in your father's village."

"Mummy," her father murmured, eyeing the young man, who was sitting as though dazed. But now dada stirred.

"Brother-sir—respected sister-in-law . . ." he began softly, addressing them in the intimate yet respectful Oriya manner, which established imaginary kinships. He had to repeat himself to get their attention. "I am so sorry. This is my fault. If it had not been for me, my exam, the child would not have lost her costly thing."

As absurd as the notion of him taking responsibility was associating him with such an expensive foreign object. Her parents hastened to put such possibilities to rest. "No, no, it is the child's fault." Mummy turned to Vidya. "The whole idea was stupid. What a waste, to give this girl such a beautiful thing."

The realisation struck her as a blow—she too was unfit for such beauty. In writing her story, she had tried to claim something that was not hers, like the beauty of the class princesses. Undeserving, she had failed to care for it. The doll's disappearance was a judgment that cast her failure to write in a new light: not as a difficulty to be overcome with worthy effort, but a permanent inability you had to live with, like dark skin or the lack of talent.

The loss of the doll sat heavy in Vidya's lap. Gone with it was the idea of her perfect story, leaving behind only ordinary things.

Mummy busied herself in the kitchen, reheating the afternoon curry for dinner with fresh chapatis, and the clanging pots and pans were a continuation of her scolding. Baba retreated into the toilet for his usual evening half-hour with the newspaper. From time to time there was a rustle, indifferent as the weather.

Dada buried himself in his books, his brow furrowed in thought, as though the exam were still before him. But in the evening he asked to borrow her father's scooter, to "explore the city by himself, if Brother-sir did not mind." He was gone for so long that Baba was debating hiring a rickshaw for a nighttime search. When he finally returned, there was a telltale pink box in his hands.

"For the child. The little doll," he explained, thrusting it forward awkwardly. Unasked, unexpected by anyone, he had managed to find a doll with golden hair. Her parents were overcome with thanks and protestations. Why did he go to all this trouble and expense, and how exactly did he get his hands on such a doll? When he told them the story, they were filled with wonder and kept repeating it, adding their own embellishments.

Dada had scoured the local bazaar on his host's scooter: Having never seen such a doll before, he did not know where to look. At last he found a shop with huge dolls the size of people in the window. The manager had smiled tightly at him and explained it was a saree shop, before taking pity and directing him to a real toy store. There he found hundreds of pink boxes, with dolls looking like the one he had seen the child play with. This doll was the only one he could afford. He hoped the child would be happy with it. "It is nothing to the doll she lost," he said modestly.

Vidya silently agreed. One look, and she saw there was no comparison: True, the doll had golden hair, but with a stupid bloated face and a cheap-looking cotton dress printed with blue dots. It required all her convent politeness to express the gratitude expected of her. Then her eyes returned to the doll unwillingly, and its central flaw revealed itself to her. "Baba," she asked, trying to keep her voice calm, "why is the *r* missing?"

"What? What?"

Her parents peered at the box and slowly spelt out the brand name. *B-A-B-I-E*. There was a moment of silence before Baba looked merrily at her, as if sharing a joke. "*Sweet-hart Baa-bee!* This is too good!" He slapped his thigh and laughed, having

recognized the doll as one of the counterfeits flooding the local bazaar.

"Made by America in India," her mother remarked. Instead of laughing, she smiled. Her smile had a twist in it, like the taste of something bitter.

Vidya felt she too must smile, if she were not to burst into tears. Grinning fiercely, she turned to the young man.

At the look on his face, she forgot herself. He was staring at his hosts, his mouth half open and shapeless, as if unsure of settling into an expression. He seemed to have realized he had made an error, despite his good intentions and great efforts, but he was unsure what it meant. The delight his hosts took in his mistaken purchase puzzled him, as though its counterfeit status had somehow enhanced its value in their eyes. Vidya watched on, waiting to see what he would do next. Would he join in her parents' merriment or say how sorry he was?

At this point his gaze met hers by accident. In his eyes she saw an unformed thing, wounded but watchful, still in the process of becoming. The next moment it was gone. As soon as his eyes fell on her, there was a kind of settling in his face. He gave her an indulgent smile, of the sort any grownup would give, and then turned back to her parents, this time knowing exactly what to do: laugh at himself, while making a note for when he would take his place among knowledgeable city people.

In his eyes she saw an unformed thing, wounded but watchful, still in the process of becoming. The next moment it was gone.

There was no trace of the unformed thing she had glimpsed. There was only the impression it left, a gap in her chest, waiting to be filled with future words. At present they were molten and unformed; perhaps in time they would cool into the shapes of words. Some of the meanings she could understand even now—a young man on the make, come to sit the exams for a city job. Even at her age, she was familiar with exams and ambition. But beyond that lay something deeper: a formlessness that lay inside people, only surfacing during uncertain moments, when none of their regular faces would do. It was not perfect and heavenly like the princess dolls, but possessed of endless depths that

shadowed the edges of everyday things, like the fact of one day following the next, and people saying things by not saying them straight. This was not something to be got at directly. You could only get at it through free slant touches that together conjured a shimmering world in which real things—the rich school, the bare slackness of home, the hungry candidates trying for city jobs—were reflected in ways that lit up the centre that could not be written.

"Tikimi, did you remember to say thank you to dada?" her father reminded her. He had stopped laughing by then.

She had already thanked dada, but this time it was different. She put herself into those words, charged them with her particular personal feeling. "Thank you very much for the doll, Prashant dada." Till that moment, when it suddenly came to her, she had forgotten she knew his name.

The young man's face opened in a real smile.

The day after Prashant dada left for his village, Vidya took out her notebook and began to write again. The story was due in two days. This time her words were simple, not straining after spectacular effects, but merely laying out what she saw. Though they did not come close to telling everything she felt, they were the best she could do in the limited time at hand. She would keep revising her story every time she caught up with her changing thoughts, long after the school assignment. It could take many years, and even then her words might not capture everything she felt. All that remained was the certainty of more attempts, each failing more narrowly than the last. Strangely, this knowledge did not make her sad.

She received her story back a week after submission. The first thing she noticed was the star, given only to the best assignments: how inexpertly it was drawn, in a line stretched awkwardly into five points, the pen not once rising from the page. It was her first star, but all she could think of was Sister concentrating hard on her crooked effort—head bent low in its wimple, tongue tip jutting out of the corner of her mouth, trying to get it better each time.

The next day Sister invited two girls to read their stories to the class. One was Mia Ford, and to universal surprise, Vidya was the other. Mia looked at Vidya curiously, not hostile, just surprised at something being out of place. In her half-American

English, she read a story about celebrating Christmas in Boston, where she had spent the last winter with cousins. What was interesting was how she made things like *white Christmas* and *clam chowder* sound ordinary and routine, as though she were used to such things. Vidya had never seen snow. Outside the American drawing room with its real fireplace and its Christmas tree lit up warm and golden, she imagined real snowflakes dropping white against the dark, magical and unnoticed.

After the unanimous round of applause, it was Vidya's turn. Unused to reading aloud, she began lisping from the first sentence, but she persisted, and soon her mouth smoothed itself. "He opened and closed his mouth silently, trying to say *Baa-bee* without making any sound. He had never heard that word before, and had only just learned it when he saw it was a fake—the real *Barbie* had an *r* in it. So he had to learn that word anew."

The class had not been silent throughout her reading, keeping up a running commentary through their reactions. In the beginning they had hissed at her lisp, till Sister silenced them, and at the description of the pigs they made sounds of disgust. At the reveal of the fake Barbie the princesses laughed triumphantly, as though some secret suspicion had been confirmed. But Vidya read on, wrapped up in her own story, while also looking at it with a critical gaze, thinking how it could be written better. When her reading ended everyone clapped, as was the form, but the applause was tinged with uncertainty. It was not the sort of story they expected in class. But apparently the strangeness was what Sister liked. She spoke of trying to enter the mind of another, a poor young man from a village, and this was what storytelling was about.

Vidya was not so sure. It seemed the sympathy and kindness were on the other side, the poor young man extending himself to buy her a doll. What had become of him and his search for a city job? Vidya did not know. She was already thinking of the next thing to write.

On their way back to their seats, Mia turned and spoke to her for the second and last time. "That doll, was it really a fake?"

Vidya took in the still beauty of her face. This time it did not despoil her of words. "Yes, it was a real fake." She frowned as she spoke. The two words were not supposed to go together—they meant opposite things—but at that moment, they matched exactly what she meant to say.

The fakeness of *Sweetheart Babie* was written on its face: bloated where the real one had had a neat and tight symmetry, with its eyes slightly divergent. Not fixed in perfect beauty but changeful, charged with life, capable of growth. The prospect of future words, if she was watchful and lucky.

The class moved on to the next period, but Vidya was not paying attention. She was thinking about a long-ago day at school, which now resurfaced in her memory for some reason. One morning during assembly, the goldfish had plopped out of its tank and briefly become a graceless, gasping thing, chasing its breath in thrashing arcs across the cold cement floor. Its supreme and beautiful indifference had vanished, replaced with great futile spasms of effort, as the girls screamed and scattered. Finally, someone scooped it up and put it back just in time. But the goldfish did not resume floating right away. On being returned to its watery sphere, it had struggled for a while, its usual fluid glide broken into distinct, irregular movements, each to be learned anew.

OLIVIA WOLFORD

THE DEER COLLECTOR

Immaculate, his assemblage.
What can be brought and live
Long enough for me to shoot?
Bring that. Dapple backed
White tails. Antlers thick as
Cherry trees. Something from
Africa, two twists skyward.
To them he was a
Smear of oil on the horizon.
Bloated and mechanical. A
Lesser god. They can't lessen.
Trembling messengers, eyes
That see in the dark.
Perfuming hell as home.

OLIVIA WOLFORD

THE HOLE

Factory tones: snow,
Clean. Snow, dirty. Melting grey.
Quite quiet, quite loud.
The former, when I
Enter, peer around. Where are
They? Strangers, saviors.
Steel jaws in repose.
Finally the shock of a
Bare wrist, beckoning.
Huddled in the back
Room. Years they had maintained
It, hidden from changed hands.
Perfect circle of
Dirt. They were never told why.
I lift my shovel.

OLIVIA WOLFORD

THE COTTAGE

Cottage warm, cottage
Quaint. Unassuming. Cottage
Wall of vials. Strange.
My cottage? My hair
Under glass. My nails saved for-
Something. That's my blouse,
Just a shred, stuffed down
And arranged next to others.
Cottage crammed with me.
If the earth shakes, glass
Will fall like snow, make music.
I'll spill all over the floor.

CAROL CIAVONNE

IN THE GREAT HALL

After "Memory Reflections," photo by Amadís Amaya

A great hall and shapes of light

humans blurred shadows what the camera sees as motion

The voices stay back don't catch up to the people

continue the conversation with the paintings in the first room.

Space as if humans were born with enormous bodies

or they were a flock of cranes that need to fly indoors

build nests in the rafters with saplings.

A choir of cranes if cranes could sing

if cranes do sing but we don't hear it as beauty.

Singing in a great hall or a cathedral

where the music stays for a minute in the first room

after the song leaves.

The way the camera has moved like music

to leave the images pulled into spirit by the camera

in the great hall where there is room for spirits,

the rare largesse of humans.

Contained but with room to sing, reverberate or echo but more
what the effect is, what it is meant to be
the feeling by each felt by all, not shared with, but being shared to.
To enter into the large shapes of light.

Where the singing and the conversations with the paintings mingle
and become the history of the paintings
and the evolution of the music
blended, repeated, which it was always meant to be

until it is a massed and tender cacophony, reassuring, enveloping
as in a great nest where the limbs of the tree creak in the wind
and no one has yet fallen.

CAROL CIAVONNE

LANDSCAPE

If only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there.
—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

You move in the landscape as your mind moves. As the landscape

permits you to think. Its own mind allows it,

as going alone in the Antarctic after the companions turn back.

Think fear, and self blocks the light.

Think grace that can't be asked for: chlorophyll rising,

hearts of birds and mammals beating, slow aging of wood and iron.

The sound water makes underwater without breath's distraction.

As in viewing a photograph we are not there.

The act of viewing obscures the real,

the suddenly almost-understood bird language.

CAROL CIAVONNE

DIRECTION

> *Certain realities are more or less transparent; others are opaque; but behind each, indistinctly, is God. Our only concern is to look in the direction of the point where it is found, whether or not we see it*
> —Simone Weil, *Pensées sans Ordre Concernant l'Amour de Dieu*

To look in the direction of god is to look in the indistinct direction,
in the direction of the coast or the direction of sound,
to look where you hear. Or the direction of god is a book or a
person or an animal like a small cat. A forest, but each tree is not
quite there. You may look for a propitious direction, when
building a city. You can't see a thing until you stop looking
in the direction and focus on the thing. Then you see only the thing.
Like the bill holding the reed, not the direction of the flock or where
they are going. Cranes in mist: red flare, black stroke,
beautiful as directionless eternity, or world without end.

JIHYUN YUN

SEE, CREATURE

My mother is an octopus.

I've always known it from the ruinous strength of her grip. The way her palms ghost small ovals on glass and leave immaculate round stamps on every surface she touches.

There is also the fact of her skin. Normally bronze from diving, it occasionally ripples and shifts to blend with her surroundings. Sometimes at night, I enter the kitchen and find her standing still near the stove, her skin the perfect blue-black of morning, so thoroughly camouflaged with the wall it's as if her white dress hangs on nothing but the memory of a woman, the woman herself long gone. *Mom*, I call, and her hue settles and becomes at once skin again. Human. Slightly cold and damp and prickling when she reaches out to touch my cheek with love, or other times dismissal.

It is only after I reach menarche that the women allow me to accompany them to shore, and I finally see it with my own eyes.

We abandon our mopeds for sand, rock, our rural wind-whipped Jeju, South Korea. We are haenyeo, the female free divers of our island province, but we are not like the rest. Where the other village diver groups enter the sea in wet suits, goggles, plastic webbed flippers, we enter the sea and become it.

But I'm only a girl and too scared to swim. I'm scared of what I might become, I mean.

I stop at the tide pools where the water only laps at my knees, despite the sharp look my mother gives me as she tries to wrench me deeper before giving up with a sigh. I can't meet her eyes. Instead, I resign myself to collecting swimmer crabs and seaweed while the women shed their Western garments and enter the water naked and gleaming.

The Daesanggun goes first, her skin so ancient it looks cut from beige crepe paper. The evidence of long life written all over her body is beautiful. Distended belly. Breasts like low fruit. Her hands are so work-worn the fingerprints are long obliterated. Sanded down, anonymous. Pressure-sickness has deafened both ears, but when she enters the water, she is a stronger swim-

mer than anyone. She pushes her tewak, an orange floating device rigged with collection nets, into the water, where it bobs like a tangerine. And then she follows it in.

The transformation is immediate as she wades out. Her wrinkled body elongates, smooths, becomes the slate gray of a stone. Her nose, crooked from a decades-old diving accident stretches to a long, smiling maw serrated with vicious little teeth. A blowhole opens at the top of her skull last, releasing a small plume of blood into the water. And just like that, she is a dolphin. Her ancient human lungs traded briefly for strong cetacean lungs. She jumps high out of the sea, then plunges, snapping the ropes of her tewak between her teeth to drag it out behind her. I watch the shadow of her move toward the farthest diving grounds she is allowed to navigate, then vanish.

The other haenyeo follow, pulling their own tewaks after them. Several women also become dolphins. One, a copper shark. Another, a giant blood-red squid. Hunters, all of them. One by one, they leave to forage the seafood we will sell at market.

My mother goes last. One of the youngest of the divers, she doesn't have to go far. She wades in, knee-deep. To her thighs. The water rises to the dark of her pubic hair before her transformation starts in earnest. The surface of the water ripples out as both of her legs split into four distinct tentacles. Blood pleats out like a skirt around her hip then beaches itself on the shore—pink froth that erases and erases itself. I can't see it through the stained water, but I know that her skin is erupting now with neat columns of suction cups. The pain must be immense, but she doesn't wince. With quiet dignity, she dips the rest of herself into the sea. Her skin ochres, eyes distend past their sockets, grow bulbous with coin-slit pupils. And it is done.

Does she know me, when she is like this?

Though my hand drips with sodden kelp, I still lift my arm to wave, bidding her safety. But she doesn't wave back. For a while, she is not my mother. She is an octopus, propelling herself dutifully toward the woman's work of predation. I stand on the shore and watch her leave.

I am told that at first, our village was only cursed in the usual way: by war or occupation or massacre. Our men wetting the soil of the slaughter fields or taken away on boats and never seen again.

What was there to do then in the wake of such misfortune?

Our women did what they always have. They went to water, to work. They left offerings of fruit and incense at the sacred coastal rock pillars to plead for safety at sea, then dove ten hours a day to bring mollusks to shore. Our village's haenyeo were so ordinary then, swimming with strong women's bodies, not yet become animal. They gutted squid, divested them of their spear-head bones, haggled their wind-dried jerky at markets and—unlikely as it was—lived.

A war came and went. An authoritarian regime came and went. By the time history turned its culling eyes elsewhere, our women found themselves sun bleached and bewildered in sudden, forgiving light. They thought their fortune may have come at last, and it had, for a while.

And then—

There is only so much to harvest from the tide pools.

I fill one plastic basin with seaweed and another with littlenecks and tiny adolescent crabs we'll fry whole and glaze with chili. Then, my worth exhausted, I sit on the sand and watch the haenyeo work the sea. In the far distance, the Daesanggun leaps out with a whistle, her dolphin's flippers scattering a parabola of water into the air. She deposits a sea pineapple into her tewak before diving back below. In the shallower depths, my mother the octopus slinks up, one conch held in each of her eight sentient legs. She drops them one by one into her bobbing net before skimming the shore with the protruding knobs of her eyes. They find me for a moment before she vanishes again to hunt.

Even as night begins to fall and I find myself shivering, I stay by the water and wait for them to emerge. Once in the water, our women don't leave until the hunt is done. It is one of the reasons their harvest is always so good. No hour-long lunch breaks to massage the taut muscles of their calves; our haenyeo feed as they dive, snatching porgy in their maws and tearing into them as they swim, scanning the deep for more valuable things to salvage for their nets.

It's past twilight by the time they come up for air, one by one dragging their animal bodies to the banks. The auntie who became a copper shark is the first to emerge. She beaches herself on the sand with the rope of her tewak clenched between her gnashing teeth. There are always a handful of moments that feel like violence before the transformation happens. Being a creature is easy. It's becoming a woman again that can kill you.

A few times before, our haenyeo have beached themselves and expired before they could throw off their curse. I remember every one of them with the perfect recall made possible by horror. Though the wreckage of their bodies differed, the way they lay prone on the starchy funerary sheets was much the same. Their faces, or what was legible as faces, were always contorted in fatal effort. I can't forget them. The elder whose shark gills failed to close, who'd died with five parallel gashes carved on either side of her throat. The one who still partially wore a squid's face, which is to say nearly no face at all—just the tumors of her eyes ballooning past her sockets, a vanished nose, and her lips burrowed into a hard beak somewhere beneath her chin. For weeks after death, her skin still secreted a steady film of mucous that dampened the freshly turned dirt of her grave from within.

Being a creature is easy. It's becoming a woman again that can kill you.

It was almost always because the divers had gotten too old to weather the transformations. But without enough haenyeo to replace them, how else would the village be sustained?

Each time they died like this, their bodies were brought back to our village and buried quietly beside the millet fields, close enough for them to alight from their graves and visit upon their homes. In this way, our island hews close to our ghosts. But I've had enough of our ghosts and their quiet, wet wanting. I want all of us to live.

"Please." I fall to my knees beside the shark woman. It is horrible to behold. The smooth planes of her body undulate violently, like the limbs of some other creature are contained inside and pushing up against their confines. "Come on. Please." I reach out to touch her, then flinch back as she thrusts her body against the banks, heaving. The serrated edge of her tooth glances against my wrist, splits skin, and, as if maddened by the scent of my blood, her jaws gnash frantically. Sand in her gills. Lidless eyes moving wild in their sockets, recognizing nothing. I hold my breath as I watch her writhe.

But then, my god, it begins.

The shark's great body collapses in on itself like swiftly decaying carrion, becomes a quivering mass in the shape of a

small, elderly woman. She remains faceless for a while, swathed tight in the copper sandpaper skin of her sea creature, and then slowly, slowly, her features break through. Hooded eyes, button nose, her mouth cleaving open to suck in breath. I wrap her in a towel as she spits out seawater and pulls herself up. I let her lean on me as she stumbles, shocked by the sudden fact of her legs. "I'm okay," she pants, reassuring us both. "I'm okay. Good girl." She pats my hair with shivering hands, as if I've done anything good today. My little buckets of seaweed and cheap clams.

One by one, the haenyeo return to land, transform in various degrees of violence that stain the banks cerise, towel off, dress themselves in damp clothes again. My mother reemerges last, as usual, and so silently that by the time I hear her coming, she's already cast off her octopus body and is walking on the shore, a woman again. Pale in the failing sun, wringing water from her long black hair.

It wasn't long before our village came to be cursed in an unusual way.

It started with news of the construction of a naval base on our island to the peril of our rural, virgin coast. Our diving grounds. Our soft coral reefs and rare frilled fish that live within. But worst of all was the slated destruction of our sacred rock pillar to make space. The treasured grounds where, for centuries, the people of our village laid offerings for safe passage, gentle waves, the abundance of fish that sustained and sustains us.

The village protested, of course, painstakingly and for years. But bulldozers came anyway, and the volcanic pillar was knocked into the sea, along with a brass bowl of rice and incense that had been placed at its base just that morning.

The year was 2012, and I was not yet born.

My young mother and the other haenyeo wept as they donned their wetsuits the next morning, grieving for the ancient rock gone to rubble and the shipyards that would take root in its place. They cried as they dove with sharp blades to cut abalone from the seabed, and cried on their way to peddle their goods.

And then I happened. These were the circumstances of my birth as I know it: My mother, then only twenty-one, returned home from the wet market one night and fell suddenly, cadav-

erously asleep. When she woke, she was on the kitchen floor. Sweating. Feverish. Her mouth tasted heavily of salt. Her belly had suddenly swelled in the gone hours without having taken any recent partners.

Shivering, she dragged herself to the bathroom and squatted over a washbasin. There was a heaviness in her pelvis, and she pushed until she released a rush of seawater, warmed gently by her interior heat, and what looked like a dense cluster of pearl-white sea grapes. It pulsed like it was alive because it *was* alive. In each oblong sack, two pairs of black dots peered out through the translucent caul. Eyes. Dozens of them, watching her as she knelt toward the floor drain and heaved.

She knew from years of diving what she'd birthed. They were unmistakably octopus spawn, and in a panic, she ran to the sea with the basin of eggs and amniotic fluid sloshing in her hands. Half believing this a dream, she threw it all into the ocean and watched the waves take the birth, basin and all.

My mother may have continued believing this was a hallucination if the next morning she and the haenyeo hadn't gone to work, slipped into the water, and themselves become beasts, their sacred rock pillar no longer casting its protective silhouette over the waters where the women thrashed against the pain of their temporary marine bodies.

Two weeks later and already a child, I crawled to shore. Nameless, without language. I imagine myself picking cords of kelp off my skin and making my way to the village, like all brand-new things, in search of its mother.

I have no recollections of this, of course. What was I when I hatched from that egg sac? I suppose I could have been anything, given the impossibility of our bodies. Yet I can imagine myself as nothing but a human baby the size of a pumpkin seed, curled embryonic as I broke free from the others, growing rapidly as I rode the currents. Sucking my thumb, beatific, drifting past schools of fish and plankton as the sea ferried me to land.

The yield, as always, is good.

Each woman's net bulges with abalone, sea pineapples, and fish as silver as polished spoons. At the market, we sell what we can, and the creatures too small or too dead to sell the haenyeo divide amongst themselves to take home. Mother and I are given two ruby sea cucumbers and a bucket of turban conch.

At home, we cut them open as the television fills our dining room with uncanny oceanic light. The sea cucumbers we blanch quickly in hot water and toss in doenjang and oil. The turban conch we break from their shells to chew their cartilage-firm meat raw. We eat in silence at the floor table, the communal bowl of rice slowly vanishing as our spoons scrape the ceramic. Outside, the wind howls through the citrus groves.

She isn't happy with me, my mother. I can see it in the furrow of her brow and the way her chopsticks clang against the bowl, and after a day of silence, she can no longer hold her tongue.

"It's ridiculous for a daughter of our village to be afraid of the sea," she says. She stabs a slice of conch into sauce, splattering the table with viscous red vinaigrette. "Our oldest haenyeo are well over eighty now. Beyond the years where they should be resting in their homes. Being scared doesn't change the fact that you'll have to replace them soon."

She doesn't know that I don't actually fear the sea. I'm fascinated by it. I love how cold it is, even in the humid apex of summer. I love its mystery, that science knows more about outer space than its depths.

I fear only what it might make me become.

The last dozen village girls who entered the water failed to turn into anything useful. Most had simply become fish. Little decorative, colorful things like the species that once thrived in the reefs before naval fleets docked on our shores and cursed us. Others had become tiny cuttlefish with stubby, useless arms. No creatures of meaningful financial function. No predators. Nothing that could hunt.

What we need now is another dolphin. Another shark. Even a turtle with strong enough jaws to rip mollusks free of the rocks. I wish I could voice this to her, but she'd only scoff. *An octopus*, she'd say. *You are my daughter, so of course you will be an octopus, just like me.* If only it could be that simple. An octopus. So very useful with its eight independently intelligent legs, nimble bodies that can camouflage with anything, can squeeze through a keyhole in the rock.

An octopus, she'd say. You are my daughter, so of course you will be an octopus, just like me.

But our curse doesn't work that way. All of the Daesanggun's granddaughters became olive flounder, even amongst bottom-feeders, profoundly useless fish. Poor swimmers with bad peripheral vision, their bodies flat and fanlike as if rolled out with a baking pin. All this, despite the fact that their mother transforms into a dolphin and occupies the very top of the hierarchy of divers. I will never forget the shame on their faces when they turned back into girls, the way the Daesanggun set her jaw and looked away as they dressed themselves.

Who is to say I wouldn't be the same? I don't think I can handle seeing my mother's disappointment should I fail.

"Soon," I say.

I pick up my plate before she can respond and lay it in the sink.

Though stern by nature, my mother is not impervious to tenderness. This was especially true when I was a child.

My earliest memory: sitting cross-legged before the mirror as she combed through the black tangle of my hair, looking for creatures. I was only two years out of the ocean then, and its thumbprint had not yet left me. A child of eddy and crush. At random, my follicles would produce not hair but eelgrass that flared spruce green in the sun. If neglected, barnacles grew along the oily plains of my scalp like pewter cysts. I pissed my bed with seawater, left my sheets and legs dotted with sand, algae, dead many-legged organisms left to desiccate in the night. But the most surprising thing about me, my mother said, had been my eyes.

Electric blue. Like sea glass. So pale that when I looked into them, instead of seeing myself reflected, I'd vanish.

But when I looked into my mother's dark eyes, I never vanished. Her irises the slate black of a TV screen, my reflection would pull wide against their convex curvature. I saw myself, face dumb with devotion, happy to be seen as she inflicted care and violence against my scalp.

Back then, when you followed me around the village with those eyes, people gossiped that I'd secretly met with one of the American marines who so often stop over in that base. I don't think anyone believed me when I said it wasn't true, until your eyes darkened the following year, she said, her fingers fixing around a barnacle, digging with the spade of her fingernail until it came away. A bright spot of pain, and then she flicked it into

the bowl sitting between us. It clinked and rolled to rest atop the others, a streak of blood and hair against white enamel.

Then she held my cheeks between her hands. *Look at me.* I looked at her looking at me, seeking her own reflected face in my eyes. She studied me so long, there was a feeling of vanishing that intensified until she at last broke into a relieved smile. *See,* she said. *There I am.*

When she pulled her hand away to clear the bowl of barnacles, her palm left a mark on my cheek, the bright red oval of a cephalopod's suckers. I remember sitting in front of the mirror that night, long after she'd washed the dishes and turned in for her shower. Studying my now-dark eyes, the imprint of her affection fading on my cheek, mourning something that I had yet to ever fully receive and thus couldn't name.

Weeks pass, and then a month. Autumn's crisp bite leaves the entire island flush with color that drains all at once as winter begins. Wind scours the volcanic bluffs, and hail occasionally thunders across the sea. This alone isn't enough to halt the dives. Haenyeo operate in all seasons, using the moon's guidance to predict when the waters will be too choppy, the tides too high.

Most days, they still drive to the coasts to enter the water. Like always, I follow them only as far as my knees and burn time collecting seaweed that fetches little at market. I know my delay is untenable. Every day, my mother's gaze grows a little more impatient, angrier. And the Daesanggun grows weak. It's impossible to ignore. Each transformation wears more on her body, and it is harder to throw off. The other day, her dolphin's blowhole took two hours to fully close, and the top of her head stayed wet with a deep divot that wept thin streams of blood down her face and into her soup.

I must do what I can, but that doesn't mean my first transformation can't be on my own terms, which is to say, witnessed by no one else.

On a cold Sunday evening, I wait for my mother to fall asleep. Perhaps it's the physical strain of her work, but no one sleeps like she does. Once she blinks out, nothing short of sunlight on her face will wake her. Sprawled on the floor mat in front of the TV, a bowl of tangerines balanced precariously over her chest, she snores and doesn't stir even when I pad over her to the closet, pulling the warmest coat off the rack.

And then I'm out the door in the perfect indigo night. I hop on my mother's moped and drive slowly through our village hushed with sleep, past the fences of stacked volcanic rock and the Jindo dogs dozing in the yards. Past the orange groves where we make our money when the sea is too treacherous to work. And then finally the coast.

I park the moped. There is no direct path to the water. There is only the sharp incline I trip down until my feet reach sand so frigid and fine it feels like snow. Our shores are remote—not even the buses of gawking tourists make their way here—and I am perfectly alone as I shed my coat. It falls to my feet with a heavy thump, and immediately the biting wind has me hissing sharply between my teeth. Unsteadily, I loosen my sleeping shirt, my pants, my undergarments, until I am pale and bare and lit sickly white by the moon.

The sea laps at my feet and I shiver at the impossible temperature. The urge to turn back nips at me, but I still wade forward. Such is a daughter's debt to her mother.

Here I am, I think. *I've come back. Change me.*

The water rises past my knees, a terrible shock. The cold is a physical thing that parts flesh and touches bone. My teeth chatter. The hair along my arms and legs stands up in protest. Then, when the sea reaches my thighs, I feel something else. A rush of electric anticipation. Visions of powerful tail fins cleaving swiftly through water, tentacles strong enough to tear abalone from the rock. What will I be, now that I've gone so far the beach is just a thin white band in the distance—farther than I've ever been, and all alone now?

I sink my head below the water until I am submerged completely for the first time since my mother threw me here a decade ago. Below the surface is black velour; small motes of light dance deep in the water like darting bioluminescent shrimp. Beyond that, I see nothing.

My human eyes are insufficient. But when I transform—if I do—my animal eyes will adjust to this darkness, become so photosensitive I will be able to see black urchin rolling amongst the volcanic seabed.

What will I be? I think with anticipation now. The tides pull my hair wild around my face, and it feels like my mother's hands combing barnacles from my scalp.

I close my eyes and wait for our curse to take me.

As my body sinks beneath the sea, I'm no longer cold. It feels like I'm floating in outer space, my body turning slowly, inert and weightless as my hair billows smokelike in the perfect dark. An oppressive silence bears down on my ears. Pressure. Stillness. The feeling of the body becoming an imaginary body. It never takes this long for the other haenyeo to turn. When they submerge fully in the sea, blood always spreads its red wings in the water in a matter of seconds, whatever creature they become, darting up and away before it can fully disperse.

An oppressive silence bears down on my ears. Pressure. Stillness. The feeling of the body becoming an imaginary body.

I've gone far. The beach just a slim hem of white in the distance. The tide pulls me in. Thrusts me back. My eyes are full of water.

I'm not going to turn, I think, at first with relief and then a slow horror. *I'm not.*

How long have I been down here? Time feels elastic. I can't track it anymore. A pressure mounts in my throat and the back of my head like a want to weep. A horrible beating in my ears. Air. I need air. I try to kick my legs out from beneath me, but they're leaden. Not mine anymore. The mote of light beyond the water, that seafoam moon, grows small as I sink. I think I'm not going to survive this.

But then.

A prickling sensation, like the feeling of a slit opening in my center and something small like a grain of sand slipping inside. I can see nothing, but I imagine blood curling up into the water like incense smoke out of the fissure. All my attention, my every nerve, gathers around it. This entry wound. This foreign body floating somewhere inside my core. And then, like matter collapsing into a vacuum, I feel myself siphoned inward toward it, self devouring self until I am smaller. Diminished. The pain is memorable and then it is over.

I open my eyes. The world is a blur of blue, gently phosphorescent and livid with activity. I can see. I can see it all, and suddenly I love the world in the way only prey animals can.

Feverishly, with everything I have, knowing at any moment I can be gone.

When I finally manage to beach myself on the shore and become a girl again, I throw a coat over my shivering, soaked body and sob hard into the sand. When I'm emptied, I scramble up the incline toward the moped. At home, my mother is still asleep, a half-peeled tangerine resting in the bowl of her palm as a low drone emits from the TV. Some sort of survival show where increasingly desperate-looking K-pop idols try to sustain themselves on a rural island with only rudimentary tools. A hungry teenager is trying to dislodge a live abalone from its shell with a spoon. Laugh tracks when the mollusk writhes in an expression of suffering that seems impossible for a being with no brain and no obvious mouth with which to scream. The boy drops it with a shout of alarm. There is true dread on his face before the camera pans away. On the floor, the abalone muscles violently, trying to escape itself. The laughter crests then fades.

By the time I reach my room, I am shaking. The tips of my wet hair have gone stiff with the prelude of frost. I make it halfway to my bed before I fall, coughing hard at something trapped in my throat. When I entered the sea, before I animaled, I'd felt myself opening, some irritating object burrowing inside. This must be what I'm choking on now, what I'm trying so desperately to dislodge.

A fistful of water comes up first, spreading over the wood-laminate floor, saline and somehow still frigid despite being held inside me. Then, the gruel of masticated, half-digested rice, sour now with bile. And there, amidst the mess, something oblong and dull like a white pebble, evidence of my failure. Gasping, I roll it clean and hold it up to the light, the rush of the ocean still crashing in my ears.

A pearl.

My mother is an octopus, and I am a scallop.

No.

My mother is an octopus, *and yet* I am a scallop.

There is weight in the distinction between these statements.

My mother is an octopus, powerful and eight-legged, pulsing through the ocean to hunt for her village's sake. *And yet* I am a scallop. I swim with the heartbeat propulsion of my shell fluttering open then shut around my sweet interior meat. I swim

comically, in frantic fits and spurts, then sink when I can't snap my shell shut fast enough, bubbles emitting from the fissures between my gills. People make short-form videos of my floundering on YouTube, offset with American carnival music. There is shock in the comments: *I didn't know scallops could move*! People seem to mostly picture us inert beneath the sea or else shucked and cling-wrapped over fish-market ice.

I have two hundred eyes with which to see two hundred potential perils. Eyes, which I know from my furtive online searches are heartbreak blue, each containing their own concave mirror. Such feats of organic engineering to help my peripheral vision in the water, and I hate myself for them. But god, my sight. My myriad eyes feed me images in bites and silhouettes, as if by echolocation. The ripples set off by a starfish's arm. A distant dorsal fin cleaving water like a knife. I see them almost before they happen. I see them long after the movement stills.

All this, and yet I am just a scallop. I hunt nothing but crevices in the rock to hide in.

When the women wade into the water, I gnaw my hair on the shore until they are all gone, then I follow them in. As a bivalve, I watch them work. The animals they become navigating the waters with such speed and power. I watch them fill their nets, and I watch them eat. Their efficient teeth tearing into the pulsing, translucent meat of cuttlefish that are much speedier than me.

Once, a shark-woman spotted me in the distance and tore toward me for her lunch. It was only through some grace that a porgy caught her sight and she detoured for that instead. I let myself sink. All my ganglion nerves trembling with the fact of my near-devouring by someone who loves me.

Still, I can't stop myself. Despite danger, I wade in after the women every day. Beneath the depths and tucked out of sight, I am closer to them than I've ever been. I watch their jaws, their sinuous tentacles, their strong beaks work the seabed until the sun begins to pleat strange against the surface, and I know it's time to go.

An hour before them, I propel myself all the way to shore in my awkward bivalve way and wait to become a girl again, flesh rematerializing from air. Blood rushing from all my brand-new limbs. I vomit seawater and dull, worthless pearls, brush relics of burst shell from my brow, then rush for dry clothes so I can greet the haenyeo like nothing has changed.

These days, my mother tries not to look at me. Not only do I refuse to dive with the women, but my secret distractions under the ocean have also left my clam buckets empty. Our dinners are cool, and our conversations utilitarian.

She retires to bed early, which is to say, on the living room couch. Dimming the lights so I've no choice but to trip around a home of such complete darkness, it feels like the deep sea.

Being prey has made me privy to the language of the hunted, their myriad deaths and myriad mournings. When I'm underwater, watching my mother the octopus thrum through the blue like a flexing hand, I hear all manner of things singing toward each other. The choir of the bedrock, the thousands and thousands of mollusk praying to be passed over when the shadow of some scavenger moves over them.

I hear urchin mouthing the kelp forests, more of them than there were decades before. Brought from the slowly heating sea to decimate our seabed, weeping that they too didn't want this. I hear flounder cursing their rolled-out, lateral bodies, their poor vision and swimming as their tails are seized, dragged to the surface until all at once, I don't hear them anymore.

The Daesanggun dies on a day when snow is falling along the beach in halfhearted flurries. She's half out of the water when she collapses. Her legs return to her, naked and human, but she is without arms to break her fall. She rolls in the wet sand, imprinting it with her misshapen, tubular silhouette. Her transformation halts at her torso. Above the belly, she is still a dolphin, her flippers and serrated teeth gnashing in the sun before her heart gives out. My sobbing mother drapes the elder's animal half with a coat and cradles her weight precariously on her moped.

In the village, when she is laid out in her home to prepare for a funeral, the Daesanggun's daughter bursts in and kneels beside the body. Takes in the familiar wrinkled human kneecaps, then the unfamiliar, smooth cetacean belly. Beak and inkblot eyes. The woman cradles it, crying out, *My mother's face. I want to see my mother's face just one more time.*

After the funeral, my mother rides to the diving grounds. She wades out to her waist and wails toward the horizon. My failure is her failure, I think. And as if she wants to run from the thinking, human part of herself, she slips under, ejects the weight of her womanhood away, and darts out to sea, an animal again.

I wait all day for the sun to fail, for you to return to land and be my mother again.

When you don't, I choose. I follow you in.

Swiftly enough, I'm mollusk. I'm brief animal, flitting against the rock.

And there you are, turning in cool temperature. Your suckers burgeon then contract, your disparate legs fanning out below you. Your beak opens in the cold, wide blue.

I think of you, of cool hands digging for barnacles on my scalp, of the bright burning of being born here beside the naval architecture so often hosting the fleets of a faraway country, of the indignity of burials. I tear away from the rock and swim toward your numerous arms and think of how a daughter is an open wound, an effigy, a bowl.

I'm here, Mother, singing toward you in all the languages of my failing. Your body or pure corded muscle turns toward mine, arms opening to embrace or feed. I leave it up to you to know me.

PETER LEIGHT

AMERICAN PLAN

As long as we're planning we don't even know if it's time or it isn't time nobody's saying *wait up* or *wait for me* not even on the clock not in a free country we're not that interested in the element of surprise as long as we're planning it takes some planning it's actually more like an idea or group of ideas if we had ideas instead of things honestly it would lighten us up it's true ideas often seem most profound when their meaning escapes us I mean there's not much difference between an idea and anything that happens to you if not for the plan we wouldn't have any idea to be honest we don't even know if it's our plan or somebody else's plan for us is it the same plan isn't it? Opening the windows like an open source opening the doors and offices not even making an appointment opening up the money jar and leaving it open like a vault that turns into a tunnel letting everything out at the same time everything's coming in there's nothing wrong with that nobody's saying *wait a minute* or *wait up* not in a free country the plan is to open up as needed planning to take everything out of our pockets to make room for everything we're putting in our pockets cutting out some things that aren't even there as in the walls of a birdcage sometimes we need to remind ourselves *it isn't a picnic* isn't it? Taking out our laces the ones we pulled ourselves up with as when you make an appointment and don't even show up

PETER LEIGHT

AMERICAN SIDES

When we're close together they pull us apart putting some on one side and some on the other as if they're counting to two handing out tickets even though you don't need a ticket to get in it's better to have something to hold on to inside if we want to know which side we're on we have to know which side everybody else is on like a side by side comparison when we don't even understand each other are there any questions? Separated from each other on one side or another not even picking one not letting our minds meet or a meeting of minds like a combination of compilation and erasure when there's too much on one side honestly there's not enough on the other it's the kind of discrepancy that causes you to reevaluate are there any other questions? In places the land is under water water divides the land like a punishment we aren't even aware of disguising the sides as landscape features is it a bad example or an example of something bad? When you're not on anybody's side I mean nobody's on your side not even waving or looking for someone to wave to like a program that's basically unwatchable we don't even need to understand each other

PETER LEIGHT

AMERICAN FREE RANGE

There isn't a place where it opens up and you go in with your
hair down like a sweetheart deal not even lightly regulated if
it's long range or short range it doesn't matter as long as you
have the range finder in your saddlebag nothing's out of range
free to range from one side to the other riding from side to side
like a story that continues wherever you are not even picking a
spot or picking your favorite spot there's a place for everyone
it's actually the same place like a pie chart that's undivided
not even geographical not looking for a sign or a place to
put a sign not even consensual as if freedom is the absence of
anything specific when it's young it's yellow darkening later on
like a peaceful story with a little free war mixed in freedom is
what we bring to the table in the first place free to loop around
rather than out and back free to stand in the saddle or curl up
in the middle of the saddle as in a story that continues as long
as you keep reading

PETER LEIGHT

AMERICAN TROUBLE

When it's the same juicy juice at the end of the straw we suck it up or look for a straw to suck on the trouble is everybody wants what everybody else wants to be honest it's more trouble than it's worth as far as the means are concerned they often depend on the ends to give them meaning in America as when you get out of the car and you don't even know where you are is it even a trip? It's true there are things that have already happened that keep happening the trouble is there isn't enough when there's nothing left the trouble is the creeps the dodgers the dollars the scholars the shooters the trouble is the troubleshooters the trouble is the people in trouble actually the trouble is we're falling behind when we're not keeping up not even catching up when everybody wants what everybody has stop me if you've heard this before as far as the ends are concerned I don't even know what you mean not even thinking in those terms honestly it's too much trouble when the juice is just as juicy the trouble is the distribution the trouble is the suction the trouble is the juice the trouble is the straw the trouble is we need to get out of trouble when we're in trouble we spend our time getting out of trouble we think it's all over but it's just another kind of trouble

JOHN CONSTANTINE TOBIN

ELEGY FOR EACH ALTERNATIVE JOHN

John is the fruit, not a byproduct of it

Adam and John would piss in adjacent urinals, giggling at the queerness. Queering it. Queerer. Queers by the johns. Queered by John's queerness. Proximal queerness. How queer it all was. They were. Are. Unbecoming becoming queer fruit, same tree.

John is not a Greek patriarch of Grandfather Kostas

Could not consummate with either of two Hannahs, Leyan, or Marilyn, but Patrick. Could not follow them into a middle-class Baltimore pathway: 20s in Federal Hill, 25s in Fells Point, 30s in Canton, Kevin Plank'd in Under Armour, a jog along the Waterfront Park with a golden retriever. May his memory be eternal.

John is not at the Lectern

The spirit of his Irish Grandpop concealed itself within the morning glories, binocular-eyed as it was in life, horrified to spot its namesake's molted skin, about 17 years old, in the woods just past the fruit and vegetable garden, shredded flecks clinging to the raspberry vines, mourning the wasted Catholicism strewn among the wild violets.

That John has no future

Like Hipponax to "Boupalos, that motherfucker," or Archilochus to Neobule and her sisters, That John writ his own annihilation with malicious wit.

John is dehumanized by Biopsychology, Cognition and Neuroscience

Recognize that petty human desires cannot withstand the inner ape. Take a class in primate social behavior. Be a bonobo.

The First and Second Hannah's John

The first Hannah gave lessons on how to be a boyfriend and wrote, in gel pen, a breakup note that declares, "Lessons aren't ova!" The second Hannah enlightens her wife how she and John once skinny-dipped in bioluminescent phytoplankton, how they glittered all around each other, her bruised spine flush against his purpled ribs.

This Patrick and The Next Patrick's John

Twelve years of wrestling; twelve years of one-sided erections. In short, This Patrick knew he and That John would not know each other past middle school. The Next Patrick waited 4 years till That John was alone in a hallway to confess, then generously helped That John write his final poem in college.

John during Daniel's rediscovery of cocaine

Death by strangulation.

Johnny to John in Nichols Arboretum

"You will never see what I see when I look at the Huron River."

Reni and Husband John's parental image of Son John

"You have to understand that we love you, but we're disappointed. You have to understand, we've spent your life imagining how your life would be. You have to understand that we'll need time to reimagine it."

Reni's John

"But honey, I would love you even if you were green."

JOHN CONSTANTINE TOBIN

DIVINE—

What a miracle to have died of something as hetero
As heart failure in the 80s. It's been 34 years. I am 30.

Though healthy, I too have been to Ruck's Funeral Home.
You were 42. You did not have HIV. Lady Divine—

Of The Cavalcade of Perversion. Eater of Hearts. Whose
Rosary pleasured her loins. Who was raped

By the giant lobster, Lobstora, and driven to
A killing spree by the harbor in Fell's Point, where Poe

Also died in a gutter. How fitting
To be put down by the National Guard in Baltimore—

Don't worry. We're in a John Waters movie. When she really
Died, she was resurrected by Walt Disney

A year later as Ursula— I try not to remember you as her. I prefer
The stories of how you hid in a suit of armor on Read Street,

Scared my parents and other shoppers on the weekend, those who
Don't expect us to be armored. I never saw you

At Bengie's drive-in, never bathed in your screen light, in your scent,
At *Polyester*, a scratch-and-sniff film: Roses first, followed

By the foul: Glue. Gasoline. Natural Gas. Skunk.
New Car Smell. Dirty Shoes. Air Freshener.

Ursula—Divine. Ursula. Either the name of my first cat
Or my firstborn child. Ursula. Maybe Sappho. Little bear, Ursula.

I don't know who else to look up to. But you are
Divine, a knight with broom—A holy, Baltimore light.

ALYSSA FROEHLING

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION DIPTYCH

I already have a mother
& laughter. A sister

& distance. A best friend
& revenge fantasies.

I need someone
who can metabolize

anger, use it as muscle.
Someone to summon,

a secret weapon, loyal
companion with teeth

sharper than mine.
A girl like a fishhook,

hard to remove
once she sets

into the flesh
& even harder to forget.

I need someone
to consume me

& use me to their own
bitter end. Someone

whose rage can't be
laughed at or scrubbed

away with lye & ribbons
of steel. Girl like a scalpel,

precise with clean
lines. Someone

with hypnotic power
outside of her body

that compels other bodies to stay
frozen underground.

Someone who laughs
back louder. Self-summons

weapons, champion
with bags full of baby

teeth. Someone who can
disappear as soon as

you look at her. Rumored
but never confirmed.

Who reappears for the sole
purpose of striking fear

through the heart of beasts
easy as plunging a silver stake

into soft spring ground.
Mother Slaughter, Sister

Insistence. A best friend
with revenge strategies.

***

I already have a mother
& slaughter, a sister

& insistence. A best friend
& acceptance.

I want to float
on the ceiling. To find

hinges on my ribs
so I can easily carve

out my heart, bury it
deep in the woods

as I howl profanities
up to the bald-faced

moon, showing off
her every pockmark

& bruise. I want the floors
on the ceilings. To crawl.

To hear the shudders
of a bedframe in a room

I will never be
invited into. I need more

than faith. I need
a reliable witness

with a propensity
for the profane

to uncover the discrete
nature of certain wounds.

Someone with a firsthand
account of the new

geography in my gut,
that quarry of blood

edged plastic flowers
& stars. I need more

faith. A witness to carve
out my heart & offer it

to the other woman
buried deep in the woods.

Someone to remain calm
during the descent

of the dark tomb marking
the end of each day.

Someone with an indisputable
alibi for what I bring to life

in a clenched womb: A mother
& laughter. A sister

& distance. A best friend
& absolution.

MOLLY ROGERS

AN UNCOMMON AND GRIEVOUS CALAMITY

It starts with this thing on the black conveyor belt, this small thing that rolls back and forth—and then again: *back and forth*. It starts with this thing because this is what I notice first. I notice the movement, the graceful little arcs this thing makes as it rolls back and forth on the conveyor belt. I notice the invisible lines etched upon the surface of the night. The shapes this thing makes, the invisible lines, they describe a geometry problem—yes, that's what this is: *a geometry problem*—and I feel certain that if I could see the shapes more clearly, the shapes this thing makes on the conveyor belt, then I could get inside the bigger thing unfolding around me. And if I could get inside the bigger thing, then I could understand everything that is happening, every last thing. Yes, I feel quite certain about this.

It happens in one of those stores, those big stores we go to now because there are no actual shops anymore, no small mom-and-pops located just around the corner where you could get everything you needed even though they never seemed to have very much at all. Those shops, the small mom-and-pops, they are mostly gone now. What we have instead are warehouses, vast metal sheds with six or eight different kinds of everything we don't even need, not really. These warehouses are pumped full of music, haunting music, music I can't ever seem to shake. I can't even remember the name of the tune or who it was that made it popular enough to be force-fed into a warehouse full of everything under the sun. These songs, these hypnotic songs from the warehouse that haunt me, they are very like the shapes on the conveyor belt that the thing, the first thing in all this, makes as it rolls back and forth—and then again: *back and forth*. Yes, I realize this now. I realize this is not a geometry problem so much as a song with a refrain that comes back to me every time the belt jumps forward and the thing rolls back, but not back to where it was before, not exactly, because the belt has moved everything forward. The belt has moved the whole damn show forward, taking

this little thing along with it, this small thing inside a bigger thing, inside a vast metal cavern held together by music that just won't quit.

It is beautiful, in a way, really beautiful, the way something small and fragile but that has the capacity to loom large in your mind is always beautiful. This small thing is so full of light and grace, so sublime—yes, that is the word: *sublime*—that I have no right to look at it. I should avert my eyes. I should look away from the beauty that is also a kind of terror. I should look down at my feet or turn away from it altogether, turn away from this beautiful thing that is unlike any other beautiful thing because it is also frightening. It is like the holy grail—yes, that's what it is: *This thing is like the holy grail*. But it isn't the holy grail. It is simply and only this: a small paper cup. *It is a small paper cup*, one exactly like the paper cups I had in the bathroom at home when I was young. It is exactly like the paper cups we all had in our bathrooms at home when we were young. And it is then, right then, after recognizing the first thing, this small paper cup, that I notice the second thing in all this, the second thing that suggests maybe everything happening right now is greater than the sum of its parts. Maybe the math or geometry involved is somehow messed up, somehow confused, which is to say maybe it has some deeper meaning, one not easily apprehended. And the second thing in all this, the thing that eclipses the first thing, is the man in front of me at the checkout stand. What I notice most about the man, the guy in front of me at the checkout stand, is the fact that I hadn't noticed him at all until now, until just now, because there is nothing special about him. There is nothing about him to make me look closely or look again. So now it's about the second thing in all this, the guy, the man in front of me, the one who set the first thing, the small paper cup—*a Dixie Cup, to be exact*—the man who set the Dixie Cup on the conveyor belt. There is nothing special about this man except for the one astonishing fact that I can't quite shake, even after all this time—and it has been some time now, years, many years, since it happened and I still can't shake it. And that one astonishing fact is this: The man ahead of me at the checkout stand in this warehouse that sells everything under the sun, this man wants only one thing, just one small thing, and that is to buy a small paper cup. *This man wants nothing more than to buy a single Dixie Cup.*

But then it happens, quickly, like this: When the man reaches the front of the line, when it's his turn to pay the cashier and claim his purchase and go home, everything slows to a stop because the cashier is unable to scan the Dixie Cup. The cashier waves the thing, the first thing in all this, the Dixie Cup, over the sensor several times. He waves it back and forth—and then again: *back and forth*. He waves the little paper cup over the sensor and expects to hear the sensor beep, but he does not hear the beep. He does not hear that little electronic chirp of comprehension, so he calls out to his manager for assistance, and the manager comes over to the checkout stand and states that Dixie Cups cannot be sold as singles, only in packs. And with that, the cashier places the Dixie Cup to one side, and the guy, the second thing in all this, the man who wants to buy the Dixie Cup, he turns away. He simply turns and walks out through the automatic sliding door. Without uttering a word, he exits this gaping wound of a warehouse that sells everything under the sun but will not under any circumstances sell a man a single Dixie Cup.

No sale, end of transaction—next customer, please.

It happened at the Walmart in Greenport, New York, 120 miles north of New York City. Greenport boasts many lovely homes within its twenty square miles, as well as a beautiful conservation area abutting the Hudson River, where people go to walk and also where they go to walk their dogs. In addition to lovely homes and a beautiful conservation area, the town of Greenport also has a disproportionate number of big-box stores for a place inhabited by just 4,500 people. This is because the town of Greenport surrounds the city of Hudson on three sides, the fourth side being the Hudson River itself. Just imagine a bagel with a good-sized bite taken out of one side, and there you have it: Greenport is the bagel and Hudson is the breached hole. And while it's perfectly nice there at the center, where the hole is, really nice in fact, something is missing from this breached hole. Quite a few things are missing, actually—it is a hole, after all—which is why the people who live in Hudson go to Fairview Avenue in Greenport, the three-mile commercial zone located in the northern part of the bagel. They go there to buy their food, fill their prescriptions, and have their cars inspected. Fairview Avenue in Greenport is where you go for everything you need but can't find in Hudson's restaurants and bars, art galleries and

boutique shops, which means Fairview Avenue is where you go when you need a fresh supply of synthetic cat pheromones.

The atmosphere in my home, if I have any desire to sleep or to obtain even a moment's rest, let alone to write—for writing is what I am meant to do here in Hudson—if I am to have even a moment's peace in which to write, the atmosphere must be continuously seasoned with a fine mist of commercially manufactured feline pheromones, a powerful substance mercifully undetectable by humans. I discovered just how powerful the stuff is when my feline companion howled at the window for three nights straight. Although Mingus hates me like a practiced misanthrope, he was not exercising that particular animus on this particular occasion. No, for once his displeasure was due to the fact that I had let the diffuser run out—but of course I couldn't tell that the diffuser had run out because, as I've just mentioned, cat pheromones, even the artificial kind, are undetectable by humans. So, realizing my mistake, I apologized profusely—*mea culpa, Mingus!*—and, leaving him to his ongoing lamentations, drove the short distance to Greenport, to the far end of the commercial zone in Greenport that is Fairview Avenue, where the big-box pet supply store is located. I arrived, however, after the store had closed. I arrived just minutes after it had closed, and so now where was I going to find artificial cat pheromones after six o'clock on a Sunday evening?

Looking out over the vast concrete ocean surrounding me, I saw a light, a glowing light, the kind that both invites you to draw near and warns of certain danger. This light, this lighthouse of a sort, was the bagel's own Walmart. What choice did I have but to heed its call? Rowing across the gray, lifeless ocean, I discovered that this light, this beacon, was really more like a power plant than a lighthouse. It was a glowing, burning power plant on the verge of melting down. Reluctantly, I stepped inside, moving quickly to limit my exposure. With carefully calculated movements, I located the pet supplies department, found the product, paid for the product, and then took the product home so I could get some sleep—

Looking out over the vast concrete ocean surrounding me, I saw a light, a glowing light, the kind that both invites you to draw near and warns of certain danger.

and sleep I most certainly did, now that Mingus was becalmed by the miraculous potion that only he among our modest household was able to detect. But the next morning I remembered what had happened. I recalled in vivid detail what had happened at the checkout stand and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't stop thinking about what I had seen while waiting to buy the product, a small but astonishing scene that I struggled to understand even as it was happening right in front of me. And now, only now do I realize that there is a third thing in all this, the first thing being the small paper cup, and the second thing being the guy, the man who wanted to buy the paper cup. There is a third thing in all this, and I can't stop thinking about this third thing, even though I'm not really certain what it is. I am not certain what this third thing is because it lurks behind the first and second things, or maybe it lies within them, inhabiting them, but I am unable to say what exactly this third thing is because it eludes me. I keep thinking about the first thing and the second thing, hoping that the third thing will become clear and I can then move on. But I can't move on. I can't move on because it was upsetting to watch a grown man fail to purchase a single disposable paper cup, which must have been the most inconsequential item in that absurdly outsize store containing an astronomical number of inconsequential items. This man wanted nothing more than to purchase a single Dixie Cup, but was prevented from doing so.

To fail at so simple a task, it's a crushing moment.

The world is a laboratory, a great big research laboratory in which, at one time or another, we all become subjects of scientific study. Someone observes our behavior, or the consequences of our behavior, and gets an idea. That person turns their idea into a hypothesis and devises an experiment to test the hypothesis, and perhaps test it again. After the experiment is complete, the scientist reaches a conclusion and publishes their findings in a study, thereby advancing the cause of scientific knowledge a little, or maybe even a lot. As subjects of study, we do not always know that we have been studied; we do not always know that someone has drawn conclusions from our behavior and gone on to conduct an experiment based on this behavior, but this is what makes the world a laboratory. We go about our business, and someone turns our behavior into scientific knowl-

edge—which is another way of saying that we are all guinea pigs in this great big laboratory of a world, at least until actual guinea pigs are brought in to be studied in our place.

It was a little more than one hundred years ago that a man by the name of Alvin Davison noticed something about the way in which people consumed water in public places. This was a time when railroad stations, schools, and other public places typically had on their premises great big vessels or vats of water from which people could quench their thirst, free of charge. If you were traveling from one place to another, or if you were stuck in one place, like a school campus, you didn't have to worry about where to find water; you could simply quench your thirst by using the cup provided at one of the vessels or vats of water maintained on the premises for public use. Of course, this meant that on any given day the cup had been shared by scores of people, scores of thirsty people who needed water as they went about their day. Over the course of a day or week or month, these shared drinking cups were seldom if ever washed.

Alvin Davison was a biology professor—he taught at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania—so he knew that tiny organisms cause illnesses like pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis, bronchitis, and tonsillitis. He also knew that these tiny illness-causing organisms typically enter the body through the mouth and that they can be passed from one person to another by sharing food and water—and also, presumably, by kissing, although Alvin Davison does not appear to have been much interested in kissing, because, really, how many different people does a person usually kiss in the course of a day? But if in the course of a day you were to drink from a communal drinking cup, the kind used by scores of people in public places more than a hundred years ago, that would be very much like kissing scores of people, maybe even hundreds of people, and one of them was sure to have a disease, an illness like pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis, bronchitis, or tonsillitis, even if they didn't know it.

The biologist Alvin Davison noticed that people who used these communal drinking cups often got sick, and he hypothesized that the cause of illness was bacteria from the unwashed communal drinking cups. To test his hypothesis, he obtained drinking cups from a local high school, and these cups turned out to be exactly what he needed for his experiment. Cup No.

4, for example, had been in use at the school for several months without ever being washed. The local high school students were Alvin Davison's first guinea pigs, and upon testing the residue left on Cup No. 4 by these first guinea pigs, Alvin Davison found "particles of mud, thousands of pieces of skin from the mouth, and millions of bacteria." The college biology professor then injected the residue from Cup No. 4 into his second guinea pigs, which were actual guinea pigs, to determine whether the bacteria would lead to disease. Unsurprisingly, the guinea pigs, the real ones into which he injected bacteria from the cup, got sick: "The first animal died forty hours after receiving the injection. . . . The second guinea pig injected with the cup sediment was killed five weeks later." Autopsies performed on the dead guinea pigs revealed the cause of death to have been tuberculosis. Alvin Davison's experiments made the dangers of the communal drinking cup clear for all to see, and perhaps also revealed the dangers of being a guinea pig.

Alvin Davison's experiments made the dangers of the communal drinking cup clear for all to see, and perhaps also revealed the dangers of being a guinea pig.

In 1908, Alvin Davison published his findings in an article called "Death in School Drinking Cups." Photographs of two guinea pigs frame the title of Alvin Davison's article. These are very possibly the same two guinea pigs he had sacrificed for his research, which makes the article something of a memorial to the unfortunate little beasts. In his article, Alvin Davison describes his hypothesis and his research methods, and in conclusion he calls for "the banishment of the unsanitary and filthy common communion-cup, as well as the public drinking-vessel, befouled with human excretions shielding the darts of death." Alvin Davison was clearly fond of strong words, but public health is a serious matter and serious matters require strong words. The Massachusetts State Board of Health certainly took note of Alvin Davison's strong words, distributing his article widely in a campaign to ban the communal drinking cup from public places in the state of Massachusetts. Meanwhile, the state of Kansas launched its own campaign and, eventually, thanks to Alvin Davison, the communal drinking cup was banned

from public spaces across the country. This ban, however, left a void in the landscape, a drinking-cup-shaped void, to be exact, because people still needed water as they went about their day. A relatively new industry, the paper goods industry, rushed to fill that void.

Around the time Alvin Davison was experimenting with guinea pigs, a Boston man by the name of Lawrence W. Luellen was conducting his own experiments. Lawrence W. Luellen was looking for the best shape for a drinking cup to be used in a machine that dispensed water hygienically. He experimented on paper, testing out ideas for a disposable drinking cup, and he experimented with paper, folding sheet after sheet this way and that in search of the best shape for a disposable drinking cup. If the world is a great big research laboratory, it is also a place of business, a great big place of business in which water would soon be no longer free, because free water carries germs. Lawrence W. Luellen's idea was for vending machines to take the place of communal vessels or vats located in public places—one penny paid to the vending machine bought you a single clean cup of clean water. He had a manufacturer lined up, waiting on him to discover the right shape, the right design for a paper cup to be dispensed by the machine, and he had investors eager to capitalize on the new and growing distaste for communal drinking cups, which, it was increasingly understood, thanks to Alvin Davison, among others, carried disease-causing bacteria. And so Lawrence W. Luellen experimented on paper and with paper, seeking the right shape for his paper cup.

The shape that he found to be most effective is called *frustoconical*. The frustum of a cone is the shape you get after you have lopped off the pointed end of the cone. The pointed end of the cone is another, smaller cone, but this smaller cone was not part of Lawrence W. Luellen's design—although, later, someone realized that a small cone could also be used as a paper cup, but Lawrence W. Luellen overlooked this possibility, perhaps because a cone-shaped cup could not be set down without spilling its contents, and a cup that could not be set down without spilling its contents did not seem like a cup at all. So, Lawrence W. Luellen discarded the pointed end of the cone and experimented with the remaining piece—the frustum. He added a cap to the narrow end of frustum, to keep its contents from spilling out the bottom, and he added a flange to the wider top end, to

make each cup a little stronger and also to keep them separated while stacked in the vending machine. In 1908, Lawrence W. Luellen submitted a patent application for his "new and useful Cup," which he described as "a drinking cup for use in connection with vending machines made of thin flexible paper having an open end folded outwardly to form a narrow flange integral with the body of the cup." Long before his patent was approved, Lawrence W. Luellen and his partners had formed a company for the manufacture of his frustoconical-shaped paper cup, and after a sequence of corporate mergers and acquisitions, followed by restructuring, relocating, and rebranding, the Dixie Cup was born.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Dixie Cups were widely available and had become an integral part of the twice-daily ritual of cleaning your teeth. Seemingly in every bathroom in America, Dixie Cups were either stacked bottoms-up by the sink, the individual cups fitting together neatly courtesy of the flange, just as Lawrence W. Luellen had intended, or they were held aloft by a plastic dispenser secured to the bathroom wall. Grab hold of the exposed bottom cup, pull down gently, and—*presto!*—a single small paper cup was at your disposal. After rinsing your mouth with water from the cup, you then unceremoniously dropped the Dixie Cup into the wastebasket, secure in the knowledge that there would be another one waiting for you tomorrow because there was no shortage of Dixie Cups in America at mid-century. Everyone had them and everyone had a good supply of them because the company that Lawrence W. Luellen formed earlier in the century was successful, really successful, more successful in fact than all the other companies that manufactured disposable paper cups. His company was so successful that the Dixie brand eclipsed not only all of the competition, blotting them out like a frustoconical-shaped paper moon, but it also eclipsed the thing itself, so that by mid-century it seemed all disposable paper cups were called *Dixie Cups*, even if they weren't actually Dixie Cups.

The Dixie Cup had become a proprietary eponym—which is to say, it eclipsed all other brands to become a generic term—but other, subsequent inventions helped to make the Dixie Cup a continued success. If the world is a laboratory, a great big research laboratory in which some people experiment with

guinea pigs and other people experiment with paper, still others choose to experiment with lines and/or colors in search of a mechanism for translating things into data. The inventors Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver sought just such a mechanism, which they described as an "automatic apparatus for classifying things according to photo-response to lines and/or colors which constitute classification instructions and which have been attached to, imported upon or caused to represent the things being classified." This description, taken from Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver's patent application, describes the Universal Product Code, or UPC, more commonly known as the barcode.

The inventors Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver patented their barcode design, but their invention was not an immediate success. To be effective, the product information represented by the barcode had to be standardized, so that each barcode meant the same thing to each business. They also needed a mechanism for reading the lines and/or colors of the barcode, and a computer that could translate these lines and/or colors back into the product information. So, although the barcode was patented in 1952, it was not utilized on a significant scale for another two decades, when these other inventions became readily available. Eventually, when everything fell into place—barcodes, data standards, optical readers, and affordable computers—Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver's invention allowed business owners to manage their inventory efficiently and accurately.

I wish I could tell you that the first product marked with an official barcode and scanned for purchase was a Dixie Cup, but it was not a Dixie Cup. The first product with a barcode scanned for sale was a pack of Wrigley's chewing gum. This momentous event occurred on June 26, 1974, at a Marsh Supermarkets store in Troy, Ohio. Eventually, barcodes appeared everywhere—they were printed on nearly every product found in every store in every city and town in America. This, however, is not the end of our story, the story of discoveries and inventions that starts with Alvin Davison's guinea pigs and ends with a small but astonishing scene at the Walmart in Greenport, New York. There is yet one more link in this daisy chain of discoveries and inventions, and that last daisy in the chain is the big-box store.

Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver's barcode made it easy for shop owners to manage their inventory, which meant they could increase volume without losing track of which products they stocked and how many of each product they had on hand. This, in turn, meant that those shop owners who could afford large spaces and large inventories did very well, so well in fact that they often put smaller stores, the mom-and-pop operations, out of business. These large stores with large inventories were now able to stock every available flavor of Wrigley's chewing gum on the market, and also twenty other brands of chewing gum and all of their flavors. Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver, inventors of the barcode, can therefore also be partially credited with paving the way for the big-box store, where products are stocked and sold in great quantities, where you can stand in the aisle of one of these cavernous shrines to capitalism that suck on your soul with a potent cocktail of toxic light and insipid music and try to decide which brand and flavor of chewing gum you desire most, but where a man cannot purchase what he truly desires if it is not marked by lines and/or colors, even if it is a bona fide Dixie Cup.

For years I have struggled to write about the man who wanted to purchase a single Dixie Cup one Sunday evening in Greenport, New York, but was not allowed to do so. I have struggled to find the words that could adequately describe the story of this uncommon and grievous calamity and so reveal the meaning behind it. Words themselves are not the problem—there is no shortage of words. It is like the song, the popular song I keep thinking about. Not one of those songs pumped into warehouses, but a Beatles song, the one with the line about words and rain and a paper cup. The problem is not a lack of words, because the words flow like rain. The problem is that the words don't add up. Each word stands alone, cut off from the others, surrounded by vast amounts of space like a solitary star in the night sky. Each word shines brightly in the night sky, just like

I have struggled to find the words that could adequately describe the story of this uncommon and grievous calamity and so reveal the meaning behind it.

a star, and stars can be joined together to make a shape or a picture—a constellation—but I can't see the picture in this case. I can't see the constellation. If I could connect the stars so they made a picture, then I would be able to understand this uncommon and grievous calamity. If I could adequately describe all the things that make up this story, each one on its own and also how they fit together, then I am certain I could understand the secret constellation, the hidden meaning behind this story in which a man who wants to buy a small paper cup is prevented from doing so. The third thing in all this, the thing that has eluded me, is the key to this hidden constellation. The first thing is the small paper cup, and the second thing is the guy who wanted to buy the small paper cup. The third thing, I am certain now, is the *reason* the man wanted to buy a single Dixie Cup. The third thing is the reason why anyone would want to buy a single Dixie Cup when the world is full of cups, so many cups, in fact, that we might say cups are flowing out like endless cups into a paper cup.

The words "uncommon and grievous calamity" are from the philosopher and politician Edmund Burke, who, in 1757, wrote a treatise called *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Edmund Burke was a philosopher and a politician, but he was also a man of the eighteenth century, which means he never once set foot in a big-box store like Walmart, nor did he ever have the pleasure of using a small paper cup in the twice daily ritual of cleaning his teeth. Edmund Burke the philosopher and politician did, however, understand the concept of sympathy, and in his treatise on the sublime and beautiful he wrote, apropos of sympathy, "There is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity," adding that this spectacle "always touches [us] with delight." So, although Edmund Burke never encountered a scene like the one I witnessed in the Greenport Walmart one Sunday evening, he would have understood my interest in the spectacle, the calamity of a man who wanted to purchase a single Dixie Cup but was prevented from doing so. Edmund Burke the philosopher and politician also would have understood my delight in witnessing the man's misfortune, although I prefer the word *vexation* to *delight* because the idea of taking delight in another person's misfortune makes me uneasy. But I do agree that there is delight to be found in feeling sympathy

for another person, in feeling *for* someone, and since Edmund Burke also allowed that such delight is mixed with uneasiness, I guess the word delight isn't so bad after all. Certainly, I felt sympathy for the guy, the man ahead of me in line at Walmart who wanted to buy a single Dixie Cup but was not allowed to do so. The problem is that I fail to understand *why* he did what he did, and for years now this failure to understand has bothered me. This failure has howled at my window unrelievedly, baying nonstop like an angry, misanthropic cat, but there is no known substance, synthetic or otherwise, that could restore the peace by providing an answer to the question that keeps going around and around in my head: *Why did the man want to buy a single Dixie Cup?*

What can I do but try again? I can try once again to describe the scene that began with the first thing in all this, the very first thing I noticed as I waited in line at the checkout stand at the Walmart in Greenport, which was the Dixie Cup. This small thing, the Dixie Cup, was the first thing in all this, but behind it there were many other things. Behind it there was Alvin Davison and his hypothesis about death in communal drinking cups, and the guinea pigs he sacrificed to prove his hypothesis correct. Behind this first thing there was also Lawrence W. Luellen's design for a new and useful disposable cup. And, of course, there was the barcode, invented by Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver, which set the stage for this extraordinary scene. The barcode directly paved the way for the setting in which this scene could unfold because Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver's Universal Product Code helped to make the big-box store possible. The barcode was also the thing, the very thing, that prevented the man who wanted to buy a single Dixie Cup from doing so because a single Dixie Cup lacks a barcode. It seems to me that Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver have a lot to answer for here.

The conveyor belt leapt forward and the cup rolled back and forth—and then again: *back and forth*—in short little arcs.

I remember Dixie Cups as typically being decorated with a floral motif, but the Dixie Cup on the conveyor belt at the Walmart did not have a floral motif printed on its side. It was a plain white paper cup, yet in Walmart's light—a colorless light that remakes everything in its image—the cup appeared gray. But the cup is not really the question here, because the cup is

not a mystery, or it is no longer a mystery, since we have traced its connections to various discoveries and inventions, from Alvin Davison and his guinea pigs to Norman Joseph Woodland and Bernard Silver's barcode and the big-box store. The question does not lie in the first thing, so let's move on to the second thing, the man ahead of me in line who wanted to buy the cup. This guy set the cup upon the conveyor belt and with that simple gesture set everything in motion. *What was his story?*

I looked at the guy, the man ahead of me in line, hoping to solve the mystery by examining his appearance, studying his haircut and his clothes, guessing his age. He was in his midtwenties and light-skinned. He had short hair and no piercings or tattoos that I could see, and he was dressed casually in a T-shirt and blue jeans. He may have been on the short side, not much taller than I am, and I am not tall, but he was otherwise completely unremarkable. There was nothing about him to suggest he might create a small but extraordinary scene, an astonishing scene—*an uncommon and grievous calamity*, to be exact—merely by attempting to buy a small thing, an insignificant thing. He was just a guy on a Sunday-night errand, waiting patiently in line with his wallet in hand. I don't think he uttered a single word the whole time he was in the store. Truth be told, I didn't think twice about him until I noticed the Dixie Cup rolling back and forth on the conveyor belt and, seeing the Dixie Cup, began wondering who would want to buy a single Dixie Cup.

The belt jumped and the cup rolled.

Didn't he know they came in packs? Or was this the only cup on the shelf where the packs usually were? In any case, he clearly could not go home without having purchased a single Dixie Cup. He could not return home empty-handed, just as I could not go home without synthetic cat pheromones. Maybe it was for someone else. Maybe his partner sent him out for Dixie Cups and this was all he could find. Walmart has everything—*Go to Walmart*, his partner said, *they'll have Dixie Cups*—but on that particular Sunday evening, Walmart was out of Dixie Cups, except for this one specimen, this solitary cup sitting on the shelf all by itself, surrounded not by other cups but by space. So he picked up the one solitary cup and made his way across the even bigger space of the big-box store to the checkout stand.

The belt jumped and the cup rolled.

Or maybe he opened a pack. Did he open a pack? Did he pierce the plastic wrapping and remove one cup from the pack? But why—why just one cup? If he had been after a cup, any old cup, he could have come up with something better than this, or at least something different. Plastic, ceramic—anything but a disposable paper cup no bigger than a shot glass. He was told to bring home Dixie Cups, and this was all he found on the shelf. Or maybe he was told to bring home one Dixie Cup, and so he opened a pack. But why did he need a Dixie Cup so badly that just this one solitary cup would do for his purpose? *What was his purpose?*

Dixie Cups are like the cups used in hospitals, the ones used by nurses for administering drugs. A little paper cup with pills rolling around in the bottom. They are also like the cups you find at water coolers in public places, like schools and offices, but those are flimsier than Dixie Cups; those are just circles of thin paper folded into cones that you can't even set down because they lack a frustum and a bottom to the frustum. The Dixie Cup has more to it, more substance than these imposters. Dixie Cups are crisp and sturdy and can be set down without spilling their contents, and they can be used for many things, not just for giving pills to people who cannot be trusted with the whole bottle. But this guy didn't look like he needed a cup for dispensing medicine.

So why did he need it?

The belt jumped again and the cup rolled, and now he, the man ahead of me at the checkout stand, now he was at the front of the line. Now it was his turn to meet the cashier, a thin young white man, younger and thinner than the man ahead of me. The cashier had removed the plastic bar separating items on the conveyor belt, and this sent the cup forward that last little jolt, whereupon he, the cashier, picked up the Dixie Cup and waved it over the glass window of the scanner. Nothing. He tried again. Still nothing. Realizing he needed to be more careful, he looked closely at the cup, turning it over and over in search of a barcode.

At this point, I was sure the cashier would recognize the object he held in his hand and say something like, *Hey, this is a Dixie Cup. Don't you want more than one?* But he didn't say this. Instead, he called for a manager. The light over his check-

out station blinked, and he mumbled to no one in particular that he needed a price check.

The manager, a woman, was older than both the cashier and the man who wanted the Dixie Cup. Old enough, I would say, to know a Dixie Cup when she saw one, as indeed she did. She glanced at the cup and said to the cashier, *Dixie Cups can't be sold as singles, only in packs*. Having decided the matter, she promptly disappeared.

The cashier turned back to the customer and said, somewhat apologetically, *I can't sell you just one. You gotta buy a pack*. He waved the cup in the air as he spoke, as if to illustrate his point with semaphore, but the man who wanted the cup didn't seem to understand semaphore. Seeing that the man didn't understand, the cashier repeated himself a little more loudly, and then he set the cup down beside his cash register. He set the cup down out of reach of the man who wanted the cup, preventing him from ever touching it again.

I am tempted to start again, to tell the story again in case I missed something, in case I've overlooked a detail that would explain the third thing in all this.

Sorry, the cashier added with grave finality. He then removed the plastic bar at the head of the conveyor belt, which sent my bottle of cat pheromones flying toward the front of the line and me along with it.

I waited for my change and watched the man who had wanted to purchase a single Dixie Cup leave the store. Without a word, he turned and walked empty-handed out through the automatic sliding doors. Silently, he walked out toward the cool, dark hole of the bagel.

That's it. That's all there is to this story about a man who wanted to buy a single Dixie Cup at the Walmart in Greenport, New York, one Sunday evening and was prevented from doing so. He needed a small paper cup, and not just any small paper cup, but a Dixie Cup—he needed *this* Dixie Cup—yet I simply cannot fathom why he needed it. After going over the story many times, I still have no idea what this man stood to gain or lose depending on the outcome of his mission. I am tempted to

start again, to tell the story again in case I missed something, in case I've overlooked a detail that would explain the third thing in all this, which is the reason he needed the Dixie Cup. The third thing is the key to everything, but there is no answer to the question *Why did he need a Dixie Cup?* At least, there is no answer that I have been able to find. So maybe all that's missing to this story with no conclusion, no resolution, is an ending to stop the words from flowing. Maybe all that's needed to end the story is a frustum and a cap on that frustrum. Not a conclusion but an ending. So here, by way of an ending, is another story:

Some twenty years ago my sister and I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, a museum that has a ridiculous number of pictures on display, and while wandering around among these pictures my sister and I happened upon a painting by Jacob van Ruisdael. The painting, a landscape from the seventeenth century, stopped us in our tracks; I think I may even have gasped—audibly gasped—when we came across the painting because I had seen it before. We had both seen it before, my sister and I, because a print of Jacob van Ruisdael's *Wheat Fields*, the painting hanging before us at the Met, hung in the living room of the house in California where we grew up. Our father had purchased the print from the museum in the 1950s, long before my sister and I were born, and over the years it hung on different walls in the living room of our house, as photographs attest. Growing up, we saw Jacob van Ruisdael's painting every day, which made it both utterly familiar to us and also easily overlooked.

Now, standing in front of *Wheat Fields* in the gallery of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, I remembered what it had been like to live with the picture on the wall of our house, to grow up alongside this image of the world, and I said to my sister that I had always loved the painting because the winding road suggested possibility and the tumultuous sky promised excitement, and these things offered the very opposite of what I thought life in suburban California offered.

My sister and I had by that time in our lives each traveled a fair amount. She, even then, lived on a different continent from the one we called home, another continent in another hemisphere, so I expected that she too had craved travel and adventure as a young girl, but her reply to my remark about the painting surprised me. She said that she had always found

Jacob van Ruisdael's *Wheat Fields* terrifying. I didn't know what to say. I was, for once, at a loss for words. That anyone could be terrified by a painting was something I never considered possible, but more shocking was the discovery that my sister had had experiences and thoughts, ideas and feelings that I did not have—that where I had found exhilaration and excitement, she'd found terror. I was shocked to discover that we could grow up together in the same house filled with the same stuff and occupied by the same people, that we could live in that house at the same time in the history of the world, and yet have drastically different responses to Jacob van Ruisdael's painting *Wheat Fields*. And now, as I recount this story for you, a thought occurs to me: It strikes me that if I wasn't aware that the painting *Wheat Fields* had terrified my own sister, how could I possibly understand why a complete stranger would want to buy a single Dixie Cup? How could I possibly understand the third thing in all this, the reason he wanted to buy a single Dixie Cup? People are mysteries, even those people we know well. Perhaps sympathy, true sympathy such as Edmund Burke described, requires that we accept the mystery of other people. Accept the mystery, and delight in the many stars encountered along the way.

JOSEPH DONAHUE

SPARKLES FROM THE WHEEL I

The low hoarse purr of the whirling stone, the light-press'd blade . . .
—Walt Whitman, "Sparkles from the Wheel"

Holy place so
desolate no pilgrim's
there but you

Lightning, low
then night is night
again

Once thought to be over,
the loathsome, re-
resplendent

Windows glowing
like a sunstruck
cloud

Through the wall
knife tap on
cutting board

A hole in the North Pole
into which oceans
plunge

Jam jar filled with
watermelon
sorbet

*

Boarded up pumphouse
black pond bank
derelict Kaaba

*

A dream: pleasant
chat, a sense much can
still be said

To be looked into . . .
Later, slid into a tube
of transmutation

Having never seen, may
never get to see,
Walden Pond

The Big Dipper
loops around the North Star
All seasons are at once

Kind words,
though coming at
a brutal time

A divine truth is
heard, and yet
you're lost

*

Barefoot in a scorpion nest—
how she described
her new job

Not heard from
since the results
came back

Knowing how sick
the one is the other
says nothing

Innumerable universes
devoured by a
notable love

Behind that black
curtain, the ocean,
erupting

Reaching the roots
rain brings word
of the sun

The utopian families,
their pets all put
down first

This the hour the light
tends to respect
the shadows

You wake with
a throat, dry from
continuous singing

The creek runs into
a culvert but it
never comes out

From fringe to spine
a leaf submits
to fatalism

*

Their souls came to
heal me, spoke to me
inside my head

*

Pale as a waning moon,
petals pierced with
occult light

Then the shadow of a cloud
ranging across the unimaginable
splendor

Like a cake so rich
it's both dinner
and dessert

Such abundance—
dead reeds bending in a wind
from Siberia

Amid trivial
dithering will noble
thoughts ever find me?

Unseen clouds
lessen the light but
bleach the shadows

Fish idling in
the battle stations of
a scuttled sub

You're already
the color of sunset
Shakti tells the bud

I want to feel
that heat on my face
and on my closed eyelids

*

The fender bender
knocking loose
her placenta

My feelings exist
without ever
happening

Wanting, then, to go
unseen, unheard,
go all away

An ebullience
of trees torn apart,
the sky pours in

A bitch, gaunt, in
dismay, six
pups nursing

Every road out of here
built by slaves
or convicts

Underneath the car,
vanity lights, a purple
lollapalooza

Sex, then, she said,
was a jostle in a hearse
beside an unsecured coffin

What the frogs say
all night is: We can't
wait to die

*

Raptly elsewhere
and reluctant
to wake

Heat lighting at night,
blanched, silent
microseconds

Fireflies in streaks
above the creek, their
impermanence

He's saying not that
it's good, but that
it suits you

Blossoms all along
your walk yet
you're in agony

*

Such heat as once
inside where all
life begins

A sect that proclaims
we're all born dead
and in heaven

One-legged
groundskeeper,
afraid of snakes

Run an errand, hope
to be back before
the void steps closer

A lime asks to be
sliced and dropped
in chilled gin

Streets all silver
after the drenching, the air
deep in its own dream

This ecosystem needs
an annihilating
detonation

An astonished dog
drinks from the
flooding gutter

The sky itself
refills the gardener's
watering can

Be like this flower,
unbeset by
thoughts

*

Hummingbirds at the feeder
like angels in the air
around Mary

Love touched me,
quite memorably, back in
that police state

The air itself
crying out for
a lightning strike

The bitterness of the skin
makes the cucumber
seem sweeter

The storm craves to
beat the ground while
sobbing, *Let me in*

Between Jupiter
and Saturn, pebbles
of a failed planet

Such blossoms as
will redden the branch
once the heat gets extreme

Covid takes smell from
one, taste from another,
life from a third

On a tile floor set
down so gently,
hand weights clang

*

A fig tree so bountiful
no Christ can
wither it

A novel renown for
bitter depictions of
sexual fidelity

A pill organizer
holding no dose for
the Sabbath

Cold flows out of the clinic
the automatic door
keeps opening

Wilted magnolia flower
A sampan sinking
in a green sea

For the price of
that MRI why not
rent a house at the beach?

Wavering in moonlight,
euphoric in the dew,
baby copperheads

Roadside rubble
the lost cornerstone of the
Hotel Zinzendorf

Touch me, she says,
but only when no others
in the room will see

*

I don't feel older, but I notice
those once older
are now gone

Such appointment
as a shadow keeps
with the light

Might be we don't go
back into what we
came out of

As when the Buddha's foot
touched the ground
all is paradise

Plastic body parts
used to show patients
why they feel what they feel

A stream more sliced
than parted, more filigreed
than shorn in half

What composed
all, disperses. We watch
what we were vanish

The gift at night's door
a freshly picked
bag of figs

*

Awake in daylight yet
not sure night has
been survived

Convivial murders
through a wall, heard
amid shadows

Atop a red hydrant
a dragonfly
a jeweled blur

A car slows before
a vacant house
in twilight

The stew simmers
Succulence,
omnipresent

A huge red moon
makes the meteors
harder to see

*

The burning mud seemed pure
having just been
beneath the sea

A death date is
needed to access
my file

A meal or two a day,
a place to lie
down at night

In the V, where
the road divides,
an upside-down church

The luckiest among
them, those not
yet awake

A bee unsure why
the girl is not
a flower

*

An office cubicle where you feel
like an astronaut who goes
crazy in space

Four sips, and
a treasured light
comes on in the mind

Desolate as
a paved over
trysting nook

After a gust,
gold rushes down
the wet street

Many end in death
Not every night is worth
looking up into

They're all here
and happy, but then,
time to sleep more deeply

*

The scans come back clear
The doctors are
bewildered

The sun burns a hole
through the horizon
drops into water

A flurry of
arriving wings blurs
the birdfeeder

The mood just before
a truth is to be
established

Abandoned by beauty
but alas not at all
by passion

Happy not to be
twenty, devastated
by a breakup

Yes, you cried
all night, but now
you're awake

DEEP FADE, ON ONE

Now everywhere he meets himself.
—Deborah Digges, "The Transmigration of Souls"

Rich were the hills.
Soft-pitched
and drenched with growth.
Crowns of sycamore,
maple, aspen, and oak
packed seamless as blooms
in a shuffled bouquet
or buttons of coral
in a reef free to sprawl.
Fall,
the colors were plum, carmine,
an orange like caution—
flush fountains that pumped
a sweet rust on the winds
sifting down to a valley
in central New York
where I'd stand gazing up
at the contrast
and hush.
Then first-string was called again
and I'd darken
to strike what I was taught.

Linebackers mostly.
Isolation plays.
I was the fullback:
A sprinting clench
of blunt intent.
Student of free weight
and stories
of jeweled rings
and glory,
I swelled to become
the thick stem
of a formation called the *i*.

Four fingers
sunk to the knuckle
in grass, I'd cock,
calves tensed,
then wait for the cadence
like a current
dammed years
and the gate soon to lift.

*

For my father, football was youth's one plan.
Imagine my father, a usually tempered man:
the quick, insistent punch of his Adam's apple
when he'd close his eyes and yell *whewww!*,
just once, every time he heard Jim Morrison
shift pitch on the fifth refrain of *Mr. Mojo Risin'*
in "LA Woman"; the goosebumps on his shaven
throat spreading
like shot bucked
toward something urgent.
That's how I'd break
from my stance on the best days: fast and chilled
and animal into a violence of face masks and
roped flesh, the sighed air of struck chests
and thin mingles of blood that would cake
past the solve of a cloth. Mine was the worst work.
Too honest. Surely what Wright had in mind
in his famous line marrying suicide and beauty.
Anything less than reckless abandon was nothing
worth watching on tape—Mondays, post-game
in the bronze fog of the film room where I'd sit
clutching my spit-cup for chew. We watched
without sound and the struggle seemed softer,
tactical, almost like chess. But it was the sound
that was honest. The *crack*. The first time I heard
it from the sidelines I knew injury here came most
to those lacking conviction.

*

The best hits left paint.
Colored comets on the helmet's crown.
I had a green streak
the trainer could never buff out.
From a *crack*
on a nickelback at Dartmouth
that laid the kid flat in
New Hampshire's first frost.

One maroon arc from Amherst lasted for weeks—
fifteen yards full-tilt into a UMass safety.
He countered me, and if in mirrors we were real—
our momentum carried over from the other side
and illusion's barrier removed (if the self could
be flown into) . . . that's how it was. I blacked out.
And waking, knew strange things: how goalposts
hum like tuning forks and demark sacred gates
in air. How pins of light press in at the periphery
of everything, like saintly aureoles inverted. *I swear*.
Dealt the right shot you too can see a trainer's
brisk and mechanistic face, the plated shoulders
of your teammates, take on a sudden posture
of defense against these unseen lances. Quills
that gleam like cheap champagne.

*

They know,
now,
what it does to the brain.
There was an idea it was cradled snug in the skull,
packed tight as those hills behind our practice field.
Turns out, there's a distance; that, jarred, the brain
must span a gap.
Imagine a dove eyeing crumbs behind glass.
The bird (for years and never learning) slamming
into what separates its hunger
from the fallen bread.
Until, after a while, it begins to know itself as foe,

as the form rushing forward to thwart it
every time it aims to feast.
Now, the dove sees the crumbs in his sleep,
hears the voice of a big man booming,
the ocher bristles of his broom
frayed, lit fierce and falling hard . . .

*

The pros shoot themselves through the heart.
So the doctors can study their brains;
finger black dots on a scan for the family:
This is where his emotions were processed.
This is where our balance is maintained.

*

That stadium,
where I lay on my back and saw light:
Deborah Digges jumped from the *Home* side.

*

And once after practice
I climbed through those hills.
What light lanced the crowns
mapped the earth something calm.
Dusk like cold breath in the sun slants . . .

The maple stars
would flare
blood-gold
before they fell.

BENJAMIN EVANS

IN THE HOLDING CELL

The living lean on pain,
The hard stones of the earth are on our side.
—James Wright, "The Refusal"

There are a hundred ways
to know these lives don't matter.

Darwin
carbon
quantum mechanics

paths, all,
to their inconsequence. A girl

I dated believed
this all a matrix—
that it's both made
and we make it.

Sequence and projection.

But once I got arrested
and that was real. Rough

hands on my wrists
then the click of cold metal.

God bless such harshnesses
bringing us back.

Pain calls us down from our floating.

Lord, keep me pricked by the nettles
or I'll disappear;

make these figments
mean everything
and just . . . disappear.

*

It's footholds I'm talking about. Meanings

imagined or otherwise, what

moves my hand to write

or the way
my father showed up early
in his best suit,
to his bankruptcy hearing;

said
Yes, your honor
reverently
when sentenced
to his ruin.

*

Form spoils. Flows outward. Feeds the wheel.

April 13th, 2020, I'm here. In the holding cell

pecking at the scar of infinity
because Dad took his lumps
on time and with honor

his life dripping
each drop seen
and considered,
plus the pain
of knowing the pity
he fostered in others.

A stoic. Proud. Swedish.

To the 7-year proceedings, constant witness.

Sick and conscious
of the burden
of his sickness.

I think it meant everything.

*

It hurts
and it matters, carbon, mechanics,
why I went to jail.

*

My cousin died of an overdose
and knew he would.

Too much stacked against him
and not the right tools to get over.

A lithe blonde *raised*
cross-legged 'neath the crowns of suburban oaks.

Wise too quickly—at ten listening to Dylan, Joni, Cohen.

Enlightenment. Ruin. He knew.

Around a bonfire one night
he asked me and his friend Mike
if we'd brush his dead body
with honey and birdseed
then lay him, midfield,
on the pitch where he'd played
as a kid.

We said yes
and remembered
we'd said yes
when the time came,
because remembering is everything, meant everything.

It didn't matter, *was* matter
and meant everything.

ZEA EANET

SISTER HEART

I was a kid, ten or so, playing in the street. At that time I no longer had friends in my neighborhood—in the preceding years I had committed physically and verbally to the execution of my urges, which ran toward the cruel. Rose and Kate, who for years had been my usual companions, wouldn't even play with each other anymore.

On our block there were houses and, at the end, a corner store. But if you went two or three blocks north, the opposite direction from the city center and the zoo, you came to Good Shepherd. It was a girls' school. They had a primary division, but that was somewhere else; the building on our street was the upper school. The students there wore red-and-white uniforms and had to keep their ankles covered and their buttons buttoned. I saw them every day, passing through our street at the morning bell in pairs or trios.

I had gathered all the stones to be found on my block. My pile was sizable but not impressive. Our road was on a slope, and I could see from where I stood that there wasn't much down below. It was spring, and the air was cool and smelled faintly of waste. It was late morning; for a reason I can no longer recall, I was not at school.

On the way up, I kept my eyes to the ground, scanning. I found three things worth slipping into the pockets of my dress: a mysterious black stone, jagged, like a meteorite; half a cobblestone from the alleyway behind the butcher; a plate ring, scratched and bent out of shape, with etchings on the inside. I examined the ring. It wasn't very dirty; it had glowed on the road, shiny like a trap, and anyone could have found it. I held it tightly.

Without noticing, I had come to the gates of Good Shepherd. It was time for recess; the girls were beginning to emerge. The guard had opened the gate, and those who went home for lunch continued onto the street; the others gathered on the courtyard, inside the bars, and opened their bags and pails. The day was

clear; when I held my ring in the sunlight, I could nearly make out the words on the inside of the band.

"What's that? Your wedding ring?"

It was a Good Shepherd girl. She swung her school bag in one hand; her posture was taunting, masculine, bullying. She had her uniform skirt rolled up to show the tops of her strong, dark thighs.

I didn't know what to say. To be addressed by an older girl at all was the height of strangeness.

"Let me see. He must be poor, to give you something so ugly." She put out one imperious hand.

I closed my fist around the ring and shoved it into the pocket of my dress. She frowned at me. I couldn't tell if her anger was real or teasing; her eyes were dark and they sparkled.

"You must really love him," she said and showed her teeth in a broad white smile.

Another girl came up and took her arm. This one was beautiful, tall, with quick, light eyes.

"Leave the kid alone."

She said it indulgently. It was not her defense of me that struck me but the tone of her voice; she spoke to her friend with a kind of proprietary intimacy I had never heard from anyone but pairs of parents. They started to move off down the road; neither of them looked at me again.

"Coming to my house?" asked the beautiful one, looking down at her friend's face. *Yes*, I said inside my head, *yes*.

From that point on I was a Catholic.

My parents were not very religious. We went to the big stone church every once in a while, usually on Christmas and sometimes on the weekend to see the other families. I had never paid much attention to what went on there; usually I carried marbles in my pocket and felt them all over with my hands while the sermon was being read, testing whether I could identify the color by touch alone, in darkness or with my eyes closed. At home there was never any talk of God.

At the end of that year it was time for me to choose a middle school. My parents, both professors at the city university, thought the public school would be best for me—I could take the bus there, they knew the teachers. I begged for Good Shepherd.

They didn't understand but they agreed, eventually. All summer I had to pretend to be devout. I would kneel and pray both in my room and in other parts of the house where I knew they would see me. I carried a wooden rosary and left my Bible open on my desk. I was learning about religion, but I wasn't truly faithful; I had no feelings about God. At church I still played with marbles. But I was ecstatic with my new self. What I was doing provoked a kind of pre-sexual arousal in me: the thrill of deception, of getting away with it, and of the actions themselves, the theatricality, the arcane rituals, the physical postures, and ultimately the idea that with every step I took toward convincing my parents of my devotion, I was getting closer to getting my body in the same room as the bodies of other girls, of being like the taunting girl with her beautiful friend.

I carried a wooden rosary and left my Bible open on my desk. I was learning about religion, but I wasn't truly faithful; I had no feelings about God.

I would never have said that was what I wanted, could not have. It was all muddled up in my head—the uniforms, the books, the iron gate, the shining hair, the secret bodies.

I entered Good Shepherd in September. My first day was one of the most exciting of my life. In August I had gone with my mother to get the uniform and the books; we chose a new pair of black leather T-strap shoes and a bag that matched. I lined these objects up on my desk and fell asleep looking at them every night for four weeks. The white ankle socks, the white underclothes, the white blouse with the small pearlescent buttons, the red plaid skirt, heavy, woolly, with pockets. The books, their mysterious smell of glue and ink.

On my first morning I arrived early; the school gates were still locked. I smoothed my hands over my skirt. I unbuckled and buckled my bag. I looked down at my feet and saw that already I had scuffed the toe of one shoe. Other girls gathered around me; some seemed to know each other. I smiled at no one but watched them closely without showing that I was doing it. The guard came and opened the gate. I found my classroom and chose a desk; I put my book inside it, spread out my paper, and sharpened a pencil. The other desks filled up. I raised my eyes and saw the teacher; class began. I stayed there for six years.

Unlike other Catholic schools I had heard of, at Good Shepherd our teachers were not nuns and priests but regular laypeople. Some of them were not Catholic at all, as we students usually delighted in discovering. Their secret lives were of great interest to us—especially, as time went on, the possibility of their sexual perversions and indelicacies. I remember there was a particular teacher, a man, whom we suspected of homosexuality—it was probably true—because of the pitch of his voice. We were intensely drawn to him; everyone felt loyal to him. Even the strictest believers were sorry to think that he would soon be in hell.

I managed to fit in pretty well. At first I found it difficult to declare myself—was I pious or rebellious? studious or disdainful?—but in time I settled into the middling social class: the girls who were neither beautiful nor intelligent, tolerated by all and liked by none. The first few years, between the ages of eleven and thirteen, were the best for me. I still believed in the vision of intimate friendship I had witnessed outside the gates of Good Shepherd, and I had faith that I would be singled out by some other girl soon for that kind of love. When the weeks and months went by without any sign of this event, I remained steadfast—it was merely a matter of time, which would pass anyway, and of some defect in myself I could use that time to correct.

By the time I was fifteen or sixteen, though, I had realized that the fault lay not with me but with the other girls. I was drawn to them, of course—I watched them with intense interest, the minute movements of their hands and arms, the beauty of their hair, skin, and eyes, the mysterious forms beneath their red wool skirts. But I did not love them. It became clear to me that I wanted something particular. A loyal friend, yes, a special closeness—but that wasn't all, because sometimes girls of lower social ranking would try to befriend me specifically, come to my house or walk with me after school, and for all their sincerity they were insubstiantial, unappealing. There was some missing element.

I think now, considering what happened later, that it was something like purity. By the time we were pubescent, all the prettiest girls in my year had boyfriends. They pushed the boundaries of what was allowable in order to make bodily contact with these boys, many of whom came from Good Shepherd's brother school, and then talked about it with moist eagerness at recess or in the hallway. I found this titillating—being let

into their confidence, going to their homes and sometimes bedrooms, seeing the parts of their bodies that had been touched by these boys—but at the same time I didn't like it. It seemed dirty to me and inconsistent. We were Catholic girls: We were in the special school, we wore the neat uniform, and we were supposed to be separated from the general sullying that went on in the rest of life. That's what the gate was for.

Around this time, everything started to get a little confused for me. The story of myself as a devout Catholic had become very powerful, more powerful than my inherent internal defenses, and I was so used to it that, in a certain sideways manner, I began to believe it. As a consequence, I also began to believe in God. I felt a presence watching over me, guiding me, and I was comforted. It was a relief to think that I would no longer be pretending, that such things were possible in the world—that through time, commitment, and desire, my lie could become truth.

In my second-to-last year of school, I had a friend called Tabitha. We shared a desk in history, a class she loved and prepared for diligently, and I read off her notes. Sometimes I went to her house after school, and we dressed in her mother's clothes; the family was wealthy, and the clothes were beautiful, slick and shiny and brightly colored, the sort of thing my own mother would have called "a little much." I didn't really care to wear them myself, but I liked to see them on Tabitha. Her body was already that of a woman, and in the clothes, which were a few inches too large for her in all directions, she looked like a nervous starlet.

One afternoon, Tabitha asked if I wanted to go into the city center.

"Why?" I turned onto my side on her bed to look at her; she was at her vanity, putting on lipstick. I sat up.

"There's music in the park." She blushed at me. "You know Andrew?"

"Did he ask you to come?"

"We're getting a drink after."

I stared at her.

"A soda," she clarified.

"Go by yourself," I said and lay back down.

She came to the bed, then crawled up beside me. I could feel my heart beating against the quilt. "Come on," she said. "I need you."

That was when I felt it. I knew it was wrong to go into the city for a reason like that, to aid Tabitha in her quest to touch and kiss Andrew, but wasn't it worse to let her go alone, with nobody watching over her? Tabitha wasn't a real Catholic—her parents just wanted the prestige of Good Shepherd; they didn't go to Mass even on Christmas. I twisted inside myself. I waited; the answer came to me from above: *Yes*, *yes*.

The evening was warm and sticky, almost summer. My flat shoes, the same ones I wore to school, made no sound on the road, but beside me Tabitha clicked. She was anxious and smelled of flowers. We followed a path I had never walked before, and in the calm blue air my eyes were hungry. Tabitha talked of Andew, but I saw only houses with lit windows, women in patterned dresses, an ancient church short and squat beside a new white grocery. I felt the presence of God riding on my shoulders as clearly as Tabitha's arm threaded through mine. He guided me, turned my head, moved each of my legs from the hip. *See this? Smell it?*

We were halfway to the city center when we passed the convent. I had seen nuns before, of course. They were part of the landscape: on trains and out in the city, moving in long lines like in *Madeline*, and naturally at church, busy like ants. There were a few of them on the street by the high white convent doors, heads bent together. The street was not crowded; as we approached, one of them turned and looked at us, then the others did. They did not smile; they did not speak. Some bowed their heads, but others looked on with steady, righteous confidence. My heart thudded heavily. I wished I had my uniform on. I wished I didn't have Tabitha—sinful, aromatic Tabitha—on my arm.

For years I had worshipped my fellow schoolgirls in secret, their bodies and bright new souls, the smoothness of their hair and the tackiness of their lip gloss. But those girls, I understood then, had never really been what I wanted—their purity was conditional; their beauty was becoming the beauty of women who knew men. They would soon shed the unflattering uniform; beneath their skirts they wore thongs and cheetah print and stockings with runs from the ragged edges of boys' fingernails. It seemed obvious, suddenly, that my love for them had merely been a prelude to the main event.

"Look," I whispered to Tabitha, nudging her as we passed.

Even the firm flesh of her side wasn't enough to distract me at that moment.

"Oh my god," she said. "I forgot to tell you. Lola's becoming a nun."

Lola was in the year above us; I had advanced algebra with her.

"Lola?" I couldn't believe it. That sensual name that made the mouth fall open in a caricature of pleasure, those breasts that pressed against the starched uniform blouse, those narrow calves always tightly crossed as if in illicit self-pleasure. Even Lola.

I went back to the convent the next day, and the day after that. I circled the block; I peered into the windows; I experimented with different times of day. I never saw much, though I often heard music. I learned that the sisters there were cloistered; the ones we had met on the street were visiting from another convent. It was possible to go in and see the cloistered sisters only under a select number of circumstances, and even then through a grille. At the end of May, the convent choir had a public concert; I told my parents I was going dancing with friends—they smiled with relief and pleasure—and attended.

At the door I put some money in a wicker bowl. I was given a paper program by a woman from the Cathedral Association. I sat by myself at the very end of a hard wooden pew. The convent smelled of moss and wood polish. The people around me were mostly married couples, either white-haired and prayerful or young and accompanied by small children with bows on their heads. I was the only person there alone, other than a few very old women with covered heads. I read the program. It listed the names of the sisters who sang in the choir. As we waited for the concert to begin, I recited the names to myself: Sister Mary Catherine, alto; Sister Bridget Emmanuel, mezzo-soprano; Sister Ursula Jerome, soprano; Sister Anthony Agnes, soprano.

The room quieted, then filled with rustling; through the diamond-shaped openings of the metal grille I saw the wooden double doors opening. The choir filed in, in a neat double row. There were about twelve of them wearing blue-and-white habits, and they bowed their heads as the people around me erupted in applause. They stood in a semicircle. The singing began.

I knew nothing about music. They sang in Latin, and their

voices were amplified by the walls and ceiling of the chapel. I felt again the presence of God. He turned my head slowly and led me to examine the faces of each sister. They ranged in age from their twenties to their eighties; some wore glasses; all had smooth, tender, sunless skin. One was very beautiful, a soprano. Beneath my party dress my skin trembled like the taut surface of a struck drum.

Over the summer and into the fall of our final year at Good Shepherd, my friendship with Tabitha faded. By graduation I had to hear from someone else that she had at last let Andrew penetrate her and would be married the following August, when at one time she would have called my bedroom telephone directly with the news. But I didn't miss our confidence. I had a new love.

She was the beautiful soprano, Sister Jerome. Twenty-three years old, she had entered the convent at sixteen; she was from the city orphanage. Her secular name—I had found it out by scouring old records—had been Helen. Helen, Helen, my Helen of Troy, my love. When I came to the convent in the days after the choir concert and told them I wanted to join the order, it was she, the youngest past her novitiate, who was assigned to be my mentor. Miracles upon miracles. I adored her helplessly. She was small and frail, but she didn't wear glasses, and her eyes were black, the true black that only certain people's bodies can sustain, a black so black it can be likened to nothing else. Her skin was not sallow but pale, milky, bluish. The hair that occasionally emerged from beneath her wimple was also black, lighter than her eyes, with a slight curl to it. She wore it in a center part, brushed down and braided; sometimes her impossibly white scalp showed. When she was naked, I imagined, her hair would rest like a storm cloud on the pale sky of her back.

Her secular name—I had found it out by scouring old records—had been Helen. Helen, Helen, my Helen of Troy, my love.

At school, I informed the teachers that I was planning to take vows. They were not encouraging. My English teacher, an unmarried woman in her thirties, took me aside after class.

She poured me a glass of water and pulled a chair up to her desk for me. "Aren't you curious about other parts of life?"

I thought of my parents: their long hours, dull students, creased foreheads, the dirt on their shoes, the worn place on the wall below the hook where they hung their coats and bags every day.

"Listen," said the teacher, leaning across the desk toward me. "I admire your faith, but there are so many other ways to be a good Catholic. You're young. You can always make this decision later. The convent will wait for you."

I shook my head. "It's a vocation. I shouldn't resist it."

She sighed, rubbed a hand over her eye. Her hand was grubby with pencil marks; her eye drooped. "You're clever, thoughtful, you know, observant. It makes me sad to think of you throwing your mind away like that."

My heart clenched like a fist. "It's not—what God asks of me, I perform with pleasure." What would she know of pleasure, I thought, as I stood and left the classroom. Dried-up, unloved woman—she had never known what it meant to desire as I did.

I had vocational visits with Sister Jerome sporadically throughout the fall. As the winter break approached, I scheduled them more frequently and ceased lying to my parents about where I was going. I had been telling them that I was out with Tabitha or other friends; they must have thought that was code for a boyfriend. Now I just said I was going for a walk or to church. One day in November, I came home from school to find them waiting for me on the sofa.

My dad smiled at me, a tentative, apologetic smile. "Have a seat."

"Listen, sweetheart," said my mom. Her hands were folded tightly over her knee, palms squeezing and compressing the fabric of her slacks. "We wanted to talk to you about next year."

"You know we always thought you'd go to university," supplied my dad. "You're a clever girl. Ever since you were little you've been a reader—"

"Your English teacher called us." My mom frowned. "She said you're thinking of becoming a nun?" She said it like she hoped I'd brush it away with a laugh, like it was ridiculous.

"I'm not thinking of it. I'm doing it."

Mom shook her head and said gently, "I don't think that's a

decision you're prepared to make. You haven't even had a boyfriend yet." Dad put a hand on Mom's shoulder, I guess to calm her. Their relationship, if it was meant to be a model of what I myself could look forward to, did not allure me. They were like two separate entities caged together in a small dingy space—they did everything they could to hide their soft internal lives from each other, and were drawn together only by the slippery vacuum of sex. I had never touched Helen, and I loved her more deeply.

I laughed. Dad shook his head at me, but Mom wasn't angry. She looked sad. She took my father's hand. "I'm just saying, sweetheart, that maybe the love you're looking for isn't the love of God. Maybe you'll find it somewhere else."

More teenage girls should listen to their mothers, but in this case she was telling me something I already knew. It wasn't God's love I was after.

I met with Sister Jerome later that week, after school. I prepared for our meetings as for a class—in fact, with a diligence and seriousness I had not applied to school since I was a little girl. We usually discussed certain aspects of Jesus's teachings, the Carmelite Rule, the text of the Bible. I believed these conversations were hidden tests of my faith, my knowledge, and my aptitude. We had never really spoken about my desire to become a nun, and we had not discussed her path to the convent. Her mystery remained entirely intact, even as I longed to open myself up to her.

We met in a small room within the chapel building. It was a room usually reserved for family visits and contained two dark wood chairs and a built-in table split by the iron cloister grille. It was windowless, with electric sconces by the door. They cast Helen's face in dramatic relief, accentuating the whiteness of her skin and the blackness of her eyes. Sometimes that light would play tricks on me, turning my beloved from a young woman into a corpse, ancient and decaying, or a cold, quiescent statue.

That week, I had prepared some questions about Genesis and come early for our date with my bag full of notes and my big black leather Bible. A lay sister let me in at the front door, and I settled myself in the room nervously. It was our thirteenth meeting.

After a few minutes, she came in, the hem of her habit rustling over the floor. I had determined through close observation that a set of stone steps lay behind the door on the cloistered

side; they went both up and down, but she always came up, which led me to believe she was rising either from the crypt or the root cellar. I didn't know her daily assignment; we didn't share things like that.

She greeted me and sat. I began to pull things from my bag. "Sister, since you mentioned Genesis last time, I thought we could discuss God's commands to the first men. I wondered—maybe it's a bit of an unorthodox question—"

"Yes," she said, "but there's another conversation we need to have first."

"Oh." I tucked my hands in my lap, mimicking the tightly folded way she sat. Sometimes, in the passionate throes of some idea or another, she would raise her bare hands into the air, but it was rare.

"You've been coming here for many months. I know you're to finish school this year. It's time now to decide whether it's right for you to become a postulant." She did not smile; I felt a bright ruffle of fear in my stomach.

"I would be honored, Sister Jerome."

She nodded—yes, it was an absolute honor. "So tell me. Why do you want to become a nun?"

I gazed at her and all the wrong answers came to mind: I felt, as clearly as if I were touching them, the smooth planes of her cheeks; the calm, expectant expression on her mouth; the light, stiff fur of her eyebrows. "I feel called to it. It's my vocation. I feel God watching me, guiding me. I love to ponder the mysteries."

Before she spoke I saw on her face that she had seen through me. I despaired, but I loved her for it—my secret soul was transparent to her, as transparent as it would be, as it was, to God. "And how long have you had this desire?"

"Not long, though I've been devout for many years. Actually it was you—well, all of the sisters"—I knew she knew what I meant—"that first convinced me. I often pass by on my walk—"

"I know," she said. "I've seen you."

Beneath my school uniform my body pulsed. "And, well, I felt so drawn to the sisterhood. To this life. I felt God drawing me to you." It was the perfect truth.

She sounded me out further, asking more about that moment, how it felt, my desires for my life. She emphasized that the commitment was eternal, that while I was a postulant, I would be unable to hold a job or earn money, that I would have to say

goodbye to my friends. She studied me closely. Then she opened her pale pink mouth and told me no.

"I think you should wait," she said. "Test your faith. The Mother Superior and I are not certain that this is the path for you. Let God show you a sign." She was sorry—I could see it in her eyes. I went away sobbing.

I trudged home, thinking cruel, violent thoughts about both of them. I decided the Mother Superior was fucking her, my beloved, touching those perfect thighs with her wrinkled hands, corrupting the body that was mine, that was to be given only to me in love. I came home; I slammed the door; I thought these things; I touched myself; I wept and was sorry.

In the end, as, in my best moments, I believed Helen knew it would, this challenge only renewed my determination. All I thought about was the convent. I dreamed myself in one of the little cells, which I had never seen but whose walls and floors and worn linens were more real to my imagination than the confines of the bedroom I had slept in for seventeen years. I imagined the heavy, mysterious clothes settling over my body, rubbing my skin until it toughened at the shoulders and the elbows, the soft places in my center remaining new and smooth, the cloth lying over the secret obscenity of my nipples that nobody would ever see except—except. I imagined Helen in the next cell, the sheets rustling around her body as she slept and the sound carrying to me like the lapping of ocean waves—I had never been to the sea—and I imagined her eyes sparkling with covert warmth as she glanced at me across the table in the refectory during the hours of silence. I imagined some crisis, some dark midnight trouble, a bad dream or a clanging alarm bell, and myself rushing into her chamber to find her, reassure her, her looking up with those endless black eyes, pearlescent tears collected below them without falling, like a painting by El Greco, and opening her arms and taking my body against her sacred body—

I went to church every day. I spoke to nobody except the Carmelite sisters, often only a brief exchange through the grille. My faith grew; their belief in and affection for me grew. I still met with Helen weekly. I told her about the sorts of challenges I imagined the truly faithful encountered and almost believed they were my own. I felt that she understood my coded messages. When I spoke of God's love, I believed she knew what I

meant; I was blissful; I floated over the streets in my uniform shoes. I ignored my parents, my friends, my classwork. I saw Tabitha once, at a cafe in the neighborhood half-sitting on Andrew's lap, and even though she waved and called my name, I pretended I had not heard. Already in secret I was calling myself by the name I had chosen: Sister Marinos.

It was December when it all came down around me. My parents were terrified that I would succeed in my aims and be admitted to the convent; I'm sure they were whispering late into the night about what could be done to prevent things from going too far. My mother told me later that she had serious thoughts of sabotage, of going to the convent and telling them that we were worshippers of Satan, or Jewish.

I felt that she understood my coded messages. When I spoke of God's love, I believed she knew what I meant.

It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday, my usual day with Helen. For a cloistered sister she made herself very available to me; I took this as evidence of the strength of her secret love. When I imagined what would happen between us, I usually thought of her as the innocent and myself as the powerful, experienced corruptor; this was how I explained the perfectly decorous nature of her conduct toward me. She did not yet know herself.

That day, I was emboldened by the weather and my sense of certainty in my own success. I spoke to her more freely than I had ever before, about my disappointment with the evanescent faith of the girls at school, my feeling of God's presence guiding me and how it felt to give myself up into those hands, my relief in my vocation, how I enjoyed our conversations. All that might have been all right, but I pushed too far. Maybe she knew all along what it was I was after. At the time I didn't think so, but I'd like to believe now that she did, that she partly wanted me in some subconscious way—or maybe consciously, I don't know—that she was in fact another me, a better liar a few years further down the line. I think she did. I think she had determined within herself to allow me to succeed, to support me, and further to welcome me into the sisterhood not only with her mentorship and guidance but also with her love, physical or not

but certainly more than chaste. Then I ruined it—too eager, too much, too fast and hard.

We were talking about the medieval saints, my favorite, the hermaphrodites and the holy virgins I loved.

"And Ursula," I said. "Your namesake, the little she-bear, what a woman she must have been! A true holy soldier. I would have fought to my death in her army."

Helen laughed. She had started to do that more often when we were together—it was a subdued laugh, fond, a little surprise each time. "You certainly have the fire of a crusader, but I'd hate to see you martyred."

Could she really have said that? A shocking admission; maybe my memory plays tricks on me. *I'd hate to see you martyred*?

"I'd like to be remembered that way," I said, shifting my chair so the grille blocked as little of her face as possible. "Better to be killed in the flower of your faith."

"A little out of fashion these days," she said, more disapprovingly now but still with that tinge of affection.

"Well, but so are so many of the things that nurtured the early Christians! Even monastic life, you have to admit, is an anachronism." I smiled at her to show I meant it with love. She smiled back; I was emboldened. "Sometimes I think I was made for those times." I sought her eyes. "Made for the company of women."

She looked back at me; I thought there was a flush rising in her cheeks. "What about you, Sister Jerome?" I said, my heart puffing with heat and light. "What were you made for?"

There was a silence. Then she closed her eyes, folded her hands, and stood. I saw again the woman I had first been drawn to—the fragile, inward stranger, the deep mystery—but was slow to understand what her reappearance meant. "My child," she said, the first time she had ever called me that, "I have enjoyed our conversations. You are an intelligent and passionate young woman. But you will never be a Carmelite sister. You are called to an earthly life."

"No," I said. I stood and leaned over the table, pressing my hand to the grille. "Helen."

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. She kept her eyes squeezed shut. "But I can no longer permit you to tempt—to attempt—to call me away from the life I have chosen."

Tempt! In that moment, I think, I could have changed things

had I affirmed my love, pushed my fingers through the grille and touched her—but I was timid and a virgin, and her faith did impress me, her seriousness. I denied it. Forgive me, I opened my mouth and denied it. It was hollow, the worst thing I could have done. I protested I did not want her; she shook her head again and descended the dark stair.

This time I could not weep. I wandered the city gardens, cold and stiff, my body an unknown territory for the first time in my life. I felt all of it slipping away—the surety I had felt in my path, the life I had dreamed of—but it was not gone yet, and I was certain that there was, if only I could find it, a path back into grace, a way to make the world I longed for return to me. But I was too stupid, too young, and the steadying presence I had believed was God had deserted me.

I walked in the gardens for several hours. All the blooms had come off the roses and lay on the ground, crumpled. It had not yet snowed; it wouldn't snow all that long winter, not until the middle of April. By then I had failed my graduation exams and was working as a secretary at the city post office. From the window by my desk I saw the snow fall and walked out into it with a sense of heaviness upon me. It took me years to get rid of that heaviness, and more years after that to understand that it was never God, that presence that had guided and then abandoned me. Only my blind, faithful heart.

JILL KHOURY

[CORSET]

some delicious insect / cosset closet encase encode attraction
wasp waist / satin leather denim / *what's your squish factor hon* /
long long laces *my what* / stealth or goth bondage violent romance /
constant covenant / commit to the bitch / hour glass / vessel / time
in a battle / youth compulsion / function / like a "lady" /
about to be ruined or ruinous

/// my spinepain got better but i couldn't sing

JILL KHOURY

[BLACK PVC BODYCON DRESS, FISHNET TIGHTS]

for a minute dreamt i was young garbage
[a delicate deathless borderland] again

purr of a zipper zipping [unzipping]

patina screams they ["the boys"]
will want to fuck [marry kill]
you to music made by robots
[electric engines]

— *you can borrow my* [scarlet] *lipstick*

i never hurt for company
[am hurting now]
just us two in the dressing room
i don't even like her much

— *i can do your eye makeup*
i say *i'm self-conscious about my weird eyes*
— *his eyes won't make it all the way to your face*

my legskin turns to scales
i have always had trouble walking [on land]

i am a forbidden animal [fish with teeth]

JILL KHOURY

[COTTAGECORE KNEELENGTH BABYDOLL DRESS]

you may address me as honey / i like the bedroom to be tidy / when i'm home alone i'm lonely i like when you call me pretty / makeup mirror, mantel, holy / line of sparrows up my spine makes me feel fancy / i powder my chest in a reverie / deckled edges and darjeeling tea / backyard crow convention shakes the tree / at noon i walk religiously / magpie, i pocket anything shiny / don't strain your eyes trying to undress me / high neck ruffle and bow make me feel free

JILL KHOURY

HYPOTHETICALS

i suppose i would never steal a dead woman's dress / i am thinking of one particular woman / i suppose i never found out what they buried her in / never got an invitation / i suppose it was just hospital gown, sheet shroud, out the door to the crematorium / i suppose i have little idea of the particulars of afterdeath / like did someone fix her hair or what / i suppose i would never steal a dead woman's dress / even if it was my mother's / i mean who would do that / anyway / there's a share of ashes in my closet / behind a rack of too-small dresses / i am hoping to sell

KELAN NEE

WOOD PILE

Through the fumes, a triangle in the sky and a purple
tint to the edges of things. My hand

is an object I hold out and pull away once it's been grazed.
Silent mornings, I walk around and try to hum

through my consideration of other people's bonebent souls
and my own. My friend tells me

he doesn't give a fuck about my writing or the things that I do,
he only wants me to live my life

fearlessly fulfilled. Nothing else. He and his wife balance and spin
their lives, their sobriety,

and their four sons while he balances me. He's teaching me to be
selfless, by being selfish for a little bit first:

Make them make a compromise. The delta in the sky has growing
lines, thickening, getting wider and thinner

until eventually they will fade. My mother told me she's been
thinking recently that she should have told my father

to get it together. We were in the general store wandering
around picking up cookware and kitsch,

navigating what was her fault, fighting back tears. My tally,
nothing. Hers, some things. We continue

to disagree. Adam tells me at work how he broke a man's back,
not for the cigarettes he stole

(*better than money in prison*) but for the stealing itself. *It was
a fucked up thing to do,*

but he never stole from no one again. He cooks oils in the back of the shop, talks to me for hours a week

about what pigment to mix with which thinner, so the wood I shape will look right once it's been stained.

We laughed easily at his stories, shrugged at the violence in them.

I'm afraid I'll lose my fingers almost every day. The wood jumps against the blade and my hands

keep it pressed to the table. Small threats that I hope are not omens, are not promises. Hillary tells me

she'd had a bad year, her boyfriend's mother died. *I don't know, somehow it's like I've lost a mother*

and a part of him too. We were changing blades on the shaper. It's amazing how little we care and think about each other,

and amazing how much we do. The wood delivery comes, and people scatter. The ones who don't are leveled to grunts and heavy breath.

My friend says that's why he took me on: *I know a lizard when I see one*. And then tells me to be easy

with myself. All of these things I see in the sky, looking for names. There is so much winding in the mind,

the countless gears, the endless tuning of it, the way it makes true and untrue so many truths. A new friend thanks me

for saving her life, which is nice, but wrong. She did that herself. I've gotten so tired.

By the end of the summer my hands are more scar than soft, and almost everyone I know is still alive.

KELAN NEE

HARVEST

There's something rotted in me that sprouts out
through my hands • once I swung a club hard enough
to kill a pig • the shadows were straightforward, single,
coming off of monofilament in my room • we cut the pig's
throat for good measure & when it bled, the blood
filled up a pail • this was before I knew you • someone else
didn't swing hard enough & the pig was dazed &
screaming • when I got the club in my hand again, I got the pig
in a corner & when they both were dead, we gutted
them & took their skin away & everyone left to go cook
what meat they had & left the organs with me & I remember
the field, how I stood there in the sun, the quiet wind
& my hands my fingers running the shit from the intestines
until I was sure they were clean, & I could see through them
& there was no sound when I loosened my grip on the hose,
while the water cleaned & abandoned the liver & the heart
& there were insects in the air & the breeze wobbling
& my shirt & pants soaked in blood, a knife in my hand
that I'd used to free the liver from where it lived • it was
so quiet • the oil in the blood the water on my hands • I swear
before I hit it, before I left my feet, the second pig looked
at me & pleaded • *do it come on* & it had faith, visible
that I would • this was before I knew you & before I touched
your face • the taste of the heart • how I ate it again, cold,
when the sun rose & put light on the table • every night
the shadows, before every morning • how I wanted more

KELAN NEE

GRAVE ROBBING

They're just
bones
sitting across
from me
drinking
my coffee,
both of us
listening
to liquid
slosh
over ribs
like rain.
At least
the bones
are old.
At least
they are
old bones
and getting
older.

SARA SCHAFF

ALONE IN THE WORLD

Lucy Winters was a young woman alone in the world. Or that is how she appeared to Henry when he first saw her dangling her toes in a salty river in Maine. This impression wasn't entirely correct. He knew it even then. But it was a fantasy that clung to him long after he drove down the long winding driveway of Driscoll Cottage and, from his car, saw the straight back of a thin white girl; it was an image from a painting: the contemplative beauty gazing out at the horizon while three small children pummeled each other with canoe paddles on the dock nearby.

Brad Driscoll Sr. had two daughters near Lucy's age, both from his first marriage, but Henry knew immediately Lucy was not one of those happy blonde beauties. She didn't turn when he slammed the door of his silver Audi, or when the youngest child, Emily, began to cry. Henry knew a despondent nanny when he saw one.

She was the latest in a succession of girls hired to care for the youngest Driscoll children. Henry had seen them all in passing during his brief interactions with the family: hovering on the edge of a pool at the club or on their way up the stairs of the Driscolls' grand home on Charles Street in Boston to put pajamas on squirmy bodies and read endless bedtime stories. None of the previous nannies had struck Henry as happy, but none had struck him at all. Each had blended at the edges of his memory, slender and pliant and unremarkable.

And yet from the start he'd understood the nannies had their work cut out for them. The children were, in Henry's opinion, the epitome of everything that was wrong with America: spoiled, poor listeners, brutish.

He should have gone straight into the house, but instead he approached this newest nanny and the children. As he stepped onto the dock, the oldest, the boy Bradley, pushed the middle child, Monroe, into the water, and the little girl screeched.

"Lucy! Help! Lucy! Look what Bradley did!"

Lucy remained where she was. "Bradley, help your sister out of the water," she said coolly.

Defiant, he pushed Emily into the water as well and turned to greet the visitor. "Hi, Henry," he said. "We were just playing." He poked Lucy in the back with his lethal child-sized paddle.

Immediately, Lucy swung around and yanked the paddle out of the boy's tight grip. "Cut it out," she said menacingly. From the water, the girls bobbed warily. Bradley choked back a sob.

"Hello," Henry said. "I'm Henry." He willed her to look at him, and finally, she did.

Even in the middle of summer, her skin was bone white. Like a swan, he thought first.

Or a ghost of a ghost.

A shiver ran through him. He had to take a physical step back or risk touching her.

"I know who you are," she answered.

Her sea-glassy eyes bored into him; her thin lips knit together. She gave him a sullen, indifferent look that practically killed him.

"Brad's inside," she said. His stomach dropped. Her voice was flat but somehow still musical. Intimate. "He's excited to see you."

He had the distinct impression she was making fun of him.

Brad Driscoll Sr., not lovely Lucy Winters, was the reason Henry was staying at Driscoll Cottage for a long weekend.

Henry was there as a guest, ostensibly, but his true purpose was business, not leisure. He wanted to do for tea what Starbucks had done for coffee. It was 2014 and that sort of thing seemed possible. He'd opened one Earl of Carwich tea shop in Central Square and had plans to open more across Boston, then the rest of Massachusetts and beyond. The tea shop franchise was unlikely to get off the ground unless Henry could secure the financial backing of several key investors. Brad was rich in an obscene way that would have embarrassed Henry's parents; he

Brad was rich in an obscene way that would have embarrassed Henry's parents; he had multiple homes and private planes to take him between each one.

had multiple homes and private planes to take him between each one. He owned an import-export business that exploited the riches of several countries in South America and West Africa, and he bragged about being a self-made man. (Everyone knew he had inherited a fortune from his dead parents before he even finished high school.)

Over a round of golf two weeks prior, Brad had expressed enthusiasm for investing, but Henry could not take country club enthusiasm as a signed legal document. Henry hated golf almost as much as he disliked Brad Driscoll.

The Driscolls' house was old but recently redone: its siding those quaint cedar shingles one expected on small cottages but here employed on an enormous house that spread out close to the water, announcing its rustic grandness.

Henry went inside. When he opened the door to the cool and silent entryway, his impression was that the house was all sealed up. Slate floors. A wooden sign above a coatrack hung with children's brightly colored coats said "Kindly Take Off Your Shoes," which Henry did, more aware of the hairy whiteness of his toes now that his loafers were off.

At first it appeared that neither Brad nor anyone else seemed to be waiting for him. For a few moments, Henry stood awkwardly in the gleaming kitchen, a kitchen so clean it looked like no one had ever chopped a single carrot on the marble countertops or cooked a soup atop the huge gas range. He didn't realize he was tiptoeing until he'd reached the glass French doors, which overlooked a deck at the front of the house. The deck extended from the house over the river. There on the deck was Brad, glass of something cold in his hand though it was just after lunchtime, his sunglasses on, grinning.

Henry thought he could tell where Brad was looking: downward, over at his children. The girls were bobbing in the water now, laughing, beckoning to Lucy, who appeared to be ignoring them. At the edge of the dock, Bradley was doing a strange, taunting dance, his mouth and arms flapping.

From here inside the air-conditioned house, Henry could no longer hear the screeches of the children. He put his hand on the door, as if to open it, and stopped. He followed Brad's gaze down to the dock. Lucy was standing, shaking out her long dark hair with her fingers. She took off her shirt slowly, as if unfurling a celebratory flag, and then undid her shorts and

stepped out of them. Her bikini was bright red, and the fabric of the bottom half was caught deliciously in the crack of her cushiony ass.

He felt dizzy, stupid.

The little scene played out in front of him:

Lucy turned slightly, looking up. Brad waved down to her, smile wide and predatory. She did not smile back. Instead, with one hand, she shoved little dancing Bradley into the water and then dove in herself, creating a vicious little splash as she disappeared into the water.

I'm going to marry that girl, Henry thought.

He thought it even though the words didn't sound entirely right in his head, even though he felt like the male lead in a patriarchal Hollywood movie. But he'd never been more certain of anything else in his life.

Just then Brad turned around and saw Henry standing at the glass door, limp and sweaty in his dawning new love, and grinned.

Inside, Brad made Henry a drink—bourbon and a squeeze of orange he spirited from the metallic refrigerator, then sent crushing down into the vast kitchen sink's garbage disposal.

"Poor man's old-fashioned," he said, handing Henry the glass, and Henry felt immediately annoyed at Brad's winking condescension.

Brad was the exact kind of American man Henry had imagined before coming to America—square jaw, sandy hair, blue eyes that charmed the sense right out of a person. The thing was, before coming to America, he had imagined he'd admire such a man, at least for his confidence and summer tan.

"Cheers," Brad said, clinking Henry's glass harder than necessary.

Henry drank rapidly, nervously, happy for the sweet-bitter cool, then the warm sting in his head.

Initially, there was no talk of business, only pleasure. The pleasures of coastal Maine, of summer, of living on the water.

The pleasures of Lucy, Henry thought, his chest tightening.

"I hate the ocean," Brad said, "but Thérèse finds the lakes of Maine boring. This river was our compromise, even though she hates how far we are from civilization."

After years of boarding school with brutish and pale aristo-

crats, Henry had arrived at Yale, where he soon heard tales of Brad's exploits from his roommate, Tim. The boisterous frat parties, the drunken "wooing" of freshman girls.

Brad and Henry never overlapped at college, but they'd become acquaintances through Tim, and Henry had remained curious but wary. For the past three years he'd turned down invitations to this very cottage in Maine. Henry had seen plenty of men like him, Brad replicas, and by now he knew what to expect from such men; he was no longer curious.

But he also knew how to appease them, how to flatter them, and that just sitting next to a man while speaking with an accent like Henry's, a title like his—such qualities did strange things to the egos of Brads nationwide. It could work in Henry's favor this weekend.

Or else it could turn Brad against him completely.

While they were drinking at the counter, Thérèse, Brad's second, very young wife, returned from a yoga class. Or that was what Henry gathered, from the yoga mat under her arm and the designer athletic gear she wore unselfconsciously, as if parading down the runway, unsmiling. She was short and compact like a dancer, with high round breasts pressing against the stretchy fabric of her purple sports bra. Henry had met her for the first time before she and Brad were married, when she was the first Mrs. Driscoll's private yoga instructor. Over the years, she had grown no older, only blonder, and Henry looked and looked away, then looked again. Brad barely registered her arrival.

She stepped forward and kissed Henry on the cheek. Her hair was glossy, and not from sweat. Her copper-brown skin smelled of strong perfume and, under it, of delicious, skunky weed.

"Welcome to Vacationland," she said, grimacing.

She had a slight accent that Henry could never place.

"At least the drinks are always strong here," Thérèse said now. She looked at her husband with a stinging hatred that embarrassed Henry, and then ran her fingertips up and down Henry's arm in a flirtatious manner that embarrassed him more.

And yet, Brad still had not looked at her. He was facing the window, watching Lucy and the children.

"Make me a drink, will you, Brad? I'm going to take a shower and then get dinner started."

Soon she was singing theatrically from the depths of the house.

"Thérèse has a beautiful voice," Henry said.

Brad had made another drink but was already drinking it himself. He held it aloft and smiled. "She sure thinks so."

Though it was only the three adults for dinner, Thérèse dressed as if for a party: a long salmon-colored caftan with a plunging neckline, and emerald earrings dripping toward her pretty rounded shoulders.

In spite of her pre-shower proclamations, she appeared to have nothing to do with the dinner that followed. The meal was a full-fledged gourmet experience, and the children were nowhere to be seen while the dishes appeared, served by a middle-aged woman in a snug black uniform, curly gray hair pinned up under a white cap. Her face was a map of crisscrossing lines; her hands were small but strong. With each dish, she announced its ingredients and where those ingredients came from: endive salad with carrots from a local farm, oysters from their own river, haddock from the nearby sea. When she spoke, her gray eyes remained on the dish itself, and after leaving it on the table, she disappeared, leaving behind her a trail of lemon-scented air.

Thérèse said, "Did Brad explain about Cindy?"

"She's our cook," Brad said. He smiled serenely. "There. I've explained."

Thérèse rolled her eyes, then leaned across the table toward Henry, her cleavage very close to the decorative parsley on her haddock. "We found Cindy two years ago at this party on Nantucket. She was basically homeless. Brad tasted something special about her cooking. He asked her to be our live-in chef." Here she leaned back in her chair, looking satisfied.

Brad downed the rest of his wine. "Now Henry knows the story of how we saved our cook."

"Don't be like that, my love. She's become part of the family." She was looking at Henry, but he got the sense she was performing a little dance for her husband. The way she emphasized *family*.

Brad rolled his eyes. "Dear Auntie Cindy."

Thérèse continued, "We're the lucky ones, really. Cindy's a miracle worker." She glanced at Brad and then away. "*Lucy* supposedly watches the kids, but it's Cindy who keeps them fed, who cleans the house."

Brad's expression changed. "Lucy cleans," he said defensively.

Thérèse laughed. "I've asked her to help pick up after dinner tonight. And to wash the dishes."

"She'll do it," Brad said.

"Good, because it's part of her job description, no?"

At that moment, Cindy appeared in the dining room, a gorgeous pavlova on a fine ivory-colored platter. "The blueberries are fresh, from the meadow." She lowered the platter to the table and drifted out.

At the end of the meal, Lucy did finally appear, her expression stormy, her body language stiff, as if she were the Driscolls' sullen teenager forced to do her chores. Without expression, she began to clear away the dishes.

"Thank you, Lucy," Brad said, grinning, watching each fork she plucked from the linen tablecloth.

Lucy ignored him.

In what Henry understood to be a show of domesticity, Thérèse stood to help Lucy, lifting each glass slowly, one at a time, touching Henry lightly whenever she passed by his chair.

While she was in the kitchen, Brad leaned across the table and whispered, "I think she likes you."

Henry blushed. He knew Brad had meant Thérèse, but it was Lucy who appeared in his mind; it was Lucy whose admiration he wanted in spite of a little warning muscle tightening in his gut. Tim had once suggested that Thérèse and Brad had an "arrangement": each was allowed dalliances outside their marriage, but Henry had shrugged off the gossip because he didn't want to dislike his financial backers more than was necessary.

It was Lucy who appeared in his mind; it was Lucy whose admiration he wanted in spite of a little warning muscle tightening in his gut.

"Let's have a drink outside," he suggested now, and Brad smiled.

Thérèse appeared on the deck a little while later, her sheer caftan backlit by the inside lights, revealing her contours and, Henry realized now, the high probability that she was not wearing a bra.

"Good night, gentlemen," she said. "I'll be working in my

study if you need anything." Her voice trembled. The confident expression she'd worn all evening slid off for a moment, as if she were going to cry, and then she recovered her smile, her aristocratic jaw. She slid the door closed.

"Is she all right?"

Brad ignored the question. "The only work she does," he said, "is on herself."

Henry suspected Brad might have something to do with some or all of that work, but he smiled stupidly.

Seemingly encouraged, Brad said, "She has everything she could possibly want, but she still finds things to complain about. Just yesterday she was going on about how white Maine is. She claims someone followed her around this little jewelry shop downtown."

"Followed her because?"

"Because she's brown, of course!" Brad leaned forward in a drunken way and batted his eyes at Henry. "They theenk I want to steeeel their trashy beeech glass!" Brad rolled his eyes.

It took Henry a moment to realize Brad was trying to perform Thérèse, and he felt horrified. "I mean, isn't it possible that's just what they think? People of color in America—"

Brad laughed. "In America! You mean the colonies?" Now he was imitating Henry. Poor accent and everything. "Henry, my good man, you've seen how my wife dresses—for attention. And attention she gets."

"You shouldn't—"

"Tell me, sir, is it so different in England?"

"In England, race isn't as much of an issue. When I was dating a Black woman—"

Brad wasn't listening. "One thing about Beverley," he was saying, "she didn't complain. She was frigid and nuts, but she didn't complain! She really took on her role as mom. It's why Angelica and Virginia have turned out so well. Did I tell you Virginia is going to Yale in the fall?" Henry shook his head no. He couldn't keep up. Brad sighed. "Thérèse can't be bothered with those three little shits. They'll probably all end up at UMass Boston. If we're lucky."

How often was it, Henry wondered, that an entire family could be so detestable?

And yet, over more drinks on the deck, and while they shared the joint Brad had rolled while smoking a cigarette, the salty,

muddy river air breezed over them pleasantly. Henry felt a hush come over him.

"You know, I like you, Henry," Brad said. A pause, an invitation.

"Yeah, me too," Henry said, leaning into the lie.

"I've always been a real Anglophile. Spent my junior year at Cambridge—Tim probably told you—and I almost didn't come back!"

"It's your love of England that made me think of you for this project, Brad. I really think—"

Brad interrupted. "I don't like tea, though, Henry, I have to tell you. That's where my love for your country ends." He laughed, as if he'd told a great joke. "And I really don't think Americans are tea fans, either."

Henry's heart skipped. He hadn't expected the deal to be wrapped right away, but he did think it would be fairly easy, just a matter of logistics.

Brad winked. "Then again, I think you have a good vision, good instincts, and who doesn't like English royalty?"

"Not exactly royalty, my dear man."

"Oh, well, I Googled your house—what's it called—Felton?"

"Ferndon."

"Looks pretty royal to me, those pictures. I showed Thérèse, and her first reaction was to ask if it was for sale."

Henry smiled and passed the joint back to Brad, who was staring now at the house. Henry turned. The kitchen window was lit. Lucy was framed in it, washing dishes, her hair hiding her face.

Brad let out a chuckle. "I guess I shouldn't complain."

"Pardon?" Henry said.

"About Thérèse's parenting. The fact that she requires live-in help has its plusses." He grinned. "You understand."

Henry didn't want to follow Brad's perverted breadcrumb. He took a drag from the joint, admired the fireflies hovering at the edge of the darkness.

"I love it here," Brad said. "Don't you?"

Henry nodded. He did. He felt the water and air working some magic on him. But then Brad smiled. His teeth were movie-star perfect, and Henry hated them. He would never understand Americans' obsession with their teeth.

"I have nothing to complain about, and I *shouldn't* complain. But Thérèse and I are going through some things."

"It's not my business."

"No." Brad sighed. "She's going down to Portland tomorrow for some yoga thing. She's teaching a class or—I don't know. As long as she's making us money." He shrugged. "I hope you don't mind that she won't be with us. I apologize."

"Oh, no, it's fine, really."

"Anyway, I have a great day planned out for us. Quinn is going to take us out in the boat"—Henry had no idea who Quinn was—"and we'll dock at Fisherman's Landing for a shore dinner—" Here Brad stood up suddenly and unsteadily. "We need more bourbon."

Henry felt too drunk to stand up, let alone drink anymore. "Good" was all he could manage.

Brad slipped inside, shut the door behind him, and grinned at Henry from behind the glass.

Everything went quiet, except for the water running darkly past him and a kayak knocking into the dock below.

In spite of Brad's boorishness and hatred of tea, Henry was filled with a strange liquid happiness out here alone in the night. It was easy enough with the drink, the view. The river that led to the sea, the hills, the wild meadows both reminiscent of England and yet so un-English, so unlike his Ferndon, which was both confined and decrepit. He never wanted to return to England, let alone live at Ferndon. But a place like this, a place like Driscoll Cottage, isolated but somehow open, this he could easily love. This felt like the America he'd hoped for—the openness, the beauty, the possibility.

But a place like this, a place like Driscoll Cottage, isolated but somehow open, this he could easily love. This felt like the America he'd hoped for.

And then there was Lucy, like an angel in the window.

He turned again to look at her. The kitchen light shone down on her hair from above, creating a golden halo on her crown. Her lips were moving slightly.

Oh, he thought, a pain stabbing his chest: Brad had come up behind her. He was a head taller than her, and he appeared to be smelling her hair.

Henry shuddered. Lucy's gaze remained steady, looking out into the darkness, where he guessed she couldn't see anything at

all. But then, for just a second, her gaze caught on him. He was dimly lit by citronella candles; it was possible she saw him. But her expression did not change.

Henry closed his eyes until the sliding door opened and shut again.

"My, my," Brad cried. "I think I need a cold shower. How about we call it a night, buddy? See you in the a.m.?"

Henry lifted his glass and nodded. He stayed out on the porch for a long time, hoping Lucy would come find him, but she remained in the window—the pile of dishes from dinner had been vast, endless—and he remained alone, concocting a plan. A plan to save Lucy. To take her with him when he left Driscoll Cottage.

Finally, he got up, his head swimmy but leaden, and went inside.

"Good night," he said to Lucy's back.

"Sleep well," she said. "I hope you brought ear plugs." She did not turn around.

Henry soon understood what she meant about the ear plugs. His room, the "guest suite," apparently shared a wall with Thérèse's study. Lying under his soft, floral-scented sheets, he could hear Brad and Thérèse having loud, grunting sex.

Eventually, he turned on the fan in his bathroom to mute the sound, but he couldn't quite rid himself of the images in his head: Thérèse's perfectly crafted tits in Brad's face, his fingers cupping her beautifully round ass. No, he couldn't get rid of the images, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. With some embarrassment, he jerked off first to those images, then a more powerful series: of Lucy bending over in her bikini, Lucy in his bed, whispering to please take her away while he fucked her from behind.

As he came, he felt both humiliation and utter relief flood through him.

By the time Henry woke up, which wasn't at all late, for he wasn't a late riser, the house was eerily silent, and the breakfast spread on the kitchen island resembled a banquet at a five-star hotel: a carafe of hot coffee and a platter piled high with pastries (a nearby box with a label still on it suggested said pastries had traveled all the way from Boston to be there). Outside, it was raining—none of the previous day's blue skies.

A door Henry hadn't noticed before opened, and the faint

sound of a morning news program came through it. And then Cindy appeared, wearing her black uniform and a striped apron. It struck Henry as odd to make your home employees dress in a particular manner. Fetishistic—not just a way of separating the two classes in the household.

"Good morning," Cindy said, voice neither friendly nor interested.

He said the first thing on his mind: "Where's Lucy?"

Cindy blinked at him. Smiled faintly. It was, perhaps, a mistake to ask about the nanny before asking about his hosts. "She's taken the children to the aquarium in Boothbay."

"And Brad?"

"Mr. Driscoll is very sorry. Mrs. Driscoll's car wouldn't start, so he is driving her to Portland."

"He's the whole reason I came here."

Cindy watched him steadily. "He'll be back as soon as he can. In the meantime, please help yourself to a pastry." She grinned. "Why not two?"

With what felt to Henry like mocking hospitality, she backed out of the room and opened the secret door—behind which Henry caught a glimpse of a narrow bed, a television, and a small white dresser—before she closed it again.

The rain was letting up a little, just misting now, so Henry took his pastry—an almond croissant, actually—and coffee down to the dock where he'd first seen Lucy, and took off his shoes. Dangling his toes in the water, he didn't mind the mist dampening his croissant. The air smelled muddy and delicious. If he didn't need to walk Brad through paperwork and legal documents, he would be happy enough to just sit here alone all day.

Or so he thought. But by the time he finished his coffee and pastry, he was feeling overly damp, a little cold, and embarrassingly lonely and longing for another glimpse of the long-legged girl who'd pushed her charge into the water the day before.

Why didn't he just leave? Lucy was why.

With no one there to stop him, and nothing else to keep him occupied, he took himself on a tour of Driscoll Cottage, its bright white and mostly uninhabited rooms that all smelled vaguely of fresh paint. He counted four full bathrooms, and that was before he descended to the basement, which featured

a gleaming bar and tiny movie theater. Feeling mystified and bored, Henry poured himself a glass of gin and lime, then sank into one of the leather lounges and tried and failed to get the three remote controls to work on the screen and projector. At Ferndon, as far as he knew, there was just the one television, in the library, where no one but his father watched BBC News.

Frustrated, he went back upstairs with his gin, his head a bit soupy now, and thought again that he should just leave immediately. And he would, if he weren't drunk. He'd drive all the way to Boston and declare his idea of expanding his English tea shops dead and done. His father had called the whole enterprise "disappointing for a man of your age and education," cementing Henry's determination to fulfill the idea, and also to never return home. As much as he sneered at the typical American's sense of entitlement and naivete about the world, he loathed the cold delusion of the English aristocracy. One would never suspect that they had lost an empire.

He decided a nap might be a better option to driving drunk. But as he opened his bedroom door and surveyed the bed now perfectly and tightly made—presumably by Cindy—he turned to the closed door of Thérèse's study and went right ahead and opened it.

The room made him laugh. It didn't look at all like the other rooms of the house, the bright rooms straining at some kind of cottage-in-Maine aesthetic. This study looked like a replica of what an American would imagine an English library might look like. Dark wood, built-in shelves filled with leather-bound books, a great mahogany desk at the center of the room with a stained glass lamp turned on and glass paperweights underneath, catching the light, radiating rainbows.

The couch was overstuffed brown leather. He sat in it and felt immediately cradled. So he stretched out and tried to come up with a plan—for the day, his life. Instead, he just lay there for a while, unsettled—but also newly alert in that satisfying way that new love provides.

He did not even notice that his eyes had closed and sleep had taken over. Then suddenly he awoke with a jolt, and there like a shadowy nightmare in front of his eyes stood Cindy in the doorway, her expression inscrutable, her arms full of hotel-white towels.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable in the guest room," she said. "Or maybe you'd like to go for a swim?"

Henry did not want to swim, but he swam, and though the mist had cleared and the sun had come out, the river was like ice, and his heart raced and made his head pound.

It was while he was swimming that he saw the Subaru station wagon pull into the driveway, parking next to his own car. And out sprang Lucy and her cascade of hair. When she greeted him this time she waved and smiled. Like it was funny to see him in the water. He was too embarrassed to climb out, and so he just stayed there, treading water.

The children piled out of the car, grumbling, sweaty, the littlest covered in crumbs.

"Hi, English guy!" Bradley called out. The boy ambled over the dock, grinning slyly at Henry. "We just had the most boring day."

"I'm sure that's not true. If Lucy was there."

Bradley looked over his shoulder, turned back to Henry, and whispered, "Lucy's the most boring there is. She was cool at first. Not anymore."

"Has she been with your family a long time?" He was only vaguely aware that he was interrogating an unreliable source.

"Forever? Like, since last summer, when Mom's baby died and she got really sad."

"Get inside, Bradley!" Lucy called. She was standing at the house, holding the screen door open.

"Anyway," Bradley shrugged. "We did see a shark that could kill you with one snap of its jaws."

"Bradley! Come *on*. I'm turning on the television and making you a snack!"

"Gotta go, dude," Bradley said.

And off he went with Lucy and his sisters into the house.

And still Brad wasn't home and hadn't called to tell Henry whether the deal was on or not, or what he needed to do to make the deal go through, so he acted as if he were finishing up his laps, and then he went inside.

The breakfast items had been replaced with a lunch spread. There was no sign of Cindy or her television show. Henry helped

himself to a sandwich and a bottle of expensive-looking sparkling water and went out onto the deck to eat.

He was squinting, wishing he had brought sunglasses with him, when the sliding door opened and shut, and a ripple of joy and desire went through him.

Lucy stood at the door, glass of an icy beverage in one hand, sketchbook in the other, sunglasses hiding her face. Her body cast a graceful shadow between them.

"Oh," she said, seeing Henry. "You're out here."

"Try not to sound too disappointed."

"I have ten minutes to be alone."

"I won't talk to you, if that helps."

Lucy shrugged and sat, then took a long drink from her glass. Henry tried not to look directly at her. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her open the book, a pen hovering over a blank page. Was she writing? Sketching? He desperately wanted to know. It seemed to him that neither of them was breathing. He pretended the river still interested him, and that he was breathing it in.

Then Lucy shut the book, and Henry turned.

"Do you have to do that?" she said.

"Do what?" he asked, genuinely perplexed.

"Breathe so loudly. Thérèse has a yoga room, if you want to meditate."

"Are guests allowed in that one?"

Lucy smiled. "Aww, did you get in trouble for going in the library? Cindy give you a little talking to?"

Henry wasn't sure why he felt embarrassed. He looked away.

"Don't worry," Lucy said. "I go in there all the time. I like the books, and the quiet. Thérèse doesn't care. Everyone calls it Thérèse's study, but it's Brad's room, just like everything else here. His rules."

"Brad's rules," Henry said. "Tell me about those."

Lucy pushed her sunglasses back on her head, finally. Her eyes were tired, distant. "I don't think you'll be here long enough."

"I have the whole weekend."

She tilted her head, studied him. "Aren't you and Brad supposed to be doing business? Right now?"

"We are."

"Not going as well as you hoped?"

"It's going fine."

But Henry could tell she knew enough to know that wasn't true. He would tell her. Tell her soon enough. Because in the end, what did a small business plan matter in the face of true love?

"Tell me, Lucy, is it hard work being the Driscolls' nanny?"

"Those angels?" Her pretty lips curved.

It took all his strength not to reach out and brush away the strand of hair by her mouth.

She turned away. Looked out at the river. Oh, he wanted to know what she saw. *What she saw when she looked at the sea . . .* His eyes closed, the sounds of those syllables in his head were like waves crashing over him. When he opened his eyes again, Lucy was looking at him as if she could read his thoughts.

"What's your story, Lucy?"

Lucy's gaze remained steady, but she smiled faintly. "My story is I'm the nanny."

He could see the window closing, her eyes going dark. And he'd barely begun to look inside!

"You went to university? Came from somewhere? Like to write up everyone's darkest secrets for a future novel about working for the upper class?" He pointed at her sketchbook. The smile on her face faded entirely.

"I came out here to draw. Not answer so many questions."

Ah, a young artist. He smiled indulgently. He needed to back off. "I'm sorry, Lucy. Please. Draw."

He took out his phone and pretended to look at it. She opened her sketchbook again, and for a few minutes, he reveled in her making no sound but that of pen on paper. He had to restrain himself from looking at her, and even after he heard her snap the book shut, he kept his eyes on two birds—he had no idea what kind—flitting past the deck.

And then: "I'm twenty, I have no parents, and I need a job."

Slowly, he turned. He didn't want to startle her. "No parents?"

"Just me." She shrugged. "Here I am."

"Here we are."

She rolled her eyes. "Not we, Henry. Just you, just me. I'll go back inside in a minute, and then it will just be you."

Oh, she was hard, but his heart flooded with love for this girl, some inner strength she possessed, some daring that he'd never have in his life.

There was the sound of gravel under car tires in the driveway.

"That'll be Brad," Lucy said, standing, looking over her shoulder.

A wave of desperation rose in Henry. "Are you happy here?"

Her expression turned grim. Or perhaps it was just her closing the door on him. He'd prodded too much. She wiped her hands on her shorts.

Henry stood too quickly, bumping into the table, and his bottle of fancy water tipped over on the glass top, hard enough to leave a thin, spider-webbed crack beneath it.

"Wait!" Henry said.

Lucy stepped backward, away from him. She looked suddenly afraid. "I have to check on the kids."

He heard the snap of the door sliding back into place. She had left her glass, and he leaned across the table toward it. As he lifted the glass to his mouth, imagining his lips against Lucy's, he saw her bookmark there, on the cushion where her sweet ass had been, and slowly and carefully he made his way toward it.

As he lifted it up, he saw it was not a bookmark at all but a sketch on a piece of loose paper, hurried but legible: his face in profile, sneer on his lips. It was not flattering, but he had never felt so flattered.

Henry slipped the sketch into his pocket. He felt she must have meant it for him to find.

The sound of a car starting caught his attention. He went to the railing of the deck. A light wind blew salty air through his hair. Brad's red convertible was in the drive, Brad at the wheel. A moment later, Lucy came running from the front of the house and climbed into the passenger seat. Henry felt physically pained. He couldn't see her face. Her black hair cascaded down the creamy leather seats. She raised one arm in the air, exultant.

He did not recognize it then, but whenever he would hear it thereafter, he would feel ill.

They drove away, a song playing so loud Henry felt it in the center of his chest. He did not recognize it then, but whenever he would hear it thereafter, he would feel ill.

After a while, he went back inside.

The kitchen was empty and still. It was very likely a mistake to be here. Brad only wanted to see how far Henry was willing to drive, probably. Tim had warned him: "He likes to play with his food."

In the living room, the children were still planted in front of the television, the littlest one asleep on her sister's lap, cheeks rosy with summer heat. It was Cindy on watch now; she sat in an armchair nearby, eyes closed, hands resting on her stomach. Henry cleared his throat, and she opened her eyes.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" she asked.

"I thought I saw Brad leave again just now?"

"Oh yes. Mr. Driscoll came back. And then he left again." She watched his face. Smiled.

Henry understood she was laughing at him without making a sound. An ancient, fuming rage filled him. He looked around. The clean house. The house by a salty river in Maine. What had moments before looked pretty now disgusted him.

It would take five minutes to pack up his suitcase and leave. He turned to go. Stopped. Fumbled for his wallet. Drew out a business card. Handed it to Cindy.

"Will you give this to Lucy when she returns?"

Cindy accepted the card. Her smile changed. She stood up and came closer. Her breath was minty. Whispering, she said, "Don't you get it?"

"Pardon?"

"She's nuts about him."

"But she's his employee. The inherent power dynamics—"

Cindy rolled her eyes. "She'll be the third Mrs. Driscoll before the year is out, bet you a hundred bucks." Cindy paused, smirked. "Make that a thousand. You look like you're good for it."

"My god."

"Oh, honey. Lucy's the kind of girl who can take care of herself."

Americans liked to say this kind of thing. What did it even mean?

Cindy looked at the card again, then over her shoulder to the children, whose eyes were drunk on cartoons. Henry thought she was going to hand him his card back. But instead she patted his shoulder. She smiled again, this time with pity.

"I'll give her the card," she whispered. "But don't hold your breath."

Henry grabbed the card from her, took out a pen from his pocket, scribbled on the back, returned it to her. Cindy turned the card over. Then she laughed. Laughed so hard Bradley tore his eyes from the television.

"I can't hear!" the boy complained.

Cindy ignored him. To Henry she said, "You rich guys are so full of yourselves."

Henry was surprised. Defensive. "I'm not—"

"What? Not rich? Not full of yourself? You just met this girl, who is, frankly, a big pain in my ass, and you're asking her, on the back of a business card, to come work for you?"

"Is it any crazier than her marrying Brad?"

"What do you even *do*?"

Henry felt incensed. "I'm in the tea business."

Cindy raised an eyebrow. "Okay, mister."

"She has exactly what my business needs."

"Does she now?" Cindy laughed, loud and hard.

Bradley screamed, "I can't hear!"

Henry knew he was embarrassing himself, but he couldn't help it. For whatever reason he didn't want Cindy to think ill of him. "Haven't you ever met someone and just"—he didn't want to say *fallen in love*; he knew what Cindy would think about that—"just *known* they could do better?"

"So now you're a psychic life coach. Dear Jesus. I'll give the card to her. Okay?"

"Thank you." He didn't move. Felt he couldn't.

"Hell, will you just go on your merry way so I can get back to doing the childcare I'm not actually paid to do?"

Cindy's gray eyes were sharp, the skin around them patterned with intricate wrinkles. Henry was looking at her as if for the first time. A face with character, once pretty. Oh, how his mother hated that phrase: *Never tell me I used to be beautiful, the most pitiful compliment you can give to an older woman*. Well, Cindy's face wasn't much older than his own. Her figure was still good, now that he was looking. He understood the tight uniform now; it showed her contours, more naturally voluptuous than Thérèse's.

Cindy cleared her throat. She had no patience for Henry,

he could tell. What about for Brad? He almost snapped out of it then. The spell of Driscoll Cottage, of Ferndon Hall, of his whole entire life.

But he didn't. Couldn't?

Maybe. Also: He wasn't sure he wanted to. He held a vision in his mind: Lucy knocking on his door, thin shoulders trembling.

PETER BALAKIAN

CARAVAGGIO/THE DEAD BODIES

1.

Here again—in

time space darkness

thinking about the Pope's question
"What is mercy?"

I put some coins in the lightbox

of the Contarelli chapel,

after a long day walking the city—

click-flash—

and the light on the face of Saint Matthew—
blazed off the canvas—like a—
a laser from somewhere—

—"out there"—
like Caravaggio's history of running,

his canvas a black hole in flight

in makeshift studios—
a castle in Malta, a barn south of Naples, roadside hideaways.

2.

On a coastal ridge dead bodies ricochet
I stare at the image on the TV screen at the hotel—

all day it sticks in my head like frozen frames
like 20 below in Hamilton in January

like ice spiles jammed in my gutters

the rafts of the terrified and starving—
like like like—useless—

3·

Take *Seven Acts of Mercy*:
the brushstrokes in the angel's wing—

appear to rise off the canvas
and the dead man on the ground,

his skin so taut the bones look real—
(is he looking up at the sky?).

What's in this sky? I'm staring at

the refugees who are staring up from these smashed rocks and water—

near death, they float in orange vests.

4·

Exile and terror were his pigments

soaked in linseed oil, yolks and glaze,
chalk and carmine, green malachite and Naples yellow,

pine resin and gloss and mineral fumes—

Now—on the screen of the screen in my head
I'm replaying the oil slicks of smashed hulls floating toward land

Syrians, Nigerians, Kurds—

5.

Burnt orange clouds peel the skin off the sky, and what shatters more
than light on the washed-up bodies on the rocks near Lampedusa—

beaten, robbed, crammed into makeshift crafts—

the sea swallowed some of them whole—

A gunwale sliced open in the sunrise looking like

a dead whale and then
the shouting: "West, where is west?"

6.

Sun blistered bodies on the rocks at Lampedusa—
wailing to God, prayers sent up in foam—
past egg yolks, past the lapis sky

past the horizon of bloated heads—
the slashed scalps—the castor-oiled gashes

the broken waters of the uterine sea and its
blood rushes of mandrakes—

7.

Caravaggio stuffed his brushes in a saddlebag—
canvasses rolled in satchels—

in Sicily he was on fire—

light followed the shadow of his horse

a stroke of gesture—a gallop that sizzled into sun—

hog bristle, mongoose hair, Siberian weasel—all his brushes
with fate—

raw umber, burnt sienna, lead white, vine black.

8.

How many drowned at sea this week?

Libyans, Iraqis, Afghans.

9.

Master of illusion = bitter myrrh = boiled to vapor.

Whose hand is on Christ's shoulder in the *Supper at Emmaus*?
The shadow on the wall shocking the light into the circle of his arms.

10.

What happens to memory, then?
What are your last thoughts

of the coconut groves, muddy riverbanks
of the body and the soul of the one

thread that makes us all the same—
of bones and flesh, hair and teeth

of self and the holy matrimony
of sky and earth—of smashed sun

coming down on them. In the middle
of night, who calls whose name?

names of the beloveds. Holding on
to the sounds of vowels in any
language, hanging by a consonant

to your son or daughter or granddaughter
or any child whose hand grabbed

yours as the sun sank below the water
and salt blinded you before darkness came.

11.

Expunge the mythic, make it real—to sum up Caravaggio to
Cardinal del Monte.

Take the horror on the face of Holofernes next to the eyes of Judith—

or Saint Matthew summoned by light—not by Jesus—

It's the pretense of the sacred in the name of nature that gets you—

like Shakespeare, who never let God into a scene.

12.

Images haunt on TV:

bodies tangled in floating clothes around the dinghies

moonlight on the orange life jackets

Eritreans, Libyans, Iraqis.

Night was moon cracked
on miles of water.

Some birds picked their eyes,
some fish ate babies whole;

women felt their hair with fish-teeth combs,
sucked on lemons for life,

children hung on splinters, paint
gouges, sliced hands,

stargazers and eels ate the ocean bottom.

13.

Caravaggio's faces are gaze in gaze:
take the pretty young man staring at us

in drunken lust in *Sick Bacchus*
as he clutches a bunch of grapes

his longing—his touch of air
the luminous skin of his fingers.

14.

Did the conch shells bellow back
prayers to the void?

Some prayed to Malak Taus
and the ashes of Nineveh,

some prayed to Allah,
some prayed to Jesus,

some heard the machetes
of Boko Haram in the whirr of a diesel engine.

Some dared fate with a flask of arak,
a gold chain, and an evil eye.

15.

In Naples, not far from these rocks the refugees washed up on,
Caravaggio kept sinking into delirium—
along the swampy back roads

where he saw that darkness was not death but a new space for light—
on the other side of the brush.

In *The Beheading of Saint John*, the neck is pulsing ligaments and veins
so palpable as if we feel it in our own hands—

16.

The Armenian priest I walked with around old quarter Aleppo—
disappeared in the sandstorm of bombing a couple years later—

and now I'm staring at a letter from him
and his note about the caves we walked through to find
remains of the dead of 1915—

What happens to the remains of the dead?
death by water, death on land?
You decide.

17.

Q. What do you do in the face of plague, Spanish rule, earthquakes?

A. Make paintings of beheadings and crucifixions—

A. Make light.

A. Take the corpse of a bloated prostitute dragged from the Tiber
as a model for the Virgin

18.

The latch hook diamonds
on Kurdish bags disappeared

in the drowned bones.

Quran pages smashed
in a splintered gunwale.

The green tomb of John the Baptist
was a mirage

of a wave that swallowed
mothers and daughters;

on the white horizon there
were no open boats where no
one knew the color of the sky.

19.

Why is Salome's golden platter more shocked than Herodias's face?
why is the light warm then cold—one idea of physical force?

And get this: Caravaggio signed his name in his own blood—

was this a private penance for murdering Tomassoni?

his gradations of amber varnish were boiled down to the corridors
to hell.

20.

Near the end Caravaggio was hunted by knights and patrons,
wanted for murder,

His face was slashed from one more brawl—

desperate for a papal pardon, sleeping under bridges, infected,
delirious with fever—

some days painting in a stable—some days in a palace.

21.

In Naples the black got blacker.

Take his last Christ (1607), the flagellation with the cloth around
the crotch
the head down slung in humiliation,

but striations of the pecs, thighs, neck—
the power of the muscles here replace the old idea of the emaciated
savior—

maybe for Caravaggio—a sadistic pleasure.

Executioner's hand? Or the murder of Tomassoni lurking?

22.

On Malta he sank into the silence of bees and olive trees and rocks,
he heard his mind outside of the blackness,

roamed slave markets with prostitutes, saw the Turkish slaughter
of monks
in the turquoise sea.

Captive of his gift, he who threw a plate of hot artichokes at a waiter
couldn't keep from running.

His packed a canvas of the severed head of St. John
on the felucca he hijacked to Porto Ercole.

*

He would have painted these boatloads of Christs
smashed and swept under the ocean—

He would have caught their skin against the rocks
their arms flayed, their gashes sunlit—

His light would have been right-on—stark—
to shatter the deaf world.

KIMBERLY GREY

THE THEATER OF MEANING

I once watched the sky become a language.

I was in Miami Whitewater Forest, in southwestern Ohio, where a lake saddled by kayaks and paddleboats held the blue quiet. The water was still enough to look deliberate; trees doubled in reflection and the horizon remained steady as a line. Nothing about this place suggested movement, and so I could stand in it without demanding more of the moment before me. I didn't want memory; I wanted a present tense I could hold.

The air was winter-pale, metallic, the kind of cold that makes sound travel farther than expected. I was alone and reveling in that aloneness. I had just been given the news that a former lover had died by suicide, and my mind was reeling, my brain unable to arrange the world. I wanted to talk to no one, not even the forest. It was then in the silence that a wind came and brushed my shirt up off my back. It was then that something rustled in the nearby trees, though nothing was visible. It was then that the birds appeared.

At first they were only freckles, punctuation scattered across the margin of the sky. And then something larger gathered. A pressure, as if the sky itself were becoming some kind of perceivable event. The flock folded inward and opened again. Like fast light that has slowed enough to reveal its inner joints. Not a shape but movement. Not movement but choreography. Not choreography but orchestration. Not orchestration but a grammar of wings: a murmuration of starlings across the span of air.

The physicist Andrea Cavagna found that each bird in a murmuration tracks only a handful of neighbors—seven, usually—yet the flock moves as if governed by a single intelligence. Watching them, I thought maybe language works this way. No center. Only relation. A swirling of effort until suddenly: theater.

And from theater: meaning.

I want to say the starlings wounded the sky, but that isn't right. They wounded me. Not the sky but the gaze that held it. Barthes calls this the *punctum*: the detail that rises from an image and pierces the viewer singularly. Not what the photograph shows to everyone—the *studium*, the general field of meaning—but the small wound that belongs only to one pair of eyes.

That is how the birds entered me. Like a punctum made of winged bodies that made a single body. An image specific to my exact gaze. No one standing beside me would have seen the flock the same way. The lake below it remained perfectly still, a second sky that refused the disturbance above it. That refusal sharpened the moment. The flock was not reflected; it existed only in the upper air, a moving darkness against the fixed blue-gray of the water. Watching it, I felt the odd recognition that Barthes describes: the sense that an image does not simply appear before you but singles you out directly. It attaches itself to your gaze and refuses to leave.

The birds stretched into ribbons, then gathered again into a tightening lung of shadow before dissolving. Each turn arrived too quickly to predict yet felt inevitable once it occurred. I tried to follow a single body and lost it immediately; the pattern would not allow the isolation of parts. Instead, the whole kept reforming, briefly legible, then gone.

This was the wound of it: not the beauty alone, but the knowledge that the shape existed only in that single instant of looking.

Standing there beside the lake, I felt the beginning of expansion. The birds were already dispersing, but the turn of them—one sudden folding of the sky—remained lodged somewhere behind the eyes, insisting that what had passed through the air was not only movement but recognition.

Only later did I learn that physicists have a name for the way such turns travel through a flock: *scale-free correlation*. When one bird changes direction, the change passes through thousands of bodies almost instantly. The physicist Giorgio Parisi

describes such flocks as complex systems, where the smallest adjustment reorganizes the whole. But standing there beside the lake, none of that language was available to me yet. What I felt instead was something older: the suspicion that meaning might not belong only to words. Perhaps the world arranges itself through proximity—through attention—through bodies leaning toward one another until a structure appears, briefly legible.

Watching the birds turn, I began to understand something else: No single sentence contains the past. My lover's mother calling me on the phone, telling me her son had shot himself, was not a sentence that contained all he was to me. Instead, a sentence gathers in motion, one signal answering another, until suddenly the sky fills with the shape of what happened. Words act this way. They tumble out and collect. A clause leans toward another clause. A correction enters and the pattern adjusts. Meaning arrives late, after the movement has already begun.

Once, over coffee, the lover said to me a sentence that resembled a line from Gertrude Stein. He was not literary, and I'm sure had I mentioned *Tender Buttons* he would have thought I was talking about a quiet machine or blouse I couldn't fasten. He rubbed my left hand with his and said, "You are a little kind of yes that I keep." The lights in the café seemed to dim. Inside turned to outside. I felt the atmosphere was made of the uncanny, and though I liked the sentence very much, I didn't know what he meant. I felt equal parts turned on and offended by the notions of affirmation and ownership, by the playful nature of the line. I thought, Is this what lovers want to hear? Is this a declaration to memorize when he gently takes my earrings off at night and bites the side of my ear?

I wonder if the reason I cannot leave a moment unanalyzed is that I love sentences too much. Or rather, that I trust them as a form of thinking. A sentence proposes that relation can produce coherence—that fragments, when placed near one another, may briefly hold. Perhaps analysis is simply the mind reenacting this faith. Faced with movement, it searches for a structure. Faced with sensation, it asks what relation made the moment possible.

I have never been able to watch an event without wondering how its parts consented to remain together.

The lover, I'm sure, had already forgotten the sentence by the time I began studying it. For him it was probably nothing more than a moment of tenderness in the middle of a coffee date—the kind of phrase that evaporates as quickly as breath in winter air. But for me it stayed. I turned it over the way one turns a small object in the hand, examining its edges, its oddness, the way the words leaned against each other: *a little kind of yes that I keep*. What was he keeping? What kind of *yes* was I supposed to be? The sentence had arrived too quickly to interrogate in the moment, but afterward it began to expand in my mind the way certain images do, growing larger the more one looks at them.

Philosophers have tried to explain this intimacy between language and sensation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty insisted that speech is not the clothing of thought but its body. Language, in this sense, does not merely describe experience; it encounters it, enters it, reorganizing perception as it occurs.

Sentences do something similar. They accumulate pressure. They modulate it. One word alters the conditions of the next. A clause redirects the movement of the whole. Syntax is not a container for meaning but a choreography of relation—units adjusting to one another until a structure becomes briefly intelligible. The coherence feels inevitable once it appears, yet it exists only in duration. When the sentence ends, the words fall back into language. The structure dissolves. Then what remains is the trace of having recognized something while it held.

Other writers understand this relational structure more intuitively. Susan Howe, in *Spontaneous Particulars*, quotes Gertrude Stein: "What is the difference between a sentence and a sewn. What is the difference between a sentence and a picture. They will sew which will make it tapestry." She claims Stein's sentences behave like fragments of fabric, small pieces stitched into a field that only gradually becomes visible: "A sentence," Stein writes, "furnishes . . . A sentence is drawers and drawers full of drawings." I think of the birds again: each body a mark, each turn a revision. Nothing fixed. Just accumulation across the sky.

You are a little kind of yes that I keep rehearses itself in my mind almost daily, even though the lover is gone. It was unbearably sharp and instantaneously sweet. It was a sentence that swung me around and made of us both something grammatical. Something uttered. Something reaching toward a meaning that has not yet been fully imagined but was an articulated recognition. I'm sure of it. As sure as I am of the birds that danced above the lake and then left—only to live somewhere behind my eyes.

One can catch a glimmer of it—how a pattern forms not from command but from proximity and attention, from the small adjustments bodies make to one another. What remains is the sense that something was legible. And that legibility stuns something alive.

Then language does what all language does: It becomes a memory of itself.

GEORGE QUASHA

FROM "LIGHTNING STRIKES FROM BELOW" (PREVERBS): *7, 9, 10, 14, 17*

7 *above ground*

. . . contextual shaping is only another term for grammar.
—Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*

Beautiful day although anything said *about* is not strictly true.
Who still sees his mind in the tree makes room for the mind in the tree.
Confusion of minds is original state like sky *ch'i* overflow beyond doubt.

Having to work for meaning is punishing recognition.
Knowing it like you see it is cash withdrawal energetically speaking.
I let my eyes serve the tree's wish to see other by way of me.

There's no how-to in work connecting but bare work itself.
How you feel is not how you say you feel until it is.
Center tells all is *ur*positional.

Dream truth.
Enter anywhere and go where the field leaks you.
Revelations about reading within reading engender further readings.

Sorcery threatens science on its own terms.
Seeing's believing seeing authorizes.
Shaman's ambiguity describes the warrior's belief the world is only description.

A tree knows you by your fire.
The ontology configures you before you know it.
Its poem is an artifact of image explosion.

Vision tension surfaces out loud.
We are retained for another say.

I swear I was there like peacock eyes for Beatrice I failed to see until told.
The swirl is what it takes to see anything through.

The departed thought magnetizes the possible next.
This is how mind works the torque it takes back here the earthlier we go in vision.

I can't help herself.
Feeling dreamt isn't a gender nightmare like the present age.

No doubt you are a painting if you see one with reflection.
Your world goes where you go.

The time it takes seeing you is *waiting* pregnant with thinning veil.
She says beautiful things knowing being made up it lets me see.

It takes a lifetime to let register it's not you naming alone with your alone.
Being half here shares being not all there.

I didn't come here understanding what I read so why pretend.
Some books read themselves out loud just being in the house.

It gives the game away like alms to the inner beggar.
Drawing draws back seeing light settle.

The art is going away with ripple splitting to show it's still in tow.
The reflection has draw and softening shatter.

The more to say is here to stay is slogan keeping sane.

A poietic thing is willingly antonymous to the thing seen.
—Ontononymous

Anything mind focuses spreads the wider it comes.
You don't have to know what it is for it to run you.

Leaving it to question itself makes space for the impossible real.
Nature has a new sex toy.

I saw thinking writing the book preceding here even now.
How to read the not yet staring you in the face?

Nature writes the book in its nature because it's your nature writing in its nature.
A thing true cannot not be true even when it changes its tune.

The entity ruling an unknown world speaks its alien language in our listening.
I'm in my own world is a motto with multiversal focus.

Monstrous in mirror does well to reflect further.
Doppler image deflection doppelgänger synesthesia comes and goes if you follow.

It's hard to get up to sync with a dying fall.
No guarantee you'll rise to the line.

Keeping up appearances is unsustainable vulgate grotesque commedia.
It risks too pretty.

Live transmission in denial with the reluctant dead is a promising attractor.

No one is listening when everything is heard
—Old Icelandic saying

I tell it like it isn't until I tell it.
Nothing seems quite as unrecognizable as old selfhood.

I had her dream and it contained me containing her.
I'm beginning to understand communication by standing in
between.

The theme song is every sound slicing through neurons.
Passion rips the moment out of time.

The vision is not a thing that can be, as a matter of discipline.
It pictures the image avoiding credence.

The music is utterance with riptide timing.
The reminder: nothing seems quite as unintelligible as ancient
jabber.

Children born ancient is relatively new on our scale of millennia.
Some history is newly sprung into time from the womb of
timelessness.

Adventurous birth retains prior mobility in the current of surround.
Time rips out.

Flow is reaching out.
From here it makes out tree so happy to see.
I come out loving my treeness in the tree flexing me back.

Extra dimensions come cheap these days; physics is full of them.
—Rupert Sheldrake

Barely bilingual with my body yet her seeing doubletalks me
through.
Imaging displaces the world it evokes offering its further where
to travel.

A point in a day descending breath extends to wind breaking
through before *down*.
When you go hungry to a scene it nourishes other beyond good
and evil.

Life sins in my inattentions and wakes from blur to see anything.
This is my life as I understand it and fail to.
It edges over into my bio-fabric spreading further afield.

Vision as true cannot be modeled.
Giving up seeing point to point for intensity space to space all the
way over through.

Seeing makes a hole pulling everything through it.
Choosing *not reading* the world pretends life ever gets by unread.

Cutting off from the main stream the invisible tributaries assert newly
just for you.
Time is coming at you from all sides.

Throwing the die on when to die will not abolish abolition.
Sky watch tick tock vigilance times out light first.

Who I am is not this simple sentence but who I'm writing as I
go along.
The sky I die for is already dead ahead.

A person is never not what a world revolves around.

KHALED MATTAWA

PSALM UNDER SIEGE

For a shattered time
we have eternity.
It's the "yes, you here,"
not the sky you reside.

By any means, "the what
earth" this affirmation,
this somehow heaven-
ward shooting star.

This urgent prayer
to the seas of mind,
this seagull wandering
earth's inset and grid.

Fragile nests,
tucked prayers
in date palm trunks
girding adobe walls,

in the shiver
of screech, hum
and groan, the smote
of fire, ash, and rock.

Please, buoyant
sparrow flitting
verdant thought,
swift hawk piercing

the depths of shock.
Please, do not—
not so "disowned"
as to call you dust.

KHALED MATTAWA

ON EMPATHY

Surprised the
victim of geno-
cide has become
a genocider?

Some victim-
izations noble,
others less, or
none. As to

the dead being
equal among
themselves:
a lack of

evidence. Turns
into dialogue
about current
shortage/abundance—

a virtue or habit
friends proselytize.
Even though it's
myopic,

feeds
on narcissism—
for a man to see
self in another's,

a trace reflected—
to look, speak,
think like him.
Example of such

kinship—men
from same clan
engaged in
gang rape.

KHALED MATTAWA

WHAT FOLLOWS WHAT COMES NEXT

Air, dust, rain,
and trees. Byproducts
and contingencies—
the body finds

passage inside itself,
lifting upward
into the open—
no code or mirror

for its obscured face,
yet keeps feeling
a thudding
against its skin,

not strong enough
to fracture joint
or draw blood, only
the astonished

air wheezing
its pain, and each
moment is lived
twice at least.

A disquiet burgeons
into a pulse:
the clothes we wear,
the bread we eat.

KHALED MATTAWA

TO YOU, EVER IN PURITY IN NIGHT'S STILLNESS, ONE LAST TIME

A wish that
can't wait,
a wish that would
not be found

under all
that has passed,
a wish without
lungs or gills,

roots or wings,
somewhere between
modesty and a bird's
cut throat.

A murmur through
the needle's eye.
A breath roiling
in the dust.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Rae Armantrout's most recent books are *Go Figure* and *Safe Rooms* (both from Wesleyan). Her book *Versed* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She is professor emerita at UC San Diego and currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

Peter Balakian is the author of many books, including *Ozone Journal,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and the forthcoming book of poems *New York Trilogy*. His memoir *Black Dog of Fate* has been translated into many languages, most recently Tamil. He teaches at Colgate University.

Carol Ciavonne's poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Denver Quarterly, Boston Review, Colorado Review, Interim, New American Writing*, *Rain Taxi, Tupelo Quarterly,* and other journals. She is the author of *Birdhouse Dialogues* (with artist Susana Amundaraín) and a collection, *Azimuth*. Ciavonne is an editor of the online journal *Posit*.

Joseph Donahue's most recent volumes of poetry are *The Palace of Boundless Cold* and *This to That and Thus: Poems 1983–1998*. Volumes four and five of his ongoing poem cycle, *Terra Lucida XII–XXI,* and *Disfluency: Collected Uncollected Poems 1973–2023* appeared in 2024. He is the co-translator of *First Mountain*, by Zhang Er. He teaches creative writing at Duke University.

Zea Eanet lives in New Jersey, where she can be found teaching French, walking around, and going to the library. A recent graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she is currently at work on a collection of short stories and a novel about ghosts.

Isabella Piedad Escamilla is a poet from Salinas, California. She completed her MFA at the University of Illinois, where she worked on *Ninth Letter*.

Benjamin Evans played football and studied philosophy at Colgate, earned an MFA at the University of Oregon, and is the former editor of the arts review *Fogged Clarity*. Previous poems have appeared in *Sugar House Review*, *Cortland Review,* and *Rhino,* among other places. Presently, he's fine-tuning a collection: *Flammable Ghosts*.

Alyssa Froehling is a poet from the Midwest. Her poems appear in *Black Warrior Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Pinch*, and elsewhere.

She was a finalist for Radar Poetry's 2024 Coniston Prize, judged by January Gill O'Neil. Currently, she is associate poetry editor of *Sundog Lit* and lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with her partner and dog, Duckie. Her website is www.alyssummaritimum.com.

Kimberly Grey is the author of the essay collection *A Mother Is an Intellectual Thing* and two collections of poems. Her fourth book, *Bewilder Meant*, is forthcoming from Persea Books in 2027. She teaches creative writing in the graduate program at the University of North Texas and works across poetry, nonfiction, and hybrid forms.

Jill Khoury (she/her) is a queer, disabled poet holding an MFA from The Ohio State University. She edits *Rogue Agent*, a journal of embodied poetry and art. Winner of the Gatewood Prize, her second full-length collection, *Earthwork*, is available from Switchback Books.

Peter Leight lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review, Agni, Antioch Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, New World*, and other magazines.

Khaled Mattawa is the William Wilhartz Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan. Mattawa's latest book of poems is *Fugitive Atlas* (Graywolf, 2020). He is the editor-in-chief of *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

Kelan Nee is a carpenter and poet from Massachusetts. His debut collection, *Felling,* won the 2023 Vassar Miller Prize. His work has appeared in *Poetry, The Paris Review, The Yale Review, Adroit Journal,* and elsewhere. He is a PhD candidate in critical poetics and the editor of *Gulf Coast*.

Pritika Pradhan is a writer and lecturer of nineteenth-century literature at the University of York, UK. Her creative writing has appeared in *The Mays Anthology*, *Electric Literature,* and *Literary Hub*. She is currently working on her first novel, which explores nonlinear pathways of immigration, ambition, and disappointment.

George Quasha, poet and artist, is the author of over twenty books, including his twenty-five-year work in the original genre "preverbs," *Not Even Rabbits Go Down This Hole,* and *Hearing Other.* A Guggenheim and NEA Fellow, he is co-publisher with Susan Quasha of Station Hill Press in Barrytown, New York.

Molly Rogers is a historian and scholar of the history and theory of photography. She is the author of *Delia's Tears* (Yale, 2010), and she

co-edited *To Make Their Own Way in the World* (Aperture, 2020). She is currently writing a domestic novel about the Cold War.

A recipient of grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts, **Sara Schaff** is the author of *The Invention of Love* and *Say Something Nice About Me*. Her writing has appeared in *LitHub*, *Kenyon Review*, *Joyland*, and elsewhere.

Bret Shepard is from Alaska. His collection of poems *Absent Here* was awarded AWP's 2023 Donald Hall Prize for Poetry and was published as part of the Pitt Poetry Series. Another full-length collection, *Place Where Presence Was*, won the Moon City Poetry Prize.

Ira Sukrungruang is the author of seven books, including the forthcoming collection of essays *Under and Up: Fatherhood and Fear in the Age of Distrust*. He teaches creative writing at Kenyon College.

John Constantine Tobin holds a PhD from the University of Southern Mississippi, MFA from The University of Baltimore, and BA from the University of Michigan. Dr. Tobin teaches writing and LGBTQ Literature at the University of Maryland; his recent work appears in *Shenandoah* and *Quarter After Eight*.

Olivia Wolford is a writer from Texas. She holds a BS in environmental studies from Texas A&M University and an MA in anthropology from the University of Maryland. Her work has appeared in *Four Way Review*, *Copihue Journal*, and elsewhere. She currently lives and works in Temuco, Chile.

Jihyun Yun is a Korean American writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. Her debut poetry collection, *Some Are Always Hungry,* was published by University of Nebraska Press in 2020. Her USA Today best-selling YA gothic novel was published in 2025 with Penguin Random House.

$2,500 honorarium & book publication

Book-length poetry manuscripts
accepted until **January 14, 2027.**
Final judge: **Juliana Spahr.**
Obtain complete guidelines at
coloradoprize.colostate.edu
or send an SASE to:

Colorado Prize for Poetry
Center for Literary Publishing
9105 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-9105

the 2027

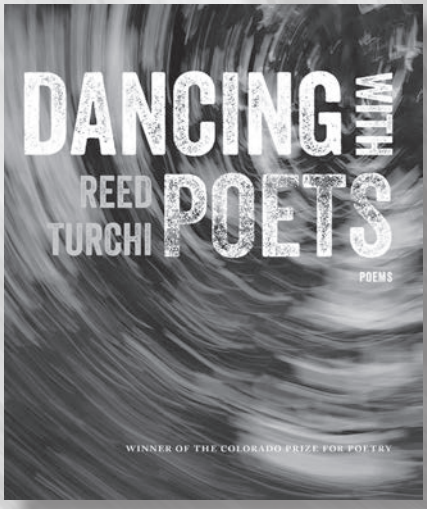
COLORADO PRIZE *for* POETRY

New from the Center for Literary Publishing

DANCING WITH POETS, by REED TURCHI

Winner of the 2026 Colorado Prize for Poetry

selected by Victoria Chang



"The poems in *Dancing with Poets* do that—they dance, rhythmically, as they swirl through, around, and within their narratives. These incantatory poems draw you in as they fuse the speaker's voice with the reader's imagination. The comma, the em dash, and the line break enact the drama so that what we have transcends the speaker, transcends the drama, and transcends the many elegized in these poems. 'Forgive me. We hold on to what / we can, & then we lose it anyway, // because *such music cannot last*—,' the poet writes in the stunning opening poem, 'Swannanoa: Swirl & Vortex,' yet what's left on these pages sings and sings . . ."

— VICTORIA CHANG, final judge

"An amazing book. Reed Turchi is a music-maker and a storyteller of the highest order. A searing voice, restless, moving, and strange in the best ways. I'm shaken by it, and high from reading it."

— JESSE NATHAN

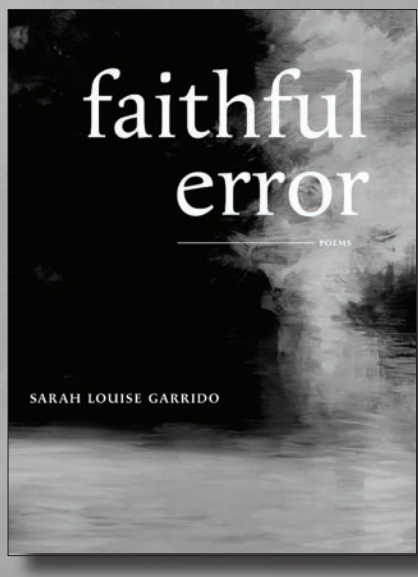
Distributed by the University Press of Colorado
Orders: 800-621-2736 or www.upcolorado.com

university press of colorado

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

Distributed by the University Press of Colorado
Orders: 800-621-2736 or www.upcolorado.com

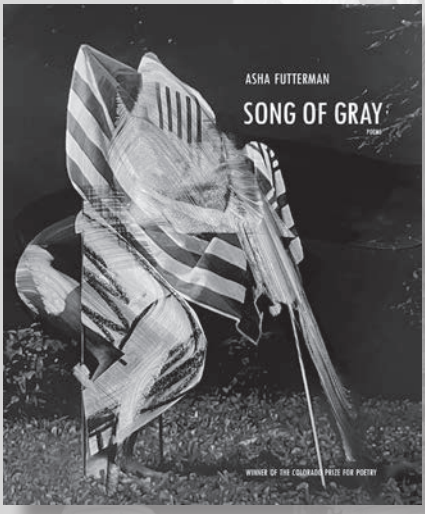
university press of colorado

New from the Center for Literary Publishing

SONG OF GRAY, by Asha Futterman

Winner of the 2025 Colorado Prize for Poetry

selected by Craig Morgan Teicher



"Asha Futterman's debut, *Song of Gray,* is a book of devastating insight and clarity, and introduces a vital new poet. America's inexhaustible racism is one urgent muse: in sharp staccato lyrics that leap easily back and forth across the lines of logic, Futterman maps 'the abyss/ between nothingness and infinity,' an area of gray areas, where 'a black name is often registered/ as little more than an encounter with power.' These poems drive toward a kind of offhand aphoristic wisdom, toward language so irreducible, it could only be the truth: 'he died shoveling snow/ that melted the next day/ poetry makes nothing/ happen.' Again and again, Futterman arrives at a tense sort of wisdom—'there is no changing what is happening/ what is not happening'—which is to say, everything is something else and also nothing else. These are confusing, terrifying times: I want these remarkable poems for company."

—CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

Distributed by the University Press of Colorado
Orders: 800-621-2736 or www.upcolorado.com

university press of colorado



HR

Memorandum
To: Readers and Writers
From: HR

AGENDA:

HARVARD REVIEW

Fiction / Essays / Book Reviews / Poems
Art / New Translations / Conversations

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE / HARVARDREVIEW.ORG

NEW ENGLAND REVIEW

READ
WRITE
SUBMIT
FOLLOW
SUBSCRIBE

Recent Contributors

Lauren Acampora
Gabeba Baderoon
Mary Jo Bang
Chico Buarque
Rebecca Chace
Ama Codjoe
Cynthia Cruz
Abigail Dembo
Jorge Galán
francine j. harris
Jane Huffman
Donika Kelly
Jameelah Lang
Ana Menéndez
Nilou Panahpour
Patrick Phillips
Sandra Lim
Shaan Sachdev
Richard Siken
Christine Sneed
Bruce Snider
Craig Morgan Teicher
Mai Der Vang
Devon Walker-Figueroa
Kirk Wilson
and more

Forthcoming

Special Feature
on the Agnès Varda film
The Gleaners and I, edited
by J. M. Tyree

NEReview.com @NERweb @newenglandreview

Black Wolf Books presents

The Walls of Amadeus

by Milo



In the depths of WWII, a boy and his mother race to escape the Nazis, but his mother suffers for what she endured to buy their freedom.

Abandoned, Amadeus comes of age to fight for his father's heritage, only to reel in horror at the massacre of Palestinians.

As the second novella in the *Noir Tetralogy*, it presents a tale of exile and survival. With the protagonist's fate split by Israel's wall, he challenges a divisive authority, leading to an anti-MAGA conclusion as satisfying as it is rebellious.

As with Milo's other fiction, this novella is gritty, hopeful, and heart-rending

His other work has been compared to Malamud, his poetry to Sappho.

Available from

BlackWolfBooks.org



CENTER FOR
LITERARY PUBLISHING
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Photograph by Zoë Keeler