

fugue⁵⁵



f u g u e

Issue 55

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Cover image: Pointillist portrait illustration of Anne Sexton by Zachary Schomburg; hand-drawn with ink pen on a 16x20 acid-free archival paper board. For more, visit www.zacharyschomburg.net

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“THE FIRST YEAR OF ANNE SEXTON, POET”:

FOUR REDISCOVERED POEMS
AND AN ESSAY

In the fall of 1956, Anne Sexton returned home from her most recent stay at a psychiatric hospital. It was a difficult period for her. On paper, the basic facts of Sexton’s life at this time ring of traditional success: she had married a college graduate who’d served in the Korean War (they eloped) and was the mother of two girls, aged two and four. She was a one-time fashion model and a graduate of the Rogers Hall boarding school. But details like these—which the poet would eventually call her “masks”—reveal little or nothing of the individual she was. Behind them, Anne reeled at the verge of total breakdown. As she would later put it in her poem “The Hex,” “someone is in the shooting gallery / bidding her time.” Mourning among other things the death of her great aunt Nana, the woman who’d cared for her during her childhood, Sexton experienced regular episodes of depression and mania. She attempted suicide several times. She was shuttled in and out of institutions periodically. So when her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, encouraged Sexton to write poetry to complement to her psychiatric treatment, she promptly enrolled in poet John Holmes’ poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

On Christmas Day 1957, Anne Sexton presented her mother a homemade chapbook, with an accompanying letter. “Here are some forty-odd pages of the first year of Anne Sexton, Poet,” she wrote:

You may remember my first sonnet written just after
Christmas one year ago. I do not think all of these are

good. However, I am not ashamed of them. They are not in chronological order, but I have arranged them in a sort of way, in a sort of story. But not too much or too well. I have tried to give a breather between the more difficult ones that use a more modern idiom. A few are obscure. I do not apologize for them. I like them. Mood can be as important as sense. Music doesn't make sense and I am not so sure the words have to, always.

Each verse in this diminutive book constitutes a chapter in her poetic "sort of story," and nearly all of them made their way into Sexton's first volume of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). But a few did not.

Though they are some of Sexton's earliest publications, the essay and four poems reproduced here didn't make it to *Bedlam*, never mind *Part Way Back*. The widest audience they reached was that of the *Christian Science Monitor*, between July 1958 and July 1959. They are a young person's writings, about skiing, hiking, Christmas celebrations—formative poems from a forming poet. Even her byline is pliant and developmental: she signs one of them "Anne Harvey Sexton." Regardless, even this early in her career Sexton was already so aesthetically radical as to be almost oracular. This gave her readers a bit of trouble, not to mention her friends and fellow poets.

In part, this is because it did not take long for Sexton to lose interest in keeping "private" matters out of her poetry. Holmes, her teacher and mentor, had warned her away from intimate poetic confessions of the sort she was beginning to explore—poems about abortion, infidelity, the death wish. But his advice, while sternly given, didn't take. He may have been Sexton's "academic father," writes fellow poet Maxine Kumin, but he was not her god. Just the same, Sexton asks his forgiveness in the poem "To John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," which begins: "Not that it was beautiful, / but that, in the end, there was / a certain sense of order there; / something worth

learning." To her, the value of what we do and think in private is not that it is lovely, or "fit" for publication, like woods on a snowy evening or the plums that were in the icebox, but that "the worst of anyone / can be, finally, / an accident of hope."

That Sexton became famous, and quickly, is no accident; she'd tapped her own head, as she says, and her body too. What emerged, from the very earliest, was domestic life all-too-realistically eviscerated, guts still quivering. Viscera get visceral reactions: writing to Harper's editors about Sexton's poem "The Farmer's Wife"—with its frank discussion of "country lust" and a "raucous bed"—one reader complained that "no contemporary poet of standing could any longer consider being published in your pages. You have not only betrayed the cause of poetry (bad enough) but you have debased the valid currency of verse... The examples printed in the May issue [Sexton, Holmes, etc.] reach a new low ebb." Eight years later, Sexton would win the Pulitzer Prize.

By anyone's standards, the rate at which her "currency of verse" would appreciate is astonishing. Sexton went from being defined mainly in her relations to others—an early Harper's bio lists her as a student of Holmes' and Robert Lowell's (true) and a mother of three (false)—to existing in a state of almost unheard-of self-definition. It was during this early time (1957-1958) that she wrote the four poems and one essay presented here, which do not redefine Sexton's output so much as they exemplify the subtlety with which she helped redefine poetry and prose.

Ironically for a Pulitzer Prize winner, that redefinition would come at the cost of acclaim. By 1967, friend and fellow poet Louis Simpson was so appalled by Sexton's *Live or Die* that he publicly panned it. In his review, he wrote that for "many poets nowadays... free verse is their medium," which Simpson concedes is natural enough, though:

at the worst, this makes for flat, confessional writing. Anne Sexton's *Live or Die*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, shows the limit of the method when it isn't strengthened by ideas. Her previous books were interesting, but now mere self-dramatization has grown a habit. A poem titled "Menstruation at Forty" was the straw that broke this camel's back.

That is all Simpson had to say about the book. Does it help to know that he was one of the jurors who awarded Sexton the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry? (He doesn't confess it, but of course he flinches from "confessional writing.") Or that she'd been his sixth choice for the award, after poets Theodore Roethke (then deceased), Sylvia Plath (deceased), William Stafford, John Haines, and Ann Stanford? "Sexton," he grouches in his nomination notes, "does not improve with time." Indeed, time may have been the problem. Sexton innovated faster than most; everyone, even her closest friends, needed time to catch up—and, for all his grumbling, Simpson was her friend. Not too many years earlier, in one of her first major reviews, he'd rhapsodized over Sexton:

For once the blurbs don't lie. The book [*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*] is an experience—original, moving, and delightful. Above all, delightful—for though Mrs. Sexton's poems sometimes deal with Bedlam, that is, scenes in a mental hospital, and often with anguish, yet the mind at work is so keen and the technique so excellent that her book is an uninterrupted joy. It is a book, as so few collections of verse are, everywhere infused with the character of the author. [...] This then is a phenomenon, like Rimbaud, to remind us, when we have forgotten in the weariness of literature, that poetry can happen.

From this, to breaking the camel's back? The disconnect here is a common one, severing Sexton's early reviews from her later ones—this veering from she has said what no one else dares to say,

to shesaystoomuch. It is one of the great questions of the 1960s: Are there things a poet should not say?

Sexton never seems to have thought so—the poems reproduced here are proof of that. Today, the idea that a poet might avoid sensitive topics sounds almost quaint, but at the time, tradition dictated a great deal. Even words themselves were not exempt from censure. In her epigraph to “These Three Kings” (reproduced on p. 17), Sexton quotes none other than Louis Simpson, who says: “Like ceremony and dance, praise should be forbidden to poets of this generation.” These nouns, in other words, are apparently too hackneyed and threadbare to be of much use in verse. Sexton embraces them anyway, just as they are, her “three kings” for which “no new sounds” can be made. For her, words are no more dispensable than emotion, the value of both being in their sincerity. “She saw sincerity as a technique,” poet George MacBeth reminds us, so she used “the style that happened to fit what she wanted to say.” What Sexton says, she means.

Not that she was beyond ambiguity. As Sexton explains to her mother, “mood can be as important as sense. Music doesn’t make sense and I am not so sure the words have to, always.” The music of the poems reproduced here is in their studiously careless meter, their sophisticated rhyme, which is modal, exploratory, jazz-like. (See her rhyming in “In Your Freshman Year,” for example: road/wood, camp/step, spring/long, sculptures/yours.) Sexton undoubtedly wanted it that way. She was terribly severe in her drafting, revising endlessly for sense and purpose, avoiding all ornamental adjectives unless, as Walt Whitman says, “they have come molten hot, and imperiously prove themselves.” Maxine Kumin, who worked alongside Sexton for years, later recalled how meter, rhyme, tone, and purpose mattered so much to Sexton that she would often revise a single poem thirty times or more, sometimes after rummaging discarded versions out of the trash. “She worked to achieve through rhyme,” Kumin

says, “and the shaping of the poem’s . . . parts, a direct rendition of the actual experience.” Whatever experiences they draw on, the results, from a freshman poet of all people, are shockingly mature.

For this reason, it is puzzling that the essay and four poems reproduced below never saw collection. They do not appear in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, or in anything afterward. Our only guess is that they somehow did not fit the arrangement, the “sort of story,” of Sexton’s first book. Broadly, they flesh out the arc of Sexton’s early career, breaking ground that her later poems would seed, nurture, harvest, and burn, and finally sow with salt. These pieces are footprints, left by Sexton along the “irrational margins / between the artist / and the object of art, / between the love / and the lover.” With the generous permission of daughter and literary executor Linda Gray Sexton, *Fugue* reproduces them here for the first time.

LINDA GRAY SEXTON
ERIN C. SINGER
ZACHARY TURPIN
2018

FOUR REDISCOVERED POEMS
AND AN ESSAY

Anne Sexton

ARGUMENT IN THE GALLERY

And this is the cube.
The cube?
Instead of cube, say club.
What is the difference
between the black as a shape
that the artist found and defined
and the real object:
a color I've seen!
Or is it only
an unusual bulk that anyone sees
in the distant shape
of a chair or a block?

And this is the oval.
The oval?
Instead of oval, say eye.
What is the dimension
inside of the object?
Is it a liquid circle,
a color of air,
as changeable as rhythm?
Or is it, I suspect,
an alphabet O, an eye
in the keyhole of the camera
for looking once?

And this is the line.
The line?
Instead of line, say edge.
What else is this, this mark,

but a troubling break between
the black color and the light:
a left over arrow,
put there, after all,
to keep them apart.

Considering conceptions
like this:
shape is as careless as its color
and space is filled
with irrational margins
between the artist
and the object of art,
between the love
and the lover.

July 1959

WINTER COLONY

Stylishly, in the white season,
we come here wearing awkward logs
on our feet, to skate on icebergs,
to ride pulleys into the sky
and ride the sky down.

We ride the sky down,
our voices falling back behind us,
unraveling like smooth threads.
Say, I am the air I break; or say,
I am a spool unwinding.

I am the spool that unwound
while riding the sky down, that waits
now to ride the pulley back into the sky,
that comes here, stylishly,
each weekend, for the same trick
in the white season.

February 1959

THESE THREE KINGS

Like ceremony and dance, praise should be for bidden to
poets of this generation.

—Louis Simpson

in *The Hudson Review*, Autumn 1957

Mutual in the charm of the gesture
We grew a circle of hands;
Each turn of the holidays
It was always the same,
Ceremony and dance
And praise.

The giant ballroom was aired and opened annually.
Great-grandfather pumped over his marble floor,
Past the Italian statues, past the clapping family,
Waving her, weaving her as he did the year before.
As always, he waltzed a turn with each of his five
Gray daughters while two gay uncles played a duet
On the grand pianos. All of the room swung alive
With candles and children and cousins that met
Each Christmastide. But when the chimes rang six
We melted into a circle around the great tree.
Knobbed fingers and new fingers touched to mix
Their generations in. The manners of unity
Became a sudden bracelet when we began to sing
The family carol. The seven foot tower of balsam
Was a city of light, its mirrors reflecting
Our motion as we circled it and the song was sung . . .
That ark of a room, two pianos, the Italian statues
Are gone somewhere now. Today our Yuletide suite

Is broadloom and short. Everything here is new,
Where the candle and children and cousin still meet;
But hand in hand we will move like a marvelous chain
When the room moves alive with wonder and the clock
Rings six again.

This is the magic of the festival.
Here, in the charm of their gesture
These three words are kings.
It is much the same
With no new sound for the ceremony
Or the dance or the praise
That we name.

December 1958

IN YOUR FRESHMAN YEAR

This is the last of the tote road,
Boy, it is four miles into camp.
The forest grows a city of wood.
Know the camouflage you step
Because walking in these woods
Is to tramp your legs in.
Inform your senses, know roots,
A rock dislodging, those thin
Branches, deep bellies where spring
Floods made early sculptures.
This bear print, a whole foot long,
Is for matching one of yours.
Hump it to the breath because
The forest grows long uphill;
Boots use the earth like paws
to boost the body. Train the muscle
That makes it; test where the city leads.
Go boy, but stay aware,
Because walking through these woods
Is to learn more than getting there.

July 1958

FEELING THE GRASS

I f I understood men, I would understand their need for a perfect lawn. We live in a square house on an average tract in the suburbs, where the lawn is a very important thing.

I have tried to pretend, over these six years, that I care. I have gathered with neighbors in sidewalk groups, arguing the price and merit of seed, fertilizers, weed-killers, and underground sprinkler systems. On those yellow buzzing days of August I have moved four different brands of sprinkler from side to side, frowning beside my husband at alternated droughts and washouts. But up and down the street, I think they all guessed that I was secretly “Non-L,” with a childish preference for a field of dandelions.

This March I felt frankly bored when my husband fretted over our gray ground. When he informed me that we would have to put in a new lawn, I just shrugged—my farming instinct nil. I was still shrugging when the young man came to rototill the lawn.

.

I stood at the living room window watching him drag the machine off his pickup truck. He pulled off his shirt, his skin gleaming like summer in the March wind. He worked for a three-hour stretch, pushing and prying his machine over our ground, hooking into rocks and the underside of tangled grass. The yard became a plowed field, its thick furrows of black dirt marking it like a waiting field.

When he left, I walked outdoors to touch the dirt. It was the miracle that the grass had never been. I wanted, suddenly, to plant rows of corn and beans.

There were two days of stones first. All the children on our street ran about us with tiny rakes and baskets. It was a beach

or a mine-field, full of discovery and battle. After that there was loam from the fat back of a big truck; loam for climbing and smoothing and raking. There was loam in the kitchen and loam inside the ears of dusted children. The circus was over on the day we rolled and seeded. The yard grew solemn again, flat and neat. We tied strings around the edge to make a fence. I spent one hour cutting up old shirts and fastened them on the strings to frighten the birds.

It was a neat job. However, it wasn't until my husband left the next morning for a business trip that I felt my singular responsibility. On the blackboard in the kitchen he had printed: KEEP THE LAWN WET. That meant, he said, "twice a day." Now I know that twice a day means one hundred and twenty minutes of holding the hose gently over a lawn that isn't a lawn.

I watered gently. And I waited. The little torn rags flapped on their strings like flags in a gas station. Why didn't something happen? For one week and four days the lawn was wet, but brown. Dogs and children stayed beware, but the front yard stayed flat and bald. It looked all right, but it didn't grow.

•

On the day of one-week-and-five-days, a neighbor called across to me, "It's green!" and I rushed out beside it. "No. Not there," he called, "over here." I hurried out into the street and copied his motion of crouching over with my head level with the sidewalk. Looking that way, through it, instead of on it, I could just see the beginning of the green. A gentle green, as cool as an impressionistic painting, hovered over our yard. If you narrowed your eyes, it was even better.

The next night, when I met my husband's plane, he asked about the lawn. Driving home I told him about my long wait and my first vision from the sidewalk. As we swung into the driveway, the headlights curving across the front yard in an arc,

he said. "I can't see it. It looks just the same." We got out of the car and he followed me over to the ground. We crouched over in the darkness and stretched out our hands. The little first lawn brushed our palms.

"See," I said.

"Yes," he replied, "yes."

And now, every night before we lock the front door, we go out into the darkness and kneel down, our heads touching and our hands stretched out to feel the grass.

ANNE HARVEY SEXTON

June 4, 1959

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16TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE
FOR POETRY

JUDGED BY VIJAY SESHADRI

WINNER: "Again On the Brink of Nuclear War, Apparently"
BY SETH SIMONS

"I admired—and was, actually, deeply impressed—by all the finalists in the Fugue poetry contest, but 'Again On The Brink of Nuclear War, Apparently' spoke the most deeply to me. It is a beautifully written, beautifully paced poem. That, though, can be said about all the poems I was given to read. What drew me powerfully to this poem was the ways in which its complex and rueful ironies don't deflect for us, don't protect us from, the desperate moral circumstances the poem contemplates but, instead, condition—through their rhetorical suavity, their subtlety and indirection—the mind of the reader to look straight and unflinchingly at those circumstances. A wonderfully precise and profound piece of writing."

—Vijay Seshadri

AGAIN ON THE BRINK OF NUCLEAR WAR, APPARENTLY

It's eighty-five degrees and chilly, smoke
or one of smoke's contemporaries roped

around the foothills, flies, the sound of crows,
then crows themselves, the lot behind the pho

place glazed with, let's say, oil and soap. . . I'm sure
we'll live to see it all dismantled, or

otherwise collapse—under its own weight,
I mean, if you can call this weight—but what

do I know about annihilation. . .
I read this quote by Thomas Jefferson,

something about the future, and one more
about pride, another about war,

peace, art, law, all of it wrong,
but not in that I disagree, or wrong

like I know better, just—it didn't work.
Goodness wasn't good enough, it never

is, not his kind of goodness, anyhow. . .
Around midday the rain begins. The crows,

now silent, unfurl into the woodlands.
Save me. Don't save me. I'm on the pavement.

16TH ANNUAL FUGUE PRIZE
FOR PROSE

JUDGED BY CARMEN MARIA MACHADO

WINNER: "American Girl"

BY ZINNIA SMITH

"This gorgeous, experimentally structured essay about love and writing and the body and illness and connection straight-up wrecked my heart. The intelligence of inquiry, the deft movement between sections, and the quality of the prose are top-notch. I can't wait to see where this writer's career goes."

—Carmen Maria Machado

AMERICAN GIRL

1.

I wonder, have I reached a point where I've lost the ability to love?

2.

This essay is stylized like *The White Album* (1979), or "The White Album" (1968-1978), by Joan Didion, who was inspired by The Beatles' *The White Album* (1968). Within "The White Album" is a note, written by Didion's doctor: It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed a failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure. . . . Didion, herself, proceeds to prove this feeling, conclusively.

I cannot properly express how pertinent the details of this medical report are to me.

3.

All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to be free. The Beatles, "Blackbird," *The White Album*

4.

I should clarify. I do not have a problem falling “in love.” I fall inlovewithanyoneandeverythingandeverywhereallthetime.

My problem is a problem of a deep love.

5.

On the ferry from Boothbay to Mohegan harbor there is a boy holding flowers. The ferry passes the Wyeth island. I have always loved Christina and the sadness of her world.

6.

“Pea-soup”;ribbons;blueberrypieforbreakfast;diners;thename“Dot”;milkchocolatecaramels;coastalMaine;mygrandmother,Dot;texture;drygrass;petalpinkmakeup;laceunderwear;layers;hotcoffee;collage;glitter;velvet;delicatejewelry;laughter;tea;symbols;longmeals;mixed-mediaart;secondhandbookstores;openwindows;freckles;snowfalling;snowfallingatnighttime;watercolor;longsummercarrides;French;books,realbooks;bluebeads;whiteChristmaslights;coldcucumbers; honesty.

7.

This is not to clarify if I do, or do not, still love these things. I cannot recall any point in my life that I actually enjoyed a bowl of pea-soup, or why such a thing might be in quotations.

If it is not obvious, this is a list written by a nineteen-year-old. If it is not obvious, this is a list written by a person very different from who I am today. What might be unsettling is how a nineteen-year-old felt the need to write this list on paper, as

if for reserve. As if to create an emotional vessel for whatever might come....

8.

Write about falling in love with Frida. Write about Frida and Diego Rivera. Write about falling in love with Frida (2002). Write about Selma Hayek and Harvey Weinstein. Write about love and commitment. Write about love and commitment and men like Weinstein. Write about men like Weinstein who you are in love with and in commitment with but who do things like the things Weinstein did to Hayek. Write about the Weinstein with the roofies. Write about the Weinstein who was your boyfriend. Write about the Weinstein who didn't use a condom. Write about sanity. Write about painting. Write about disability. Write about disability and love. Write about broken bodies and love. Write about broken bodies. Write about art without limbs. Write about Frida without love. Write about art without love. Which is— ?

9.

I wonder if this problem has anything to do with Lana Del Rey. When I listen to her music it sounds like she might have the same problem: the simultaneous abundance of romance and loneliness. I went to her concert in January, on a cold day, right after my grandmother's diamond necklace fell down the bathroom sink. The same night I accidentally dyed my favorite white blouse pink, after also throwing a bandana into the washing machine. By the time I made it to the concert, I was tired and sick. By the time I made it to our seats, I realized I had miscalculated the amount of insulin I should have taken, or had underestimated how much sugar was in the sauces at dinner. These symptoms were alleviated some by the time Del Rey took the stage,

and even more so once she started singing, because they became easier to ignore. Although, I have always been capable of ignoring them. Hers is a sad music. A music that exists despite. I was surprised how many hits she sang from her album *Born to Die* (2012), and not much from her new album, *Lust for Life* (2017), which sprung the single, "Love." During the concert, I wonder what Del Rey's feelings are about this looping tracklist and does she get sick of it? Some sort of detachment I hear tells me she does not. It has become easier for her to ignore it. When I listen to her music collectively, I think there is a more mature sound, more grating guitars and longer notes in *Lust for Life*. As it turns out, when I return to the apartment, my mother has called a plumber and the diamond has been retrieved from the pipes, and the next time I put my white shirt in the wash, the red runs out. I'm not sure you will understand me if I write, I did not want the diamond back.

10.

here is the truth: something about my words in the same way I feel something about him—this something might not belong, but I don't think that really matters. there is a morning we sit in the diner on the corner of 116th and 3rd Ave. I order coffee and milk and eggs. Tom Petty is singing on the radio, and the waitress tells us to get back to "our comfortable conversation." I know when we step outside in the rain, he will kiss me under the umbrella he gave me for the walk here, but I will return it to him before I catch the train out of Penn. at the road there was a great big world with lots of places to run to. I'm sure you understand what I mean when I say this, despite the fact I'm not sure I understand what I mean when I say this. the one thing I do know is that I neither wanted a road between the world and him, nor any other place outside that diner, and that I wish the rain could have kept us there for longer, but may be not forever. what

do they say about all good things?

this same week, Tom Petty dies from cardiac arrest.

11.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment where diagnosis and my decision to love art be art chase art make art hit heads. I do know that at some point I resolved that if I was going to live the rest of my life disabled, I would live the rest of that life full of art and love.

I could not anticipate back then what disability meant when it comes to the physical love between a pairing where one is "abled" and one is not.

I could not anticipate how a chronic disease might make my tolerance for heartache greater than others, but really, I'm not sure this is true.

"It's too easy," I say.

"It's supposed to be easy. If it's not easy, those are the assholes," my friend, Tyler, says to me.

12.

Samson went back to bed.

Regina Spektor, "Samson," *Begin to Hope* (2006).

It couldn't be about bringing the columns down.

Unless it is?

13.

Fact: On an old Tinder account, I have nearly 290 matches. I did not double check this number for accuracy. Fact: I have over 100 matches on my Hinge account.

It seems that I am always capable of talking to a man whenever I feel lonely, and I'm starting to think this is not a good thing.

14.

Christina's World (1948) hangs in the MoMA. Around the corner, in the hallway that leads to the bathrooms, on the wall right next to the escalator.

15.

Now think of this. I am in the backseat of a car between two girls. Narrative. So the girls are named... Cardi and Lucy. In the front seat is Andrew and Tim. Cardi opens the back window and throws up. I rub her hair. Lucy is getting worked up about what happened during a break with her boyfriend, and Tim tells me I'm on the "hot scale," not the "cute scale," and the guy I was talking to all night was definitely on the "cute scale." I turn to Lucy and say, "I just want to stop feeling like men are always using me for my looks."

16.

Somewhere in history, Frida lies in bed painting.

17.

I find a note written to myself, tied in a pink bow. It reads, I love myself, as I am, right now.

When I was thirteen, I hid under the kitchen table, and despite what my father said to me, I did not come out for quite some time. This was a week after I was diagnosed with T1 diabetes. Not a long time after the table incident, I thought seriously about trying to off myself with a carton of ice cream. I now find this funny.

Although, I do know that if I wanted to, I potentially could have a much easier time at punching out early. However, it is always a dirty business. It is always a dirty business to bring the columns down.

You might think this is uncomfortably macabre, and it is, but you have to understand. What I'm trying to say is that everyone has a certain understanding of existence and a certain knowledge of death that drives the way we live every day, and I believe that love is when two people come together and see a person's story across a table and still sees beauty despite the dancing skeletons in the air.

America is a loveless country. You might not understand me when I write, if I could bring every column of this society down, I would. To unlearn every lesson of ableism carved into me. To unlearn every lesson that a woman's worth is based upon her physical qualities, and this is an infinity rope knotted and tangled for any woman, but particularly any woman who has "something wrong with them" physically.

18.

Summer, 2015.

Due to previous circumstances and events meant to be addressed in a very different essay, I had aged quite a bit in my head. My perception on life changed and I lost the ability of reclining into carefree leisure. Rather, I was strictly determined and "ambitious." What became constant was the awareness of certain responsibilities and frustration with humanity's struggles and hypocrisies.

19.

What actually comes about is me deciding that I forgive him. Me deciding that I do not think he had the intention of hurting me. He either did not know how to tell me properly what he was feeling, or he did, and I did a poor job listening. This is something I often do: fail to listen. I understand that this might be the naïve understanding, and I've been told before that sometimes there are just assholes in this world, but I do not live in that world. My skeletons tell me that everyone has a story, and that life is hard, and despite our best intentions, we often never hit our mark. My life has entirely become my art. Or my art has absorbed my life. There are no personal thoughts. There are only words and readers and narratives floating over tables. I have become absolved from the physical.

Optima dies, prima fugit.

(2012-2017)



HERE IS SOMEWHERE

just as late sun bends the edge
of Arizona west light climbs through the window
& warms my face running in Tennessee wild
blackberry fields grass brushing my thighs
shirt full of summer blossom honey
another house spinning in mid air
seven homes in thirteen years
repacking unpacking myself
books posters pinned maps
a dresser mirror flowering over questions
my looks white but not Cherokee
my father's face passing erased
my mother's Irish skin who exactly is what
the doubt against the push
to fit not looking
beneath my feet
an exponential line
of ancestral mothers
holding ground
Here I am—
wherever here is
anyway

WHEN I DEFEND MY NAME IN COURT

I arrive smeared with filth
& crushed
asters. Palm pressed
to a leather bible I say
my goddess is a nest of grime my worship
a cheap strap-on pursed under the tongue.
The jury of gleaming women staple my birth
certificate to my forehead reciting
the deadname while by hand or
by vise witnesses
fail to pry my hips wider.
Without verdict the judge recounts
stories of women hexed
by the sun's spit of women never
believed. Locked out
on the courthouse steps my love
watches transfixed as a shriek
pins robin hearts to her left index. For want
of relief for want of a branch.

—Runner-up, 2018 Ron McFarland Prize for Poetry—

ERNESTO L. ABEYTIA

THE PORT CITY OF CÁDIZ, ANDALUCÍA

Breaking inside me is a line I once read
about a hill, mole-colored and bare.
Its long windings ebb and swell, guide me,
heavy like a ship, along the edge of thought
until I rest, moored at a stop.
The line is a moment I lose with my breath,
the hill, a fleeting vision in an Italian square.
Here, in Cádiz, there are few hills, fewer lost breaths
except when looking to the sea,
saltwater lapping at hulls,
callous-handed men hauling thick rope stretched across foam,
woven nets spilling over with cuttlefish and tuna.

This city, this southern coast, holds no promise of snow,
no hunters, no loneliness—
instead, fish markets, clams and mussels,
the smell of caballa asada next to overripe oranges.

SELAH

/Night/

The dark forgets there is a horizon that divides water from sky.

It is the void we sail into.

A hundred feet below waves break into little white manes that rush back to the flat darkness. Air, warm and sluggish with humidity, fills the black so it is not a prime color but an illusion. The sound of collapsing waves provides directional reference. Down is where the surf cuts out from under the keel in blankets of foam and is sucked into the sea and lost. Up is where the floodlights illuminate the sea's self implosion.

And there is gliding,
through the black and breaking water.

There are no distant ships, no rigs nor signs of a coast. The world is a vessel lit like fire and entirely alone. The string of bulbs which runs from the bridge to the nose of the bow is an arrow that points to a morning coming. Away from windows and away from railing you'd never know we were moving.

/Morning/

Think of rivulets. Water flutters machine-like and peaceful.

Constant and unchanging.

The island wraps around the bay, a jungle reaching out into the ocean. A jungle fallen in. The mangrove past our mooring lines shoots up among the pocketed rocks themselves nearly tumbled into the water. This is where water moves hypnotic like and peaceful. Where the breeze is not visible and the humidity is not present but filling every space it can. Where the language of nature is distant. It is evident we are only borrowing space.

/Night/

“Sailors are the last of the Victorians” the captain said to me, “the only modern men who’s lives remain at the mercy of the weather.” He ladled soup into his bowl and stepped with the ship as it thudded against another swell.

Waves into the hull or we into the waves
or drinks out of a glass or chowder on
the table.

The water should want to devour us.

And Crane is right.

Though the next wave cannot swamp us. It's announced with a ruffle of glass and firm grasping. We don't ride waves. They are no mountains. There is no overcoming.

We cut like a dull knife. Better. We barrel like drunkards. We hardly notice pitches, at least while working. But in bed we roll like cans and drawers crash and close and doors slam and open.

There is no sleep.

/Morning/

Sunlight looks peaceful, lapping against the water, but winds still sweep down from Texas and Louisiana and up from Yucatan and over from Cuba crashing into waves that, from the fourteenth deck, look insignificant but cause me to pitch violently.

Violence is selah.

That is, an undefined break. A direction. A violent hack in acceleration.

Hemingway is right.

The water should devour us. But we crush it under the heel of luxury. Water, no matter how crystalline and anxious, is an unconscious sentimentality. There is no danger. We cannot sink. We have a heading. We are not lost.

/Night/

There is settling. Waves reach and collapse. The wind has died. And in the distant, fiery, far side of the sea, where the world ends and falls through the black of night, colors simmer and sink, floundering out of reach. Then nothingness. A sky with no stars and a moon bound in clouds. It is calm and we know this to be foreboding. But there is a divide between horizon and water, a small weakly illuminated line that draws itself in front of us, beckoning we fall off the edge.

/Morning/

To wake up there is the sound of the anchor dropping. Low and turbid. Rumble and vibration. Then, I know this shouldn't be happening.

But the sea is calm.

I turn left from my cabin and walk out onto the observation walkway below the bridge.

Fog.

The Houston shipping channel is shut down. We are an island in nature's last impenetrable jungle;

Fog;

The ocean's last dirty trick; blindness in daylight; hatred pouring out in natural form; dread as shape-taker; a hazard; or chal-

lenge; the touch-and-go what-if; plans b, c, d, and e; a lack of wind; a lack of waves, that is, the lack of violence; a psalm without selah; sharp points of pain at the thought of; peace and the settling of water;

Anger is directed at us, the apparent keepers of water and tamers of wind, as if it is our fault for not having done enough. Not being enough of conquerors or masters of these seas, as if our inability to navigate this challenge is an affront and not the utmost fear we hold. All we can do is apologize.

But convenience and luxury
do not afford forgiveness.

/Night/

Light bounces on the water droplets and burns back toward us. We are walled in, submerged and floating, blind and without scales. No sky, just the grey swirling cover. There is a distant deep horn, lonely, and no one answers back. We do not answer back.

An inventory of what I can't see:

1. Cat-eye lights or skeletal outlines
2. More than an inch
3. The slow list of the ship
4. The waver of water
5. The shore
6. Or Galveston

We know where we are. But aimless is as wandering does—except we've dropped anchor and the thrusters keep us from spinning madly around the tether.

I watch and peer and let my eyes wander like snakes towards prey, but we are all blind and searching for one another with groping hands and I've come to recognize this as the great equalizer. I must keep watching the sea, what I can't see, because there is nothing more captivating than being lost in thoughts of being found. We know there is no shore.

/Morning/

Isolation lifting. At 8, now 9, now 11, the graveyard of ships comes into focus. One two three four just from the starboard side and damn they are close.

So rattle and shake and all begin to move. We depart in order of our arrival to blindness. The incapacity we experience, even if we know the way, is the last great jest. At least if we cannot sink we can be shut down. We cannot die, there are no mysteries left in the sea, we anticipate and conquer, but unpredictability flounders us. Says the captain, "It's a bit too dangerous" and we stare wildly into nothing.

ARIEL IN FLORIDA

for Michele Oka Doner

1.

Before thought was born the dawn arrived—
the sun rose and that was the first idea,

shadows of coconut palms against sand, images
running away from the bodies that spawned them.

Mangrove root, cypress knee, scapula, polyp, frond.
A language of bones, an archaeology of the umbilicus,

syntax, propagation, the unfurling
of the mist-loving tree fern, leaf by ancient leaf.

Before words, seeds. Before songs, spells.
Before representation the things themselves.

At night the stars wheeled past, inventing mathematics,
and spiders learned to weave webs in their honor.

The full moon called the Atlantic to her side,
its waters growing salty with her envious tears.

Before hymns to hydrogen and atomic geometries,
before pistil and stamen, before gnosis—the sun.

2.

Before the tempest, before Prospero's whirlwind,
they were alone together on their island,
Ariel and Caliban, rough creatures that they were.

Even after the storm he refused to leave
so she sailed west on a raft of Sargasso weed,
adorned in its bestiary of jewels and flagella,
washing ashore on a beach of chalk-white marl.

This was Florida, the real world, fully formed.
No more enchantments, no more primitive rapture.

And so she became the spirit of the place,
strange as it was, mangrove pods for fingers,
anole eggs for eyes and conch shells for ears,
her footprints spinning small hurricanes of coral,

given entirely to the life that lay before her,
hour by hour, blessing by blessing, task by task—

to sleep exhausted at the pleasure of the waves,
to dream clothed only in an amulet of moonlight,
to arise at dawn and join the chorus of birdsong,

to command eternity to echo within a lightning whelk,
to hoard her cornucopia of husk and bract and calyx,
to reign as golden as the tabebuia tree,

to praise above all things the sun and love it
as it loves every flower that blossoms there,
tirelessly, deliriously, without thought of tomorrow.

I KEPT DREAMING

Mother marked
the door

with rooster blood

after it snowed
sooty pepper.

Ash piled

inside the toilet bowl,
in the open

cabbage, stinging

and deep as lice
folded

inside our hair.

The clock stopped.
All our minutes

hanged
and even liquor
wouldn't fix it.

Our chests shook
but we couldn't cry

over the sun

or our lost Orion.
I kept dreaming

of drinking gasoline

and lying down
in the charred grass

pulling a paper
chain of rabbits

out from between my legs.
I bled in the bed

and tried to work
the dirt, but it was useless.

My best skirt snagged

in the fence, and I let it tear.
Everything forgot

to make its sound
—do you

realize what I'm saying?

Even the last calf
stilled as a folded napkin

and silent for days.

THE DRESS DREAMS OF HANDS

All I ever wanted was to be stilled
as a mare is stilled

by the weight of a body across
her spine, shiver of fingers

in a waterfall shines her flank
smooth as the familiar waist

hanging in the closet. To be split
open to innermost

self and not find another body
beating silent and perfect

and alien as laughter as the seams
left groan and my skirt swells

in a wind still sweetened
with distant grasses, crushed

and fragrant. I cover and wear,
cut and enhance. I cower inside

the heavy amber air of a basement
bar, under the words of a man

near stranger, each tender as
a hoof feeling out the field

at night, describing a love
long gone with more kindness

than I have ever accepted or allowed,
near breaking into flames

from flinty shame, taut between fear
and want, the cringing electric

haunches and starving heart
of a stray.

SOMETIMES A TATTOO

Your first tattoo is a tramp stamp. You hate the phrase tramp stamp. You like lower back tattoos and so you tell everyone to fuck off and you let a bald man drag a needle over your spine for three hours. Your high school boyfriend is there—the one who will cheat on you and eventually marry a French girl. He's holding your hand, and ten years later, he'll remind you of how hard you dug your nails into his palm.

"I got the worst of it," he'll say. "You almost broke my hand," he'll say. "Do you remember?"

The tattoo is of two sharks in an oval, head to tail. You're a Pisces but that's not why you choose it. Tiger Sharks: a thick black Celtic design you found on the internet before it was easy to find things on the internet. On your mother's side, you're some part Irish so you think it's justified—the Celticness. You're eighteen and you show your mother and she won't talk to you for a week. A big Fuck You on your back is what she calls it, a big Fuck You, Mom forever on your back. Your father doesn't believe it's permanent.

Later, when you're on your third college—a small liberal arts school in high desert Arizona—the thing your mother says becomes a great joke. But why there, your friends want to know, why there on your lower back like a sorority girl?

"So everyone knows I'm a whore," you say.

And it's true, in the colloquial sense. You're reckless with your body and no matter how many empowered righteous women you meet / read / listen to, no matter how many times you swear off gin / vodka / red wine / white wine, no matter how many promises you make about that housemate / friend / rock

climber/poet, you just can't seem to keep your clothes on. You don't enjoy it, but you own it, embrace it.

Whore.

And years later, in Indiana, your first serious grownup partner (by then you'll be sure to use the word partner) will ask if you really don't regret that tattoo—the one on your back, the sharks, the tramp stamp.

"Not at all," he'll ask, tracing over your skin in a motion of erasure.

And you'll move his hand away.

Your second tattoo is a gnome. An outline, bearded with a hat and an axe. A stick-and-poke, anarchist, or as your mother calls it, a prison tattoo. This one is mostly her fault: the gnome legacy. A bet, because she thinks you're incapable of scarring yourself with something so trivial, so the opposite of profound.

She says, "The day you and your cousin tattoo gnomes, I will."

Your friend tattoos you thenight you graduate from college. It's taken you almost six years, and now you want the gnome. Your cousin is there with you, pouring shots of bourbon, picking out the place on his body for his gnome.

Yours is on your ankle, he picks his calf.

But your friend takes too long with the needle. Each line is tens of needle points and you're all drunk. But your cousin is there! He's sitting with you and your friends, like you always imagined he would if things had been different. If you had stayed in California. If he had picked Berkeley instead of LA, one friend or woman instead of the others.

The next day your body is unmanageable. Heavy and sleep-deprived. Your whole family is there and driving to the Grand Canyon. They look at your new tattoo and sigh, smile, shake their heads. It's winter, and you're wearing jeans and long underwear. Your whole leg aches, but you have a college degree

and this is what it means to be finished with something.

Except the tattoo isn't finished, and after the holidays when you're back in that town where you finally finished your degree—high desert Arizona—your friend who becomes your roommate who becomes a one-night stand who moves out one day while you're at work, tattoos the rest of it. A daffodil. Stretched from ankle to knee. It takes two evenings and two fifths of whiskey.

"My hands are steadier drunk," he says.

This should have been obvious to your body.

A friend, a man: his hands forever on your shin.

Your third tattoo is on your wrist. "An Ocotillo," you tell the artist. You pronounce it correctly but thick and clumsy because you're missing sleep and meals.

You've just left Indiana.

California. Arizona. Indiana. California.

Your partner is still there—you left Indiana and him.

And now you're standing at the tattoo place in the town where you spent your whole childhood hating its smallness and grayness which, after Indiana, seems not gray, not small. And you seem to have two options: tattoo or floor. The floor is checkered and smooth and when you're in the chair, the tattoo artist gives you sweet tarts to keep you from blacking out.

You're twenty-five and it's your first grownup breakup. You also cut off your hair. A long thick blonde braid your mom donates to an organization that turns haircuts into charity.

It's cliché but it also may be about survival. Survival in the way that Ocotillo preserves itself no matter what shape is made of it: fence / wall / shrub / tree. But it's probably more about pain and trying to appear above it. You being the tough girl with the wrist tattoo.

The location being essential: the wrist. A vulnerable place on the body, a place a partner may feel too entitled to touch, to bruise.

Your wrist is sore for weeks after the tattoo. It's still sore when you and your partner decide you still love each other but maybe only in California, maybe only when it's less gray, less small, more ocean, where he's not in medical school, where you don't sell shoes.

Still, you insist on moving back there. California. Indiana.

Your fourth tattoo is on your neck, which means it's on your face. "Doesn't make sense," you tell the man who is attractive and young and tired of women asking for silly shit put into their skin forever. He shrugs and asks you to sign the waiver. It's a roadrunner and it doesn't hurt much. You're in New Orleans but your whole life is still back in Indiana, waiting to sink you.

Your mother and your father and your brother advise you:

"Don't do anything impulsive."

"Don't run away."

"Don't run away again."

You move to New Mexico.

In New Mexico, you let your hair be long again. Everyone congratulates you on how fast it grows, how natural blonde and natural straight it is. Like it's something you've chosen for your body.

"It means you're healthy," you remember your partner saying. "Stable."

Long hair is about stability.

You remember how, in Arizona, after the gnome, before the partner, your hair would break and fall and knot in the drains.

He's never seen the roadrunner.

Indiana. New Mexico.

You remember how, before you left him the first time, when your hair was long and healthy, he combed it out for you in the shower, each strand slid from scalp to comb to hand. He'd hold it there in his palm, displace the weight of water from your body to his.

His hand, your hair.

“Sometimes hair just grows,” you want to tell him.

His hands, your wrists.

Indiana. New Mexico.

Sometimes a neck tattoo is a face tattoo.

In New Mexico, you find a woman tattoo artist. She tattoos you twice, but you have plans for more. You like her and her shop and the fact that she takes only cash and talks to you about yoga.

But mostly, you like that she’s a woman.

First, she tattoos a redwood tree on your upper back, from the base of your neck between your shoulder blades, its trunk extending down your spine.

“Because I’m moving back to California,” you say.

New Mexico. California.

Except, a few months later, you decide you’re not sure.

New Mexico...

The same woman, your tattoo artist, you call her now, tattoos the mountain range of this town where you’ve been living for the last three years—Las Cruces, the Organ Mountains. It’s across your ribcage and, when you show a friend who has her own tattoos, she frowns a little.

“A stomach tattoo,” she says. “That’s a clear statement.”

You know what she means. You’re thirty and many of your friends are thinking marriage, babies. Not stomach tattoos.

You’re rethirty and you’ve still only had one grownup relationship.

You’re thirty and you’re not even sure if you want to count that one, your partner, left in Indiana, twice. Except lately you’ve heard he’s moved to Colorado. You don’t know for sure because he won’t talk to you, because sometimes there are no clear statements.

Your wrists, his hands.

Sometimes the body makes the statement.

Sometimes you want to be clear about it. You want to say, for example, "Yeah, I don't want babies" or "When I'm a mother, I won't care about my own body like that" or maybe, "Fuck off."

Sometimes you just shrug instead, you stop trying to talk to him.

Indiana. Colorado.

Indiana. California. Indiana. New Mexico.

Sometimes a tattoo is just a tattoo.

HOW TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS

1.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, FIRST KNOW WHERE TO FIND THEM. WHETHER BY SEA, LAND, OR SKY, YOU CANNOT RELY ON BIRDS AND BEASTS TO COME TO YOU; YOU MUST GO TO THEM.

I float the Salish Sea in search of humpbacks, gray whales, and orcas, but rarely find them. Despite the odds, I start each paddleboard adventure thinking, today is the day. To alleviate the disappointment when I am met instead with a flock of laughing gulls or teenagers that catcall from the shoreline, I exit the park through Five Mile Drive—a winding road in the north end of Tacoma surrounded by nearly 800 acres of mossy trails, damp ferns, and plenty of wildlife. As the sun begins its descent behind the mountains raccoons, crows, and deer speckle the shoulder where the only thing missing are echoes of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” with a grand splash at the end.¹ Although raccoons peer out from behind sandwich boards clearly stating **DO NOT FEED THE WILDLIFE**, they are in no short supply of trail-mix, stale fries, or whatever else can be found in crumpled fast food bags and back seats. This reliable food source results in near-fearlessness on the part of the little wash-bears. The mo-

¹ The tune comes from Disney’s *Song of the South*, a movie that for years has been kept out of the public’s eye. The related ride (Splash Mountain) still exists, but has had all the most racist moments of the movie scrubbed out of it. Tacoma prides itself on its diversity, but I still see the occasional Proud Boys or True Cascadia stickers on light posts, disguised as messages from more mundane movements. It wouldn’t be a complete surprise if our woodland creatures started singing racist tunes disguised as joyous adventure.

ment a car stops nearby, they scramble up alongside any open window and hold open their palms.²

Raccoons in any other part of the city don't panhandle. They know humans aren't to be trusted. Outside the realm of the park, the animals scurry into bushes and scramble behind bins, cautious of commuters heading to and from work. They shuffle through shadows where oftentimes the only evidence that they've been by is the absence of a few calico koi from a backyard pond.

2.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, AVERT YOUR EYES. BINOCULAR VISION IS A SURE SIGN OF A PREDATOR IN SEARCH OF PREY. TRY AN INDIRECT APPROACH WHEREVER POSSIBLE.

The term of vengery for a group of raccoons is a gaze. Once the animals of Five Mile Drive approach a vehicle, they sit in silence, perfectly content to stare straight into the eyes of the nearest human. The first time one of these raccoons approached me, I was not filled with the usual delight I feel when graced with the presence of a wild animal. The beeline saunter of a large male raccoon as it locked eyes with my own made my skin feel suddenly smaller. Rabies is not a concern in the area and I knew the animals were acclimated to human contact, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this behavior of a smaller animal deliberately approaching a much larger predator was a threat to be avoided. He didn't fit into my prescribed ideas of what a

² In a move some would consider reminiscent of this century's most reviled generation: millennials. I hesitate to ask for assistance of any sort for fear of obligating myself for furthering the stereotype I'm burdened with. I live in an area where the future of affordable housing is precarious at best. The suggestion by some to simply move away (or even better, to get yet another job) misses the root of the issue.

raccoon should be, or how it should act. I assumed something was wrong with him.

Just as the raccoons of Five Mile Drive have learned that humans who drive through are not going to harm them, I feel comfortable flocking to the ocean to get close to an apex predator.³ We know from data collected throughout history that orcas simply do not harm humans, despite their impressive assortment of hunting strategies placing them firmly at the top of the ocean's food chain. All other animals, including members of other orca clans, tend to avoid them when they're nearby; not doing so, especially for smaller mammals and fish, is an invitation to be eaten.

One way to gain the trust of a prey animal such as a parakeet, is to only let them see one eye at a time during interactions and to "lead with the wrist" when trying to pick them up. In this way, you are less likely to be perceived as a predator grasping at them with talons. Maybe orcas don't eat us because we approach them as another predator might: direct curiosity, rather than terror. Our behavior toward them is counterintuitive, inspiring a novel response in turn.⁴

3.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, MAKE THE INTERACTION MEANINGFUL. TRUST MUST BE EARNED.

Orcas are coordinated and intelligent. Consider how they

³ I am less frightened at the thought of approaching an orca—a hyperintelligent predator capable of tossing 300 pounds of mammal 80 feet into the sky—than someone like my father, who maintains dramatically different political perspectives from myself. I'm afraid that if my words aren't exact, as can be found in legal documents and policy language, that he'll unravel the spirit of everything I have to say.

⁴ Maybe there is a different way of approaching my father that doesn't trigger his drive for prey.

hunt seals from ice in the arctic: they start out in a line, fin-to-fin, heading directly toward a floating patch of ice before diving down at the last moment and creating a pocket for the ice to dip into. The void creates a wave that then washes over the floating platform. The seal, having only his claws for traction, is swept into the sea toward the expectant hunters. It's not surprising, then, to find out wild orcas will work with humans if it benefits their own survival.

Old Tom, the leader of a pod of orcas, became famous for his cooperation with local whalers in the Australian coastal town of Eden in the early 20th century. Old Tom and his pod herded baleen whales toward humans in exchange for their favorite pieces of the kill. The practice became known as The Law of the Tongue and continued until Old Tom died from injuries sustained in a bout of fish-net tug-of-war with one fisherman who refused to pay the tax. When the orcas stopped receiving their pay they went on strike, never to return. The fisherman who injured Old Tom didn't do so out of malice, but because he was afraid his catch—a vital form of subsistence for his family—might be the last of the season. The thing is, knowing the fisherman's intent doesn't repair Old Tom's jaw.⁵

There are a handful of other cooperative relationships between humans and animals, including the honeyguide, an Old World passerine bird that leads locals to sources of honey. Humans do the heavy-lifting, being more equipped to dispatch a bee colony than the birds, but both end up with a tasty treat by the end of the process. By respecting boundaries and ensuring both parties get what they need out of an interaction, relationships are strengthened.⁶

⁵ Hearing my father say I matter to him doesn't negate actions he's taken that conflict with my ability to safely exist in the spaces we both inhabit. Frankly, I'm tired of being called a snowflake for pointing out that things like "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" aren't as innocent as they sound on first listen.

⁶ As it turns out, everyone's idea of honey is a little different.

4.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, KNOW THAT YOUR BODY LANGUAGE CARRIES DIFFERENT MEANINGS FOR DIFFERENT SPECIES.

Orcas and honeyguides aren't the only animals to use strategy and group cooperation to take down prey. Wolves are the poster-children on both ends of the spectrum when it comes to evil and goodness, thanks to their ability to communicate and hunt as a cohesive group. They're cunning and elusive, but until recently not very well understood, which has resulted in a tumultuous reputation. They are portrayed in media and conversation as both the bloodthirsty demons of the forest, and the epitome of stoic leadership earned through determined struggle. What's unfortunate is that both ends of the spectrum misunderstand the animals entirely. As Farley Mowat came to find out not so long ago, wolves are rather reserved if curious about humans, and while it's true that wolf packs have an alpha, beta, or omega, these roles aren't earned or assigned through bloody conflict as many believe. The lens we use to perceive animals completely changes our relationship with them.⁷

The truth about wolves is that they typically live in packs consisting of a breeding pair acting more like human parents teaching their offspring the ins and outs of life in the wild than a group of infighting beasts struggling for a leadership role.⁸ Researchers sometimes use the terms dominance or submission to explain the relationship dynamics between individuals, but

⁷ There was a moment, sometime between my first goat college and the second several years later, that I realized my father didn't have all the answers—that he is just another adult pretending he isn't making things up as he goes along, same as the rest of us.

⁸ The truth about my father is that he mastered the act of carrying himself confidently and for most of my life, I had no reason to suspect he could be wrong about anything.

these concepts are usually lost on the layman. That is to say, submission is not taken by a dominant animal, but given by an animal that hopes to relieve tension, and therefore might be better described as appeasement. Rolling over and exposing the belly is an indication that the submissive animal doesn't want any trouble. An upturned lip and closed jaw, sometimes accompanied by the tip of the tongue licking through the front teeth, is called a submissive smile. To us, the wrinkled nose and bared teeth look aggressive, like a silent snarl, but to another canine it comes across more as an "oh, sorry, excuse me" than anything else.

5.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, BEGIN TO THINK OF INTERACTIONS AS GIVE AND TAKE, NOT GOOD OR BAD.

Domesticated dogs don't growl because they think they're in charge, or because they are being dominant, but as a method of communication (one that often happens as a result of fear).⁹ Maybe it's because dogs have been humanity's oldest allies and can read our body language and facial expressions better than any other animal that we so often assume they should intuit our every intention and thought.¹⁰ When their behavior does not fit neatly into our expectations, we punish them for it. This is an unfair approach. They're still individuals with autonomous desires and unique ways of experiencing the world. When we

⁹ The distinction is subtle, and one that many will impulsively reject because it goes against what they have always known to be true. It's important to challenge what we think we know.

¹⁰ I always respected my father. I thought him to be intelligent and well-reasoned. He was a good source of practical and financial advice. He always provided for the family and did everything right by society's standards.

reach for the bowl and are met with a growl, old-school beliefs on canine behavior told us that the dog was trying to become alpha and we should respond with a show of force to teach him who is boss.

We so often miss other signals the dog has been giving us ahead of time—the ones that show he’s afraid of something or about to exhibit a certain behavior in response to his fear.¹¹ It’s important to note that whether we see his fear as unfounded makes no difference for the animal going through it. Some canine appeasement signals include extended yawns, or averted eyes and hunched posture. Another is excessive lip-licking as the dog desperately tries to communicate that he’s afraid his food will be taken. By punishing the dog for not letting us take what is his (as if we would be just as accepting of another human taking our plate, or our clothes, or our beloved smart phones from us) we prove his fears right. Instead of working with the dog to teach him we’re an ally instead of competition, we punish the growl and stamp out the only way he knows to communicate his fears.¹² When he subsequently skips the growl for a bite (and he will because it clearly didn’t work the first time), we label him an evil, no-good, bad dog.¹³

¹¹ After the 2016 election, I didn’t feel like I knew my father anymore. What signs did I miss before reaching this point? He always voted Republican, but I thought there was a line he wouldn’t cross and was left wondering how far things could escalate. Did he, like other voters, see me as sub-human? Could he be dangerous to me under the right circumstances?

¹² How could I see my father as an ally again, after this last year?

¹³ The shock of seeing my father instead as his evil doppelgänger stems from the idea that only the other can be evil. People fall for it all the time when they find out their neighbor or relative has committed a heinous act like murder. He was always so normal, they say when told the news. We can’t believe that someone so similar to us, who is an otherwise upstanding citizen, can do evil deeds. There must have been something he was hiding, or there must be something wrong with him. The truth is that ordinary people commit atrocities every day, and lumping them into binary categories of good (like us) or evil (not like us) doesn’t do us any favors.

By failing to challenge our own perceptions and knowledge of these animals, we perpetuate untruths. If we spent time understanding our dogs' behaviors from their perspective rather than our own prescribed ideas of how they should act or feel, maybe we would have better relationships with them. Maybe we could learn more pragmatic ways of approaching them. As it sits currently, we glue our morals onto other animals a little too haphazardly. We assume that because we were raised with right and wrong that our dogs—those beasts who know us best—should inherently subscribe to the same ideologies. But dogs are amoral, not immoral. Our inability to see them for who they are is our failure, not theirs.

6.

TO BEFRIEND BIRDS AND BEASTS, BE PERSISTENT, BUT KNOW THAT PATIENCE IS MORE THAN JUST PREFERRED. RUSHING AN INTERACTION RARELY YIELDS DESIRED RESULTS.

Sometimes approaches to problems are counterintuitive, like running away from a dog to get it to come to you, instead of chasing it down. To get a parrot to play with a toy she's afraid of, the last thing you should do is stick the unfamiliar object into the cage with her. A tried and true technique is to play keep-away with the toy. By slouching over it, as if shielding or hoarding it from onlookers, you pique her curiosity. You slowly let her get closer, drawn in by the elusiveness of it all, while still trying to keep the toy for yourself.¹⁴ You get her interested to the point of where she demands to be let in on the fun. Dogs are similar—forcing them into a frightening situation to help them

¹⁴ The best ideas are the ones we think we come up with all on our own.

overcome it often results in phobias instead of acceptance.¹⁵

Having meaningful experiences means being physically present, and like paddle boarding, it takes practice to build muscles and habits; it means knowing limitations so as not to induce injury from trying too much too soon.¹⁶ Whales travel through the Salish Sea all the time, but it's a big area to cover and individual chances of finding one are slim without persistent attempts. If I gave up after my first or tenth paddleboard adventure, I'd never have seen the humpback under me on the eleventh, or the family of orcas cruising around the southern tip of Vashon Island on the twentieth.

The predicament I've always found myself in when attempting to get close to other animals is that I come across like Elmyra Duff—smothering and obsessive—which has the opposite of the intended effect. I'm learning restraint and with any luck, I'll make some progress.

¹⁵ The wounds were still too fresh when my father asked whether I had “calmed down” yet after the election. In that moment, I was a cornered animal. It's exactly a year later and I'm still not sure I'm ready to discuss it.

¹⁶ One can get concussed from too much head-butting.

FALLING FOR THE WILY ONE

That wily Jamunapari had a beard
I couldn't stop stroking.
We spoke without speaking
for what seemed like
an hour, and then it
bleated a bleat of real love,
or something that sounded
disproportionately like love.
Suddenly, I remembered
my past life, or maybe
it was a future life.
I was on a bumpy train
to only God knows where.
My conical teats shook
almost imperceptibly.
That's when the big one
came. It came in six
to ten silent and sorrowful
pulses. When I opened
my eyes, I was looking
at a patch of amaranth
on a new cliff, over-
looking a different
cliff in the distance.
I had yet to know
that goat, a world
overfilled with bridges.

THE SUNRISE LASTS FOREVER

You're doing a great
job lifting five people
above your own head,
The Mangler, Jr.
But you're just making
everyone miss your
father. He was so
unnaturally strong.
I remember once when
you were a baby, how
he lifted five people
while lifting you too.
He was so kind too.
And beautiful. He
had such beautiful
hair and skin, and
when he spoke,
his tongue floated
above the heads of
everyone in the room
licking the evil away
and freeing them
from the evil that
held them hostage
in their own hearts.
I wish you luck,
young man.

I HOPE YOU DANCE

Because I hadn't planned to attend a funeral I had nothing to wear but the black polo I'd worn to the visitation the night before and my father's nicest flannel shirt. It was hot for June and the polo already stank. Neither of my father's two dress shirts fit me. The decision felt crucial. I was nineteen and visiting from school and not yet good at going to funerals. So when I couldn't choose, I sat on my parents' porch to smoke pot and hope the answer would reveal itself like a zen riddle. It didn't. Instead I again worked through what was known—

Skippy died a few days earlier when our drunk friend James launched them off a ravine in the late model Ford Mustang he couldn't even afford.

Supposedly James was playing a game of cat-n-mouse with a carful of young women on the way up the hill from a place called the Don't Know Tavern.

Supposedly Skippy was passed out with the passenger seat reclined as far back as it would go. He'd been passed out there for a while after getting 86'd from the Don't Know.

Supposedly he never even woke up.

Forty-five minutes later, wearing the flannel tucked lumpily into my jeans, I skulked into the old hexagonal church on the hill above town. I was very stoned. Inside some people mourned in t-shirts and others in old suits. The cruel heat of the old folks' gazes singed the stray fibers of my flannel as I found my buddies and sat. The church had been built as a hexagon so there were no corners for the devil to hide, and it did not feel coincidental that we sat as close to the center of the church as possible. Most

of the complicit friends were there, each sweating beer from the faux-wake we held the night before—

—Brett, in a crisp JC Penny button up, who ignored Skippy's 12-pack+ a day habit as long as Skippy'd buy him beer until Brett turned 21.

—Matt, in a Nike golf polo, who didn't meet them at the Don't Know that night.

—James, in absentia, in a hospital gown, chained to a hospital bed for DUI Manslaughter, thirty miles away but still hovering over us.

—Pat, flannel, who was as guilty as a person can be just for being alive.

—And me, with my shirt's wooly threads jabbing into me like one thousand tiny mosquito beaks. Guilty of leaving for Ohio to memorize a thesaurus and forget these people existed. Guilty of laughing when my dad had told me that Skippy did a shot every half-an-hour, like clockwork, at the local bar each night.

The preacher was a local truck driver and amateur singer who spoke about God at the request of Skippy's mother and stepfather and then read the lyrics to Lynard Skynard's "Simple Man," at the request of Skippy's father.

But I never thought of him as a simple man.

Skippy liked Jeff Foxworthy but also liked hip-hop.

Skippy was in gifted classes in school and spent a year and a half at college before dropping out and getting a job at a plywood plant back home.

Skippy wore glasses.

Skippy saved trash bags of beer cans until the price of aluminum was high. He was great at math.

Skippy drove a car previously owned by a disabled person; he accelerated and braked with toggles on the steering wheel. Once, because he didn't have a bottle opener, he opened six beers on the trunk latch of that car and drove home from work.

The preacher had arms like two-liter bottles and shoulders like a box and his voice boomed through the church. I can't remember what was said but I remember him growing in stature as he spoke and I remember Brett sitting like a stump next to me and Matt weeping next to him. I remember the stained glass and the sweat skating down my chest.

As the service neared its conclusion, a boom box appeared from somewhere. Under the pulpit? A pew? Heaven? The preacher said there's a request from the deceased's mother. He pushed play. A sentimental drumbeat began, followed by bright guitar arpeggios.

The baritone preacher began to sing from some lyrics written on his sermon notes.

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder.

I looked at Brett, my best friend since kindergarten, and could read his mind: "Lee. Ann. Fucking. Womack."

It continued. Verse, chorus, verse, chorus, etc. I wanted to rush the stage and stop it all from happening.

At the bridge, the preacher became dramatic.

...And when you get the choice, he said with the cadence of a poet, whispering over the interplay of guitar and cello. He was in front of the pulpit now.

...To sit it out or dance. He eyed the room, almost erotically, and actually began pointing at people in the pews. The music was rising toward its apogee.

...I hope you—

—DANNNNCCCCCCCC soared over the boom box crescendo, so loud it cracked open the sky. The ceiling flew off and was slurped up into to the heavens. The sun poured in. Hawks shit down upon us. Little spot-fires erupted under my armpits.

When it ended we were all struck dumb—a communion of the shocked. Matt was still weeping.

"Matt," Brett whispered, turning toward him. He had one hand clasped on Matt's knee and another on his shoulder. Men

from places like this are not supposed to touch one another.

Matt sniffled. Awkward seconds passed. The preacher recommenced his preaching.

“Matt,” Brett whispered again. “Listen.”

Matt listened.

Brett, deadpan. “That was fuck-in’ horrible.”

And together we laughed in the center of it.

Later, as the mourners walked through the green cemetery, I heard some woman say, “I hope this is a lesson to the goddamn kids in this town.”

EKPHRASTIC FOR SNAPCHAT STORY PATCHWORKING A FORGOTTEN BAR CRAWL

The hourglass of me sloshes with the final cocktail. I'll hold it like a saucer of light—despite the way it frizzles my hand,

greenly sinister. I whoosh through the street on a rope-suspended halo. Fish pour from the swing & engine into the night. Enough

for everyone! None for me, thanks. My mouth is brimming with wristwatches I tongued from other mouths, their hands

pointing everywhere for blame, their ticks replaying the same bland tune: There is no sea in a shell; there is no rose in a bottle.

Truthfully, I should have grown up drawing the door of my house beige & knobless. Now, every joint is a brass opening, signed off

with neon. Water pours from every hole I shouldn't have. Enough for everyone! None for me, thanks. I'm beached as a tongueless

conch. There's the miracle of a whole ocean in here. I'm empty enough to live inside of. Please, enter the way a hand takes a glass.

RAG AND BONE

After hustling three hundred at nine-ball and nearly having my ear sliced off in the bathroom, I'm thrown onto the street. I can barely walk, and I'm shaking even though it's summer. I find the one working pay phone left in Tampa and call my dad collect while a man in an Army jacket laughs at me from across Seventh Avenue. I am embarrassed for being so skinny.

It's three in the morning and there's no answer, so I take the cord and wrap it around my throat. I pull tight but tell myself to knock it the fuck off, call again. This time he picks up. We breathe in sync until I tell him what happened.

He says he loves it, that he fell asleep thinking of types of trouble I could get into, played out scenarios over in his head: me screaming while pressed over the front of a patrol car, me puking in a holding cell then being told to lick it up. Soothing as counting sheep, is what Dad says.

He finally gets here, and on the way home he hands me the rubber tourniquet from under his seat and I wrap it tight to find a vein. Dad hums over the radio. It's his favorite song.

.

Three nights later, I'm heaving into the kitchen sink when Dad gets home from his PTSD therapist and dares me to go out and do it all again. He dangles a dime bag of the powder over my head, then slides it into his shirt pocket. I'd rather peel off my own skin, but I say okay, it's my pleasure, same bar, same game.

Dad smiles and gives me an envelope. Inside are five twenties and a pamphlet for the Marines.

Your choice, he tells me. Entertain him, or enlist.

I walk out the front door, and the deadbolt locks into place. I remove the brochure. A kid in fatigues—looks my age—smiles at me, invites me. Call the recruiter and it could all stop, this game, this trap.

I take a bite out of the Marine's face, chew, swallow, then throw the rest into the bushes.

On the bus, I stuff my fingers into my own shirt pocket, searching, feeling for a bag that isn't there but might appear like magic to heal me. A woman three rows ahead asks if I'm okay, is there anyone she can call, and why am I screaming bloody murder. I didn't realize I was. Now she's looking me over, and I get so mad at how bony my elbows are that I turn from her and push my face against the window.

A pitbull chases us along Powhatan for a while. He jumps over potholes, dodges trash. Tongue flapping and teeth grinning, he's having fun, so much god damn fun. And for one flash of a moment I am too, until we hang a right onto Sligh and the dumb thing keeps running straight.

At my stop I get up to leave, and when I pass the woman, she tries to hand me a Rosary, says she's got plenty and that the gas station on Twelfth will let me take a shower for free. I stop, stalled there, and stand until the driver yells for me to get off, and once outside I find her window and tap on the glass. The woman looks down at me and waves. I mumble any random words, so she'll always wonder what I tried to tell her.

It's not raining, but the air is hot and sticky. There's sweat behind my ears. I want to drink all the water in the world, so I go inside and order a glass at the bar. I think about Dad at home alone, rubbing lotion over the POW tattoo on his chest, over his two bullet scars. I picture him picturing me. I'm crouched in the desert. I'm aiming a rifle. He says attaboy, son, attaboy!

I ask a man who looks like a cartoon sailor if he shoots pool, and he agrees to a game for twenty bucks. I miss every pocket by three or four millimeters on purpose. I shake his hand congratulations, and he calls me rag-and-bone man, I guess because I'm so thin. A rag-and-bone man is someone who used to roam around during the Plague, steal other people's trash, and then sell that shit just to get by, day to day to day. I know this. I dropped out, but I've read the textbook.

Now I say we should play for sixty, and he says I'll eat lead if I'm a hustler. I've heard much better. He places his bills next to mine on the edge of the table, gives me a wink. I win before he even gets to lift his cue—a stupid move. Too obvious, too eager. I reach for the cash, but he the jabs the end of his stick into my Adam's apple and my legs give out.

There's yelling from the bartender, and the cartoon sailor drags me to the parking lot and smashes my face against the back of his Astro van. I close my eyes and try to enjoy the pain for whatever rush it is. Sometimes it can feel good, like when you bite your own tongue.

When he's done with me, he throws me onto the cement, takes my envelope, and preaches something from above like he's a tough guy, or a prophet. I give him a thumbs up and mumble God, Guns, and Country because that's what I see on his bumper sticker.

I lie for a while, then stand and walk east until I come across a group of women in front of a hotel and show them my open forehead. The women are as young as I am, and their dresses look too nice for this part of town. One lets me use her cellphone to call an ambulance, but I call Dad instead. When I finish telling him about the cartoon sailor and the beating, he asks if that's all. He's disappointed. I make up something—like I stole a car, like I wrapped it around a streetlight, like the cops picked me up and put their cigarettes out on my neck. He knows I'm lying. I beg him to let me sleep at home. I

ask for mercy. But I know the drill: not impressed, not tonight. I say I love him, but he hangs up.

The nice woman reaches into her purse for something she might use against me, so I gently hand her phone back and tell the whole group, all of them, that I will pray for them, I swear, if only they would just pray for me too.

•

It's close to one in the morning. Jim Berry and I are sitting on the steps of his trailer while his girlfriend and baby boy sleep inside. I know Jim Berry from the bar, back when I tried to shake him for fifty bucks and he took pity on me by playing dumb. Now he throws me oxys when I'm too sick to breathe. During the day, he picks strawberries out in Pasco County. He's offered to get me a job there, but I never have the time. Picking and picking, he tells me, all day picking. I call him Jim Berry because he's from Guatemala and won't give up his real name, even though I tell him everything about me. He looks around fifty or something, but who knows.

Jim Berry does me a solid and gives me five of the things, but this is all he can spare for the rest of the month. I take off my shoe, and onto the step below me, I crush the pills into dust and shape it into as clean a line as I can muster right now. Jim Berry just watches in silence, and after I snort the stuff and put my head in my hands, he waits with me until I'm breathing more easily and my right eyelid stops twitching.

I tell him, thank you. Jesus, thank you. And he asks how long I'm going to keep letting my dad fuck with me.

Thing is, Dad's not fucking with me. My dad loves me. Or he will. He just wants what's best, wants me to protect and serve like he did, wants me to suffer until I agree. My dad is a man of noble causes, and this is what I tell Jim Berry. He doesn't buy it

though, says we both know my dad hooked me on smack to sit at home with his dick in his hand thinking about my funeral.

I'm about to say, Okay, I'll just cave then, Jim Berry, I'll just enlist, go to war for my dad's affection like some sort of Ancient Greek statue or dry-cleaned good old boy, but a tiny kid, couldn't be older than eight, walks by, drinking out of a two-liter of Sprite.

Jim Berry yells at the kid to get the hell home to his abuela and to take it easy with the sugar. The kid keeps walking and says his abuela hasn't been home in two days. Jim Berry says of course she hasn't, and he doesn't look surprised.

I start nodding off, so I ask Jim Berry for a bed and maybe a sandwich. But he tells me no, it's time to leave now, that I'm not his family. And of course, yes, he's correct.

So I actually end up taking that shower at the gas station on Twelfth. The woman on the bus was right. The night clerk just gives me a key to the bathroom out back without asking any questions. I turn the knob all the way left, freezing cold, and sit in the water with my clothes on. Even through my shirt, I can count my ribs.

I imagine Jim Berry, all tanked-topped and pony-tailed, pulling my head against his stomach, holding it there and rubbing it like he probably does his baby's. He asks whose country I'd be fighting for, exactly. His? My dad's? My own? What about the kid wandering alone with a soda bottle? Our battles are individual, one-on-one. I don't know, Jim Berry. I don't know. And I fall asleep to the rhythm of his breathing, unable to answer.

I wake up wet, congested, and sick. On the floor is a rusted drain. I think of dragging my wrist across it, just to see if the option's still there, but realize I've never wanted that way out. I turn off the water but still feel dry inside.

In the gas station, there's a long line which must be the morning commuters, but the clocks say three in the afternoon.

Everyone gives me an odd look because I'm trailing water everywhere and, I guess, crying. But I can't really turn that off anymore. Some tall guy wearing a golf shirt asks if I need any help, and I just say ha ha, swimming pool, got pushed in. I grab a Gatorade from the fridge in the back, as if electrolytes will help any of this, and leave the store. What are they going to do, stop me?

.

Dad's truck isn't here but the spare key's on top of the mat, so thank God he's shown enough sympathy to let me in today. I go through his bathroom drawers, where he keeps his pills, all prescribed by his therapist at the VA: Lamictal, Ambien, Seroquel, Valium, Lexapro, Viagra, Edecrin, and so many goddamn vitamins. I empty the bottles onto the floor and look for any opiates he may have hidden. Nothing. Still, a lot of power in these pills. I could swallow one of each and see what happens. I could swallow them all and blackout. But right now, I just need to stave off the withdrawals and the gagging, the sweat, the cruel illusion of dying.

A dog barks. Dad whistles. I pick as many of the things off the tile as I can and throw them back into the drawer. Dad calls my name because he knows I'm here, that I'll come needing a fix, needing affection.

He's in the living room, on the couch, and wants to show me something. This big son of a bitch, a mastiff, rolls all over him and pins him to the cushions. Dad's got his tongue out, licking this dog more than the dog licks him. A giant red, white, and blue handkerchief tied around the dog's neck, its muscles are so defined they have veins the size of ropes. Dad tells me the VA gave it to him, even let him name it. Uncle Sam, Dad says to me, Uncle Sammy. Man's best friend and all that shit.

I'm so jealous I want to tear the dog's skin off and chew the meat from his skeleton. I want to take his head and force it through the sliding glass door. I want to stab a syringe into the corner of his eye, make him dependent on me.

I scream at Dad, I scream that I am Rag-and-Bone Man. I am Rag-and-Bone Man come to serve him.

He pours Uncle Sam a bowl of kibble, even throws some cheese on top, then tells me to hold the leash while we walk him. I'm white as a ghost, Dad tells me, and I say I wonder why as I'm pulled by the dog.

And of course it's uncontrollable. Dad laughs while the dog rips my arm to the right, left, forward. I say Dad please, I can't, but when my shoulder cracks and my vision blurs, I fall to the ground and get dragged across the lawn. Dad says if I don't learn how to walk dogs, dogs will always walk me and finally takes hold of the leash so I can let go.

I run inside. I put some ice in a pillowcase and tie it around my arm and shoulder. When Dad comes in, red faced and giddy, he goes into his bedroom, and I hear the clicks of the iron safe. I yell to my dad that I can be good, that I can do better, and he tosses me a shoebox with all the junk I need for now. He tells me I better fucking prove it and calls for Uncle Sammy.

So I do to myself what I need to do. Then I roll my neck around slowly to make it crack. The swirls and pastel colors of the kitchen floor are so light and delicate they seem painted on by an angel's hand.

.

All of this is how I find myself crouched behind Jim Berry's A/C unit, in the middle of the night, holding a combat knife. Even though there's no rain, heavy clouds block the moon from lighting the sky.

I don't plan to hurt the baby. I don't even plan to take it. The art is crafting the appearance of the act. I need Jim Berry to catch me. And if the only guy who knows me, the only person even close to being a friend kills me, crushes my head and smears the brains across his carpet, all the better and so be it. I move to the window—pitch black inside—and pry it up an inch. An odor, whatever they ate for dinner, lingers. The television is turned off. I get angry at how little more I have to slide open the window to fit my thin body through, and it's hard with one arm immobile in a makeshift sling.

Jim Berry's stash sits in plain sight, just bottles and bottles on the kitchen table. I pocket as many pills as I can and swallow at least seven or eight. I know where the baby sleeps—in his own room, in his crib. I hesitate, though.

Again, always, I'm thirsty. I can't see anything at all in the kitchen, but I feel for the sink so I can drink quietly out of the tap. And when I do, it tastes better than good. It tastes how I imagine the waters under a frozen stream taste.

I pull my shoes off so I can silently move toward the baby's room, and as I leave the kitchen I notice a pan left on the stove with meat gone moldy and green. The oven has been left on. I turn it off.

The door to the baby's room is cracked open, and small plastic stars glow from the far wall. The hinges don't squeak at all, but when I move forward my foot touches something, someone's leg, and I almost yell. Jim Berry's girlfriend sleeps in front of the doorway, and her boyfriend is curled into her side. I don't know who I stepped on, but no one says a thing.

I suppose this is fine. I will move behind the crib, and when I tug the baby's ear he will scream, and Jim Berry will hopefully grab my knife and plunge into me until I am half dead, maybe remove a finger or even a whole limb. And I will crawl to my dad's feet.

So I reach for the baby, but as I do, I notice its hair—black like Jim Berry’s and in contrast to the white skin from his mother. I rub my finger along his hairline and whisper good boy, good boy.

Jim Berry coughs and rolls onto his back, his chest lifting and falling rapidly. I stand tall and stretch my spine. It cracks with pain. His girlfriend inhales a breath for so long I don’t know how she isn’t inflating in size. I hold the knife over the baby, and I think of Rosaries and pool cues and heaping mounds of dog food, and here it goes.

Through the pain of my shoulder, I move my right hand toward the baby’s face and poke his puffy cheek. A small bubble grows then bursts between his lips. He coughs and slowly opens his eyes. He looks directly through me before he screams, a condemnation, like he’s damning me to hell. But Jim Berry doesn’t wake up, and neither does his girlfriend so I go over and tell him that hey, I’m going to kill your baby. No response. I kick him in his side, and he moans.

Then I understand the obvious.

I bend over and pull back Jim Berry’s eyelids, and his pupils are rolled into his skull. He’s so high he’s lost in space, and the same with his girlfriend. The baby’s still screaming, but in short bursts. The kid’s saying something different to me now, telling me that, sure, he can see how I live, but take a look at his world.

I kick Jim Berry’s foot out of the way and go to the kitchen to find a bottle. I look in the cabinets, slamming them shut when I find nothing. I finally pull one out of the god damn trash, but it’s broken in two and the nipple is missing. In the fridge is a carton of milk only a few days expired, so I carry it back to Jim Berry’s baby boy. Holding the container with the hand of my hurt arm, I dab the finger from my other into the liquid. I place the milk on the baby’s lips, and finally it quiets down. I wet my finger again and do the same, and he smiles, this baby. He’s even giggling. Again and again I bring the milk

to his mouth. I don't know why, honestly—I've never done this kind of thing—but I bend over and kind of kiss his forehead. His lashes flutter.

Eventually Jim Berry mumbles something coherent, and I know I have seconds. So yeah, of course I think about stealing the baby. We could roll as sidekicks, escape, grow fat, get high only on gallons and gallons of milk. But instead I do something else. I place the carton on the floor and exit the room, leaving Jim Berry's son to the unimaginable circumstances he may find himself in every single day.

I ask God and God answers. Jim Berry's kid might find a way out or he might not. But I am damn well nobody's protector.

I walk for hours until I find that old pay phone, and when I do, it looks even dirtier than before. I pick up the receiver and dial my dad's number, but after it rings once I hang up. I poke the sides of my face, press into my sunken cheeks. I run my fingers down my forearm, stopping at my wrist to check for a pulse.

I lift the phone again. This time I try a number I've memorized but have never used, one scribbled onto a legal pad in Dad's sock drawer. It belongs to my mother's home. The house sits against the beach, on the bay, where she and my sisters play Scrabble and give high fives.

A woman answers, but she has a foreign accent. She says she doesn't know my name, I have the wrong number, no one with those names lives there, she's sorry.

The man in the Army jacket stands across the street again, determined, fists raised to the sky.

I walk out from the stand, pulling the cord taught, and I say one more thing to the woman on the other end:

I believe you. But can I see for myself.

WITHDRAWAL NIGHT ONE

Cut nightshade piled on the veranda

A steer lowers into coarse sedge

The gap where its testicles used to be

Interval between dinner and Bessie Smith

Needing dope but your feet hurt

Chew ice

Sweat your perm out slowly

Bleach your panties until the elastic band rubs your waistline raw

A distant road snores

There is no death on this episode of General Hospital

There is no withdrawal you can't survive

A roadside currency of dirt and wood

Where a tooth used to be, a salamandered void

Needing dope but riffing and shrieking on the phone with Jane

Touch yourself counterclockwise

Mesmerized by a bad movie

In this light you have seven shadows

They don't lean in as if to see about you

Can't sing

Do not go but if you must

SHOOT YOUR LOCAL HEROIN DEALER

read the bumper sticker on the black truck
in the ALDI parking lot. Yes, shoot him
behind the store and hide
the body under your broken trampoline.
Shoot him vastly. Shoot him
with something large enough to split
the first atom of his body. Take his money,
his fake Gucci belt, the program
for his son's holiday concert.
Give the money back to your brother,
who is an addict.
Shoot your local heroin dealer
even if he's just a kid or a part-time nurse
or your hair dresser. Use light, lead, leaf or storm.
This town used to be safe.
Now it's two pills in a sandwich bag.
After you've shot him, if you wish,
cradle his head and forgive him.
Tell yourself you can now go
to your brother's house
and he will be cured and his eyes
will never again hardly open when you rock
his shoulders slumped against the sink
shouting the unbelievable news
that he is still alive.

ANNE FOSTER

THE NOVICE

Today is the day. I am out in the driveway, waiting, standing over my collapsing duffel bag when Sister Trisha arrives in the red hatchback. Sister Trisha is about six inches shorter than me with wire-rimmed glasses and a pile of white curls on her head. Her cheeks are sagging. She has been around for a long time. She parks the car and gets out to give me a hug. “I’m so excited for you,” she says. “You are only just beginning.” I smile back at her. I get in the car and we pull away from the house that is no longer my house.

Sister Trisha drives us away from town on two-lane roads bordered by half-heartedly built fences. It is summer and the trees are tall and their green leaves throw diamond shadows on the pavement. There is a trickling stream and a herd of cows standing dumbly. Then the hill. The car lurches as Sister Trisha downshifts. At the top is the nunnery. It is vast like a royal estate and bordered all the way around by blooming sunflowers and forget-me-nots. I will have the rest of my life to explore it all. Sister Trisha and I wait in the car while the garage door opens.

For dinner on my first night we have pork chop and baked cauliflower with cheese and an iceberg lettuce salad and it makes me smile because these are the kinds of things I ate when I was a kid. I’m wearing black jean shorts and a t-shirt because I have not earned my habit yet and also, it is still being made for me. The sisters said that normal clothes are okay as long as they are modest. They seem very eager to accommodate me. They

haven't had a new member for a long time. Sister Beth who is the youngest nun says, "I like your tattoo." Oh. Sometimes I forget that I have a tattoo on my arm. It is a dog with a long nose and pointy ears. A guard dog, I like to think. I smile at Sister Beth and take a bite of cauliflower and cheese and think, yes, I do belong here.

The next day I get married to God. That's what the nuns like to say at least. But I think of it more as getting married to myself. I mean I believe in God, but not the way that the nuns believe in God. During the ceremony I wear white and towards the end when I am kneeling at the altar of the church and the nuns are kneeling behind me in solidarity, I slip a small band on my finger. It is not part of the official ceremony. No one else knows about it. This is me marrying myself.

Why did I decide to become a nun. That's what everyone wants to know. Why did I do this. Well, it's not an easy question to answer. Back when I still lived in town and went to parties, sometimes people would find out that I was going to be a nun and they would ask me why and the answer was always different. When I was twelve I thought I wanted to be a nun. I wanted to live all over the world and help people like nuns did. But now I am decades older and I just want to help myself. I have always been alone and it seemed that I was going to end up alone and so I figured I might as well join the nuns and maybe they could teach me. How to let things go. How to be alone.

I met you at a bar in town with a big watercolor painting on one wall and lights so dim that we were just shadows. We both sat not facing each other but I could feel your eyes and it was almost psychic the way you asked me if I was going to be a nun. I raised my eyebrows and asked, "How did you know that?"
"I didn't know," you said. "That's why I asked."

You never asked me why I was going to be a nun. You just said over and over again, "It's amazing that you are going to be a nun." And I just let you be amazed.

I first came to see the nuns about one year ago. I walked all the way up the hill and knocked on the thick wooden door. Sister Trisha answered. She asked what I wanted and I said, "I'm thinking about being a nun."

"Well, come in."

I visited every week for a year. They asked me questions about what I believed. They quizzed me on the Bible. Sister Trisha wanted to know for how long I had been regularly attending Mass. But the truth was I did not go hardly at all. Only on Christmas with my family and on Ash Wednesday because I like it when they say that I am ashes. Ash Wednesday always seemed to me to be in opposition of everything I learned about the church which is power and rules. But on Ash Wednesday they say forget everything we told you, you are nothing. We are all nothing.

"For how long have you been attending Mass?" Sister Trisha asked.

"For six months," I said.

And just like that, I lied to a nun.

Now married to God—or to myself depending on how you look at it—I have my own room at the nunnery. There is an excess of rooms these days. Back when this place was at its height there were thirty-six nuns which, at two per room, meant eighteen rooms. That's why there are bedrooms on the second floor and on the first floor behind the kitchen. But now there are six nuns. Not only do we have our own rooms but there is at least one room left empty between each of us. My room has a twin bed and a wooden night table where I leave my watch and ring and phone while I sleep at night. I have emptied out my

duffel and my clothes are in the closet. As soon as my habit is ready I won't need them anymore unless I go to town for work or to visit family.

The nunnery has three floors. The first floor is long and winding and in the first week I get lost regularly. There are guest rooms, a chapel, a living area with a TV and a stack of puzzles. Then the hallway branches into two kitchens, one where we make our food and one where we make food that we sell to the public. There are offices, more bedrooms, kennels for the dogs. In the basement there is a library and an exercise room filled with equipment that appears to be from the eighties. On the second floor there is a high-ceilinged room where we make the habits. And a west-facing room full of windows where Sister Beth does her painting. One day I see her through the sliver of the open door and she is not wearing her habit and her long brown hair glints from the sun.

In my first weeks at the nunnery the sisters assign me a variety of tasks so I can explore different labors within the community where I now live. This morning my task is picking raspberries. I do not wear my white shoes. I notice before I begin that there are a lot of bushes, but it's not until I've been picking for a few minutes that I realize that there are enough to pick raspberries for days. It is satisfying to gently tug at the berries and feel them dislodge from the branch and it is satisfying to fill the plastic containers with them. I did not wear my watch nor do I have my phone so I have no idea how long I have been out here. The farther I get the more I am lost in time.

Once dated a man sparingly for several months. He wanted us to be together—like really together—but I did not. In an effort to make me see the foolishness of my resistance he blurted out one night that he had had girlfriends since our first date. It made me laugh to think about how, in the weeks between two of our dates he had started and ended an entire relationship—

entire relationship—like entire life entire species entire planet! If relationships are about time then he and I might as well have been in a relationship. I guess relationships are not about time.

Before nuns become nuns, well, we are just people. We might have had sex, or abortions, or sent nude pics, or cheated, or lied. But when we become a nun we confess our sins. We renounce them. Or that's the idea at least.

After we met at the bar you came over and we had sex in my queen-sized bed. It was three months before I was going to join the nuns and you joked that I should get in as much as I could beforehand, but it wasn't like I needed convincing. I liked that your hair was longer than mine and in your sleep you talked in a foreign language. While we were lying in bed, my skin touching your skin, you said, "Maybe you shouldn't be a nun." And then you added hastily, "But don't not be a nun for me."

After my first heartbreak my mom told me about the time she had just moved to a new city. She got a bad case of mono and ended up in the hospital. She was dating a man at the time who came to visit her in the hospital one day. And then she never saw or heard from him again. Sometimes I imagine that man being my father. I'm pretty sure he's not because it doesn't correlate with the timeline of my life. But I feel like my life would make more sense if that disappearing mystery man were my dad.

Sister Beth gives me a book on St. Julian of Norwich. She says she knows I like history and women who write and so she thinks I will like it. I start reading it during my free hour after lunch. I sit alone on a couch in the living room where there is a cool breeze coming in through the open window. I'm not sure where the other sisters are but that is one of the nice things about the free hour. No one has to explain herself. We go where

we want. I flip through the introductory pages, still crisp, until I land on page one.

There are many things we do not know about Julian, the book tells me, because she lived so long ago. She might have been a nun, but maybe not. She might have been married and lost her family to the plague. What we do know, the reason we know her at all, is that in her fifties she became an anchoress which meant enclosing herself alone in a small room on church grounds. No one entered her room and she never left except to attend Mass. During her days she prayed, dispensed advice to strangers through a small window, and wrote the first English language book penned by a woman. We are not sure when exactly she died, but we know that she spent about two decades in that room.

A bruise is blossoming on my thigh. I'm not sure where I got it. It could have been trying to get the dogs into their kennel one night or maybe cooking in the kitchen one day. It is an astounding rainbow of pink, purple and blue and has risen to a bump. The bruise is hidden beneath my habit but when Sister Beth and I are out picking raspberries I tell her to feel it. It's just that I am so amazed at this bruise and I want someone else to share my amazement. But as soon as she touches her hand to my thigh I realize that maybe it wasn't right for me to ask her to do that. She says more to the raspberries than to me, "That isn't a bruise that's a muscle."

"I swear it's a bruise!" I say, even more amazed now but still alone in my amazement.

"No, no." She moves farther down the row.

An ex-lover texts me late at night and I see it because I am still up reading. It is obvious that he wants to hook up and it is tempting, the idea of being in bed with another body. But then I remember how I didn't like him anyway, how after sex

he would never cuddle with me and I had to outright ask him will you please just cuddle with me like, it's not like I'm trying to be your girlfriend I just want you to fucking hold me. He did hold me that night but it felt wrong and fearful even and when I remember that it makes it easy for me to text him back and tell him that I'm a nun now.

I'm not sure if nuns sleep naked or if they are allowed to sleep naked but anyway, after a few months at the nunnery I decide to start. When I sleep naked and alone in my bed there is only me to observe my body. The feeling of my bare thighs resting on top of each other and the look of my shoulders peeking out from the sheets. Me hibernating under a mountain of bedding in the morning. I am learning to love the four walls that keep me alone.

During afternoon meditation I am supposed to be chanting prayers silently in my head but I can't stop thinking about Julian.

Raspberry season is long over. The yellow and purple flowers have turned brown. It smells like snow but it hasn't snowed yet. My habit is already wearing at the hem. Sister Beth hasn't given me any more books to read so I pick my own from the library. But I would like for her to loan me a book because it would give me a reason to visit her in her room to return it and then maybe I could ask her the questions I want to ask which are, is she scared and does she have any regrets.

In the morning I woke up first and your back was to me and I pushed my body up against it and you turned around and pulled me under your arm. "You are going to be a nun," you said and you kissed me on the forehead. I loved you but it was starting to annoy me, how all you could think about was that I was going to be a nun. I wanted to explain to you that it wasn't just about being a nun. That there's a whole story.

But I don't know how it goes. I don't know how I ended up here. I mean, yes, I came and visited Sister Trisha and I went to Mass and took the quizzes and sold my things and packed my bags. But there was also the fact that I was born into a Catholic family. The way I was raised. The man who couldn't hold me and another who held me so tightly that when I tried to get out I couldn't. So I don't know if it is choice or fate or even a fatal flaw that has brought me here and I don't know how to tell the story.

If things go the way that they usually do, which is that older people die first and younger people die later, then one day it will just be me and Sister Beth in this place. But maybe she will want to live in one of the bedrooms behind the kitchen and I will live on the second floor so it would take five minutes to even walk to each others' rooms and maybe we won't see each other at all and it will feel like I am here alone. Just me and the dusty library, the living room with its stacks of puzzles. I will be like Julian but with a basement full of broken exercise equipment.

What is enough? A look. A touch. A hand pressing lightly on a bruise. The way the crowd pushes me closer to you. If it is enough to be able to manage then I guess it is enough.

You text me to ask how the nun thing is going. I text back it's going good. You write that there is a party in town next week and you will be there and I should stop by to say hi. But I can't come. You ask if it's really against the rules as long as I don't drink or do drugs or have sex. I write back saying no, it's not technically against the rules.

I have shut and locked the window in my room. There are ice crystals on the outside pane and I doubt I will have any reason to open the window for months. I must be ovulating the way I

am craving another body. I am not supposed to masturbate, but there are entire empty rooms between me and anyone else.

As soon as I step inside the house where the party is I am filled with regret. It is loud and there are lots of people that I kind of know and no one that I really know and I don't see you. But I have come all this way, down the hill, and I told you I would be here so I step all of the way in. I take off my puffy coat and scarf and put them on the bed in the other room. I find a spot on the wall where I can stand without getting in anyone's way or line of vision. I linger with a coke until I see Claire and I go talk to her because we used to be good friends. It is comforting to talk to her and she catches me up on her life. She is living with her boyfriend now and they have a dog. Then Claire asks, "Oh yeah how's the nun thing going?"

"It's going good," I say.

"Hey are you even allowed to come to parties?" Claire asks and laughs at her own joke.

"Well, I didn't tell the sisters I was coming here," I admit. "But as long as I don't drink and stuff it's allowed."

"You miss us don't you?" Claire teases.

I tell her yes I do and I tell her how you invited me. And I think I'm a bit infected by the party even though I'm not drinking. It's the smell of beer and sweat, the way the windows are starting to fog up on the inside, somebody across the room who keeps turning the lights off as a joke. And I think that's why I confess to Claire that I love you. She is shocked.

"Nuns are allowed to love you know," I say in my defense.

"Yeah, but, do you even know him?"

I shrug my shoulders. I don't really know you. But so what? It's not like I throw the word around carelessly. I would only use the word for you and Sister Beth. And my mom. But so what if I loved a hundred people. Who decided that love has anything to do with knowledge or time.

I am about to leave the party when I see you standing with your back to me on the other side of the bathroom door which keeps swinging open and hiding you from view. I walk over. My plan is to say hi and goodbye all at once. I give you a hug and when I do you put your arm around my waist and kiss me on the cheek and your hair brushes up against my face and my exposed neck. For a moment I am all wrapped up and warm in you even though you are a stranger and I am a nun and I think about the raspberry bushes and how I got lost there. Please don't say anything. I will accidentally on purpose flush everything that tells me down the toilet. I will get lost and wander among you.

TO THE ESTATE OF

The frog husk between finger and thumb
was dry as sticks—a small desiccation
in slick heat. At the edges of the sky,
storm clouds flared red. Splotches rushed to the visible
side of my skin. I'd bent to stretch
when I saw it—slack-jawed,
empty sockets. Hours

before, on the last page of a novel
about the Vietnam War,
the claims adjuster returned my call.
I hadn't left my name on his machine.
He gasped when I gave it—I'd been
reported dead.

My ovarian cysts flared
that week, my uterine lining refused to shed—
a persistent thickening. Age six: I'd caught tadpoles
and forgot them in a plastic cup. Twenty years on,
an insurance company sent a letter

to the estate
of Jessica Collins. Cyst-gripped—my middle
follicles bubbled, unproductive.

A frog's life begins as jelly—
swells with water and affixes itself

to grass-blades, waits for a spray of sperm.

In hot autumns, I pine for death. Spinning
black flecks sprout legs if they don't shrivel
in a creek bed, a cup. The stranger on the phone
was so glad his voice shook. He marked the claim settled;
I returned to my book.

A minor character
strode into the sea, and I wept. Hours later,
I bent over a dead frog, my body not more
than a lousy balloon wrapped around breath.
Someone used my name to cash out
on a false policy. No egg waits in me,
no jelly will swell. Somewhere, a bird flies
with frog eyes in her belly.

HUMMINGBIRD

How did I live so long without seeing you? Grace and beauty
Useless where I came from—no one cared for flowers. It was my whole
Marriage, right there, when my husband called me outside to see a hummingbird
Moth he mistook for a bird. Something was wrong—with it or with my vision.
It bumped against the window in the fading light, a gray ungainly static, fuzzed,
Not feathered, like a cheap wind-up toy. No bright accurate dart, but brain-dead,
Grotesque. The real thing years away—tiny nest woven with spider silk, lined with lichen—
Black-hooded sunbeam, sparkling violetear, green-backed firecrown, Calliope—
In myth, both muse and word, music and maker. To inspire and be inspired at once, a
Rarity. To find you, finally, I made myself in the likeness of what I desired, so what I
Desired—glow-throated, ruby-throated, woodstar, sunangel, snowcap, volcano—desired me.

LIKE ORPHEUS HIT STONE

Out in the cotton Fiddling
with a silver ring Cold river up
the white blades of his legs Warmed by
his charge to break one song into two
Your nose against his face like a broken wing
Like the sculptor hiccupped when he was
naming you Your last morning together
in the shade of a widow's house She's
upstairs cutting the baby clothes
into lime & daisy lace He is getting
dressed for a wedding He is carrying
a torch for your carrying a torch for him
In his breast pocket like a burned coin
he loves to finger while he looks at her
The wedding begins The wind at his back
You fall back You're thinking Orchard
You're thinking Heaven will be like the streets
after the first snow You're thinking
All kinds of walnut flowers
But you hit stone like Orpheus hit stone
His mama gets her red hair in the soup
Gets her hair in the decanted cherries
The cherries get warm Something about the way
you felt he felt when his father died He's asked you
to imagine all the flowers going out
in a purple violence You can hardly believe how soft

GRASSHOPPERS

My mother shows me a clip on her tablet of grasshoppers. There is the image of grasshoppers and two sound tracks. One track is the high whine of bug noise, the racket of grasshoppers going mad in the wilderness. The other track is the sound of angels singing with heavy reverberation—Enya meets the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. She holds her screen in front of me, and I can feel her waiting for me to comment. This is the moment where we reconnect, I know she is thinking. She raised me and guided my sensibilities, and now I will see the wonder of these insects singing sweet songs to one another.

The answer is clear to me. Forget about analysis, forget telling her that the sound track is probably fake, definitely fake. Forget asking her why this is so amazing, even if it were real, and just pause for a moment and tell her it is amazing, thrilling really. Just play the game. Just do the thing that is desired and allow happiness to wash through the household. A small token of appreciation.

“Hm,” I say.

“Let me guess,” she says. “You don’t think it’s fantastic, do you?”

“I never said that,” I say.

“I know you don’t.”

“I might. I might think it’s amazing. I might think it is out of this world.”

“You’ll find a way. You’ll say it’s fake, or nothing is credible these days. You’ll say nothing is true on the Internet and that they are only interested in selling you something or stealing your identity. You’ll tell me truth is dead.”

"Well," I say.

"This is true, though" she says. "The sound of the singing is the grasshoppers. The sound has been slowed down so much that it sounds like angels."

"Okay, then. So what?"

"It sounds like they're in love. Doesn't it?"

"Alright," I say.

"Well, I think it is sad, to tell you the truth. I think it is very sad. I think it says something that you cannot just sit back and watch, or listen to something, and be inspired, or awe struck, or say, 'that's fantastic!' I think it speaks volumes."

"What does that mean, when people say that, speaks volumes?"

"It means it says a lot. It means that there is more to what you say than what you say."

"Then why don't people just say that? Why don't they say the thing that they mean?"

"Because this way everybody knows the meaning."

It is a curse, I know. How difficult is it to just fly over the weather? How difficult is it to let the blood flow to your face for ten seconds and let your eyes brighten with wonder? Is it that difficult? All you have to do is say "goddamn, goddamn the world is a special place, play that thing over again. Play those goddamn grasshoppers one more time." How difficult is it to let the sound wave sink into all of those calcified capillaries and break them down one by one?

The truth is, it used to happen all the time. My eyes did once widen, and my heartbeat often wound itself up with amazement, and I just had to know. I think for a minute about a Sunday school teacher who once told me that scientists had located the approximate position of Heaven. He told us that scientists had counted the days backwards to the moment that God forced the Earth to stand still while the Israelites laid waste to the Amorites. Our teacher told us the scientists just kept counting backwards until the days doubled up. I had to know

how these things worked. So, I asked. I asked, and inquired, at church and at school, at soccer practice and Boy Scouts, visits to the dentist and doctor. I asked about every single thing.

TERRITORY

The mountain lion stares at the cell phone. There is a woman clicking the camera, or a man. The mountain lion does not care. The mountain lion knows his body is only separated from theirs by a pane of builder-grade window glass. If the mountain lion wanted to be inside, the mountain lion would have lunged at the flash of light. Instead, the mountain lion, long as a love seat, presses against the sun-warmed brick, a raw ache in his bones; the mountain lion knows why he chose this place.

It had been a warm spring, a wet spring, drenching the tree roots with damage we wouldn't recognize until July. We all watched the blossoms come on a month early; we were outside every evening, working our yards and spreading mulch and hedging against the strangeness of the season. When someone murmured they'd seen a mountain lion lurking on the perimeters of the paths crisscrossing behind our neighborhoods, we rolled our eyes. Created Twitter accounts called RealOmahaCougar, MountainLyn'. When the reported sightings continued, he tweeted. We could track his movements, from Giles to Harrison and another mile north to Q Street, loping inside the loop of I-680, crawling the creekbeds, trawling the railroad tracks. He was a mountain lion. No, a coyote. No, a bobcat. We traced the routes of the westbound trains screeching behind our houses to find his trail; we made excuses to run errands at sunset so we could watch for the glare of our headlights reflecting in his pupils.

We knew he shouldn't be here, but it comforted us to know

there was still some wildness we hadn't chased out of our suburbs—the prairie we'd spaded under, subdivision by subdivision. This was his turf, and he was back. We had to respect him for that persistence.

The mountain lion came from the Sandhills, the mountain lion stalked the Platte all the way from the Rockies, the mountain lion had been holed up in the bluffs, the mountain lion caught a ride on a train. The mountain lion clawed apart house cats, pounced on hares, sat in front of a mole hole for hours, waiting for that peek before prey. The mountain lion was starving. The mountain lion was satiated. The mountain lion and his network had their territory topographically mapped long before the city plats. The mountain lion was alone, anonymous, anomalous.

We went to work, we went to school. We opened our blinds to let in the day and there he was, like a fantasy, like a nightmare, like 1860. Looking at him was as safe and manufactured as the taxidermy mountain in the middle of Cabela's, a clock directing us towards fishing at 3, tents at 6, guns at 9, close-out at 12. There should have been a plaque in front of him, "Killed by __," and then he blinked. We blinked. We reoriented ourselves—we were in the ground-floor office at Project Harmony, a trauma center for abused children, for Chrissake, elementary schools flanked us half-a-mile in either direction. The children, we screamed, what about all the children?

We called the Humane Society, swearing it was real this time—no, a real mountain lion, down in Millard—and they called the news stations, called the police, called Parks & Game. We refreshed our Twitter feed of the police scanner's live coverage as they debated and decided. We wanted tranquilizers so we could carry him off to our famous zoo, partner him with our mascot "Omaha," the mountain lion we'd bagged off Dodge and

114TH twelve years earlier. But instead we watched the Youtube video posted online five minutes after three police officers took their rifles, aimed and fired, shot again, shot again, shot again, six rounds of rifle shots until one officer finally took his handgun and fired at close range five more times. Someone said the mountain lion reared up. School let out and we dropped our phones on the passenger-side seat and we waited in the pick-up line for our children and they made it on time to soccer practice, piano lessons, wherever.

The mountain lion is wary. The mountain lion doesn't give a shit. The mountain lion crossed the interstate in the dead of night, dodging the handful of cars migrating eastward, or west. The mountain lion padded beneath the chain-link overhang on Q Street at noon while our eyes were occupied scanning our phones between stoplights. The mountain lion is tired. The mountain lion has a secret: a broken leg. No one will discover the mountain lion's inability to leap and attack until Parks & Game warily lift his hundred-twenty-odd pounds onto a canvas tarp, a paw-joint awkwardly bent in death-pose, but not death-pose. His corpse is taxidermied and trophied, or burned and buried, but the mountain lion left another secret, gestating for three months; a secret sleeping along the converted rails-to-trails, taught to be skittish and suspicious like her mother. But two winters have passed and as the final traces of snow melt streamed down the gullies months earlier than the almanac-springs, she could not hold in her scream; we heard it as we jogged nearby and we paused, pulled out an earbud, tapped open Twitter and hit refresh, refresh, refresh.

CAPACITY

Consider the capacity of trees: The trees all around thinking into us. This is how we dance when it's windless & cut each other's hair. The mothers all around were expelled from the air. She dreads it when I tell— my mom was born in Fresh Meadows (Queens), but how could I ever be so sure she was a child? Pictures of my mom in a meadow: Mom in a field of dots—meadows each of them, unborn to each other. Dad was an African once, a sculptor. Made masks until the day he forgot the way his face went. Wilde: "Give him a mask & he will tell you the truth." If he gives one to you, are you marrying a liar? If you put one on & you

enjoy it, could you disassemble it in time? In sickness
he used her rendezvous of a body like a fur trapper
lost inside America. He dreads it when I tell—
the ways he welded things to other things in free-fall.
She was America & hovered down beside him.
Consider the capacity of trees: Their density confused with lovelessness.
Imagine the proteas & rhododendrons jumping all around
inside the winter thicket. Your belly dissipates into the floor
like the weather outside shaken down into an animal.
Look around: no Hebrew to protect you. No year you were born
when two souls decided to squeeze themselves into a body.
A mask destroyed into a field of dots: This was how you met me.

IN EITHER TONGUE

My father ums and ahs trying to describe it all
in his second language. Trails off at the bridge
of a sentence lost in a churning wheel of Arabic
to English, words not quite settled in either tongue.

The close the lights and turn off the door. The easy falter
of tripping syntax. His accent is long smoothed
like a hand run over and over a wrinkled piece of paper
but it's still there in the shadowed creases—

the wonder of a grown man becoming a poet or a child.
You just have to milk the situation like a cow he tells me
while tears puddle my blank Arabic school homework.
The jasmine won't grow here! It knows this isn't Syria,

even despite the sun. He frowns the words and turns
the closed-lip buds to find the light. Turns himself
to find the direction for prayer, to find the world
as he learned it, in Arabic, to fit the loud racket

of consonant laughter in such a small, quiet space.
Pack up the throat, the tongue, the happily-yellowed
coffee teeth and arrange them behind pursed lips.
English squeezes him like stiff, new shoes. He walks,

breaks them in. The nose on this glass. The long legs
on this red wine. Does the wine have the rest of its body or just
nose and legs? He wonders at the phrases as they widen
in his speech, like jasmine slowly opening to fragrance.

HIS LADY BIRD

What was it about my best friend that drew her to dark places? What was it about her that made me follow? That made me say yes when she woke me in the middle of the night with a rough bite on the shoulder and said there was someone she wanted me to meet, who wanted to meet me, and wouldn't I please get up? We were juniors in college, living in an underheated apartment off campus and sharing a bed that winter to keep warm. She woke me when I had nightmares and sang me Spanish lullabies when I couldn't get back to sleep. I made her bland meals of oatmeal and dried toast, crackers and bone broth, on those days when she couldn't get herself out of bed. We undressed in front of one another and ruthlessly criticized our bodies until we were exhausted and then drank whiskey and water until we could laugh at ourselves again. I would have followed her anywhere, and I did.

Eliza wanted me to meet a man. That's what she called him when we climbed into the cab of his pickup truck that night, her man, and she was his lady bird. He drew her into his side and uttered the awkward endearment into her hair. I didn't understand when this naming ritual had taken place, when they had achieved such a level of intimacy that they couldn't bear to be known to one another as they were known to the rest of the world. I wondered, too, what name Eliza had called me by when she spoke to him of me, but in the car, she only said: "This is her."

His real name was Raymond, and he was 29—eight years older than Eliza and I, but he worked on a farm off the interstate and Eliza thought this proved his wholesomeness. That's

where we were going, she told me, kicking at my ankles with her snowy boots, out to Raymond's farm to see his horses. It was midnight, and I had classes in the morning, but I didn't think that time mattered to wild animals, so I decided that it didn't matter to me.

Once we'd gotten out of town and onto the empty interstate, Raymond pulled three cans of beer from beneath the driver's seat and passed them to us like unlit torches in a line. We didn't think about what we were doing, not out by the farmland where the roads rarely curved, and the houses were set so far back that they disappeared beneath the palms of our hands when we pressed them against the car's windows. I drank quickly, impatient for the warmth that would settle in my stomach and bloom across my nose, loosening me. Raymond already seemed loose, settled low in the driver's seat, controlling the wheel casually with his left wrist. His free arm was draped across Eliza, and his dangling fingers brushed against my shoulder each time the car jostled.

Eliza kept her eyes closed throughout the car ride, taking short pulls from her can and humming to a song on the radio I was certain she'd never heard. She liked folk music, played at a low volume through a set of speakers inherited from her grandfather. They were the most expensive thing she owned, and she used them constantly, filling our apartment with the sounds of nylon-stringed guitars and deep, wistful voices. Sometimes, when Eliza had a record playing in the living room and I was off in the kitchen, the songs would come to me through a shared vent, like secrets breathed from the walls.

But Raymond had the radio turned to a metal station, and I grew tense at the sound of the distorted instruments and the voice strained to a scream.

"How did you meet?" I asked, hoping he might turn the music off, or at least down, at my questioning.

"What?" he shouted, without reaching for the volume knob.

In nudged Eliza, who opened here eyes slowly at my prodding, like a child wakened from a nap, lacking any sense of urgency, of need.

"What is it?" she asked.

"How did you and Raymond meet?"

"Ray," she said.

"Where'd you meet Ray?"

"You tell it best," Eliza said to him in a way that made me want to escape the car and her new, cloying affection. When we were alone, her affection was subtle, I could feel it when she set me between her knees to comb out my knotted hair or when she brought food home from the diner where she worked as a waitress. French fries wrapped in wax paper or sandwiches on thick slices of white bread. Did being with a man, her man, require showmanship? Could he not see her otherwise?

"It was just a bar. But Eliza was dancing all by herself, and I couldn't stand it. A girl who looks the way she does isn't meant to dance alone."

I agreed that Eliza was beautiful; she was tall, made to seem taller by the vast sheet of curly hair that fell to her waist, and bearing the firm arms and legs of the women in her family who had spent their lives carrying other people's children on their hips and then went home and did the same for their own. I was beautiful, too, it wasn't a characterization I would deny myself the way so many women did, but it was simpler, required a closer study. Eliza drew immediate attention, and it seemed that men felt she owed them, for having distracted them so easily, for having made herself known.

"So, you asked her to dance with you?" I asked.

"I asked her to stop dancing. To sit with me," he said.

"We talked about farming. About animals. I told him that I work at the diner, and he said they've got the worst coffee he's ever had. Shit coffee. I swear he got me so drunk." She laughed when she said this and fell into his side, as if she were still there

with him in the bar, losing control of her body.

"Been a month now," Raymond said.

I thought back over the last four weeks and tried to remember seeing signs of my friend falling in love. But I could only remember her coming home late one night, falling into bed with the sharp smell of lavender and tonic on her breath. When I reached out to move her hair from her face her cheeks were hot and wet, and she rolled over, turning her back to me.

"Congratulations," I said as I let the empty beer can roll from my fingers to the truck's floor.

Raymond looked at me across the plane of Eliza's shoulders and made a slow turn off the highway.

.

The house we pulled up to was dark, and the path between the truck and the front porch was covered in snow. I stepped into the footprints that Eliza made as she led the way while Raymond trailed behind, shining a flashlight at our backs. Gauzy gray clouds filled the sky and the moon shone dully through them. I wondered where the barn was, the horses we'd come for, but I could only see out to the edge of the property line, and I thought it was probably more of the same beyond that, everything flattened by the snow. When we reached the front door, Eliza knocked.

"I thought this was his place," I said.

"Practically," she said, turning to me. I couldn't make out her face, but I felt comforted by her silhouette. The familiar outline of her hair gathered loosely in a braid, her narrow, pinched nose. Her rounded shoulders twitching slightly as she shivered in the cold. "It's a friend's, but he stays for free."

"And the farm?" I asked.

"He helps out." She lifted her arms and placed one on each of my shoulders, as if she were suddenly exhausted. "He says he

helps out.”

The front door opened, and light fell in a square around us. A man stood wrapped in a blanket, the skin around his eyes swollen and dry, as if he'd just been sleeping or had long been stoned.

“You're so late,” he said, slowly lifting one bare foot from the floor and then the other.

“For what, Mike? There weren't plans.” Eliza had the same tone of false irritation a sister uses with her brother because she loves him, because she couldn't ever be mad at him. In one month, it seemed, Eliza had found a family. Had the two of us never really been one?

Eliza and I had met in the dorms as freshmen, bonding at first over stories of our roommates and their peculiar habits, their demands. Mine, who had run a strip of tape down the center of the room. Hers, who called her parents every night in tears over the cafeteria food. Eliza and I weren't used to privacy, to having our own space worth protecting, nor did we long for home and meals made for us by our mothers. We were both raised in towns an hour south of campus, had both shared beds with our siblings, ran our hands over the waxy, faded knees of our sisters' old jeans. We never went hungry, but we ate what was cheap: sinewy cuts of meat and toasted bread, cabbages shredded to a slaw. In our homes, comfort had little to do with food.

Nor did we miss our parents. It wasn't that they were cruel or neglectful, just indifferent. They hoped we would follow the rules, those set by them and those set by the world, and that forced us to keep our dreams small. We never knew what we wanted to be when we grew up, only that we'd grow. When Eliza and I met each other, it felt as though we'd been told to keep quiet all our lives and were finally given permission to speak. But there she was, speaking to Raymond and Mike, and I wondered what she had to say to them that she couldn't say to me.

“Who's this?” Mike asked, jutting his chin out toward me,

his hands lost somewhere beneath the blanket.

"Claire, my roommate. I thought you all should finally meet. Would you get out of the way?" Eliza said.

"What about Ray?"

"I'm here." Raymond was standing at the foot of the front porch stairs, and I could make out his face for the first time. He had a wide jaw, one that seemed made to endure long bouts of chewing, and a nose that rose slightly in the middle and flattened out towards its end. From where I stood, his eyes were just two points of light. He'd stuck the flashlight in the pocket of his coat and held his hands in fists at his sides. He seemed to me like a man, but not in the same way that Eliza and I thought of ourselves as women, as adults. We knew we had been girls once, but it was as if Raymond had never been a child at all.

"Alright, then," Mike said. "Get inside."

•

The house was filled with debris, though not the kind normally collected in a life—these shells and blank postcards, the stacks of books, the photographs too small for their frames. Instead, it was filled with trash. I sat alone on a couch in the living room and tried to count the number of cans that had been left on the table and floor, empty and crushed around the middle. Though it was cold inside, the fireplace only held damp newspapers in its concrete mouth. Eliza sat across from me, curled into a smaller version of herself on Raymond's lap, and Mike sat on the floor, unwrapped finally from his blanket. He wore a black cotton t-shirt with the words 'National Guard,' printed in red across the front and adorned with an American flag meant to look as though it were waving in the wind.

"We never got to do anything but train," Mike said as he handed a beer to me from a case on the floor.

"What?" I said, taking it. My buzz from the car had worn

off, and I felt the sudden and unfamiliar need to be drunk. Drunk enough, at least, to feel like I belonged there with the three of them, like I had sat on the same couch, missing half its cushions, a hundred times before.

"Ray and I, we enlisted after high school, but we never got to do anything but train."

"What'd you think you'd do?" I asked.

"Go to Iraq, maybe. Shoot a gun."

"We shot in training," Raymond said.

"Not at anyone," Mike said.

"Maybe not you."

"You never shot anybody," Mike said, and we both watched Raymond shrug like he didn't care if Mike believed him or not.

Eliza turned in Raymond's lap to look at him. With her knees pulled up to her chest and her hands clasped together around her shins, she looked like a child in rapture, but I knew that was only because I couldn't see her face. I couldn't see the way her cheek puckered as she pulled it between her teeth or the way her brow furrowed into a series of wrinkled lines, thin and shallow like tributaries traced on a map.

"Come on, just tell us you didn't," Eliza said.

"Don't be that way," Raymond said. He pulled her hands apart from one another and moved his own to her waist, sneaking his fingers beneath her sweater. She looked around the room at us and tried to laugh, as if Raymond had told a joke she'd hoped we'd all heard, but it came out like a cry. I didn't know what she was feeling, the prodding of his cold fingers, maybe, or the pinch of his uncut nails, but I wanted to feel it, too, just so we could talk about it later and wonder at his arrogance.

"A lady bird needs protecting," Raymond said.

But Eliza had never needed protecting. It was just something Raymond wanted to believe about her because it allowed him to believe something about himself, too. That he was powerful, that his power was useful.

"Did you know that a hawk can tear the flesh from an animal?" I asked, finishing my beer, adding it to the room's sweeping collection and reaching for another. I drank from the can deeply and gagged, feeling sick at the sudden intake. "That a great horned owl can crush you with its talons? Swans. They can kill you with the power of their wings." Raymond's hands steadied on Eliza's body, and he looked at me as though he were surprised to find that I could talk.

"What'd you say?" he asked.

"She's been drinking, Ray. Let it be," Eliza said, burrowing deeper into his lap like she could anchor his outrage with the weight of her hips

"Your friend's a bitch," he said.

From his place on the floor, Mike laughed.

I wasn't surprised by the word but annoyed at the energy I would have to waste absorbing it, converting it into something useful so that it wouldn't sit, hard and fibrous, nearly alive, between my ribs or in the back of my throat. Annoyed at the ease with which he'd found this new name for me and restless to distance myself from it.

"Where are the horses, Eliza?" I asked, pushing myself up from the couch. "I thought we came out here for the horses."

"Who told you there were horses?" Mike asked.

"Ray said you kept them out in the stables," Eliza said.

"It's what I thought," Raymond said.

"There are no animals left here," Mike said.

"Isn't this a farm?" I asked.

"Used to be my grandparents. It's been vacant since the 80s or something. When my parents kicked me out, I came here."

"I'm going out to look," I said.

"I'll go with you," Eliza said as she unfolded herself from Raymond's lap, but when she stepped toward me he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her down to him again.

I stood in the middle of the living room and looked at the

three of them looking back at me. Drunk, my vision had doubled, and each of them seemed to be sitting next to their own ghost. I preferred them that way, with their blurred and mouthless faces.

•

Out on the front porch, I tried to make out the shapes rising in the darkness around me. I thought the farmland of the Midwest was the closest I would ever come to space, though I didn't feel weightless or infinite in that moment. I tried to imagine the home as it once was, as it was still meant to be, noisy with children, ruled by their hardworking and humorless parents. There would be the expectation of order and cleanliness, and the children would despise it. They would grow tall, taller than their own parents, and they would waste their natural physicality, their broad hands and muscle-bound shoulders, to pursue school and then jobs in a nearby city. Visits would be filled with tense, disapproving silence, over career choices and unsuitable lovers, but there would be nostalgia, too, for the years when they didn't know anything but that house and each other. Now, though, it was just an escape for men who thought they should have been sent to war and hadn't known what to do when they weren't.

I descended the steps, sinking ankle-deep into the snow, and went around to the back of the house where I thought the stables might be. I felt as though I'd left campus and walked down the Interstate by myself, had wandered onto this property and sought out whatever life lived there on my own. That Eliza was not yards away from me, pressing her fingertips into the shallow impressions left on her wrist by Raymond, but was back home in the bed we shared in the winter, alone but not lonely. Because in the life I knew, the one I was living hours ago, she wouldn't have let me leave, and I wouldn't have let her stay.

By the time I had crossed the backyard, my eyes had adjusted to the dark, and I could make out a long, low structure in the distance. Inside, sections of the roof were stripped away and the moon, clear of its clouds now, lit up the empty stables, their rotted wooden doors hanging from busted hinges. Snow had come in through the roof and the warped slats of the walls, covering the floor so that I couldn't see the dirt packed there. I had come looking for the shape of the curved and muscled bodies that had slept in that dirt or tracks left by the indelicate, restless hooves that trod there, but everything that had once been wild in those stables was gone and probably wouldn't live there again.

I turned to look through the open door, across the backyard toward the house, but all the lights were off, and it looked like anyone could have been inside or nobody at all.

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The next morning, I awoke to the sound of music coming in muffled through the bedroom door. A woman was singing, her pitch so high she sounded like she might start crying instead at any moment, and I lay on my back and listened to her maintain that delicate balance between effusion and mania until the song ended in the slow picking of an electric guitar. The kind of thrumming sound I thought the moon might make as it turns endlessly on its axis. When it was over, I went into the living room and found Eliza gathering her grandfather's records and her own collection of CDs into crates.

"How'd you get home?" she asked me. Her back was turned towards me so that I had to discern her mood, the face she might be making, from the angle of her shoulder blades and the knots of her spine visible through her t-shirt. It was a form of divination I could only conjure with her.

"I caught a ride."

"That was foolish," she said.

"You're leaving," I said, and watched as the muscles in her neck tensed.

"I'm just bringing some stuff to Ray's."

"Things don't have to move so quickly," I said.

"Why shouldn't they? I'm tired of taking my time."

I reached out to her, my arm floating up on its own, as though I had spent so many hours trying to keep from holding too tightly to her that my body had grown tired and finally loosed itself. I was relieved she couldn't see me, it would have been one of the few humiliations we hadn't shared.

"Spend the day here, at least. We can go the Red Herring and flirt with the bartender," I said.

"Ray's outside in the truck," Eliza said. "You'll take care of these?" Her head lifted in the direction of her speakers, but still, she wouldn't turn around.

"Until you're back, sure."

"Come by the farm, okay? It'll be nicer in the spring."

Eliza lifted the crates from the floor and left without a coat, without closing the front door behind her.

I stood alone in the living room, staring at the items she had chosen to leave behind. Her books, lined neatly on a shelf, their titles worn from the spines. A picture of her grandfather in front of his childhood home, his face tight and unrevealing. She had saved a month of tips to have it framed. On the living room table sat a clip in the shape of a flat silver bar that she used to hold back her hair. It didn't feel so much like she was gone but like she'd left the truest parts of herself there with me, taking only her body and a few belongings to help pass the time.

THIS
IS
WHERE
THE
SINGLE
PAGE
LETTER
FROM
THE
EDITORS
WILL
GO

CONTRIBUTORS

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ANNE SEXTON published eight books of poetry in her lifetime, including *Live or Die*, for which she won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Sexton died in 1974, at age forty-five

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