fugue 57

fugue 57 Summer — Fall 2019

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Summer-Fall 2019

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$10.00

Poetry/Fiction/Essays

f u g u e

Issue 57

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate students in the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. Fugue is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and Creative Writing Program, and is published semiannually in the Spring and Fall.

Subscriptions are $10 for a year (1 print issue, 1 digital) and $18 for 2 years (2 print issues, 2 digital); institutional subscriptions are $18 for 1 year and $26 for 2 years. Add $4 per year for international subscriptions. To subscribe or to order back issues, please visit www.fuguejournal.com.

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Cover image: "Proteas Pollinators" by Meg Adamson (2017; gouache on paper). Visit www.megadamson.com for more.

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Summer—Fall 2019, Issue 57

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17TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR POETRY

Judged by Chen Chen

Winner: "Love Poem with Jellies"
by Kaylie Johnson

"'Love Poem with Jellies' begins with God and ends with a peach, vanilla ice cream, and smoke. In between, an I, a you, and desire. What gorgeous alchemy, this poem. Devilishly physical, muscular, these lines. What reinventing and gleeful dreaming of love."

—Chen Chen

KAYLIE JOHNSON

LOVE POEM WITH JELLIES

God, when making jellyfish: how
about an evil bag?

Inside: a long
CVS receipt stuck in static.

Fished out of the water,
a separated egg yolk,

you seem to melt, dear,
seem to ooze

between my two fingers
like purple, like

something I want to web
spreading apart my fingers

and sniff, almost lick,
but dip you back in

so your strings flow again
before I draw them—

make you contract
into a beautiful kissing mouth.

And I do
kiss you, and you do

sting me microscopically
like building skyscrapers into my lips

where the sky would be,
something tall to bite me

just a little, how I like,
and I do

like what else can I say?
Like, that evil bag, if I had to

say what was in it when God
tossed it into the back seat

and the window sucked it out:
a bag within a bag within a bag,

a soft peach, a scoop of vanilla,
and a cloud of smoke.

17TH ANNUAL FUGUE PRIZE FOR PROSE

Judged by Aisha Sabatini Sloan

Winner: "War-Fire"
by Jen Soriano

"I found myself thinking about this essay for days. By offering a vivid, almost cinematic look into how this particular author embodies ancestral story and trauma, the essay illuminates, with scientific precision, the ways that history lives in the bloodstream."

—Aisha Sabatini Sloan

Jen Soriano

WAR-FIRE

But the war goes on.
-Frantz Fanon

I dream sometimes of the day that the war came to the Philippines. It was a monsoon day. Raindrops fell in sheets from the sky. The water rose to flood people's nerves. Their riverine axons and dendritic trees bathed like rice plants in paddies, in preparation for the fire to come.

~

When I was thirteen, my family boarded a 747 to fly from O'Hare to Manila to visit my Lola, my grandmother, in the Philippines. On this trip I remember that my Lola took me out to her lanai to tell me a story. I sat next to her and held her hand and I remember her skin was like onionskin, paper thin, with blue veins running like rivers above delicately carved fingers of knuckle and bone.

It was 1989, only three years after the People Power Revolution had ended martial law and the 21-year reign of Ferdinand Marcos. But my Lola wanted to tell stories of a different war, the second war, in which the Pacific theater lay in the long shadow of the crown, and in the crosshairs of the eagle and the red sun. She wanted me to know about my grandfather.

> *When the war began,* she said, *we were in Baguio. And do you know your Lolo hitchhiked all the way from the mountains to Manila to join the guerrilla fighters. He became a general and he was a very good fighter. But the Japanese captured him. They took him to Intramuros and they tortured him. They took him onto the hill where he could see the*

Pasig river, maybe so he could observe how close he was to his country, but so he would know that he was not free.

They filled his stomach full of water like a balloon. Then they would take turns jumping on him, again and again and again until he threw out blood. They wanted him to tell them who were his fellow soldiers and where they were in the mountains. But he never told them. He never told them where they were hiding, or gave them any names.

I remember gripping my Lola's hand tighter as I listened to this story, then releasing it quickly with the fear that it might break. Before us was the yard my grandfather had built, more than 50 years ago he had seeded mango trees that now twisted two stories high. My Lola had grafted orchids into their branches. The orchids bobbed coquettish, splashes of white and purple and tendriled green, upon the gnarled bark of the trees.

This yard was like my Lola's memories of the war—vivid and preserved, as the rest of the country grew around them. Beyond her home the rice fields of the war era had given way to vulcanizing shops and red light district bars. Her barrio had grown from open plains into the clogged overgrowth of Manila. But here on her lanai, I felt that my Lola was still waiting for my grandfather to come home.

That day was a temperate day with a stirring breeze that mixed the scent of orchids with diesel exhaust from the street. Engines sputtered, dogs barked and the bar across the street started playing "Make It With You" by Bread. My Lola sat straight in the wicker chair beside me, and continued to tell me about my grandfather, in a steady but quiet voice:

The war ended but his body was never found. Afterward they came from the government, saying they wanted to give me a medal to honor his ser vice. And can you believe, they asked us to pay for the medal. I said, what do I need a medal for? I know what he did and that he is a hero. I do not need a medal for that. So they gave the medal to somebody else.

She later showed me a magazine that had pictures of the medal ceremony. As I looked at the man with a medal around his neck—a man who was not my grandfather, a man who did come home from the war—I thought about what my grandmother had said about my grandfather, uttered to the same tempo as Bread blaring from the karaoke bar: the war ended but his body was never found.

~

When you come from a multiply-colonized people, remembering ancestral history is like looking for bodies that can never be found.

I envy those who can construct family trees that branch back for generations. I have tried to construct ours and cannot move much beyond my grandparents before encountering lacunas that can only be filled with speculation.

I know of no official archives that contain registries or dockets of the regular folk who were my kin. There are no air-conditioned houses with basements and waterproof boxes, or secret hiding places where floorboards come loose and old time capsules can be discovered by a gleeful child like my son.

Instead there are cement blocks that house a dozen people with little room for one's own thoughts. There are clapboard cabinets with rusted hinges and molding photo albums, only the ones not swept away in the floods of the last too-many typhoons. There are museums, but they are anemic, plundered, and what's left is too often the detritus of what has been framed through the eyes of colonizers and their local collaborators.

The archives of remembrance were the people themselves who lived and experienced and witnessed and told. Like my Lola, who I now believe made it a point to tell me these stories because she wanted them to live. Like my uncle, my mother's brother, who told the same kwentos again and again and again over fried pork and San Miguel beer.

And once these living archives are gone, as both my Lola and my uncle are, and now my father as well, what's left is the inheritance of

shrapnel, the echoing of dreams, and an ever-beckoning silence.

~

Lauret Savoy writes, "silence can be a sanctuary or frame for stories told."[1] When I ask my mother about my childhood, there is mostly silence. There is much that she does not remember. There is mostly silence when I ask my parents about hard times. Silence is the sanctuary of buried trauma. The sanctuary is not a void or vacuum but a space of enduring pressure. That pressure finds its release in tendencies: avoidance, dissociation, hyperarousal, an overwhelming urge to fight.

This summer marks twenty years since my Lola's death, twenty-one years since I saw her last, and twenty-nine years since she broke silence and spoke the legacy of my grandfather into consciousness. And in these echoes I assemble an explanation, like collecting raindrops inside cupped hands. An explanation for a body grown in comfort but steeled for battle. For a mind that dreams of embers and a body with nerves of flame.

~

In my early twenties I used to have recurring dreams of the Philippines and of a mouse. They were fractured dreams. Broken scenes. In Bulacan I'm witness to my great grandfather tending the tilapia pond in his backyard. Reeds and tall grasses surround the brackish water. My great grandfather is suddenly with bamboo pole and has caught a fish, which he tosses to his wife, who catches it in her mouth and swallows it live, whole. A mouse scampers onto his bare foot. It stops to nibble his toenail before furling itself into the pond. In the distance there is a rumbling and several sharp pops. The two turn their heads, and when they turn back they have become my grandfather and my Lola, the tilapia pond has transformed into the main market of Manila, and they are running from an advancing troop of Japanese and American soldiers. The market floors bleed. There is a woman's hand with delicately filed nails, lying by itself on the ground.

~

I don't know what it's like to be a veteran of war. I have not been on battlegrounds, stepped over bodies, used them as shields, aimed at flesh to tear it apart. And yet, war lives within me. The sea on fire lives within me. I see white birds with red eyes in my waking dreams.[2]

The war lives within me.

Let's talk about this more, my therapist says. *Not everyone would say that war lives inside them.*

I tell her something my dad once shared:

After the war ended we went back to Tondo, and I remember a Japanese soldier scampering from under my school building. He did not know the war was over.

I tell her that somehow, even though I was not there, my body feels like it belongs to a soldier who continues to fight even in conditions of relative peace.

~

I have fight dreams. Flight dreams. I have thoughts while chopping eggplant on a sunny day in my white kitchen. I think about how easily this knife can cut skin and flesh. I scan the slice of street outside the window, mentally daring someone, anyone, to break into our home. At night when I walk in the street I don't look at my phone. Instead I stride with my head high, I puff my chest and gaze hard to challenge the few who walk around me to fuck with me so I can fuck with them. Fight me. I dare you. Fuck with me. I dare you. It would feel so good to let this caged rage free.

~

Psychologist Peter Levine writes that in the face of threat, we are wired to generate an enormous amount of energy that mobilizes our limbs to fight or flee. Trauma happens when our ability to do this is smothered by outside forces. During traumatic events, the powerful kinetic energy of fight or flight becomes trapped in the body. When

we are unable to complete an initiated survival action, this energy becomes locked in defensive patterns in our tissues, nerves and even bones. This trapped energy longs to be freed, our thwarted defensive actions long for completion so the feedback loop of stress response can be closed, so that our bodies know they can relax now, that we are now safe.

~

The war lives within me. The barrio lives within me. Tondo looks like this, smells like this. Smokey mountain. Rat stew. Flies on fish drying on corrugated tin balanced on the backs of tricycles. The Pasig river bubbling. Children rapping hungry fists on car windows, begging for money or selling lottery tickets like my dad used to do. Tattered flags hanging from the Santo Niño de Tondo church, thoughtlessly ripped by the wind. One cousin shot in the head, another on the lam. Knife to the throat on a jeepney and three jumped on one - all in dead bright sun.

~

Rachel Yehuda is a neuroscientist whose work may explain why people like me carry the emotions of fight, flight and war in our bodies. Yehuda made waves in the field by showing how war trauma might be transmitted genetically from parents to children. Her research with combat Vietnam Veterans found that they had surprisingly low levels of the stress hormone cortisol in their blood. This defied the conventional theory that people with post-traumatic stress disorder would have higher levels of stress hormones in their body. When Yehuda and her team later studied Holocaust survivors, they obtained similar results.

Yehuda found that many of these Holocaust survivors, like the combat Vietnam Veterans she had studied, had experienced symptoms of PTSD. When she asked the Holocaust survivors why they hadn't sought mental health treatment one of them replied, "You know Dr. Yehuda, we don't have VAs like your veterans do."[3]

In response, Yehuda established a support clinic for Holocaust survivors at Mt. Sinai. But then another surprising thing happened: clinic staff received more calls from children of Holocaust survivors than from Holocaust survivors themselves. A pattern emerged where the 30- or 40-year-old offspring of survivors consistently said they were experiencing symptoms of PTSD.

Yehuda's team embarked on another study of this population and found that children of Holocaust survivors were three times more likely to develop PTSD in response to traumatic events in their lifetimes than those who were not children of Holocaust survivors, but who were exposed to similar traumatic events. They also had similar hormonal abnormalities to Holocaust survivors with PTSD, such as differing cortisol levels compared to control groups.

The theoretical mechanism that explains these results is that traumatic events like the Holocaust can be so overwhelming they can force changes in the way that stress-related genes get expressed. In the face of extreme threat, a quick and active stress response can save your life. But because of the neurological rule that "neurons that fire together wire together," this quicker stress response can become a self-reinforcing negative cycle. The more these nerves fire and activate survival mode, the more quickly and "efficiently" they will fire in response to even the smallest perceived threat. This can lead to chronic changes in hormone and blood sugar levels that over time can result in a cascade of physical, mental and emotional health disorders, such that PTSD is now considered more of a systemic rather than solely mental disorder.

This mechanical alteration in the body's neuroendocrine response to threat can last a survivor's lifetime, and can also be transmitted directly to offspring. Yehuda's research is part of a growing body of evidence for the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Her scientific studies were among the first to show that in the bodies of some descendants, the war does indeed go on.

~

I once heard a Chinese fable about a fighting cock. Its master saw that this cock was full of fire; he was ready to fight to the death. "You have a winner there" said the master's friend, "he was trained very well." To which the master replied, "No, he is not yet ready." The master continued to train the cock and after a long while he put the bird in a ring with another fighter. The cock stood still. But when the other bird approached, the cock puffed out its feathers and raised one clawed foot to strike. The master swiftly pulled him out of the ring. He shook his head. "Not ready." He continued to train the cock, and after another long while the master put him in the ring once again. This time the cock stood still and stayed still. Even when the other bird approached and raised its claws to strike, the master's fighting cock simply moved out of its way. "Your cock won't fight," mocked the master's friend. To which the master nodded and replied, "He has been trained very well."

~

My Lola despised the Japanese army. I could hear it in her voice as she told me stories on her lanai. When she talked of what the Japanese soldiers did to her love, my grandfather, it seemed as if venom joined the orchid-diesel scent that permeated her yard.

My Lola and grandfather met each other at a cockfight but lost each other in the war.

The cockfight was in the town of Bunlo, and my grandfather was there to bet on a winning cock, while my Lola was there to support her family by selling food. The way my mom tells the story, my grandfather was in love at first sight. He knew right away he wanted to marry my Lola. But she was a barrio girl with no money or reputation and he was a town boy from a family of teachers. They were like Romeo and Juliet but instead of losing each other to feuding families they lost each other to feuding empires.

My Lola and grandfather met each other at a cockfight but lost each other in the war.

My Lola never forgave the Japanese army for taking her love away.

And I wonder exactly how much more she lost. Not every Japanese soldier raped Filipina women. But some of them did. And my grandmother was alone with three children when Japanese soldiers took over her house. She had a fourth child who was born during the war. That fourth child, my Tito Jun, was not beloved by my Lola. He was a virtual outcast and died young from too much alcohol in which his liver drowned.

~

My mom's account of the war years:

> *I was about three years old when Japanese soldiers took over our house to use as a headquarters. I remember them coming to the door and I stood between the door and the bookcase because I knew that's where my mom hid our money in a brown paper bag. But the soldiers were very nice to us. One time coming home through the rice fields I fell and broke my arm, and one of the soldiers helped me set it. But not very well, because look, I can bend it backwards!*

My dad's account of the war years:

> *During the Japanese occupation (1940-1945), the Japanese soldiers would play with me, perhaps missing their own little kids back in Japan. We did witness the atrocities when the Americans were advancing to Manila. We fled to the province, at Malhacan, Meycauayan, Bulacan during that time. I had a great pet dog colored white with brown spots named Hitler, I played with him a lot in that time. He just disappeared when the Americans came. He probably ended up in somebody's stew pot or as pulutan.*

To hear them tell it, except for the fate of my dad's dog Hitler, they were happy. It was a relatively normal childhood despite the war. They even got to play with Japanese soldiers.

Is this an ironic truth; were they the lucky ones? Or is this a trick

of traumatic memory—the repression of the painful in favor of memories that are easier to live with? Or perhaps their parents worked tooth and nail to preserve their childhood innocence. Perhaps a combination of all of the above. Not every Japanese solider threw babies upon bayonets. But some of them did.

~

Why does war live within me? Is it because of my Lola's stories? Or what she and my parents left out of their stories? Or because of the trauma of war and colonization embedded in my genes?

Sometimes I think I live my grandfather's actions. Both his incomplete action to fight for freedom, and his incomplete actions to escape capture, to escape torture, to come home to my grandmother and live the rest of his life in times of (relative) peace.

~

At the end of the second world war, Manila was one of the most devastated city of the allied front, second only to Warsaw, Poland. A photo of Manila at the end of the war shows a city razed to the ground, the remains of buildings jutting from the earth like the jagged teeth of exhumed jawbones. Was my grandfather's body in that wreckage? How many of my other relatives, my kababayan or countryfolk, were similarly reduced to remains?

When I look at this photo, I see a mirror for the marrow-deep despair I have felt, a despair that often feels much larger than me. The thing is, there was no Marshall Plan for Manila, nor was there one for Warsaw, yet Warsaw received great support from the Soviet Union and others, to painstakingly rebuild itself. Manila, in contrast, was left in the wake of warring empires, and all but abandoned by its closest master, the United States.

Yet the city of Manila has lived on, and continues to grow, its neighborhoods transform, its rivers are reclaimed.

I've learned that our nervous systems can grow and transform and be reclaimed in a similar way.

How do we rewire that which precedes us? Dendritic trees singed. Family trees truncated. How do we heal scars as deep as genocide? As aged as colonization for a near 400 years?

I would like to know more about the grandfather who did not go to war, but who played music instead. About the great-grandfather who was an arbularyo, a healer and a fisherman.

But their stories lie in silence while I hear the insistence of more martial spirits.

~

I have learned from my somatic therapist that processing trauma through the body is more important than processing details through the mind. There is so much I'll never know, not in my thinking brain. But my body knows enough, that my pains and fears, my anger and readiness to fight, are things that are connected to the histories of war I've inherited. Knowing this gives me a sense of stronger resilience, but it does not solve everything.

It does not change the fact that I still have recurring dreams of violence.

It does not change the fact that on my doctor's behavioral health questionnaire I answer "no" to the question: do you have access to guns? And I feel deep relief.

It does not change the fact that when I take Teo to a play space that has air guns, I feel transported to an actual warzone. As my body buzzes I have to hold myself in check. It takes a full body bracing of my limbs to walk away from small boys shooting foam balls at my back.

~

This is burning that ignites survival and freedom dreams, but demands a cooling.

I am sitting in my therapist's office talking about anger. The rain patters on the window outside but the typical Seattle winter does nothing to cool my flames. I tell my therapist that I feel I've been

angry my whole life. And that the healthier I get, the angrier I feel.

My therapist reminds me that anger is the second stage of grief. It is only six months after my father has died. She also tells me that anger is one of the first emotions to thaw when trauma is unfrozen from the body. This knowledge lands on my body like rain on sun-baked soil.

My therapist tells me to envision a volcano erupting, and that if that doesn't dissipate the anger, to envision the volcano erupting even more. This envisioning has been shown to help bring the anger to completion, without linking it to aggression against anyone else.

I think about a volcano erupting, and am amazed at the sensations that result. Pleasure. Completion. Relief from drowning around the heart.

~

Once, at a time when my chronic pain was at its worst, I went to a silent meditation retreat where we spent long moments walking in the woods. We were allowed to send notes to other participants, and I received one from a woman who wrote: "During walking meditation I've noticed your warrior stride. Shine on, warrior sister."

A part of me was flattered, but at that time I felt more like a bruised banana than a shining warrior. I had to spend most of the meditation time lying down because my systemic pain made it unbearable to sit.

I also resist glorifying the warrior. The chronic pain I manage from central sensitivity syndrome, peripheral neuralgia and complex PTSD has long felt like the impact of my own anger turned against me. My internal warrior has nearly destroyed me.

I wonder, too, how this will affect my son. He also has a fire within him. He is in many ways a stereotypical cis-gendered testosterone-influenced boy. He turns his fingers into pistols and aims them at people's faces, and when I try to gently explain how his actions might make others feel bad, he does so even more. He asks endless questions about the military and the police. He is my extra accountability

to model peace over aggression. To model power in vulnerability and connection rather than power through force.

Every parent gets impatient and loses their temper. This is natural. What is perhaps less natural is the shorter fuse some of us carry along with historical trauma. We will have to work harder, says Rachel Yehuda of those who parent with transgenerational trauma. We will have to work harder.

And so I do.

I work harder.

And I journey.

To navigate hormonal floods, sparked by tributaries of disrupted nerves.

To find my grandfather's body in my neurons and to find his peacetime longings in my soul.

To practice mothering and connecting and rewiring a new circuit for inner peace.

To become the fighting cock in the Chinese fable trained so well, they never had to fight.

---

1 Lauren Savoy, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape.* Counterpoint, 2016.

2 After Melissa Sipin, "My Lola, The River." *Black Warrior Review,* Issue 43.2, Spring/Summer 2017.

3 Inverview with Rachel Yehuda, "How Trauma and Resillience Cross Generations." On Being Studios, 2018.

PERENNIAL

From this distance
my childhood sounds like
my name called constantly
from across the yard
my mother leaning from
a second story window
the clothesline wheel crying
like a gull like Joni Mitchell
singing about a blue light
before I knew what
the words meant
but mostly I remember now
the things that didn't happen
our magnolia in bloom
behind the swingset my sister
walking away from the crash
laughing glass from her hair
or summers in our grandparents' river town
where gardens still come up
in the yards of abandoned houses
and I should be grateful
for impatiens and hydrangea
for the medium who said
she never felt a thing
said it in her voice
as if she had my sister
in her pocket like a ghost flower
she blurs and we call her
ever back into focus.

AND STILL WITH LIGHT IN YOUR EYES

Two foxes run circles
around the cement wall
of a reflecting pool.

Someone has unnamed them.

I point them out to you,
and they stop
to consider us

through the glass. We're just

sitting down to breakfast.
You pour salt
into piles on the table,

toss pinches over your shoulders.

I should know better
than to speak, but I call them
Conclusion and Prudence.

The renaming casts shadows

on their bodies. Our plates are full.
A basket of pears rots on the back
porch. There are no animals

left to be seen, but the scent

of fur lingers around the cement
pool, and the pool
remains empty.

—Runner-up, 2019 Ron McFarland Prize for Poetry—

Karthik Sethuraman

THE RIVER

When I dig a hole and can't bury myself,
I leave an opening to watch for stray moonbeams, carry a portable
television to monitor the eight o'clock news. Reach me
through the cable station, I'm waiting for the vernal rains

much like my grandmother before she was cast into the river,
already in pieces, teeth in a cup, kidneys tumbling locks, kidneys
turning grey. Through her keyholes, light left a residue, hopeful,
something peeling, the flesh of a jackfruit, a carcass washed up on the bank,

the scent of her hands the last time in the ambulance, my father holding her
littlest finger up the stairway, the alley between the mess hall and the internet cafe.
I pretend he told his siblings, over the telephone, that to love is to love alone.
When she went, sheathed in her own blanket, catching a glimpse

of my grandfather walking down the hall, the dial on the fan pushed to rotate,
to keep the eyes away, and her youngest son, my father in the next room,
the kitchen, blending rice and yogurt with salt, did she look down, did she
see her footprints in the dirt next to theirs, her marks on the floors of her home.

DEAR ERIK [HONEY]

You raise honeybees in your backyard—a horizontal hive that bears a ghostly likeness to a child's coffin. Did I ever tell you my father was nearly blinded by ground bees? He was eight years old, visiting his uncle's dairy farm in Illinois, a city boy whose idle pleasures were the rolling fields, tilting barns, and long black snakes holed up in the trees that bordered his uncle's creek. One day he caught his boot in a nest of yellow jackets and was swarmed, swallowed by a mad vibration, and if not for his uncle's coming, his long strides and labor-hardened, leathery arms, my father may have died. He survived, but his eyes swelled shut; he was blind for 3 days. *I remember in your cottage outside H-burg, you taught me how to make kasha. I asked you to clarify one small part of it, like for how long to cook the buckwheat with the eggs, or maybe how to know with certainty when the grain is adequately toasted—you got angry, started singing: "It ain't me, babe. It ain't me you're looking for!" instead of helping me. I recall, too, the time my mother caught a milk snake on the rusty tong of a hoe she'd been wielding to weed the hostas; my father, fearless, pinched the snake by its frantic neck, delivering it across the road to widow Tisdale's fields.* Nothing stopped my father in my uncle's weedy yard the day I climbed the old forbidden pick-up truck behind the shed. In a dead sprint he ran past my mother, aunt, and cousins—all standing flat-footed as I got stung, and stung again, and stung *again*. I recall, in my frantic, narrowing ken, my father's figure looming larger the nearer he drew, until with brazen, blind love, he threw himself into the swarm.

NOTHING LIKE THE SOUND OF RAIN AND SIRENS

while ghosts knead absence
to your sheets I sleep alone

All the trees on your street have fallen

Mother
and I go

up-wound past bodies
skintorn sinewsplit

Maybe they like we are tired

Mother
so long

standing and so outstretch their phantom
limbs gather wind willing their due

rest

Mother
our minds

are caved in crowns trepanned and timber-
cracked

I read Plath
open windows to let out the rain

Mother
don't bore

too deeply to boomred blueflash awake
to thrust

of key in lock clocks
resetting unwelcome advent

of light
Remember

Mother
the moon

is no door

THANATOPHOBIA, OR SLEEP ADDRESSES HIS BROTHER

Night: the world boils. Men
toss sleeplessness
inside their sheets like stars.

Because I look down.
Because a man holds his only son
amongst the spillage

of buildings, & children
sitting on debris
after the bombs, their bodies

casting shadows
on to stone. The boy hangs
from his father's arms, a hand folded

to his open neck, his open eyes
cold nickels looking past me,
past the white sheet

of linen. How terrible
the fabric when it veils
the end. How terrible

the night for him, the sleepless,
Brother. When an American soldier
swallows a grenade that bursts

as it slips down his throat, a Mexican
immigrant, a woman beaten
half to death for stealing

a pomegranate, breaks
the fruit's skin open, red
from her wounds

like the inside of the fruit,
or the inside of the soldier,
& doctors put to sleep

a girl to replace her heart with a new
beating. Soon that artificial
sleep turns the same terrible

fabric. Her mother,
quiet as a desert in the hall,
admires Wojnarowicz's "Untitled

(Buffalo)," that great beast at the edge
of the photograph suspended
in air forever.

& the girl's father reaches
her mother's arm to keep her
from plunging off the rooftop

to fall into you,
Brother. I know nothing
but impermanent rest.

How can you do it each time
you take & take
& wrap your permanence around

sleep? Brother,
you terrify me.
You make my heart

gallop like buffaloes
in the white desert. Large bodies
advancing their fall.

Kayleb Rae Candrilli

DROUGHT BECOMES ME

What if this Father's Day we all sit quietly and remember the devastation
of biblical fire. Arson is only named arson if it was a man's will to name

it so. When a home burns I can only think of the small explosions
that make the whole. Under the sink aerosol cans swell like God's

broken Sun & the flair of chemical burns can be glamorous & gay
if you are desperate to feel beautiful. I would like to feel beautiful.

My desire cannot be shallow if there is no water to measure.

One day I'll write a poem with no water at all.
And then, how will we stop this burn.

Amanda Marbais

DROUGHT

The second year of drought begins with the policing of water. On the radio, the Ag Department warns of an 8% drop in crop moisture, a 40% reduction in yield, the retreat of rivers, the promise of dust storms.

X lights one of her mother's cigarettes by the window in her bedroom.

X's family talks with agents who have driven through a hundred cities to touch the hides of dying livestock.

She uncaps a red Sharpie and puts away the black. I try to decipher why she's called me rad, why she's covering my knee with flowers.

She goes on about the Peace Corps, the expulsion of the pregnant girl at school, and the hypocrites at her parents' country club who spray tons of water on worthless grass.

I gave a blow job on that golf course, I say.

Gross, she says.

What if she were actually jealous? The possibility electrifies me.

—

I don't mind X's father, who shows us how to shoot tequila and who sucks salt from the inside of my wrist and says *mmmm.*

I am taken with the Swatch phone in their nook, beside a notepad preprinted *Don't forget....*

> of X and her siblings blaring slasher movies, the fake screams filling the house as their bodies lay jackknifed on leather sectional sofas in their own TV room.
>
> of the piles of marshmallow birds in their snack drawer because X's mother is blind to her daughter's anorexia.
>
> of framed photos of her smiling family in Nags Head and Steamboat.
>
> of the way she will abandon me to spend junior year over seas.
>
> I am transfixed by the light spilling over the yard, forty rooms ablaze to accommodate teenagers coming and going,
>
> by the unattended liquor cabinet where a stolen bottle yields something hot and herbaceous.
>
> by Gretchen the tuba player voicing what everyone feels —"X, your parents are way cooler than mine." Perhaps Gretchen loves her too, in that self-destructive way that leaves a mark.

I envy X's gabled dormers wide enough for our narrow asses. The way she tucks shorn strands behind one ear and slowly licks away a sliver of cigarette paper like we're in love. But we're not.

And those ridiculous Christmases where waves of gifts stretch from the entryway to a paneled room they have the balls to call a library, though it's just a den.

the way X uses my presence as an excuse to ignore her mother who grows increasingly drunk. Every hour she yells up the stairs - *It's Christmas, for godsakes.*

the way X and I climb out the window into the cold to avoid getting smoke on her overflowing box of geometric tights, neon tights, snow-covered tights, tights dotted with stars, tights with sailing ships and tights with gold lame skulls, tights with houndstooth, sharp and gray.

the way X tells me I'm the first to listen, and in response I kiss her shoulder.

I'm there when X returns from her exchange program and calls everyone *bitch.*

when Rotary holds a single meeting about her sexual assault.

when her days of crying remove any pretext of privacy between X and her mother, who checks for clean underwear by making X stick a thumb in her Levis and fish out the white cotton before she can leave the house.

when the drought closes the pool, blows dust every where, and bankrupts X's family grainery.

when her mother dies of cancer while we are both in college and X leaves me a message calling me the one name worse than bitch.

when, on the second day of the wake, their house will be covered with dark

stains, crumpled napkins, red straws, and the petals of unattended flowers.

when the extended family sleeps on every available piece of furniture, mouths open, exhaling a mixture of earth and lime, looking painfully like aged versions of X.

And X's aunt finds me in the yard, presses her nails into my bare back and rails about her sister's silicon implant, its rupture and cancer. She won't tell X and neither can I.

Now me and X don't talk for mundane reasons, and anyway, I wouldn't know what to say.

—

I wish our mothers had been like Anjelica Huston, or someone equally magnificent, gifted, or kind. Someone who can't be ignored. Someone with the right look, the right lines, the right delivery. Someone who makes you wish it all meant more.

She'd say, *Face it. You're both special.*

And, I'd say. *Shut the fuck up, mom.* But, I'd know she was right. She's Anjelica Huston.

Anjelica Huston would say the things our mothers should have said:

You need a skill, a plan, and a vibrator.
Don't smother your anger with reflexive kindness.
Consider freezing your eggs.

Drought dusts the cars with a layer I can write in. Days after the wake, I make loopy letters with my finger, enjoying the burn of the metal.

I write *you beautiful bitch* on the bumper of X's BMW and draw a heart beside it.

—

On the last day of high school, before her mother's death and before I have failed her, X yanks off her tights in the alley behind her house. She uses my shoulder to steady herself. She hands me her underwear which I shove in my pocket. I'll think of it during class. She is wearing an oversized sweater embroidered with yellow cat heads, which her mother says is maudlin, but I love it because it touches her skin.

Just a few hours earlier, her mother cornered me in the upstairs bathroom, head wrapped in a scarf. She said, *please, please, watch out for X*, and I held her skeletal body while she cried. But I did not tell X. I did not say a word, even as she leaned on me. Because I am too proud. Because I am weak. Because I cannot love freely. Because I need everything from you.

On their bathroom radio, the Department of Agriculture reports grain silos were the preferred source of wealth. When it rains it will really flood. The USDA has sent out agents to measure the depth of topsoil before it all blows away. It has not lost sight of the futures, nor does it know what will happen, but it will keep records on what was lost.

Alisa Gaston

SUGAR

It has been a repression of some sorts. Either by way of myself, or by others, but now and again, reminders enter like contrast dye with such tenacity that I understand my inability to fade my thoughts no matter how diligent the effort. Then there is the stigma. You are either with the dogs or you are not. While in graduate school, I longed to write about an incident, a precise failure of mine. The instructor of my creative nonfiction class requested an essay with divulging material, raw material, content that makes a gut wrench. One stipulation arose. He warned that we, the students, could choose any topic except dogs. He stressed this point. Accordingly, I did not write about *the* incident. Even after receiving my master's, I kept the memory buried, unused in my published pieces, fearful that writing about a dog would equate to mediocrity, appear amateurish. All of those years, close to twenty at least, I was not able to confess my dreadful mistake, so at last, the written admission is not for a curriculum, or a particular reader, but for the dog. The dog that did not belong to me.

What has finally given me permission, or allowed me to take permission by force, is a simple picture book that I read several times a week to my six-year-old daughter. She has many books, but this is one of her favorites. It is about dogs, each page a profile of a specific canine, name included, along with dubious behavior, cuteness, ancestral tendencies, or the assumptive outlook of pure breeds, cross breeds, and mutts. And then there is Sugar. The illustration of Sugar resembles the dog from which I must somehow ask forgiveness. Therefore, I will call the dog I write about Sugar. This is not about one of my pets I mourn for because of a sad, end of life. It is not reminiscent about an ill-behaved canine that brought me humor and lessons on life.

#

Years ago, I began volunteering at an animal hospital. I had every other Friday off from my fulltime job as a web content writer, so on the alternating Fridays, I spent the afternoons in a back area of the hospital where countertops overflowed with various lab equipment and supplies, a computer, an industrial sink, a stack of files—with any required accompanying medications—spread in a way that revealed each file heading, and a white board on one of the walls with a list of roughly fifteen to twenty dog names. Next to each dog name a family surname had been written.

On the other side of the room, through a glass door, there was a long corridor with the lights off, and kennels down the length of the wall, small ones stacked on top of large, about twenty-five all together. In the kennels, sleeping dogs of every size curled on blankets. All of the dogs came from a kill shelter. They had recently been adopted and the hospital provided free spay and neuter services. It was my responsibility to help the animals wake from anesthesia, and lead them to a small room where I handed them over to their new owners and explained post-op instructions. Then at the end of the day, I wiped feces and urine from each kennel, took the blankets to the laundry room, and filled each kennel with a clean blanket in preparation for the next day of newly adopted dogs.

The hospital sat in a rough part of Denver known for guns, gangs, drug deals in the large park, and the occasional pilfering of entire wheels off cars in the middle of the night. Local rumors claimed the wheel theft was some type of gang initiation. My neighborhood bordered this troubled area and my wheel was taken at one point; the culprits even left my small pickup truck jacked up on cement blocks.

None of the vet techs made much effort to speak to me. When I offered help—if say, they were looking for a bottle of meds or a packaged IV tube because I knew where to find such items—for the most part, they ignored me. Stressed of course, busy always, maybe they simply remained focused. But I am a realist. I am an active pessimist. I agree with Andy Rooney. *The average dog is a nicer person than the aver-*

age person. So I left those vet techs in their distant bubbles and became absorbed in my main task of helping rescued dogs, which was nothing but magnificence in my pessimistic world. Each Friday, when it was time, I turned on the light and walked down the corridor peering into the kennels. One after the other, as they came out of anesthesia, I assisted groggy dogs out of their kennels. They would flop into my lap, and I cuddled and wooed them as they licked the air, releasing the metallic smell of narcotics. Rather than rough paper towels, I used soft tissues to wipe the goopies from the dogs' eyes, and waited for them to gain balance and composure before I put them back into their kennels where they remained until the owners arrived.

And then, the chaos would begin. The scratchy, muffled voice of the front-desk admin would filter out of the speakerphone, announcing which family had arrived for the corresponding dog. I always rushed through all the required steps because the new owners came back to back, and after handing over a dog, I had to stay in the examination room with the people until they felt relaxed leaving with their new pet. I must say, that although I was required to expedite this process, I was meticulous. I could have shortened the instructions, given a small percentage of the full dialogue, but I did not miss any crucial point: In a few hours, give the dog a little food and a small amount of water or ice cubes. If this stays down for an hour, offer another small meal and water. Do not allow your dog to guzzle unlimited food or water. Do not let your dog lick the incision. If you notice redness, discharge, or discomfort, bring your dog back to the hospital. Do not let your dog walk up or down stairs. You can take your dog on a brief walk but it must be on a leash, even in the yard. Do not let your dog run loose or roughhouse with other pets. Do not bathe your dog for one week.

The last thing I said to the people before they left was something I added on my own. "The most important rule is to never, ever hit your dog. If you get frustrated, walk away, and then come back to your dog when you've calmed down. You can always call us if you need help." It was my way of convincing myself that no harm would come

to these delightful creatures once they left my arms.

For two hours of every four-hour shift, I hurried. Take the dog out of the kennel, put the lead around its neck, lead the dog to the exam room, give the instructions, rush to the back room, wipe off the matching names from the board, take out the next dog. It was difficult to miss a beat, impossible to stop for a water break, impractical to take a moment to go to the restroom. After she hired me, the volunteer coordinator had emphasized that it was crucial I keep on top of the releases.

#

Almost a year later came Sugar. It was a typical day with many dogs, but she stood out. When I took her out of the kennel to help her wake, I noticed her beautiful, short-haired white coat, the endearing black patch that surrounded her black nose, her profound maple-colored eyes, and her sweetest of sweet personality. The vet's guess was that she was a mix but mostly American bulldog—not to be confused with an English bulldog, those stubby, stout dogs with massive under bites and prone to heart attacks. She weighed roughly sixty pounds. The call came and I took her to the room where her new owners waited.

The two men wore baseball caps, and one looked as though he'd been working construction all day. He was dirty, had worked hard, it seemed. He was standoffish. I will call him Aloof Man. The other man was pleasant, jovial, and clean. I will call him Friendly Man. When I brought Sugar into the room, neither of the men reacted. They were not like the others who cooed and swooned and exhibited pure enthusiasm about their new canine companions.

I said, "Here she is. She's really sweet." I squatted down and rubbed her ears, patted her back. They did not move. Aloof Man took a step back, inspecting her from a distance, so I looked at Friendly Man.

He said, "I'm not the owner, he's the owner," pointing to the dirty man.

I said, "Oh, okay, well she's been spayed of course, so I need to

give you the post op instructions." I handed him an instruction sheet.

Aloof Man whispered something to Friendly Man.

Friendly Man asked, "Is he aggressive?"

I remained at the dog's level, continuing my affections. "She's a female, and no, she's incredibly nice."

I stood up and began my delivery.

Aloof Man spoke to Friendly Man again.

Then Friendly Man asked with his lighthearted tone, "What's he like with other dogs?"

"She's very social."

"So he's not aggressive?"

"No," I said, "she's not aggressive at all."

Another whisper.

Friendly Man asked, "What kind of dog is he?"

I aspired to have patience, yet I must admit, my irritation expanded due to his refusal to acknowledge the dog's gender. A simple oversight, nothing to cause the level of my annoyance. But I felt it, regardless. At this point I saw a red flag. Yet, the warning moved through the automatic system of my brain that files things under "do later." The part of my brain that dominated at that moment was the reflective system that commanded me to stay on task.

I corrected him again. "She."

Friendly Man laughed a bit. "Right, sorry, what kind of dog is she?"

"They think she's an American bulldog." I felt confident saying this. I owned a copy of the official publication of the American Kennel Club, *The Complete Dog Book*, and I read it like one might study a thick classic, an instructional manual, or a bible.

The two men looked at one another. I stared at them. I heard the crowd in the waiting room, a thick acoustic press against my sense of responsibility.

"Do you want the dog or not?" I asked, neglecting to hand over the leash.

"Yeah, we want him, no problem." He smiled at me again.

Through the small window in the door, I noticed all the other new owners lingering. Nevertheless, I did not hand over Sugar. Friendly Man stood with his hand out, but still, I hesitated and kept her by my side. My reflective system switched on once again and finally, I gave him the leash.

As I left the room, the "do later" part of my brain instructed, *write down the owner's address*. I knew this was not allowed. Perhaps even illegal. Only, I didn't care.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a flurry, my scrubs damp with sweat from my chaotic yet organized scuttling. When all the kennels stood empty, and I worked on my hands and knees with a spray bottle of disinfectant and paper towels, I realized my blunder. I charged to the countertop where the pending files lay each day. The vet techs had already filed them away in a cabinet. And this is where I shouted in my head, *fuck!*

As I finished my shift, I tried to think of some way to find that file. I pushed my memory hard to retrieve the last name of Aloof Man. I tried to envision the file header, to recall the color of ink. Nothing came to me. I drove home, looping the expectation that I could somehow find that address because the dismal notion moved in and rested. I could attempt to ignore it if I were that type of person, yet I knew what it was Aloof Man wanted and it sickened me that I had given Sugar to him. Although she was mostly American bulldog, her appearance looked somewhat similar to a pit bull.

I called the volunteer coordinator. I told her what had happened and how I felt that something was off. When she asked what I thought the problem was I said, "I think he's going to use her for fighting."

"Why do you think that?"

I recounted the men's strange questions and disconnectedness from Sugar. I told her I regretted handing her over.

"We can't withhold the dogs from the people, you know that. They're the new owners."

I asked if the hospital could request a "well-check." She told me they do that with every dog.

I said, "No, I know, I mean a proper well-check by the police. Not just the regular phone call to the owner."

"We need to start with the owner."

Distress flared up on my part. "That's fine, but what do you think the guy is going to say when you ask him how the dog is doing? 'Well, she's not fighting like we want her to, so we're beating her to make her more aggressive, and if that doesn't work, we'll just use her as a bait dog.'"

Her silence made me realize that I did not know her. In the last year, I had spoken to her perhaps three times and only in passing. She hired me, then expected me to release dogs and clean up piss and shit. She did not hire me to analyze the potential results of adoptions.

At last she said, "We'll do what we need to do."

In the middle of the week, I broke from writing and editing web content at my "real" job and phoned her. She told me someone from the hospital called to check on the dog, but they couldn't get in touch. I took a deep breath, made that magic breathing kick in to relax tension, and asked again if she could have the police drive by the address. She said she would have a caller try again. Magic breathing. I asked if she could call me after her caller spoke to him. A "sure" in that dismissal sort of tone.

That Friday, when I went in to volunteer, I stopped by the volunteer coordinator's desk. "We got in touch with him, everything is fine," she assured me.

My argument was pointless. It didn't matter how many times I asked her to have the police drive by, knowing that she could easily find the file to get the address, whatever her intention, she would not do it. I could not stop thinking about Sugar. Each evening, when I walked my own dog, I wondered in what sort of condition Sugar lived. The realist part of my brain claimed that my thoughts made no sense. That I had no proof someone was mistreating her. No proof that her survival depended on what she brought to a backyard fighting ring. Only, I knew the truth. I could say it was in my heart, a gut feeling, my intuition. Except, it was logic. What those men asked me

only made sense in a dog-fighting realm.

Shortly after I sent Sugar into a presumed horrible existence, I stopped volunteering. When I had given notice and explained to those around me that I was quitting, no one there asked me why. I disappeared without anyone saying good-bye, not the vet techs, the vets, the administrators, all of whom I had seen every other Friday for an entire year. I had great respect for those people working in a difficult place. Dealing with injuries and fatalities. Once, after one of the vets had to euthanize a dog, she walked to a room where she kenneled her own dog during her daily shift, let the dog out, and held it while she cried for a good ten minutes. It was the only time I had witnessed a visceral reaction in the hospital. I understood the intensity of their responsibilities. I recognized their commitment to show compassion while having to suppress displays of emotion. Their detachment was a simple requirement, or result, of their professions. It made me realize that if they did not concern themselves with a volunteer leaving, then why would they concern themselves with one dog they had spayed and passed along?

#

Years later, while I wrote my essays in graduate school about anything other than Sugar, Denver passed breed-specific legislation that banned the ownership of pit bulls. Within three months, the police and associated vets and shelters had euthanized almost 300 dogs because of misconceptions about the breed. I knew this because I had written a piece on the subject and interviewed one of those officers. That "dog article" made it into my graduate-study collection of writing because I created it for a different instructor in a liberal studies class, and because the base of the content was about regulation—it was not a "sappy" dog story.

Recognizing that wherever she existed, Sugar had more than likely been mistaken for a pit bull by the authorities, and had been thrown into the mix of unjustified disposable dogs, I knew they must have confiscated her. I wondered if she went into the euthanasia room with her tail wagging, unaware of the needle that would soon

end her life. Or if she had been dropped into a metal box with other dogs and tried to jump out before the worker sealed the lid and gassed them. Maybe she never made it that far. It is not difficult for one to understand what horrific things I have imagined she went through.

#

During my time at the hospital, after coming home one evening, I had misplaced one set of my scrubs. Years later, while cleaning, I found the scrubs with a sticky note shoved in the pocket, with Aloof Man's address. I must have written it down in automatic mode and forgotten it in the chaos. After I told my husband, he and I drove in the middle of the night to the man's house in Denver. My daughter had not yet been born, so we had this liberty. There was an alley behind the house and we parked the car a short distance away. I held a bag of dog treats and a leash. I looped the end of the leash through its handle to create a slip hole. The house had a four-foot high, chain-linked fence and directly behind the fence in the backyard, Sugar was chained. When my husband and I walked toward the fence, a porch light went on and Sugar barked. We ducked behind a dumpster. The light went out. We walked near the fence again. The porch light went on. After we realized it had a motion-activated sensor, we relaxed a bit. We snuck around the dumpster and saw her in the glow. She could barely move around the space surrounding her doghouse because of the short length of the chain. Her water bowl lay on the ground empty. She barked at us. My husband had doubts. He whispered that she looked mean. I threw her a treat, Sugar inhaled it, then barked again.

I continued to throw her treats, and with each one, she barked a little less. Finally, in a calm state, she stared at us. I climbed the fence, keeping a safe distance between the dog and me. My husband scanned the alley and nearby houses to be sure no one was coming. I used a soft voice to speak to her. When I did this, she suddenly became submissive and cowered. I gave her a few more treats as I placed the leash's loop over her neck with caution, then I detached the chain. Up close, I saw the scars on her muzzle, on the top of her

head, on her neck. A piece of her pure white ear was missing.

My husband walked close to the fence between us. I was careful as I lifted Sugar by placing my arms underneath her chest and abdomen, then I handed her over the fence to my husband who held her the same way. He placed her on the ground. We led her out of the alley, down the street, and into our car. She slept during the hour-long drive to our home in Loveland where we took her in as ours, healed her, and adored her. Sugar is safe.

#

Only that never happened. I wish it had. I never found a sticky. I never found Sugar. I only imagine over and over again that it could have happened. This thought is a fight on its own chafed by as much disarray as a dog in a ring. I cannot forgive myself. I believe I am responsible for Sugar's probable inhumane survival as well as her cruel death. Despite the fact that over the last two decades I have adopted two dogs and released them from appalling circumstances, paid monthly donations to animal advocacy groups, reported the abuse of a neighbor dog to my local animal welfare agency, and participated in annual walkathons to raise money for animal shelters, I cannot relieve myself of this culpability. I want to believe that I would do these things despite my experience at the animal hospital because I am *that* person. The one who cries during films not when the people die, but when the animals die. The one who takes injured birds to the wildlife rehabilitation center.

#

As I read to my daughter, I squeeze her into me, brush her hair back with my fingers, kiss the top of her head. She has softened me, for sure. We look at the clear yet subtle brush-painted illustrations of the picture book's Sugar. She is curled up, sleeping on a plush bed duvet. The author tells us, "Sugar doesn't want to go outside, or take a walk, or go in the car. She's not ready to eat, and she wants the covers back over her head." The presumed similarities in different circumstances make me ache. As my daughter traces her tiny finger over the page, my Sugar lies next to me in my head. I hope she is forgiving.

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Major Zalasar, animal control manager, Denver Animal Control. Personal interview. 21 July 2005.

TEETH

I talk in my sleep of bladed women
and the blades I feel growing from my feet,
the leaden jerk of my worthy, ascending heel
pulling me through some angelic membrane
and splitting the blue heavens
with androgynous ferocity.
My hair is so soft,
and I have wings too big for the stars
erupting from where my breasts would be, propelling
the Earth toward its final resting place
far off where incineration
by sun erases any trace that I've ever loved wrong
(or ever *been* loved wrong).

My moan at 2 AM is a widening gyre
of throat calling for the oneironaut's
kiss, the amphibian adventurer
who will learn to breathe in my dense
dreamfog, pirouetting with my iridescent
body of flame and water.
A lover in command of the elements,
atomic, alchemic.
What can I say? I'm a romantic. I reek
of it. I want it all, and anyone can taste that
on the nape of my neck.
        But I have made myself too singular too often
in service of this great and terrible shackle.
It's time I let myselves out.

Dreamer, I have teeth. I have teeth that don't fall out,
and that makes me a priest.
I contain opposing multitudes,
which is to say I am both
a mouth and an altar.
I am relentlessly geminid, unremittingly plural.
My knees will not touch the ground
for another thousand years.

OSCILLATIONS

I am like a tree in the woods;
when you are not here
I don't make a sound. *You should*
hum, you told me once,
I always hum; it takes up time.
I bask in the wilderness of your sound,
small and wordless as an insect
in a field. It is a mystery
that our bodies can bond
to this world only once. Meanwhile,
the earth rings like a bell, its eternal
purr laboring to heal open wounds.
And I'm reminded, again, of you
as I study two ammonites
at a local museum, white as pearls,
preserved in a clump of stone,
side-by-side, the empty shells curling
against each other like the horns
of rams, locked, perfect, as if trading
wisdom, whispering to one another
the tiny rumble of earthquakes
hidden inside of them.

Mika Seifert

THE WAR 5.2: A REVIEW

We ordered the War 5.2. It came with high ratings. Only two wars, in fact, rated higher, the 4.8 and the 7.3, and for a while there we were leaning heavily towards the 7.3. It had everything we were looking for in a war, and in spades: high-decibel ruckus, rampage galore, fracas aplenty. It had also been named war of the month for three months running by WarAdvisor.com.

"Well, then, that settles it," I said, but just as we were getting ready to order, my friend Matt drew our attention to the expert's comments for 5.2. Right up top in the pro column, it said, "highly recommended for amateurs and first-timers." We had never ordered a war before, and so sanity prevailed. We put the 5.2. in the shopping cart and clicked on Buy. Less than ten seconds later, a new message appeared in the inbox. You've ordered the War 5.2., it said. From everyone at *BlowUp*, a heartfelt thanks. Your war should be with you in about two weeks. We couldn't have been happier.

But even after three weeks had passed, the war was nowhere to be seen. We typed in the twenty-digit FedEx tracking code (getting it right on the third try), and our hearts sank when it said "Processing." What, not even shipped yet!

Next, we called the *BlowUp* hotline, and after forty minutes of listening to Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries in endless loop, we were told to be patient. The BlowUp intern spent another ten minutes rebooting the system and searching the database until finally spitting out the reason for the delay, letting us know, in badly mangled English, that there had been an error. The war had been sent to the wrong address. Apparently there was another town by our name somewhere in Iowa, and that's where the war had gone. Then the mistake had been discovered, but not before nine houses and one

school had been leveled, lawsuit pending. Now the war was back in Indiana at *BlowUp* headquarters, awaiting maintenance. It should be ready to ship in a week's time, but would we care, in the meantime, for a gratis sample of *BlowUp*'s newest flagship offering, the Cold War 6.1?

What was there to do? We said yes to a week's delay, and also yes to the Cold War sample. And let me tell you, was that ever memorable! It was right on time, too: suppertime the next day a rumble announced the arrival of our goodies – a grey, somewhat ordinary-looking plane with BlowUp written, for superior exposure, on its underbelly, circled the town appreciatively, once, twice, then dropped a cloud of something mysterious that sparkled like Christmas lights, then rapidly descended and enveloped us in a mist of chemicals. *Twenty-four hours of Cold War delights*, the *BlowUp* ad had promised, and that, it turned out, was right on the money. I can only speak for my family, but we were really climbing up the walls there for a few hours. Well done, indeed, *BlowUp!*

And what of the war itself, the 5.2.? I have to say, that was a big letdown. Of course, our judgement was somewhat clouded by the fact that it was so late in getting here – in that time we'd read up extensively on other wars, gotten other, better recommendations, and generally felt cheated out of making a more informed decision.

To be fair, the decibel level was satisfying; in fact, it was ear-splitting a lot of the time. The equipment, too, was state-of-the art, and visually the whole thing left very little to be desired. But that was it, basically, for the pros.

While the piloting was generally expert (only two crashes, and those in fields outside of town), it was a mixed bag, all things considered. With some of the pilots, it was obvious they were intent on giving us our money's worth, circling overhead with real flourish and getting our blood going and the adrenaline moving. Then again, in other cases, you really got the impression they were only doing it for the

paycheck, an in-and-out kind of thing, and wanting only to drop their ordnance and be done with it. A disappointment!

If called on to summon our grievances with one word, it would be this: acting. The whole thing was never quite believable. And though it was good acting, it never went beyond.

A different complaint we had was with the composition of the war. And *BlowUp*, if you're listening: mix it up more! With the 5.2., it was more often than not, one thing done to exhaustion, followed by another, and then another. Two days of nothing but carpet-bombing, three days of rocket-propelled grenades, house-to-house fighting until we were sick and tired of it. When, at the end of the week, the tanks finally rolled through – a highlight, according to the manual – we had long lost interest.

A few malfunctions, too, drew our displeasure. As a nod to the family-minded among us, we had specifically ordered the 9 to 5 version of the war. Yet, on at least three occasions, we were woken by heavy shelling in the middle of the night. This did not go over well with parents.

So, in a nutshell: more cons than pros here. Not nearly what was promised, and casualties, among townsfolk, were high.

Would we recommend the 5.2.? Sure, why not? But bear in mind that it can never be more than an introduction. For the full experience, you really have to follow it up with the 6.4, the 7.1 and the 8.3. We cannot, therefore, in good conscience rate the 5.2. higher than a C minus.

That said, be sure to bomb us on *Trenchbuddies*, and check out our recent reviews of the War 7.8, the Siege 1.3, and the Mushroom Cloud 9.2.

A LESSON: IN ETHEREAL MANNERS

if i could lace my fingers through hers i would. no body any more though. she hears me thinking about food. it comes out of the air. she comes over to the spot and holds out her hand her carrot to a dog. it turns away. that's mean. she whispers. sorry, sorry. puts the carrots away. tries to zip her jacket. jams her thumb. lazy fingers. ha. have fingers vs no body anymore. half fingers. ha. she frowns. sorry, sorry. i try i think something about light being where it isn't. she hears me think something about light.

Tianli Kilpatrick

THE IMMORTAL JELLYFISH

We squeezed under the couch and met in the middle. In second grade, I wanted to try everything I saw around me. We wiggled closer, the tall dressers and white slats of the closet shrunk away. I blew on a spider's web and watched it disintegrate. We pulled ourselves along by the wooden slats above us into a tight spot that pushed our heads into the carpet. We giggled. We counted down. We kissed. And the second our lips touched, we scooted away from each other as fast as we could, heads hitting the edges of the wooden frame. Laughing, we agreed to never do it again.

My first kiss with a boy was consensual.

*

I was five years old the first time I was stung by a jellyfish and so the obsession began. While snorkeling around St. Thomas, I swam through a cloud of almost invisible juvenile jellyfish. The nematocysts decorating their tentacles coiled around my skin like I was a fish, venomous, tight, unwanted. Jellyfish hunt by waiting for their prey. They can't dictate the direction they swim, merely drifting with the currents, pumping their bells to move their tentacles, showing a semblance of control. They hide strength in their vulnerability. They cannot control their movements, but they know exactly what to do when they touch something. For all their softness, they know how to be deadly. I scratched at those itchy red welts the juveniles gave me for weeks.

*

Late at night, the distinction between Crete's olive trees and the Aegean blurred. Below the stone wall, I heard goats settling down for bed, rabbits shifting in their cages, the peacock murmuring to himself. In the loft, I pushed away from Vassilis and walked around the table cluttered with empty raki bottles, bottles that I had offered to help clean up moments before. Downstairs, I paused at the door

to the room my study abroad roommate and I shared. Looking up to the loft windows, Vassilis's frame blocked the light from inside but I could still make out his thick beard, the curls, the roughness. Closing the heavy wooden door, I checked and re-checked the lock. I tiptoed past my sleeping roommate, past the little kitchenette where our laundry hung drying inside open cabinet doors, and into the bathroom. Staring at myself in the mirror, I brushed my teeth twice and wondered if the centipede that had been behind the sink was sleeping. In the darkness, the scared girl in the mirror held my gaze and I could not ignore her. Together, we thought about guilt, about tongues, about what-ifs. From the open window, the animals were silent, sleeping, as I paced the threshold between kitchen and bathroom until 3AM.

*

I joke that I blame all centipedes for the fact that I was assaulted. When I see one weave across the tiles in my bathroom, I hate it for being a cousin to the one in Greece, for making me remember. I still see the body curled against the marble countertop, my body curling inward away from everything trying to touch it. The centipede's flexibility rivals that of a jellyfish. The way they bend, contour themselves to their surroundings, no fight, no questions. Maybe I blame the jellyfish for not having a better self-defense mechanism, for not fighting back when it should. Or, maybe I'm envious of the security it draws from being vulnerable.

*

The next morning, after a breakfast of yogurt, honey, and mountain tea, my professor brought me back to the loft. We sat across from each other at that same table now cleaned of raki bottles. The sunglasses in my hands shook as I played with them; the click the arms made against the table distracted me. He listened to everything I said, unmoving, waiting until I was done. I told him what Vassilis had done, about brushing my teeth until even the taste of raki was gone. My throat tightened when I told about Vassilis watching me from the loft window; my professor said he was probably waiting for an invitation into my room. I told him this was not the first time someone knew me too well. I told him too much.

*

Jellyfish kill more people than sharks do every year. In rape prevention training, girls are taught to yell *fire*, because no one comes when you yell *rape*. Maybe next time I'll yell *jellyfish*.

*

I've discovered there are advantages to being assaulted. My body's awareness of space and touch is heightened. I know the safest seat in a restaurant is with my back against a wall. I flinch when my boss hands me a stapler, and everyone laughs. I provide some comedic relief at work because my jumpiness can always make people laugh. My desk is immaculately organized because I need to know where everything is and when something has been moved. Late at night, I work alone with my computer screen as the only light, and I feel safe in the darkness.

*

Three months after Greece, I went to Zaza Ink in Massachusetts alone and asked them to tattoo a jellyfish across my ribs. They questioned me, asked if I wanted color, if I wanted shading, if I was *sure* I wanted it on my side. I told them it was my own drawing and a solid black outline was all I wanted. I remember this big bearded guy in a black tee-shirt, black leather vest, and sleeves of tattoos didn't intimidate me. We talked about poetry and his interests in Whitman and Plath, how English and writing were his favorite classes in college. For the hour I laid there smelling cigarette smoke and listening to the buzz of tattoo guns, I didn't flinch once.

*

It took me years to write the word *rape* and even longer to say it aloud. The power four letters have that curls the tongue down feels wrong. It originates from the Latin *rapere*, the French *rapir*, to seize, to abduct, to take by force. Perhaps it's the absence of letters that carry so much weight. It's not a word that can be misspoken, nor is it a word to be misunderstood. It requires the speaker to confront the word and all its implications; it demands too much. It's a word that we interchange with guilt, a word that makes us remember but not reflect.

I've learned that in making other people laugh, I mute myself. I've learned that overworking is a form of self-harm. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth talks about sexual assault survivors oscillating between a crisis of life and a crisis of death, between the nature of an event and the nature of its survival. The event and the survival correlate, leaving the victim in a constant state of experiencing both. I've learned that rape is a word that ends conversations.

*

Just to see if it could be done, researchers in Dallas, Texas created a saltwater and peanut butter mixture and fed it to moon jellies. Apparently, they took to it as well as the phytoplankton and zooplankton that make up their natural food sources. So now, peanut butter jellyfish exist. That's something. I wonder if the researchers thought about the implications of forcing an unnatural food on these sweet jellies. I want to know if the jellyfish ate it because it was the only option provided, or if they genuinely liked it. I wonder if the jellyfish could feel the peanut butter swallowed inside their bells, the oily texture against their tentacles, the lingering taste. I wonder how natural it is to feel disgusted by my own body.

*

Five years after Greece, and I still don't kill centipedes when they weave across my bathroom floor. Instead, I watch their legs move in rhythm, and I step aside to let them pass. I'm fascinated by the fear they bring, a fear that has little to do with being an insect anymore. I am so afraid of the next flashback.

*

My sleep patterns drift, amorphous, untethered, the complex shapes of night terrors, of jellyfish. A smile is the easiest lie. I know how to make myself so tired I can't cry. I know I cannot forget my own blame. I know not wanting to die is hard work. I watch the banners of lights from passing cars dance across my ceiling, never fully reaching into the corners of the room, and I know.

*

That dead jellyfish washed up on the beach? The one you're poking with a stick? It will still sting you.

*

I still feel his hand on my shoulder, his alcohol breath against my cheek, his rough tongue too large for my mouth. I feel him when I don't want to in the touch of others. A colleague flirts with me and I'm suspicious, then he smiles and I don't see a beard, I don't hear lyre music, and he's harmless. A student sits outside my office waiting, not for me, and for a second I consider walking all the way around my office block to avoid passing him. We make eye contact and now I have to walk past him because to turn now would be awkward. Because before it somehow wasn't. At night, I wake up mid-scream, suffocating. I can't breathe through the hand across my mouth. His voice, "I enjoyed our time together," fades with the dream. The hand across my mouth is my own. I don't dream in color; I dream in the weight of a body pressed unwelcome against mine.

*

Deeper water jellyfish are red, purple, green, yellow, striped. The jellies that live closer to the surface tend to be colorless. As a child, they found me in the Caribbean, leaving scars across my legs. Fifteen years later, I found clear ones in the cold Aegean at Galaxidi, taunting me with the red flower-like organs floating in their bodies. Jellyfish are prevalent across the globe and have even ventured into freshwater lakes and ponds.

*

I can bring fire back from the brink of death, breath life into greying coals. I can blur my traumas, forget where the symptoms of one bleed into the symptoms of another. I don't remember when the panic attacks started, but I've learned to quiet them, keep them from disrupting people around me. Sometimes the aftermath of trauma is worse than the trauma itself because of how the brain decides to remember. I wonder if holding a hot coal will make me forget.

Sometimes I binge countless episodes of *House* and *Sherlock*, loving the characters' suicidal tendencies and I consider sticking a knife in a wall socket. Burning wood turns grey, then white, flaking and unfolding like the exoskeletons of ancient insects, like the arms of jellyfish.

*

Our first night in Athens, while our cohort slept, I followed my professor through the city looking for live music. In one little open-air restaurant, we found two musicians playing a bouzouki and a tambourine, and another man singing. We sat at a little table and ate chicken livers and potatoes. I fell in love with the melody of *S'agapo giati eisai oraia*, a folk love song, where the narrator loves simply because the person they love exists. The small crowd knew most of the songs, and their voices rose to the rooftops of the narrow cobblestone street, my heart rising with them, untethered, free.

*

Adults who recalled a childhood sexual assault only upon the trigger of a second assault often maintain a silence of both traumas. This decision not to speak is not the same as an inability to speak. These recalled memories, and the questions of self-doubt they bring up, steal agency from the survivor even to admit traumatic amnesia. Rather, we relive the events through flashbacks and dreams. The slightest smell, sound, or touch can bring us back to a trauma and the game is guessing which one. In the late 1880s, Freud introduced the concepts of dissociation, the creation of a second consciousness with a different awareness of space and time, to trauma theory. I've given the sound of bouzouki strings the power to switch my consciousness. The taste of ouzo candies is a blend of anise and raki, full-bodied with sheets and sand, and my seven-year-old self is standing in a loft overlooking the Aegean. We always lose the game.

*

Jellyfish mature from polyp to medusa. There's one species nicknamed "the immortal jellyfish" because it has the ability to travel back in time to the polyp stage. At times of stress, the cells convert back to

pre-mature polyps and the jellyfish's life starts over. I wonder if each stressful meltdown is an attempt to regain a previous self. I wonder if the jellyfish prefers a previous self.

*

When asked to see pictures of Crete, I don't show people the acres of olive trees, the lighthouse at dusk in Chania, or even the Samaria Gorge. Instead, I show the picture of our group standing in an arc behind Vassilis, our professor, and a few other staff members of the estate where we stayed. I describe learning to make *yemista*, *tzatziki*, and *dakos* from scratch with Maria, the head chef. The late nights when Vassilis sometimes brought friends over who drank until they fell out of their chairs, until he had to pull them away from our table of ten college women. When Vassilis played an instrument, he rocked to the music, eyes closed, his thick beard resting just above the strings. I don't know why this is my go-to picture for Crete. Maybe because in despite of Vassilis's actions, my week there was the most fun of the trip. Maybe I'm still trying to understand how those than co-exist.

*

Jellyfish survive without brains, hearts, ears, or bones. However, some species have 24 eyes, some of which can see in color, and they breathe through their thin skin. I guess that compensates. Instead of brains, they have nerve nets: a system of interconnected neurons without tangible form. These nets are flexible, allowing the jellyfish to sense changes in the environment and respond accordingly. Many have bioluminescent organs that glow in patterns to attract prey or distract predators. I wonder if jellyfish have memories. I wonder if they ever hurt each other on purpose.

*

The word trauma comes from the Greek τραὺμα meaning "wound." Originally, *trauma* referred only to an injury of the body; however, in 1893, Freud built upon the trauma theory research by Jean Martin Charcot and Josef Breuer and used *trauma* to refer to an injury of the mind.

Greek words nag at me. Their curves and accents captivate me, the ancientness of the alphabet and its continued influence today. They compel me to interrogate the etymology, the sounds, making me repeat it until I think I'm saying it right. While in Greece I learned the word χαρμολὐπ—*harmolypi*—which translates roughly into "beautiful sadness." It's the feeling of being both sad and joyous at the same time. A hesitation between two versions of consciousness. It's the liminal space between a crisis of life and a crisis of death.

Even with the assault, Greece fascinates me. I cannot forget the beautiful golden sunrises over Delphi, the handprints of ghosts in Arkadi and Akrotiri, the violence of Santorini's caldera. I cannot ignore the way this land didn't feel foreign, how xenos means both "stranger" and "guest," the people that greeted me with kalimera each morning. The florist who gave my cohort flowers and wanted nothing in return.

*

Moon jellyfish get their name from their white color and shape. Where they swarm, the waters turn milky, as if white cloth floats just under the surface. I held one upside down so I wouldn't get stung, felt gravity pull the body into the shape of my cupped hands. Its tentacles hung at awkward angles. A jellyfish doesn't have muscles to move away from a hand, but it has a similar fight or flight response when threatened as humans. I wonder if being held upside down, helpless to move, made it too feel vulnerable.

*

The night he assaulted me, our cohort had gathered in the loft for dancing and drinking. We learned the traditional line dancing styles of *hasapiko* and *sirtaki*. We each took a turn in the ouzo dance, tiptoeing in a repeating pattern around a shot glass of raki while our cohort threw white paper napkins at us.

Eventually, everyone cleared out to go to bed, and only my professor, Vassilis, and I remained at the table. My professor stood to leave, and he asked if I was going to stay. Vassilis was still playing the lyra softly and I stayed because I loved the music. We talked about my studies in college and my trip in Greece so far. He asked me if I had a favorite Greek song, and I told him about my first night in Athens

at the open-air restaurant. Vassilis picked up his bouzouki and played *S'agapo giati eisai oraia*, his voice deeper than the man in Athens.

Maybe that lulled me into a false sense of security. Maybe I'm an idiot for not reading the signs. I walked into this situation, but more importantly, I didn't leave. I can't forget that.

*

"I can't imagine you letting someone rape you," my friend says when I tell her.

*

Jellyfish are plankton, not fish. Their name *cnidarian scyphozoa*, the "true jellyfish," combines the Greek for "stinging nettle" and "cup." Their bodies cocoon poison, the kind that seeps into a victim's flesh, leaves scar tissue, creates memory; the kind that is both respected and feared. However, the comb jellyfish, a primarily deep-water species, is not a jellyfish as it doesn't have stinging nematocytes like its relatives. These jellies have adapted to rely on a transparent body and flashes of bioluminescence to both attract prey and startle predators.

*

His tongue explored my mouth and now my own feels too big. A large beer belly rubs against mine. Hands pin my wrists down. I can't flip myself over. I wake up when I kick the wall, and I wonder if that ever bothers my neighbor. My skin crawls and I drag myself out of bed to shower at four in the morning. I scrub until I can't feel my own skin; I turn the water temperature up until my skin mimics floating red organs, until the steam patterns the mirror like a hundred moon jellyfish and I can't see myself.

*

The Portuguese man-of-war is not a jellyfish. Rather it is a siphonophore, a colony of individual organisms that only survive by working together. The colony on top is gas-filled, which the jellyfish can deflate in order to sink from threats on the surface. Like a network

of neurons, they must all decide to fight or flee. An indecisive jellyfish is a dead one.

*

My ghosts followed me across the country, from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts to Michigan, into conversations about a colleague's thesis on *Fifty Shades of Gray*, into my freshmen classroom and a student's lewd comment, into my apartment at night when I can't lock my door right. Each night I spend too much time turning the bronze deadbolt, hearing the solid click as it finds home. But it doesn't sound right. The passing cars light up the walls but their gaze falls short of the lock. I hear other people coming home; I hear them close their doors; I imagine they know how to lock them correctly. In the darkness, I stand in front of my door unlocking and locking it until it feels safe. The metal stays warm from my fingers.

Molly Brodak

THERE IS SUCH A THING

Juncos
blink in
like electrons,

an illegible
pageant

the mind screens
for the body
to believe.

Ugly honks from swans
above— *I'm here I'm here*

is all they say, scientists say.
But there is such a thing
as a spell,

a hook
of tones,

opiate,

like a habit
anyone can put on.

A drum is struck,
a chord locks,

I'm here I'm here
is all it says.

And it's helpless,
my body,

which both
is and isn't
me.

A deaf
mule,

a melting
pebble,

irresponsible

for its demands
and its stupidity.

But there is such a thing
as an idea,

and idea two
to hide idea one.

Snow
masks and
unmasks the slope.

The face, least
of all the self,

burdened
with all of it,

all clarity,
recognitions,

blush of inner
unspooling,

blink of love
for another concept

behind a face,
or the face
itself,

that image
in chains.

Jessica Yuan

THE CLEARING

opens as the thicket opens
its flatness out of retreat,
hedging in the straight bar
of sunlight which narrows
those shade-spotted eyes,
worriers dodging the visible
against the better sight
of satellites sweeping dark
and burn and slow and rot
and transgression beneath them
above the field. A belt of power
line has scorched its minimum
established width, undulating
as the bird flies. Now the little ones
have marked their leanings
through a slower, growing trace:
mice claw, yellow clouded bee,
thread of rainfall, lateral heft
of deer, the migrations, chain-
wrapped boot, chuting trunks
down the lake, the infrared chase,
the wiring and jetstream overhead.

*

When the power station
gathers its reins, they needle
into stone at the other end
of town through a rubber gasket
puncturing the plumbing wall
splayed above main street's
only lawn-patch, descending to
the valley crease now covered
with rail line and marble.
They begin with foundations,
a return to productive use.
They take decades of coring.

They hit ruin and export ruin.
The ground sours with acid,
metal, septic hoardings. They clear
it all. At night wet globules rise
beading out of yellow clay.
By morning there was water,
thin glaze of it buttering the slope.
No miracle. But enough to doubt
what we anchored to that century.

—Runner-up, 2019 *Fugue* Prize for Prose—

Joseph Aguirre

L'ENCYCLOPEDIA DU MIME: SELECTED ENTRIES

I. Man and Cigarette

Throughout Mime's history, no pantomimed bit remains more underappreciated than Didi Dedeaux's "*homme et cigarette*." Dedeaux enjoyed fame within his lifetime but was posthumously forgotten. While Deburau defined the essential sadness beneath Mime's buffoonery, Decroux provided Mime's athletic curricula, and Marceau lifted Mime to its highest expressive heights, it was Dedeaux who best embodied the slumped, dolorous essence of Mime.

Dedeaux's best stage piece was, without question, "*homme et cigarette*." It came toward a show's end, always after a particularly vigorous bit, like "*le promeneur de chien*" ("the dogwalker"), "*le sonneur*" ("the bellringer"), or "*la chaloupe qui fuit*" ("the leaky rowboat").

The bit starts with Dedeaux acknowledging his exhaustion, breaking the Fourth Wall. He stoops, pants, mops forehead, and appeals to his audience, *A break, si vous plait?* Their laughter grants permission. Dedeaux leans against the invisible wall to pull an invisible cigarette from an invisible pack. Missing his invisible lighter, he begs a light from the front row.

He saunters back to center stage, flaunting in his left hand the cigarette. As he draws it toward his lips, he coughs. Startled, he glares at the cigarette.

J'accuse! says his face, as if he's just recognized a disguised enemy. *How could I forget?* You *did this to me.*

Another cough. He holds the cigarette at arm's length. He turns his head away, but his left hand, moving as if hijacked, flutters back toward his face. He whips around to catch the cigarette sneaking up on him. He regards the cigarette, two minds warring on his face, disgust but also... lust.

Capers ensue. Dedeaux bobs like a boxer and the cigarette chases. He tries to fling it away, *Hah!* but it sticks to his hand. At last, his right hand slaps it to the ground. Dedeaux stands above the fallen cigarette, sides heaving. What has he done? He paces around it, agitated, then agonized, then hysterical. Shall he breathe it back to life? Can he let it die? He pulls himself away, toward the edge of the stage, til something

in him breaks. He dives to the cigarette, scoops it up, and attempts resuscitation. He puffs. He stops. He looks to the audience. Sorrow dawns across his face. The fire is out for good. Again, he coughs.

After "*homme et cigarette*," the audience always rose to wild applause. The show could have ended there, but Dedeaux always did one or two more bits. The transcendence always dissipated. This lack of restraint was possibly why, though famous in his lifetime, he is now obscure, or perhaps his extra bits were some private joke.

Backstage, Dedeaux swabs off his makeup. He looks without paint, in baggy gabardines and a rumpled blazer, like any of the City's million middle managers, flattened between domineering bosses and mutinous subordinates. Dedeaux takes an envelope left during the show on his dressing table and puts it into his briefcase. The envelope holds payment from the cigarette company. Above half the avenues in the City, this company's billboards show Dedeaux on a bench, holding his invisible cigarette, blowing a visible ring of smoke, the slouch of his shoulders saying, *Ah, well....*

From the theater, Dedeaux travels down the street, beneath a few of his billboards, through crowds that sound like choirs of crows. He enters his neighborhood bar. The bar is dark and somber, full of men wrung out by Progress, the ones who wash in and out of factories in faceless waves. No one recognizes him without his paint. The other patrons, here avoiding their families, wear lumpy coveralls and stare into pilsners. Dedeaux sits with a pint and watches the clock's hands chit chit chit around the face. He has a cigarette, a real one. When his beer empties, he orders another, gulps it, puts down his money, and leaves.

At home, his wife lays in a hospice bed, hooked by tubes to several wheezing machines. It has been a long sleep. Dedeaux holds her cold hand. From deep within her dream, she burbles a message in a new language, and in his own telegraphic code, he squeezes back his answer.

II. A Missing Tongue

People become mimes for inscrutable reasons. An exemplar of such reasons, and another forgotten mime, was Pierre-Paolo Gregorius. Gregorius was noteworthy for spending his whole life, to the extent records tell, in character. He slept in his black skullcap, turtleneck, and trousers. Every morning, he dabbed a fresh white face, black brows, and black eyelids over the previous day's paint.

His style was unique in that he never opened his mouth. His range did not seem limited by this. Mouth closed, he still made broad smiles, woeful frowns, and looks of spasmodic horror. His eyebrows were almost inconceivably elastic. Along with his persona, the mystery of this restraint vis-a-vis mouth movement captivated the public. As a young man, Gregorius was discovered busking on the platform of the Metro. He rose to stardom in the City's major theaters.

His oddities made sense when, during a retrospective of his work held at the height of his fame, Gregorius told his history onstage, or rather, pantomimed it:

> *The sun, the sea, sand and sunbathers... my home was a seaside town. I had no place to sleep but the beach. All day I walked up and down the shore, feet in the waves, watching beautiful people come and go. I lived by stealing the snacks they brought in baskets... but the birds, the clever wheeling birds, marked me and everything I stole. When I approached a basket, they swooped down upon me and gave me away. Because of them, I was many times beaten. Finally, I found where they nested in the dunes. One night, I snuck upon them, to wring their necks and crush their eggs, but the birds woke when I approached. They swarmed, pecking at my face. I covered my eyes, and they pecked my arms. I screamed, and they pecked the tongue right out of my mouth. So now, I speak not with my mouth, but with my hands, these hands that fly now like birds.*

This explained everything. You'd mime too if you lost your tongue. It was the same as the sharpening of a blind man's hearing, or the strengthening of an amputee's remaining limbs. Of course, you'd say, "I'd never trade my place for his," but seeing his pantomime, you'd almost wish some misery might grant you your own powers.

After his retrospective, Gregorius left the City for a seaside town. He performed on the boardwalk and slept out on the beach, always in his makeup. For some time, he was a minor curiosity, but soon he attracted no more notice than the man stuck full of safety pins or the robot woman in silver spray paint. He gave thousands of shows, fed crumbs to the seagulls, and one day passed in the sand under someone's forgotten umbrella.

At the morgue, somebody opened his mouth. Inside, Gregorious had a perfectly whole tongue, with no signs of atrophy or affliction. *His life was a long con!* the papers decided, *and the pain behind his artistry a contrivance!* Why did he do it? He had no friends, no family, and no known origin. It was impossible to say.

No matter his inspiration, his power was real. Gregorius drew real sorrow from the gap between sign and signified. Because pantomime is pure creation, creating his fake generative urge, a fake tongue stump, and all its fake attendant trauma was perhaps his masterwork. Perhaps his lesson was that we're all missing vital organs of expression, that our lives are dumbshow, or perhaps he was just some hopeless freak.

III. The Deconstructionist

Mime's canon neglects, tragically, many luminous women. One was Yvette Jeansonne. Jeansonne studied the pedagogy established by Copeau, expounded by Lecocq, and perfected by Marceau. As a student, she inflected this method with her own satirical pungency. She was a prodigy, but to join a paid company upon graduation, Jeansonne needed the Academy's *imprimatur*.

For Jeansonne's audition, she chose to play a girl in a poor, provincial town. This girl all day slogged past nosy clownish townspeople, enduring their gaze and gossip. She bought baguettes, borrowed books, and jilted a boorish hunter. Throughout her errands, tension settled on her like snow upon boughs. Even her father, her champion, himself an oddity to these townspeople, could not fully understand her experience. Only when she sat with her book, alone beneath a tree, could she feel relief, though the boughs of her soul remained burdened.

Aspirants auditioned in simple white unitards in a theater empty but for the Committee, five men mostly hidden behind padfolios in the dark sixth row. Jeansonne performed with poise and verve. As she finished, the Committee whispered amongst themselves.

Their foreperson addressed her. "Your technique was polished, your pacing professional, your material… moralizing, but your interpretation innovative. We *would* accept you, but your mien, alas, was lascivious. This Academy does not present burlesque. Good luck with your future endeavors."

Jeansonne was newly aware of her body. It felt not like an artist's brush, but like a burglarized apartment. Were they right? Was her posture too coquettish? The baguette phallic? Her ingénue disingenuous? Could she grovel before this Committee in a subsequent audition? Could she quit her vocation?

Jeansonne pointed to a man at stage left, the one waiting to audition next. "They wear the same costume as I!" Through the man's unitard, his nipples and what looked to be a codpiece were visible. "Yet their work isn't sexual?"

The Committee shuffled their padfolios. Nobody answered her.

"Excuse yourself," the foreperson said at last, and pointed to the door.

Now blackballed, Jeansonne began her experiments. She donned a black unitard, then thick, formless sweatsuits, then costumes: nuns, mummies, and reapers. She dirtied her face, blacked out her teeth, and splattered herself with blood. Sometimes she worked on a dark stage with only a flashlight, miming solely by lurid mugging. She crashed open mics across the City. She was dragged from many stages. In these years, she presented the pieces that are now critically essential, though poorly remembered: her "Nervosa Suite," the thirteen-hour "Pain of Childbirth," and "Hooker Begging for a Bed," performed verité on the streets of the City's entertainment district.

In clubs, bars, and coffee shops, cretins feasted on her performances. Her commentary enraged them, her composure enraged them, and her own controlled rage enraged them most of all. She seemed to give them a canvas on which to paint their perversions. Once, in a wet gutter, she tested her dislocated shoulder, having been flung through the door of a downtown hookah lounge, and wondered at the value of her battle. She wondered also what it was her younger self wanted so badly to say.

Her final performance was "*Le Rêve*." By then she was an infamous provocateur, and elderly. She rented a warehouse and set up a stage in the middle of the space, encircled by risers. An audience arrived, knives honed, ready for some fresh experimental affront to their sensibility.

Jeansonne stepped onstage in a white unitard, bowed amid jeers, and then, in the face of that mob, yawned. At center stage, she lay on an invisible bed, stretched beneath invisible sheets, and slept. She dreamed a dream to all but her invisible, and remained there, at long last happy, indifferent to vegetables, fruits, curses, and the weight of a world's interpretations. They fell on her like feathers.

DIANE, IN YOUR SHADOWS

Diane / what's it matter / anyway

I / can't see / your ghost

Can't / raise any / belief

Believe / that what / closes

You / may open / me

I / love / you

Can't / hear your soul / buzz or

Be / your mirror / circling

You / we are—not / two

Anymore / shadows on / daisies.

DAYS OF

days of waking days of kindness of
resentment:

the problem is
to neeed everyone
with such precision.

this summer,

i have been waiting for the
center,
shouting 'center' toward
the change.

i have waited for the water
in the center, for the
caulk to wear
away the other; shut

/unshut it so
for her to
say,

how have you been this summer ?

i tried to be intrepid and be
radiant. i tried to be a craftsman, granted
more
than i could keep account
of, naturally.
how have you been this summer ?

i will not eat.

i named a paragon for weather.
i swam a stream long cross the other
round resplendent
solitude.
i will not eat
without the center;
i am saving you
money, promise money
is on its way.

how have you been this summer ?

i have no appetite;

i have missed me
in the desert.

what seems unoccupied turns out to be
a world;

of course
return it
gently
to the water.

NOTES FOR THE ACTRESS

1.
In this day and age, no one seems very interested in remaining a mystery. If the actress just goes online and searches the right combination of keywords she can answer all of the questions she has about her costar. But isn't there something better about not knowing?

2. In the play they kiss or he kisses her, rather, a brief inelegant meeting of mouths. In that moment the actress finds herself moving through a mantra of all the things she is trying not to think about: his fingers, his eyes, his tongue. When they kiss onstage she mentally separates them from his body. If she must think of them she will think of them in a purely anatomical nature—objects devoid of sexuality or meaning. When her character pushes him back, horrified by his physical violation, the actress can still see them floating in the air: his pink tongue, ten fingers all knuckle and bone, two round and rolling blue eyes.

3. The actress visualizes the actor's affection for her as a series of matryoshka dolls: the obsessive performance encasing his (she hopes) feigned indifference which, somewhere within, holds a kernel of sentiment that might be mistaken for love. The actress would accept a mistake, at this point. She'd accept anything.

4. She is much too old for him. She rounds the difference down to twenty years; it makes her feel better. She is at the point in her life where a make-up job and a wig aren't enough to age her backwards; the director casts an entirely separate person to play her younger self. She worries her younger self will spark the actor's interest.

5. An interviewer says they would make a great couple. Internally the actress glows, ignoring her costar's quiet chuckle, but concern develops when she considers that the actor stalks her character obsessively in the play. She thinks the interviewer might be missing the point.

6. The actor and the actress' younger self go out for drinks after rehearsal one night. The actress is consumed voraciously with envy.

7. Occasionally an interviewer will ask which performance made her want to become an actress. Her answer, which she has rehearsed in private, is always Brando in *Streetcar*—how his performance encapsulated a desperation that defined true love for her for many years. The truth, of course, is shitty 90s horror movies. Any one of them. She was never the target audience but still found herself enraptured every time, guessing the slasher's identity early on but going along anyway, caught up in the plastered horror on the B-list actors' faces, rooting passionately for a character she knew all along was going to die.

8. The actress is concerned for the members of the audience who will leave thinking they have witnessed a romance. The director merely shrugs. It's not his responsibility to educate the masses, he says. Behind his back, the actor winks at the actress' younger self.

9. She comes home from rehearsal one night to discover that flowers were delivered to the apartment in her absence. A bouquet of fresh lilies splays across the welcome mat, their petals damp to the touch. The actress wonders, briefly, if a neighbor's loved one has died—perhaps they were simply misdelivered?—until she sees her name penned neatly on the stiff cream-colored card tucked among the stems, no from, love, or sincerely in sight.

10. On the subway the actress overhears a young girl talking on her phone about the actor. She is infatuated in the manner young girls are known for, her love extending to every imaginable particularity. The actress savors each word, siphoning fresh pleasure from proximity to shared obsession. Mentally she has been so close to the actor for so long that it is a joy to see him anew, as though the young girl is breaking him apart and shaping a slightly different person out of the same pieces. When she exits the subway the actress follows unthinkingly, though her own stop is still twenty blocks away.

11. Several times a week the actress continues to receive flowers—lilies, always. She researches flower meanings online, but can't make sense of the message her admirer might be trying to send. They're so overtly funereal, after all, and yet she can't bring herself to view them as a threat. She creates a bedtime ritual of cutting down the stems, placing them in a vase and reading about possible connotations late into the night. Devotion. Purity. Rebirth.

12. Her younger self applies make-up compulsively. She employs the tinted glass of the theater's backdoor entrance, the mirror in the actress' on-set bedroom, once staring closely into the eyes of the actor and trying to catch her doubled self in his pupils, giggling. She always seems to have a tube of lipstick in her pocket, blush-red, running it across her lips the moment she catches her own eye, anywhere. The actress personally prefers to retreat into the privacy of her dressing room, where she rubs a more robust hue of her own skin across her cheekbones.

13. Somehow she finds herself in a movie theater one afternoon, bearing solitary witness to the fourth installment of a horror franchise whose source material was limited to begin with. The blonde from the first has been in every one since, playing the same role. She appears resigned but well-compensated, and her scream is peerless. The actress wonders if a fifth movie is yet in the pipeline. She texts her agent out of curiosity during the movie's climax—a slightly gorier variation on that of the first three.

14. Once there is a knock at her door: timid, two taps. When the actress runs to answer—thrilled, horrified—she is met with the empty hall.

15. Her publicist schedules a meeting to prep for the next round of interviews. Over matching salads the actress hesitantly brings up the flower deliveries, and the publicist is ecstatic. Can't make this shit up, she crows, dropping her fork in order to send out a series of related digital missives. The actress asks if she should be concerned. The publicist looks up, thumbs poised over another conversation. What? Of course not.

16. During one rehearsal the actor walks onstage holding flowers. Her heart skips a nervous beat as she watches him pass the roses off to her younger self, who proceeds to nestle them in a vase on the set's kitchen table. In the middle of a scene later on the actress goes out of her way to reach across the table and feel the petals. Fake, of course.

17. The actress lies back on the bed. It's all futile, isn't it? Everyone spinning their wheels in the mire of unreciprocated want, running on fumes of unrealized desire. Maybe she should get to know her stalker. She imagines someone who will pay for her lattes at Starbucks and support her in earnest as she makes a late-career transition into low-budget horror sequels no one is asking for. She needs a change. A knock at the door, then—it's the actor, as always. The audience gasps as one.

18. During a one-on-one meeting the director arranges the actress' hair so that the whole mess of it tumbles across her left shoulder, leaving the right one bare. He says that it looks good to him; she should pin it this way. He does not clarify whether he means onstage, or in general. The actress ties it all up in a bun upon leaving the theater.

19. Late one evening the actress finds herself reading about Jodie Foster's stalker online, how his obsession spiraled out into an attempted presidential assassination. Perhaps she has more to worry about than just herself. Perhaps she has a responsibility to the White House. The American people.

20. The actress sets her phone to play the song that rolls over the credits of her favorite horror movie whenever she receives an unknown call. She enjoys feeling as though she is blending art and reality into one, her life a mere medium for some greater purpose.

21. The actor shows up drunk on her doorstep one night and he doesn't smell like lilies at all. Inside her apartment the actress puts the kettle on, not knowing what else to do. As she bends over the stove her breath quickens. If this were the play, something would Happen. This would be The Night. With her back still turned she asks, have you ever thought of me the way your character does? Knowing he won't remember the question tomorrow. He says, impossible. We'd lose all our onstage sexual tension if we slept together, you know. Imagine the reviews.

22. The actress stays up all night reading about Jodie Foster's stalker and falls asleep on the way to an interview, missing her stop. Her publicist leaves an angry voicemail. They were going to ask about her stalker at this one. It was important.

23. The director calls a mandatory meeting but the actor does not show. They all stand around onstage dialing his number, together creating a melody of beeps and endless ringing. Not even the actress' younger self seems to know where he is. He appears the next day with a fake rose pinned to his lapel, smiling mysteriously.

24. Online a rumor begins to spread that she is dating the actor. In a moment compelled by confused desire the actress creates several throwaway accounts and encourages the story, telling fellow

anonymous posters that she saw the actress and the actor sitting on the same side of a booth in an expensive restaurant, kissing brazenly in the front row a popular concert venue. She deletes these comments the following day, before her performance.

25. The actress is already well into her popcorn during previews at the movie theater when someone recognizes her. The young girl asks for a selfie, shakes her buttery hand.

26. The actress shows up to the next performance with her hair cut like Jodie Foster's circa 1984—a daring pixie shear with strange, wispy bangs that likely suited Jodie's forehead better than her own. The director storms off upon seeing the new look. Her younger self begins a desperate search for her misplaced lipstick.

27. I love you, the actor says to her, his back to the audience. You're all I need. He winks.

28. The actress eventually attends the rescheduled interview and an article later comes out online. It's less about the play and more about the new haircut, the stalker. She rigs her phone to notify her when the article receives new comments. Ping: Secret admirer when you're young, stalker when you grow up. Ping: Be careful! Ping: Maybe it's her costar. She should be so lucky. Ping: God, she looks like budget Jodie Foster these days. Ping: I'd still do her.

29. The actress comes home one night to find her younger self laying a bouquet of lilies before her door like an offering. Neither one speaks. Her younger self removes the tube of lipstick from her coat pocket and smoothes it across her lips before departing. The actress goes inside and takes a seat in front of her computer, where last night's Jodie Foster search is still visible onscreen. In the next room, a song popularized by a well-received horror movie begins to play.

THE WORD'S PLACE

Once upon a time there was a word that lived alone in the woods. The word had 14 letters and so it never felt alone, but occasionally when its siblings flew out to visit, usually at the end of summer, or sometimes over the winter break, and made the long drive from the airport all the way up the Great Dusty Highway and around the Lake of Surprise, the siblings would remind the word that it lived so far away from everything, "from civilization" the word's brother would hyperbolize, which would make the word feel as if it had to defend its position, geographically speaking.

I like it here, the word would say. I'm not a neon sign. I don't like city noise. Here the air is fresh and at night I can see the stars.

Suit yourself, the word's brother would contend. It's just, for example, what would you do if you died out here and no one found you for days?

What would I do? the word asked, incredulous. I'd be dead. I wouldn't do anything.

What I mean, the brother would say, annoyed with the word's disregard for the rest of the family who worried about the word's well-being and safety, is that I wish you were closer to things, a hospital for one, or a grocery store for Christ's sake. I wish we could see you more. Mom would like to see you more.

The Word Defends His Position

Mom can visit me whenever she wants. It's not like I'm doing this, living out here, one of the most beautiful places on earth I might add, to get away from you, or her. I like it here. And besides, lots of words live off the grid.

The word's brother resented it when he said things like "off the grid." He thought it reeked of superiority, or some sense of having it all figured out, as if the rest of them were mere cretins. For the word, living

here, out in the woods, at the edge of the earth, was a lifestyle choice, about which the word felt strongly. And besides, it wasn't harming anyone, was it?

After a great many years of contemplation, the word had made the decision to move out to the edge of the earth, a choice for which he felt his brother lacked respect, as well as any real understanding or grasp of the ideals with which the word lived by. The word's sister was much more understanding about his decision to live far away from the family, and sometimes the brother and sister would argue about the word's right to be off on his own.

First of all, his sister would say, he's got 14 letters, which is more than you have.

This simple fact would always irritate the brother, who had been born with only five, and seemed to wear on his sleeve the feelings of inadequacy about the number of letters he carried around with him. If I were German, he thought sometimes, I might be longer.

What difference does that make? the brother would retort.
Fourteen letters, the sister would repeat. How many words do you know that have 14 letters?

The point is, the brother would say, we stick together. That's how we were raised, to stick together. You know what mom thinks about all of this. Family is everything, right? You don't go off and abandon everything just for your ideals.

The Word's Nature

It wasn't that the sister didn't also believe that family was everything, or that those 14 letters gave the word a special status—numbers weren't important to her—or that he was more gifted or more equipped for living out in the wilderness, far away from everything. She worried about him too, after all. She missed having the word nearby, and hoped he would change his mind and come back, or at least live close enough to make visits easier on all of them.

That next morning the sister was up early making coffee and pancakes for the three of them, standing at the kitchen window cracking eggs, when she noticed the word traveling slowly up the dirt road that

led to his house. In one of his arms he carried something, perhaps it was a small brown sack. As the word got closer, the sister could see that her brother was indeed carrying a small brown sack.

I hope you're hungry, the word's sister yelled out through the window, so as to warn the word that she was already up and not startle him as he walked into the kitchen.

The word had a pensive, almost sullen look on his typeface. Over the years his sister had noticed that within several days of their visits the veneer of contentment in the word's face, perhaps feigned, would gradually melt away, like icing on a lemon cake in July, and his manner would change.

The word's sister had kids who were getting older, and the word was their uncle, and the kids barely knew the word and this saddened her, of course.

But she knew that the word had always liked being alone, doing things differently. Even as a kid he was like that, never much playing with the other words or the two of them, always spending time in his room, by himself. That was just, she reasoned, who he was, and why should they, any of them, disrupt his nature, or try to cut and paste him into life that he didn't want to live?

The Word Doesn't Sleep Well

But that's not the point, the brother would say. There's room for difference. He chooses this because he believes that he's better off without us! The sister's observations were in fact accurate. It was true the word's collected countenance had an expiration date. How difficult it must be, the word's sister thought, how much emotional energy it must take, for him to hold it together, put on a show of belonging, just for our sake.

You're just in time for gluten-free pancakes, she announced as the word trudged into the kitchen. And coffee!

Thanks, the word muttered. I'm sorry I don't have any maple syrup for you. In his face the word's sister could see the dark circles under two of his letters, which she read as an indication that the word probably wasn't sleeping again.

Have you been up all night? she asked.

Yes, said the word. I have.

I'm sorry, the sister said.

It's got nothing to do with you, the word replied.

Yes, look, before your brother gets up, I just wanted to say...

No, the word interrupted, I don't want to have this conversation right now. I'm glad the two of you are here, and I understand that mom doesn't like to travel all the way out here, and I'm not bothered by her absence. We talk, the word said, in a comments function. Once in a while.

I wasn't going to say anything about mom, the word's sister barked. We're not here to persuade you to move back home. This is your home, I get it! You belong here. Out in the middle of nowhere. Clearly you are happy...

She hesitated. What I mean is... Well, I don't know if you are happy, and frankly I don't know if you've ever been happy, maybe that's just not your thing.

Happiness is an emotion, the word said. Not a way of life.

You know what I mean, the sister replied. For a second she seemed anxious. It was true that she hadn't meant to go there, so she backed down, as she had learned to do over the years, before the word got too defensive. He had a tendency to do that when he was challenged, which he almost always felt he was in the presence of his siblings.

And if one wasn't careful, one might find herself on thin ice. One might find herself having to hash out old grievances, or relive some childhood incident that had seemed minor at the time, but had been, at least for the word, a much bigger deal. A place of hurt, perhaps. There were many of these. The word, at least as he was growing up, seemed to have many openings. Where other words were closed off or protected, this word was porous.

The sister grabbed two mugs from the cupboard and poured coffee into them. There's some lowfat milk in the fridge, the word said. That's all I've got.

Listen, she said, we're leaving this afternoon. I have to be at a poetry reading tomorrow night and...

Oh, said the word, you still doing that?

When I can, the sister said. When I have time. The kids have a lot going on right now and most of my time is spent getting them here or there, and actually, this is not what I wanted to talk to you about.

Things Get Real for the Word

The word could sense the air changing, he could feel his sister was going to drop some kind of a truth bomb—could it be a divorce, or a diagnosis of some kind, or something about mom? He had felt the seriousness building since she'd gotten to his house. She was holding something inside of her.

Being a word of significant transparency, he wasn't usually the type who avoided things like that. He welcomed honesty at any cost, at least he thought so. But this time, this morning, that morning after being up all night and doing what he had to do, his emotions were right under the ink, and he felt unusually fragile, emotionally speaking, and the wall of silence he'd built around himself over those years of living out in the woods, off the grid, the margins of his existence, which he'd so mindfully centered, seemed to be thinning, not just in one spot, but all over.

That moment the word and his sister heard the engine of the Dodge Journey SXT revving up, (the word's brother always rented a bigger car than they actually needed) the two words walked to the window where they could see their brother, sitting in the driver's seat, staring out at the horizon.

Where's he going? The word asked.

Does it matter? replied the word's sister. Do you think he's the kind of word who puts a lot of thought into where he's going?

It was a judgmental thing to say, somewhat out of character for her even. But in that moment, as the two stood next to one another with coffee in tow, looking out at the magnolia tree, the word could feel that reality stood not within him but around him, and that his sister understood him. Really understood who he was, more so than ever before.

The word looked his sister right in the two o's, and held out his serif. She placed her serif in his. The two hadn't done that since they were kids.

I'm not going anywhere, he said. Please don't take it personally. This is where I want to be set.

LAZY FEMME SOFT BUTCH

shaved and brought blue mascara
to the launch party
might not even apply it

was told by my coworker
I wasn't like the other gays
the gays who brunch and say *brunch*

have eaten in the late morning on a weekend
served at restaurants that specialize in it
brunches I have worked, my memoirs

painted my nails with a clear lacquer
chip at them, bite, reapply
rip the cuticles off

ordered beer, whiskey
dry martini with St. George Botanivore and a twist
a park with rosé in a can
tequila from the bottle, never swallowed the worm

didn't do drag so much
as I tried to be a woman
and dressed as Jackie O for Halloween twice

wore my most comfortable shoes
with pants pinched like duct tape around my entrails

smoked Marlboros, spliffs, light 100s
reds, Camels, crushes, Spirits, turquoise, rollies
owned two cigarette cases
but never a zippo

say *choke then caress me*
for I am so precious and full of shame

hang me upside down to dry
press me in a blank journal

dip me in wax and light the long wooden match

ENCOURAGING WORDS

He's so lucky: I wonder if he was lucky, our first foster care placement, the small, gray and wrinkled newborn who eventually became our son. When we arrived at the hospital, the nurse's station had emptied for the night, except for the nurse who took us to the baby we found alone in a room of empty bassinets. He looked at us with big black eyes. His hands, which seemed too big for his body, were folded over the edge of his swaddling blanket, his head cradled in a pink and blue newborn cap. Long wrinkles stretched beneath his eyes across his cheeks, and his chin was the size of a pencil eraser. At two days old, he was five pounds, five ounces and healthy enough to be released. His birthmother had left the hospital shortly after giving birth.

You can keep the blanket for tonight, the nurse said, when she found out we hadn't brought one. But she asked that we bring it back. *People always forget to return them*, she said. It hadn't occurred to either of us in our hasty preparations that afternoon to buy a baby blanket.

She said that it was time for the baby's bottle and asked if I wanted to feed him. Scott smiled at me.

When I leaned over the bassinet and tried to gather the baby in my arms, his body felt limp and light, as if it were made of blankets and air. After he ate and burped, the nurse said I could change his diaper. My hands shook as I undressed him. The tiny diaper was loose around his belly, and his stiff legs flailed around. He began to whimper.

It's okay, I whispered.

You're so lucky: When the social worker had called that afternoon, I was on a bus I took every Friday to the campus where I taught. As the bus bounced over potholes, I tried to write down everything the social worker said. I wrote in blue ink on a red folder, which made it

hard to read later, but I saved the folder for the baby book, in case the baby stayed with us.

We had just signed our certification paperwork at our foster family agency the day before. That moment we'd signed was the first time in five years I'd felt any certainty of a baby ever joining our family. Even though the process of foster-adoption meant we might end up losing one or more placements before we got to adopt a baby, we would get to be parents in the meantime, at least that's what I said to Scott. Unlike infertility, which had been one long, uncertain wait, becoming foster parents meant our lives as parents would finally begin. It also seemed like children in foster care truly needed homes. In our certification classes, we'd learned about statistics for children who age out of the system without one—the suicides, the substance abuse, the homelessness and prison sentences.

But our primary motivation was selfish: we wanted to be parents.

After signing the paperwork, we drove to a friend's house for a champagne toast.

It's like getting pregnant, I said to Scott on the way over.

Only we know a baby's coming for sure, he said. Now we could finally go through all the rituals: prepare a nursery, have a baby shower, pick out names. So when the call came one day later, I felt a little cheated. There would be no time to anticipate or plan. On the other hand, getting a call so quickly couldn't have been more exciting. I told friends it was like trying to get pregnant for five years, taking a test, getting a positive, and then giving birth the very next day.

It's so good of you: But I adopted a baby because I wanted to be a mother, to have someone to love and someone to love me. Perhaps I wanted to fix what went wrong in my childhood. I wanted a family. I wanted to know if I could do it, to know what other parents know, to experience parenthood before I died. And since I couldn't have a biological child, I adopted one.

I didn't do it because I wanted to save or help anyone. I didn't do it for goodness.

As a kid, I spent summers alone. I was what they called a latch-key kid. I was also often called a "good" girl. I made up games to entertain

myself and ran laps around the house for exercise, counting them off in my head. I played with staplers and matches. I rarely left the house, but when I did, I got on my bike and rode as far as I could. I didn't open the door for strangers. I didn't answer the phone, unless it rang, went dead and rang again, which meant my mother was calling. Every afternoon, I fixed myself a snack and I watched television: soap operas, cartoons, *Oprah*.

I read the backs of cereal boxes and copies of my grandmother's old *Reader's Digests*. I read the same books, over and over, sitting on the bean-bag chair in my room. I read the One-Year Bible my grandfather had given me for my tenth birthday. I gnashed my teeth and imagined Hell. I read and re-read *Little House on the Prairie*. I thought about Laura and her family alone in a mud house eating molasses candy and wearing calico. I thought about the word *prairie,* Laura's braided hair and the unknown plain. I thought about Mary's blindness and Ma's leg that had to be cut off. Mary was a good girl, and boring—I didn't want to be her.

I fried baloney in the microwave and ate it on a paper towel. I made myself bowls of macaroni and cheese. Sometimes I served myself ice cream. I loved the taste of the dog biscuits I snuck from the pantry. I lay on the floor, overwhelmed with love and melancholy, and stared into the dog's eyes.

My brother and sister were a decade older than me and busy with jobs and friends those summers. But sometimes my sister's friends would come over, and she'd let me lie out with them in the backyard in the hot Texas sun. I copied the way they greased their bodies with tanning oil and how they lay down on towels in the grass, radio blaring and glasses of ice water nearby. When my skin felt hot, I'd turn over, dizzy with heat and hunger, but I didn't complain.

You're so blessed/lucky: You might not always feel blessed during the rigors of certification: the nine hours of home interviews about your marriage, your mental health and your partner's, the mental health histories of your parents and siblings, the way you grew up, your parenting philosophy. The physicals, blood work, urine tests and fingerprinting, the submission of tax returns, pay stubs and budget work-

sheet. Of course the process should be thorough, but what I'm saying is it may not always feel like the undeserved good of a blessing.

A few weeks after the first baby was placed with us, a mental health assessor was sent to our home for a routine interview. We'd named the baby Oscar by then, and I was home alone with him that day. The assessor observed me for three hours and asked a lot of questions. He brought an assistant. His assistant shuffled through files, handing him form after form. He spoke slowly and often seemed confused about how to fill out the forms. He took lots of notes on his laptop.

When Oscar finally fell asleep on my chest, I was drenched in sweat and hungry. I kept thinking the interview was almost done. I had to pee, but I was worried if I put Oscar down, he'd cry. And then I'd have to soothe him in front of the assessor. I was still new at mothering and figuring out how to soothe my baby. What if I couldn't do it with this man watching me? I hadn't slept in weeks. I cried a little, when, at the conclusion of our meeting, the assessor asked about our adoption plans. That is, if we were willing to keep the baby should he end up needing a home. Much later, when Oscar's adoption finalized and I received a thick folder with all his records, I realized the assessor had written it all in his report: *Foster mother became emotional when asked about adoption plans*.

At the end of the visit, he asked to see where the baby slept, and I showed him the co-sleeper attached to our bed, wishing I had made the bed that morning or at least taken the time to move the dirty laundry out of the room.

Do you plan to move the baby out of here? he asked, surveying the scene from the doorway. As I remember, he was still holding his laptop.

When I said yes, he laughed. *Good. You'll want to make love to your husband eventually.*

At that moment, as I listened to sex advice from a stranger, one who seemed to have enormous power over our family's future, I realized the feeling I'd been having all morning was one of violation.

But when we got to adopt Oscar two years later, I did feel blessed/lucky.

*

I could never do that: A way of distancing. A hex, maybe. Implying that the sufferer chose all of it. Maybe a command to the universe to *not ever do that* to the speaker.

Or maybe, it's a way of pointing out my monstrosity. *I don't know how you do it*, an acquaintance says, when I tell her that our second foster baby has moved to another family. *I would get too attached*, she says, as if she is too loving.

She doesn't understand the impossibility of distance, how you buy compulsively and worry over the hours of lost sleep, the way the baby keeps crying some nights when you've done everything you know to do. This deep love you can't prevent. The baby becomes a part of you, an extension of your arms, a warm animal you keep close to the heart. And how, when the call comes, you pack up the baby's things, cancel the camping trip, make a photo book, and hold her on the couch. You hold her in the chair. You hold her on the porch. You watch her sleep, one last time, in her bed. She sleeps so peacefully now, a thin beam of light streaming through the curtains onto her face. You don't know how you will survive this loss, your life without her in it.

You're so strong: About three years later, after Oscar's adoption had finalized, we were placed with a second baby. But after nine weeks with us, the baby was transferred by a judge to the custody of a relative. We were instructed to take the baby to the child protective services office the next day. When we arrived, our county social worker came in chewing gum and wearing flip flops, her toe nails freshly manicured.

I don't know why she's late, the social worker said about the relative. I wondered if this lateness had significance. Did it mean the relative had changed her mind and didn't want the baby? Would the judge change his mind about moving the baby if the relative didn't show up on time? Other families waited in chairs underneath the bright children's murals on the walls of the waiting room. A few toys were scattered on dirty, child-sized tables. At the suggestion of our foster care agency, we'd arranged childcare for Oscar that day. Our social worker had warned us that it might take longer than we thought, and it might be confusing for him, at three years old, to watch us experi-

ence such intense emotion. The social worker went to her office while we waited. The baby sat calmly in my lap, and I gave her a bottle. Scott and I took turns holding her. We spoke softly to her. I had dressed her in a denim jumper that I thought complemented her eyes because I wanted this relative to fall in love with her immediately.

When two women walked in looking cautious and unsure, I knew one of them must be the cousin of her birthfather, the one who'd been given custody. She appeared to be in her 40s and had thinning hair and a kind, pale face. She was dressed as if she'd spent the morning at work. The baby looked nothing like this cousin. She had her birthmother's nose and mouth, her birthfather's brown eyes and hair. We'd seen pictures of her parents. The social worker came back downstairs, and after talking to the two women, introduced us to each other. The other woman she introduced as the cousin's sister, and later, Scott told me he'd heard her exclaim as they walked in the door, *You're finally going to be a mom!* which comforted me because it meant the baby was wanted.

The social worker led us to a smaller room off the waiting room that had glass walls and a glass door. From inside the room, you could see out into the waiting room, and from the waiting room, everyone could see into the glass room. The transparency offered safety, I suppose, but it also meant this, one of the most intimate moments of our family life, might serve as entertainment for the bored occupants of the waiting room. For the next hour, we waited as the social worker ran back and forth to her office to print more forms that required signatures.

I asked the cousin if she wanted to hold the baby. The baby looked at me and then at Scott, but didn't cry as I handed her over to this stranger. The cousin held the baby stiffly on her lap. She smiled and bounced the baby on her knee and when the baby got fussy, she asked if I wanted to hold her again.

I know it's your last time, she said.

I had made a list of things the baby liked and typed up her schedule. I had made a book of baby pictures. I had packed extra cans of formula in a brown grocery bag and filled others with clothes, blankets and books. I wanted this woman to like us. I was hoping she

would call in a few days or weeks to say that being a mother was too hard and that she wanted us to take the baby back, which our social worker had said happens sometimes. Or at least, say that we could visit the baby sometimes.

When the paperwork was finished, the cousin thanked us, and we said our goodbyes. We never heard from her again.

You're so strong: Job's friends might have said, *You're so strong,* to him too, at least in the beginning. The book of Job tells us they later get fed up with his complaining and blamed him for his troubles. Job's suffering is so unimaginable as to be comical. Satan makes a bet with God that he can make Job curse him. So Job loses his fortune. His children. He is struck with a plague of sores. Eventually, he wants to know why he is suffering. He asks God if he has sinned, and more bitterly, if God enjoys his suffering: *does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?* When God at last answers him, he questions Job's right to question. And when Job repents, God restores him to his former glory.

There is a mathematical symmetry to Job's suffering: in the beginning, he has seven sons and three daughters, all of whom are killed when a house falls on them. At the end of the book, his wealth is restored, and he goes on to have seven more sons and three daughters—ten new children to be raised all over again. The sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys in the beginning are perfectly doubled at the end, leaving Job with fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. That's what I mean about symmetry, though the suffering itself is asymmetrical and strange. Are we to believe that his suffering was just a difficult period between two vast fortunes? Still I wonder if Job harbored any secret bitterness.

I could never do that: A compliment, but also a way of looking down from a position of good fortune, of being spared your particular suffering. There is an element of relief when she says it. Some happiness suddenly, a lightness in the air between you. She has avoided this particular blight, this asteroid catapulting toward Earth. But she circles

cautiously, watching for fragments of rock.

You're so strong: Perhaps, I wonder sometimes, code for unstable. The question of whether your ability to do difficult things is supernatural, or perhaps a signal of a worrisome emotional looseness—maybe even monstrosity. Once, I visited a friend in San Francisco after she'd had her first baby. I stayed with her, her husband and their new baby in their apartment. The apartment was light and clean, and the weather sunny, but in the cold wind that blew off the bay all weekend, I couldn't stay warm.

During the visit, my friend mentioned a news story she'd recently seen of an infertile woman who had attacked a pregnant woman. She told me, looking away, how the infertile woman had attempted to cut the baby out of the pregnant woman's belly. I shrank back into the soft chair where I sat. I myself had been trying to conceive a baby for some time, and I wondered if my friend was thinking of that when she told me the story. I knew my friend wanted to talk about it because the story had terrified her. It made her feel vulnerable, whether out with her baby, or at home alone inside her apartment. But I wondered if she was also trying to tell me that she was afraid when I held her son.

I could never do that: We had another foster baby after the second one, and this one we kept for six months. She was eight months old when she was moved to another home. It was hot. I held her in my arms in the bright sun as we waited for the county social worker to pull her car around. I squeezed the baby's chubby thighs and swayed from side to side.

I had considered running away with her when we got the call saying the baby would be moved, but then they would never give us another baby. Also, I would probably go to jail.

There was nothing for me to do besides strap her into her seat and try to make her feel comfortable. Her life was about to change forever, but she didn't know that. I buckled her in and stroked her hair. Like the other baby, she looked at me but didn't cry.

I couldn't give her up. I couldn't do it, but I did.
I did that to her.

You're so strong: This woman in the news just wanted a baby, but she did the unthinkable. Knife at the ready. She answered the door and smiled. Maybe she made small talk, asked how the mother was feeling. The pregnant woman just wanted to buy some baby clothes. How did the attacker get her inside? Did she attack first, or lure her in and close the door? I am trying to imagine this woman's pain, the stabber I mean. Her desperation. But her state of mind is impossible for me to see. It couldn't have been the infertility (could it?), the desire for a baby after losing her own who'd drowned in a decorative pond. It must have been something beyond that, something deeper and irretrievably lost. And yet, even now when I am around pregnant women, I keep a little distance. I want them to know I am not a monster.

You're so strong: The image of the infertile woman as monster reaches far into the collective unconscious. There are examples in Greek mythology of infertile women turning evil. Often, as medievalist Linda McGuire explains in a conference paper, they were part animal, part human, abnormally formed, monstrous and with *deformities that made them frightening to behold*. Though their monstrosity was easy to see, the deformity (i.e., non-functioning reproductive system) was invisible—whether too old, possessing an inhospitable womb, or pre-menarche, they were all deficient. In order to make this uselessness visible, McGuire says, they were portrayed as monsters. Often part bird or snake, they took the shape of animals associated with death. Some of them could travel between the living and the dead. They were Keres, Scylla, the Harpies, Medusa. Or Lamia, who is often described as the former queen of Libya, or as a goddess who had an affair with Zeus. Hera killed Lamia's children as punishment, or in another version, made her infertile. Or made her eat her own children. Lamia became a monster, the lower half of her body a snake, or sometimes she is shown with a snake-head. Keats describes her as *a gordian shape of dazzling hue, / Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue; .../// And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed, / Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed*

/ Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries.

In some versions, Zeus gave her the ability to remove her eyes. I imagine her in the dark, listening to the cave winds blow. Of course she didn't stay in the cave. Grief drove her out, seeking mothers and children, trying to make them suffer the way she had.

It was a different way of being strong.

It's so good of you: OED 1. Good, *n.*: what is beneficial; well-being; a profit or benefit; a desirable object or end; property or possessions; saleable commodities; virtuous people. 2. Good, *adj.*: having (enough of) the appropriate qualities; adequate; satisfactory, effective, occasionally excellent; adapted to a purpose; useful, suitable; of a person: distinguished in moral worth; commendable, desirable, right, proper, expedient; having the characteristics or aptitudes necessary or suitable in a certain capacity or relationship; of an action, activity: adequate to the purpose, sufficient, thorough, virtuous, morally commendable; kind, benevolent; pious, devout; fortunate; pleasant to the sense or feelings, tasty, appetizing; beneficial, advantageous.

I used to be a better person than I am now, at least I wanted to be. A good person, a good girl. I did good things. I prayed and fasted and shared the good news. I studied hard. I believed in a good God, a good version of myself. I believed in service and the common good. I believed in a higher good. Good works. Good souls. I searched for a good path, my one true calling. In order to be good, I avoided good times. I tried to be in a good mood. I got good grades. I went on missions with church people and thought I was spreading good news. I never made good money, so I was always looking for a good deal. I sought after good looks. I wanted a good body, meaning thin, skinny. I aimed for good times in my high school track meets.

Later, I began to understand the difference between religious good and the greater good. Then I wanted something good for my life. To save my own life was a kind of good I realized. Then I wanted a good relationship. I wanted a good beer, a good chat, a good fuck. I tried to achieve a good balance. Then, I wanted to be a good candidate for motherhood. I wanted a good womb and good ovaries and good eggs and good embryos. On the exam table, I tried to be a good patient.

When none of that worked, I had to prove that I would make a good home for someone else's baby. Then, I wanted a good baby, not one with too many problems. I wanted a good prognosis. A good time. After the baby came, I wanted a good pediatrician, a good dentist, a good play group, a good night's sleep, a good preschool, just one good hour in which to work, a good way for him to grow up. I started asking him to be good when I left him with other people. I wanted good teachers, a good goodbye, a good place for him to nap and eat his lunch.

Now that I am a mother, I always feel not good enough.

He's so lucky: People often say babies are lucky when they get adopted. *So lucky*. These people, I think, must not understand the precipitating factors that send children into foster care. Then, there is the reality that all adopted children have also lost a set of parents. Even when adopted at birth, the baby loses the only voice he ever knew. The feeling of her body, the way she moved, how she sounded. He will later wonder if everything was his fault. He will wonder why she didn't want him.

In Nancy Newton Verrier's book on bonding in adoption, *The Primal Wound*, it is suggested that adoptees will carry this pain the rest of their lives. Comparing the original broken bond to a broken plate, there is a finality to Verrier's conclusion that n*ot only does the plate have to be glued back together, but the other half of the plate is different, so that the pieces will not quite fit together. There is always a feeling of 'not fitting.'...only the original is that other half.* The plate has to be glued back together, but it cannot be. It's the *only* in her sentence, the immovability of it, the fact that *it cannot fit together,* the irresolvable differences that stay with me. We cannot cohere. Impossibility and distance the only potential outcome between my children and me.

You're so strong: I will always be on the outside of something I wanted. But I think now that being outside is also a kind of good. How it might contain the good. Unfulfilled desire has changed me. I see now that pain and loss are not the problem—it is the misguided action, the covering up, the thing she thought would make it better, the kidnap-

ping, the murder, the attack. But the pain, and the deep swamp of tall cypress and black gum trees, living things that tolerate a lack of oxygen and the swamp floods, I understand them better now. Or I want to understand. The swamp is dark underneath and light on top. The trees are tall, the plants submerged and animals growing fat in the black water. The trunks of the Tupelo and White Cedar are very hard. Swamps are something people have often tried to drain and destroy. But I love them; I am learning to love them. The nonvenomous water snakes and the American alligators that swim like buoys but are not dangerous (unless you get in their way). The pythons that emerge fat, and ever-lengthening (the pythons that never stop growing). Alligator versus python. Python versus deer. Boa versus python. Python versus constrictor. Constrictor versus anaconda. Ibis versus crab, roseate spoonbill versus shrimp or snail, the tall wood stork versus the fish. I love their battles, or I want to. They are all seeking protein and a little light. I am learning to love the dark leaves overhead, and underneath. The tall things. Birds and trees, and the low things, growing upward.

Denise Tolan

THE UNDERSIDE OF NORMAL

From five houses down the road, I could see our garage door was open. From two houses away, I could see the slats of the blinds in the window of the house across the street held open like the sleeping eyeballs of a cartoon character. I knew our neighbor had the fingers of her other hand poised over my cell phone number, ready for me to pull into the driveway.

"He left the garage door open again," she'd say. "Third time this week."

With my own finger hovering over the answer button on my phone, I shut the door to my car and stepped over the boxes, old sleeping bags, and ice chests piled in front of my husband's car. One of the coolers in the driveway was a leaky one, but we could never remember which one, so we kept buying new ones. I counted four.

"Hey," my husband Bill said, popping out from behind an old futon he was pushing toward the car. His face was dirty and he was wearing a shirt that looked like he'd found it deep in the garage. "Come see what I did."

He took my hand and I followed him. Bill was as excited today as when he'd put together a swing-set for our son when he was five. The night before, we had fought about how his messiness constituted a lack of respect for me. Today he was paying for his sins and I took his hand, willing to give absolution.

"All this stuff," he said, sweeping his hand over the coolers and sleeping bags and boxes in the driveway, "is getting sold in a garage sale this weekend. Everything else is completely organized inside the garage."

I followed him out of the hot Texas sun and into the relative coolness of the garage as he pointed out stacked and labeled boxes of our son's old Transformers and cartons of photographs I hadn't been able to look at since my mother's death a few years before.

"Nice work," I told him, squeezing his hand. "Thank you for taking this on."

"I'm going to do better – keeping things up."

I nodded.

"I mean it. You'll see."

"Okay," I said. "I really appreciate this. We can put the bikes back in here now."

He smiled. I recognized the smile he wore after twenty-plus years of marriage. It was the smile of pride in making me happy. It was still genuine and untarnished over the many years of negotiating my world.

I sighed and walked toward the house. "Long day," I told him. He grabbed my lunch bag and followed me. "I graded over thirty American Lit I papers today and twenty of them were pretty bad. Bad papers always take longer to grade than good ones."

He held the door open for me. I was grateful for the greeting the noisy air conditioner offered me.

"Hey," I asked, as he headed toward the kitchen to push the button that would close the garage door. "Did you happen to see my dad in the garage?"

"Your dad?" His smile changed into a look of concern. "Why would your dad be in the garage?"

"He should be in two white boxes somewhere in there. I think they're white. They would say 'human cremains' on the top."

As a kid, I'd been stunned into silence by the scene in *Fantasia* where Mickey Mouse puts on the sorcerer's hat and sets into motion a vortex of chaos. The idea of setting a broom in motion with the intent to metaphorically sweep the world away appealed to me. But as an adult, I understood the danger of intentions. I should have kept my mouth shut about the boxes filled with my father. If they'd gotten lost, no one would have blamed me. Instead, like the sorcerer's apprentice, I'd picked up the baton and set loose the past. I didn't want those boxes. Did I?

Bill looked out the window toward the curb where a long row of trash bags and boxes waited for a pick up from the city in the morning.

He shrugged. “I didn’t know to look for him.”

My phone began to ring. “Close the garage door,” I said, seeing my neighbor’s name on the phone.

*

When my father died in 2006, we’d already planned, my mother, brother, sister, and me to have my father cremated.

“Would you like to share the cremains?” The funeral director asked as we all sat together in a small room. “After the cremation families often wish to retain a portion of the ashes for themselves.” This was an unplanned question and we sat in silence.

“I can split the ashes into thirds or even fourths,” the funeral director said, as if the current concern was that someone might be left out of getting their share of ashes. “We’ll have a ceremonial box available for the service.”

“No thank you,” my mother and I said at the same time. From the corner of my eye I saw my sister and brother nodding yes.

“Okay,” I told the director. “Split the ashes into thirds. One for him, one for her and one for the cemetery.”

The funeral director nodded. I felt shame at being a rejecter of the ashes.

Later that night, the three of us kids sat together on my back deck.

“He loved Savannah,” my sister said. “I’m taking his ashes and sprinkling them there.”

“I’m taking them to the coast where we went fishing,” my brother said.

The wind blew and a few leaves fell from the tree above us. I knew no matter what they planned, I would somehow end up with at least one of their boxes.

*

My brother and I went to pick up the ashes. The lady at the funeral home brought us two of the boxes nestled in what looked to be a reus-

able grocery shopping bag with the name of the funeral home in blue letters across the front. The third part of the ashes were in a maroon, velvety looking box.

"This is the ceremonial box," the lady who handed us the bag said. "We will deliver it to the cemetery for you, but I thought you might want to see it."

"It looks good," I said. "I mean, nice."

She nodded and placed the box on a table. I handed my brother the bag.

"Can we have another bag?" I said. "For my sister's box?"

"Of course," the lady said.

"Hey," my brother whispered. "Can you keep my box for a few weeks? I'm on my motorcycle and I'm not sure how it will hold up on a four hour trip."

That box never left my garage.

Three years later, when my mother died, my sister moved out of my mom's house. She left her share of the ashes behind. I stacked her box on top of my brother's and left them in my garage.

*

After dinner, I pushed the button to open the garage door and grabbed a flashlight. My husband followed. Near the center of the garage, beneath the cartons filled with pictures, I spotted a white box. Behind it was an identical white box.

"There they are," I said. The box in front had black smudges on the outside. Ashes.

"I knew I wouldn't throw those away. Do you want to bring them inside?" my husband asked as I was walking back toward the house. He didn't really expect an answer.

*

The first holiday my husband spent with my family was normal. But I had forgotten how ill-defined that term was in our house.

Christmas Eve began with a fight between my father and my

sister. In most families, fight means disagreement. In my house, it means fight. While Bill and I were busy watching TV or playing with the dog or talking to my mom, something happened to set my father off.

"Bitch," we heard my father yell. "Fucking bitch." It had to be my sister he was yelling at.

"*Beppino*," my mother began, using her pet name for him. "The food is almost ready. It's Christmas Eve. The lamp was from a garage sale." Then, in Italian, "*Non arrabbiarti*." Don't get mad.

My sister and her youngest son stood next to a lamp where the shade had a noticeable dent in it. John was crying. "Papa I'm sorry." He was missing his two front teeth from falling asleep every night with a bottle in his mouth. He was three years old.

My father grabbed my sister by her hair and spun her toward the front door. She scooped up John in her arms.

"Get the fuck out of this house. Animals," he yelled as he began pushing my sister in her back. "Goddamn animals."

My sister was trying hard to keep her balance. My mother ran to the back bedroom to get the other two kids. Bill stood with me in the kitchen. He was frozen for a minute, then, like someone had thrown a match at him, he began to move.

"No," I said. "You'll make it worse."

I reached for the car keys hanging from a hook by the kitchen door. It was almost a reflex, like crossing myself when entering a church. As children, we'd run from our house to the car many times. If we made it out of the house, we'd sleep in the homes of friends. If we got caught behind the rage, it was like driving into a tornado.

I'd hide in my bedroom, behind a wooden room divider, listening to my father tear pictures off the wall, hurl plants and insults through the air, pace the hall searching for someone to torture. I'd recite poetry, act out scenes from plays, and create worlds where I was the leader. I was rarely captured.

My husband was from calm, kind Norwegian stock. Bill was an outsider behind our foreign walls. What would I look like now that he'd seen our ancient rituals? Would he run?

In spite of the worry, I grabbed the keys. Survival instinct.

"Worse?" he said. Outside the bay window we saw my sister fall onto the driveway and drop John. The little boy screamed, red-faced and snotty. My father kicked my sister in the small of her back as she struggled to stand up. My mother was trying to be calm, speaking in Italian, telling my father to stop – to come eat dinner – reminding him over and over it was Christmas Eve.

By the time it was almost over, my sister's three children were lined up in front of her car, crying in various pitches. It was like the saddest Christmas choir ever.

From the porch, my mother yelled to me. "Get a lunch bag for your brother."

I reached into the cabinet and told my husband to grab my mother's purse and keys. While my father hit the roof of my sister's car, following her to the end of the driveway, the rest of us ran into the garage and into my mother's car.

In the front seat, my mother put on her seat belt. In the backseat, I sat in the middle between my brother and my husband. My brother was hyperventilating. The bag helped calm his breathing.

My father stood in the driveway as we pulled out. He was yelling something, but we couldn't hear.

"Did you turn off the oven?" my mother asked me.

"I did."

"You did?" my husband said, looking as if he suddenly realized he was among cannibals.

"Where are we going?" Bill asked as we pulled out of the neighborhood.

"We'll drive around and look at Christmas lights," my mother said. "He will calm down soon." She began to sing. "*Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.*"

My brother removed the bag from his face. He joined in the reindeer games.

"How long are we going to drive around like this?" my husband whispered. "Maybe we should get a hotel or something."

"No, no," my mother said. "Everything will be fine."

When we came back home, there was a note thumb-tacked to the front door. The note was not written in blood, or in lipstick, but

in simple red ink from a pen. It read, in big block letters, "Whoever sleeps in this house tonight will die. I will kill all of you, then set this house on fire."

There was a large space on the page, then the words "Except Bill."

My mother started to put the key in the lock. "Mom," my husband said, looking at as if he was now hoping to be eaten by cannibals. "Did you read the note?"

"Hey," my brother said yawning. "He said you were safe." We laughed, my mother, brother, and me. We laughed because we had been here before.

We slept in the house that night and ate breakfast with my father in the morning.

"Are the kids coming back today?" my father asked my mother later that morning. "Tell them Santy Claus left them some presents."

My sister came over with the kids that afternoon. We ate dinner. We opened presents.

"This is not normal," my husband said at some point during the day.

"Sure it is," I said. "This is how it always goes around here."

He put on a good face and helped my mother with the dishes, but I saw him watching all day, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He was quick to pack the car the next morning and hug everyone good-bye. Back then, he couldn't imagine the kind of normal I had lived through.

*

My father wasn't ill for very long before he passed away. Before we knew that he was close to death, my husband's friend Peter had purchased plane tickets to come visit. The two of them planned to spend three days golfing.

My father's funeral was scheduled for the day Peter flew into town.

"He had one of those rates where if he changes anything he

loses all the money," Bill said.

"It's okay," I said. "The funeral is early. You two can golf afterward."

There was the kind of silence that comes before a storm or before an accident or before a slap.

"I don't want to go to the funeral," Bill said. "You never let me say anything while he was alive, but I don't have to pretend anymore. I'm not going to honor him. He was a horrible man."

I took a breath. Bill had heard all the stories about my father by now. The beatings and the pain and the scars. He also understood that to see my mother, we had no choice but to see my father. But now that was over. No more pretending.

"You don't have to go," I said. "But I do."

"Bill might not be able to come to the funeral," I told my mother. She didn't react. "Did you hear me?"

"He will be there," she said.

"Mom," I said, standing in front of her. "I don't think he will. He hated dad. He hated everything dad did to us."

"I know," she said. "But he loves me. He will be there."

Bill showed up to the funeral with Peter, both men wearing golf shirts and shorts. Peter sat in the back row looking like someone who'd wandered into the wrong movie. He tried to look reverent, like a stranger in this strange land, but I was aware of how long it had been since an outsider had looked in on our family. How had Bill explained the sudden need to attend his father-in-law's funeral? What secrets did Peter now know?

In middle school I'd made the mistake of inviting a friend for a sleep over. That night, my father woke in a rage. When my mother tried to calm him by reminding him we had a guest, he ripped my bedroom door off its frame. The girl who spent the night called her parents and never spoke to me again. I lived without a bedroom door until I left for college. Normal people, like the girl, like Peter, are best left on the right side of normal.

After the final benediction, Bill hugged my mother and left with Peter, golf clubs rattling in the trunk of the car.

No one at the funeral asked who Peter was or wondered why

he was there, because by now, with our family, anything seemed normal.

After the funeral, I had a series of illnesses. "I think I'm detoxing from all the years of shit I had to eat," I said to my husband.

He didn't smile. "That might be truer than you think. How did you do it? All those years."

"I loved my mom," I said. "It was a choice. She would have been punished if we'd stopped coming around."

"Are you sure that's what it was?" he said. "Or was it easier to pretend you were just any other normal family?"

I didn't answer him.

Sometimes, when I take out the Christmas decorations, or store old clothes in the garage, I think about my father buried somewhere in the dark beneath unwanted junk and old clothing.

I forgave and forgot a lot over the years, but unlike my husband, I always remember to close the garage door.

ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, JODY

Inner emptiness is not a void to be filled with comforts; it is a window to be looked through.
–Alan Watts

The first time I swallowed *(dear God)* was in the detached garage of our family home on Maywood Avenue. I was fourteen and had recently offered myself up to my first unofficial boyfriend, Felix.* Unofficial because we never went out in public together, unofficial because he was nineteen and his stepfather was the Chief of Police in our small suburban town, unofficial because it didn't last very long. It was a late afternoon in late April, and the garage was dark except for a small square of muted sunlight filtering in through a side window.

*

My period came at fourteen. I'd always felt more boy than girl (What does it *actually* feel like to be a girl or a boy, anyway?). I hated my hair (too fine, with a weird curl), my calves too big, my breasts too small. My detestable Irish-German peasant build, not like my friend [X] with her smooth, porcelain doll-like limbs, the (then) current feminine ideal, the lithe, the skeletal, the breakable. My friend [X], the one all of the boys loved, the one all of the boys called *baby girl*. And there was my body this and my body that and isn't it often said that comparison is the thief of joy? And aren't we really more than just bodies (do you believe me when I tell you that)?

*

Mmm, your lips are like Girl Scout cookies (especially Thin Mints), jelly-filled donuts, apple cinnamon tarts, blueberry pancakes, tapioca

pudding, brownies, and peanut butter cups.

*

My father began to dismantle the fort my younger brother and I had built in the garage rafters almost immediately after discovering it. My father assumed, and rightly so, that the beginnings of troublemaking and cigarette smoking were happening in that fort. Around the same time, my father poisoned the marijuana seedlings I'd planted in an old ice cream bucket and placed on top of the hutch in the backyard where my pet rabbit once lived. My father *(dear God)* was just trying his best to rein in the chaos that our family had become. How could I fault him? *(But I did—without mercy.)*

*

Felix was grinding away, knocking down the back of my throat. I was trying not to gag. I was trying to be hot like Margot Kidder was hot in that black-and-white spread in the March 1975 issue of *Playboy Magazine* my brother probably found in a dumpster, like that couple in the same issue were hot—tearing each other's white T-shirts off with hands, fingers, fingernails, teeth, and tongues. The garage was cool. My knees hurt. I was kneeling on the dusty cement floor. My hands were upturned *(here I am)*, holding the base of Felix's erection. If I'd been a praying person back then, I would have asked God to please get Felix to hurry up.

*

Original Nestlé® Toll House® Chocolate Chip Cookies: 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour / 1 teaspoon baking soda / 1 teaspoon salt / 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened / 3/4 cup granulated sugar / 3/4 cup packed brown sugar / 1 teaspoon vanilla extract / 2 large eggs / 2 cups (12-oz. pkg.) Nestlé® Toll House® Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels / 1 cup chopped nuts *(Leave nuts out, please.). Combine ingredients and consume half of the dough raw (never mind the uncooked eggs) and the other half im-*

mediately upon removing (still warm) from the oven.

*

Mmm, your lips are like cinnamon rolls, homemade cream puffs, favorite candy bars, lemon chiffon and Jaffa cakes. *(I offered up my body because I wasn't sure what else I had to give.)*

*

My maternal grandfather used to take me and my brother to a tiny candy shop a couple of blocks from his Marion Street home. I'll never forget the way our grandfather squeezed my hand gently as we walked. The road out front was cobblestone, and glass jars filled with candy lined the walls. Our small, white paper bags full, we turned back, mouths overflowing. Following my father, I grew up God-less but deep down, still wanted God to be my sugar daddy, my *Papa Noël*, and for the tables to turn and God worship me. Now looking back, I wonder if the flutter of my grandfather's hand, so reassuring in mine, was the beginning of his palsy and Parkinson's Disease.

[FLASHBACK]

It was late morning and I should have been in school. Sunlight streamed through my bedroom window and just outside, in the backyard, the tulips, hyacinth, and narcissus were blooming. When summer came, I'd lie on my back in the green grass and try to break clouds apart with single-minded determination. Back in my room, on the bookshelf, a pair of model horses, a chestnut mare and her foal, waited. Fancy guppies swam through friendly green anacharis in the aquarium and my diary was carefully hidden under a stack of books: Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, Nathalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, Wilson Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Forever*. And my plants, perfect replicas of my mother's plants: Spider, Baby's Tears, Purple Passion, Norfolk Is-

land Pine, African Violet, and one lone cactus, waited, too.

*

How does a girl learn to starve herself or vomit? Is it discussed at school through bathroom stalls? Whispered in harsh florescent-lined halls? Spoken of during 10-o'clock break? Speculated upon across lunchroom tables? Mapped out while riding home in yellow district buses or on walks together to and fro? Or do we simply copy our mothers and fashion magazines and others?

*

Sweets to the sweet," Shakespeare's *Hamlet*'s Gertrude said. What she didn't say is that Ophelia drowned in a big bowl of vanilla buttercream frosting finely drizzled with chocolate sauce.

*

My pet rabbit, the one who's hutch was still set up in the backyard, died on my 12th birthday. I had just finished blowing out candles and eating glorious cake. He was a beautiful English Spot, white with black dots and a black stripe down his back. He was a repository for my hopes and helped to fill a certain emptiness. I found his once luxurious body/fur, cold. I ran back in the house crying, past my brother, my mother, and my father. In my bedroom, walls collapsing, death felt like being alone on a mountaintop looking out over an apocalyptic landscape with that hole opening up inside and a bitter wind whipping through mercilessly.

[FLASHBACK]

The doorbell rang. "Promise you won't go out with my brother," my best friend had said, and we hooked pinkie fingers. I never did ask

why. I didn't want to know. I was fourteen and restless and Felix was good-looking and tall and had a car. *All will be well in the world with a boyfriend like Felix*, I thought. My temples pounding, I led Felix to my bedroom, and we undressed. I was terrified of getting pregnant. Felix told me not to worry and crawled on top of me and I waited for an epiphany that never came. I didn't bleed and afterward (my skin crawling), Felix, with his faint sour armpit smell and smiling, cradled me like I was a broken-winged bird or a baby girl.

*

How quickly you went from lean to almost anorexic to bulimic (borderline body dysmorphic) trying so hard to see the truth in a carnival funhouse mirror not even remotely aware that one day you might not have a choice, that your body might give out and death come without you calling. How you tried to starve yourself, made daggers of your hip bones, lost your breasts. How you hated feeling hungry all the time, your stomach gnawing rats, your breath, Black Death. Finally, you swallowed the whole thing whole and it took your terror, your confusion, your rage (temporarily) out at the knees. You circled the toilet bowl, you circled the sepulcher, stuck your finger down your throat, again, again, again *(oh God, yes)*. Afterward, winded and with a slight glow of sweat on your upper lip, you fell into bed and lit a cigarette, strange, delicious blood-letting. (This is our little secret, these are the things we don't talk about.)

*

Mmm, your lips are like Door County cherries (lightly sweetened), cotton candy at the Minnesota State Fair, Babcock Hall orange chocolate chip wafer cones, and German chocolate cakes.

*

My father was a nightingale. I found him exposed one day on a deer trail in the woods, his tawny wing a tattered mess, his beak immov-

able, his song mute. I took his wing and bound it in gauze. The gauze was a parched rose. I slung him over my shoulder and carried him safely home.

[FLASHBACK]

I pushed Felix away and wiped his semen off my belly with my thrown-down underwear. *What have I done?* I thought. I didn't feel more beautiful or grown up like I'd imagined I would and despite being raised without a religion or without a command, guilt and sadness issued forth in slow, suffocating grasps (as if to point a finger and say: *You've betrayed a deeper and wiser part of me*). "Don't worry, it'll become like second nature," I thought I heard Felix say, and he was right. The guilt and sadness quickly gave way to forgetfulness and soon it seemed perfectly natural to skip school and meet up with Felix in my bedroom.

*

You 1) will be a will-o'-the-wisp and disappear through walls. You will pick at your plate, you will cut a sharp line. Your skin will reflect the moon. Your shoulder blades will become so pronounced that they resemble wings. Roughly 1,500 Americans will be diagnosed with terminal cancer today and would give (almost) anything for the life you are trying so hard to extinguish. You 2) will be a heavily weighted anchor (this will keep you from floating away). Every time you vomit you pray it will/won't be the time your heart stops. You will try to keep from growing up, from moving around and taking your place in the world. You think this might save you (you might be wrong) from being devoured by wolves and mentally ill fathers (whose illness will one day mirror your own). Either way, you 1) and 2) will remain fiercely loyal (until you choose otherwise or life chooses for you) to the cause of tyranny, depression, and sadness.

*

Mmm, your lips are like fresh-baked bread swimming in butter, homemade macaroni and cheese, crispy bacon, salt bagels, movie theater popcorn, Thanksgiving turkey and mashed potatoes

*

In my dreams, my maternal grandfather is a mighty *bûcheron* and he takes his glistening ax, sharp as tungsten needles, and heaves it left and ho! He blazes a trail through the woods, clears the underbrush, uproots the myth of Myrrha, and leads us out of this bewildered wilderness.

*

Felix groaned and finished off. I closed eyes and tried to breathe between gulps. His semen coursing down, down, down my throat, an under-damp oak leaves earth, a spicy fisherman's stew (not gummy bears or licorice vines). One of us left the garage happy that Saturday afternoon and it wasn't me. *How do you qualify happiness when you're fourteen, anyway?* Back inside the house (*I wanted pleasure, not joy*), I ran past my brother, my mother, and my father. In the bathroom, clutching that golden throne, I lurched, heaved, and puked *(dear God)* Felix's bitter, sweet mess.

Julia Tolo

WAR LANGUAGE/BIRTH LANGUAGE

middle of the day. the roads were clear as we
drove to the hospital. nurse helped me right
away. drank two extra glasses of water to get a
better scan. read online about what to expect:
size of a fig/bones beginning to harden/fists
opening and closing/tiny tooth buds beginning to
appear under her gums. *her.*

miscarriage. 1580s, "mistake, error;" 1610s,
"misbehavior;" see miscarry + -age. meaning
"untimely delivery" 1660s

meaning untimely doctor visits meaning
untimely purchases of cribs Oshkosh overalls
and tiny socks meaning tiny useless things

within minutes thin paper on the gynecologist's
chair underneath my butt. within minutes
contents of my belly on a screen. nothing left
but an unmoving lump.

for two weeks I've carried a 9 week old fetus. for
two weeks no heartbeat no movement no growth.
doctor pointing to different things. this is my
hand on your belly. this is the cooling gel. I'll
show you on the screen don't worry. that big
shadow. not moving.

still a few weeks later, I can poke my finger in
the flesh of the belly and the belly pushes back.
for a moment I think there's someone in there,
playing with me. body has not yet learned
that it is empty.

schedule a D&C. doctor taking what belonged to
me. what was I making. I failed to complete.

lining of uterus *gently* scraped. tissue examined
for *completeness*

the expulsion of a fetus before it is viable,
especially between the third and seventh
months of pregnancy;

meaning: too soon

spontanabort: a spontaneous expulsion like a
spell an incantation / may be cause by coffee
strawberries high levels of mercury in fish high
levels of doubt highly ambiguous feelings
towards the life being made & a history of
inadequacy and bad behavior

"miscarriage of justice" 1875
a situation in which someone is punished [...] for
a crime that they have not committed

how to use miscarried in a sentence

if a pregnant woman has a miscarriage, her
baby dies and she

BIG SUR

Her father drove north on Highway 5. Most of the time she stared out the window. She saw cows clustered on hills of blonde grass, exhausted tractors, black birds dozing on power lines. An eighteen-wheeler with a colorless Minnie Mouse tied to the front passed them on the right. Her father focused on the road, one hand slung over the steering wheel, the other on the gearshift. They couldn't agree on a radio station so she turned down the sound and left it on Seek.

Whenever she looked at him, his face seemed old and heavy, and she felt sorry for him, because he was old and heavy. They were different of course but that was obvious. She had his nose and not much else. When he'd picked her up that morning, she was lying on the cowhide rug in her dorm room, tracing her finger over the "N" and "I" branded into the cow's skin. Her mind had wandered into a world where cows bought human skins and laid them onto their living room floors.

Besides a burger, what was a cow inside.

"I heard a story on the radio last night," her father said. "About two guys in the Yukon."

Chewing on her thumbnail, she took too much and winced. She sucked on it, tasting pennies. In *Romeo & Juliet* it was an insult to bite your thumb but that always seemed so random. At least when you gave someone the finger, it had an obvious etymology. Maybe back in the day biting your thumb was like vagina dentata.

"Is the Yukon really a place?" she asked.

"Yes, it's in Canada."

"But do they really call it the Yukon? That's not a Jack London thing?"

"They were building an igloo together," he continued. "They were almost done. They just needed to do the top. The guy on the inside was bald and it was getting warm inside so he took off his hat.

He popped his head out to ask the other guy a question, but when the other guy saw his bald head poke out of the hole, he instinctively smashed it in with an ice axe."

"That's horrible."

Her father glanced over his shoulder before changing lanes.

"You know there are mirrors," she said.

"You know there are blind spots," he said.

"Why'd you tell me that story?"

"Seemed like your cup of tea."

When she was very young she pretended to be a dog, a frog, a bunny, a dolphin, and when her parents asked her, "Are you a dog? A frog? A bunny? A dolphin?" she answered, "No. No. No. No." When her baby teeth came out, her mother snuck quarters under her pillow while she pretended to be asleep. When she was in first grade her teacher gave her chocolate milk during snack time and she pretended to be ambivalent. When she was twelve she smeared ketchup on her neck as if her throat had been slashed and waited on the living room floor for her parents to discover her.

They exited the highway and drove west. Near King City they stopped at El Rey for lunch at Macho Nacho, like they did every year. The boy at the counter had a glistening faux hawk. His cheeks were covered in archipelagos of acne. She ordered a Tecate and while they waited for their food, she drank her beer combatively. On the walls were a dozen paintings of the same long-haired warrior carrying the same unconscious princess.

"I have an idea," she said. "Let's not do this next year."

They arrived at Big Sur an hour before sunset. Her father parked between two black SUVs. He collected his things from the backseat while she hopped out and lit a Camel Light. She looked for the man inside the camel's front leg. Some people thought he had an erection. Some people thought he was Mae West. Her roommate said the man was getting a blowjob from a woman on her hands and knees while she was being fucked by a lion. Her father handed her a package of white roses wrapped in brown paper. He tucked a second one

under his arm.

"Smoking," he said.

A long flight of stairs led to the beach, where a group of late-afternoon picnickers sat on an oversized blanket. At the shore, ragged rocks broke the waves. A five-year old lorded over a tide pool.

At the water's edge, she gave her father a weak smile. He returned it, but his face was solemn. She imagined his face molded into a mask for her to wear, and then she imagined her face with a less solemn expression, turning that into a mask for him. The masks were not to be worn over the face, they were to be worn on the inside, like a secret face.

Side by side they unwrapped their packages. She placed her flowers into the water and he did the same. The roses bowed under the waves. The process was slow, the surf churned the petals and stems and carried them away. The sky darkened. Somehow she was holding his hand. She didn't remember reaching for it. There was a time when there was no difference between them, when they were actually the same thing.

The beach behind them was abandoned. The picnickers were gone but they'd left behind their blanket.

"We don't have to go to Macho Nacho anymore," he said.

"No. It's tradition."

"It's disgusting."

She laughed.

"It is disgusting," she agreed.

At the stairwell, a pair of gutterpunks met them on the steps. One had the sides of his head shaved, the rest of his hair was clipped with barrettes. The other was tall, too young for wounds.

"Spare a dollar?" one asked.

Before she could say no, her father was already in his wallet. He surrendered a ten-dollar bill. The boys bowed in sarcastic gratitude and let them pass. At the top of the stairs she imagined picking up a truck and throwing it down on them. She pictured them crushed under the weight of the truck and their insides spilling out like dark cockroach blood. As they walked back to the car, she glowered at her father. His face was bruised with shadows.

Typically, they stayed at Karp's Hotel, but it'd burned down that winter. So they looked for a place near Carmel. She was surprised he hadn't booked something in advance. She'd liked staying at Karp's. The painter Patrick Nagel had lived there for some time and the lobby was hung with many of his paintings. It was how he'd paid rent.

She'd often smoked pot outside and then came in to look at the paintings while her father was in bed. The images were so melodramatic, the cocaine-skinned models with jet-black hair wearing yellow triangle earrings or a swatch of turquoise. The paintings were cartoonish fantasies, desperately erotic, ridiculous permissions.

The desk clerk at Karp's had been a heavy man whose face resembled an uncomfortable cushion. He'd worn a pencil-drawn goatee around his small mouth.

"I have two of his paintings in my room," he'd said.

She'd imagined his penis, that it looked like someone who goes to a party and stands around waiting for the night to end, as if the whole point of the party was for everyone else to feel indignant that this person came at all, uninvited. With a seam that ran down the middle of the scrotum as if it were sewn by hand. As if it were a sad alien fruit.

It felt good to know when someone was asking for sex.

The women in the paintings often looked like they were making a pass at you from across the room at an expensive party. They were extravagantly posed against grids or monochromatic shapes, petting a leopard, sometimes removing a bit of clothing, almost always meeting someone's gaze. One exception on the far wall was of a woman squatting with her back to the viewer. She wore a kamikaze headband and sandals and her eyes were cast downward, as if contemplating some unknowable disappointment.

As far as she knew, Patrick Nagel had only painted women. She didn't know what he looked like. A man in a white suit, probably, a man holding a paintbrush in one hand and his dick in the other. His paintings were mirrors. The man at the front desk said Nagel died young. She didn't know if he'd painted real models but she thought it would've been fun to meet him and smoke a joint with him and pose for a painting.

"What should I do?" she would've asked him.

"Just be yourself," he would've said.

An M has two legs and a phallus. A W is two sagging breasts. An M is for man but also for mother. A W is for woman but also for whatever.

That semester, she'd taken an art class with a student named Richard Bonds. For their last assignment, Richard built a very large motorized contraption out of wood and metal. Two long arms extended from the base and were fitted with harnesses. The purpose of the machine was to bring the arms together like two hands clapping. A gas generator provided power.

Richard put up fliers around the school, inviting everyone to the courtyard near his studio. He set up his machine there, and he attached to one of the arms a reproduction of Gustave Courbet's Origin of the World, which he'd rendered himself. After the crowd assembled, Richard removed his clothes and strapped himself to the other arm. He clicked a remote control and the machine began to slap him and the painting together.

Whenever she looked at the original Origin of the World, the Rorschach test of pubic hair dragged her eye down. She always stared at the crevice, forgetting the subject's face, the fact that she didn't have one. Eventually she decided that the painting wasn't about women. And it wasn't about how men desired women or truth or birth. It was about how men saw themselves.

When the machine stopped slamming Richard and the painting together, he unstrapped himself and stumbled forward, his face and chest scraped and bleeding. He slipped on a robe that was waiting for him on a foldout chair and limped into the closest building while the crowd walked away in disgust.

She went over to the machine. The canvas was coming off the stretcher bars. She flipped it over and spread it out on the lawn. Because the oil paint hadn't dried, it all smeared together during the performance. It looked like molasses and butter and blood. What had been pubic hair now bloomed like a dark molestation. There was no body anymore. There was no more woman.

It occurred to her, as her father pulled in to the Holiday Inn Express parking lot, that there were two different tribes, a Holiday Inn tribe and a Holiday Inn Express tribe, but she didn't know the difference. Were there even regular Holiday Inns anymore? Had the Express tribe won? In the hotel lobby, she listened to three women buzzing about how much cheesecake they'd devoured at dinner.

"I shouldn't have," one of them pretended to confess.

The women were not her tribe.

After booking their rooms with the desk clerk, who concealed his contempt with a robotic obsequiousness, they walked to the elevator.

"Do you remember in sixth grade there was a boy who sent me roses?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Did you know I kicked him in the nuts?"

"No. What? Why?"

"We were doing séances at Kelly Kessler's house. We took turns lying on the rug. Everyone put two fingers under the person's body and lifted them up. When it was Jonah's turn—"

"Jonah was the one who sent you flowers?"

She nodded, "When he closed his eyes, I kicked him in the nuts. I kicked him as hard as I could."

"Did it feel good?"

"For him?"

"For you."

He pressed the button for the third floor. She saw that he was still wearing his wedding ring, which was crushing on two levels. One, obviously, get over it. And two, wedding rings were gross. No one ever acknowledged the symbolism of the finger going into the circle. Like unicorn horns and neckties were penises. At her summer internship a woman there had gotten engaged and was showing off her ring. Everyone was gabbling and praising her while all she could think of was how a diamond was just an obnoxious crystalline clit.

"You know, it's not easy for anyone," her father said, handing her the key to her room.

She went inside and sat down on the edge of the bed. Above the headboard, there was a painting of a landscape so unremarkable that

no one would be able to point it out in a police lineup. She watched the ceiling fan cut the air.

Hours later, she woke up in the bathtub with her arm flopped over the side and her clothes puddled on the floor.

She didn't remember taking them off. She didn't remember getting in the tub. The last thing she remembered was the joint. Lighting it, the flame enveloping the tip like a valiant orange foreskin. She'd blown the smoke into the sink to conceal the smell. Only a few images from the night's slideshow lingered—her mother's hazel eyes, George Washington's face on the dollar bill, algae, one image transforming into another.

As she rose from the tub, she looked at her naked self. She scanned her chest, her stomach, her genitals, the ash of her knees. She made a sound like a terrified balloon.

Sometimes you're reading a book or magazine and you scan over "really" but really it's "reality." Sometimes the word you see is a wound. And then suddenly you have to push shit through your ear. Suddenly your heart is your tongue. Suddenly blood fountains in your throat. But your eyes are the same dark clots. Under your lip is the same scar from when a boy tried to cut your mouth with scissors. The folds in your cheeks are like casings around your lips as if your face was made of ham, that hasn't changed. Your face is the same. It's not a penis face the way some people have a penis face, with dented foreheads, veined skin, jutting jawbones, coarse hair, eyes spaced too wide apart. But even though your face is the same, you're not the same. You're an undesirable putrescent gray.

She wondered what her body would look like. Like a murder costume. She imagined the blood. Her father would have to see her like that. They would tell him that she was dead. She was a witch. A witch who didn't mourn enough. Why can't witches get pregnant? Because their boyfriends have hollow weenies. At the Palisades she once hiked to the top of a giant waterfall. All the while she wanted to leap into the chasm. She told her then-boyfriend that she'd felt suicidal.

"No, that's just gravity," he'd laughed.

She thought of walking into traffic. Stepping in front of a car. A car filled with black balloons. Black swallows flying into the air. Some

people were always getting rid of themselves. Parents taught their children to believe their toes were pigs.

Hurriedly she put on her clothes and ran down the back stairwell.

It was only later that she decided to go to Karp's.

She wanted to see if there was anything left of the Nagels. She thought of those unhappy people who say, "Everything happens for a reason." That never quite rang true to her. And then, maybe after Karp's, she'd continue on to Big Sur and look for the roses they'd lofted into the sea.

Mobile phone stores and bank branches flanked the sides of the street. She walked past a man in a yellow jacket and baggy chinos. A plastic bag stuffed with wet newspapers hung from his hand. It took her an hour to find the old Karp's lot. It was mostly rubble and a few stray black boards. Someone had left behind a green baseball hat that was brighter than any of the weeds. She found small oddities in the dust like a zipper handle from a suitcase and a metal cufflink. There was also a rusty dumpster filled with burnt mattresses. She picked up a stick and walked around with it.

A couple of hours passed before her father appeared.

He slammed the door of his car.

"What the fuck are you doing? Why didn't you answer your phone?"

She thought of pretending to be dead. They'd ignored her when she'd covered her throat with ketchup. She hadn't wanted to be dead, she'd wanted to be acknowledged, so that's what they deprived her of.

"I wanted to see if anything was left."

"Seriously, what is wrong with you?" he pressed.

He didn't wait for an answer. Instead he got up and fetched two water bottles from the car. He drank them both before coming back to her. She took out a cigarette but he snatched it out of her mouth.

"You have to talk," he said. "You have to talk to me."

Instead, she drew in the dirt with her finger, carving not quite letters.

"That doesn't say anything," he said.

"I had a terrible dream," she finally said. "We were at the beach at Big Sur and you were…"

"What?"

"I don't want to say..."

"I'm not—

"You were making me have sex with you," she said.

Her father looked strangely neutral.

"I was behind you, and you were on your knees. You kept curling your arm around me. You kept hooking me in. Your back was paste. Like, literally paste, but with bleeding scrapes on it."

"That was your dream last night?"

"No, last month."

"What else?"

"That's not enough?" she bristled.

"If we're going to try and understand it—"

"I don't want to understand it."

"Then why tell me about it?"

"Because I don't know what else to say."

He kicked dirt onto the almost letters.

She looked at him accusingly. He'd been half of her, and then none of her, and yet she was still trapped inside him, in some bullshit world, not hers, one she could never escape from and all its lurid disguises and humiliations.

She gathered her arms around her knees and looked at the cars, at the dumpster, at the sky, anywhere but him. There were clouds crossing above her. One of them resembled a bird, she thought, but soon it pulled apart, it lost its wings and talons and turned back into a cloud.

Valorie K. Ruiz

LINEAGE OF EGGS

*

The first time my mother got her period she didn't know what was happening.
Spent eggs spilled out of her in rust
I thought I was dying.
My abuela handed her diaper thick cloth
said *this is the price you pay por ser mujer.*

*

My mother didn't know she was having sex
when she got pregnant.
I didn't look– didn't like– didn't know–
what was happening. Didn't know her cuerpo
was so ready
to hold someone else's yolk.

*

8 years later she's married to a man who cracks
her spine. Spills blood to her skin, her egg white eyes
turning black, cracks her costillas in half
like a whishbone after she cut her ovaries
to stop any more eggs from being robbed by knuckled hands.
He wishes on her chips, wishes she would be an empty shell–
something only of use to fertilize.

*

At seventeen I find a man with a family
obsessed with eggshell skin.
He parades me around on a spoon— on good days—
until I gain weight, until he's drunk, until I tumble to concrete
my skin spilling bloodied yolk.

*

I start giving myself limpias at nineteen.
Wipe my skin with an egg
think of all the potential held in a fragile shell.
My abuela calls it *brujerías*, calls it *esas cosas malas*.
But I feel the way egg holds life inside,
feel the meal brewing below my stomach
feel the quiver of something sparking and spreading inside.

*

Nine years later I see my egg with limbs spreading out of a shell.
See her tumble stumble never crack, think of all the ways
the world could break her. Think of her body and the unborn inside.
My hija is allergic to eggs
she doesn't understand yet why I slide them along my skin
or why I lean in before splitting and spilling them on a sarten
why I pray to the sizzle and say *I see all that you could be.*

Matthew Hawkins

21ST CENTURY BOY

There was a boy—a real, live boy—laying right next to me in my bed. I felt like I'd known him forever, but I couldn't remember his name. He was completely asleep, like a computer after a hard shut down. I took a picture of him (carefully, double-checking that my flash was off) and snapchatted it to all of my friends. I didn't caption the photo, I wanted it to be vague and mysterious. I guess, I wanted to be vague and mysterious too. I watched his chest rise and fall like an empire while he was deep in his REM cycle. I fantasized that he might not ever turn back on, that he might never leave my bed, that he might never leave me. I wish I could sleep like him. I can never sleep.

I scrolled through my phone while he slept. I'm, like, always scrolling through my phone. I don't know if I actually digest any of the information or if I'm just looking to pass time until I die. And sometimes I look at it for so long that I probably could die. I forget to sleep and eat and prolong using the bathroom and all that. I can't do anything without it. It's like a phantom limb, or my Mom who still pays half my rent, or a boy I can't stop myself from clinging so hard and pathetically to. Sometimes when I'm holding it, I imagine it as that type of fish that rides on the underbelly of a shark to survive. I forget what they're called; I'll have to Google it.

*

Remoras. They stick themselves to others by using suction-like organs on their head. And they don't exclusively do it to sharks, they'll do it to any large, wet body that will allow them. Sometimes they'll stick themselves for so long that the larger-fish's skin will rub raw, leaving them vulnerable to infection. If this happens, the larger fish will try to eat the remora.

One time this guy got mono while we were dating. His name was Trevor. We tried to prevent the disease from spreading by not kissing for, like, less than a week, and then we stopped trying. We couldn't help ourselves. We had sex anyway. We had to; we loved each other.

I didn't even WebMD after the sex. I wanted that sickness. I wanted whatever he had. I wanted everything with him. I never got mono anyway. When he broke up with me I felt ruined: an iPhone in a public toilet. I've texted him over 300 times since he did it. He's' rarely replied. Sometimes it's hard for me to think that he doesn't think about me all the time. That the people I reach out to are never reaching back. I think about everyone and everything all the time. I miss everyone I've ever met.

Shortly after Trevor and I broke up, I was tested for mono and found out that I never contracted it from him because I had actually given it to him. I guess I never noticed any of the symptoms because I was too preoccupied loving him. I texted Trevor when I found this out and he told me to never contact him again. He said that I needed to let go. He wanted to drown his memories of me. He wanted to forget my name. For years, I've slept, loved, gotten taken advantage of, contracted and spread colds, and texted anyone who reminded me of Trevor. The problem with this is, everyone reminds me of him. Sometimes so many remoras will suction to a shark that they can't move. That they starve. That they die.

*

The boy laying in the body next to me flipped over, interrupting my scrolling. He was tall and skinny. His legs were dangling off the bed. I thought about how much he looked like everyone else I'd ever met. I think we all look more similar than we'd like to think. His body reminded me of another one of my ex-boyfriend's. I remember staring at my phone while that boy broke up with me. He said I was too much, which I guess means I wasn't enough. I was watching a video on how to make brownie cheesecake during his speech. Afterward, I cried and was too lazy to make the cheesecake, so I bought one on sale from the neighborhood Walmart down my block. I did this on an app that would deliver it directly to my apartment door, not even the door to my building, but the door to my apartment. I didn't even have to leave my house. Which was ideal, because I hate leaving my house. I ate the entire thing. (Side note: If you buy an entire cake by yourself and eat the whole thing by yourself, did it really happen? No.) I watched videos on Vine while I ate it. I don't remember which specific video. All Vines are kind of the same if you really think about it.

*

It takes a minimum of one hour to incinerate a body, a maximum of three. The temperature is set somewhere around 1600 degrees (give or take 200 depending on the preference of the person in charge of the crematorium that day). Often, if the body's position has been shifted after death there will be a build-up of gas, which can cause the body to moan and twitch ominously during the cremation process.

In 2002 the operator of the Tri-State Crematory in rural Northwest Georgia, Ray Brent Marsh, was fired and arrested simultaneously. Cops found 300 bodies, over 100 of them decomposed beyond identification, strewn about the grounds like dolls in a kid's room. Matter from the site that was supposed to be ashes of loved ones, was found to be made up of primarily ground down wood chips and miscellaneous dust. Through extensive Reddit research, I have found no causable reason for Ray Brent Marsh to do this (or to have 2 and a half first names). He didn't do anything weird with them. Meaning, he didn't have sex or eat the bodies or anything like that. He didn't receive money or really anything out of it. He just did not burn them, for the sake of not burning them—seemingly for the fuck of it. Maybe he got scared of their spasms? Maybe he'd always wanted to be a movie star or a lawyer or a doctor, but he was stuck at the crematorium all day? Maybe it was poisoning from all of the fumes that made him do it? Maybe he was just bored?

When he was released from prison in June 2016, he issued a letter of apology. I read it. Twice. It didn't say anything I didn't already know. I don't understand Ray Brent Marsh, but I really want to. I wonder if he ever looks up his case online. I wonder if he'd be happy that I did, that someone knows about his existence, that someone is still writing about him, thinking about him. I won't ever forget his name.

*

I once signed in as "Justin" at Sport Clips. This was weird because I'm not exactly a Sport Clips kind of guy and my name's not Justin. However, I consciously made my voice deeper when the hair dresser called out my alias. I told her that I wanted to shave my head. At the

time, I had long, curly hair. I told her my baseball coach was making me do it, that he said it would distract me from the ball. I don't play or even like baseball. She replied with small talk and we fake laughed. The buzzers ran across my hair like a lawnmower across a field. After she finished, she looked into my eyes through the mirror and asked if I liked it. I told her that I did even though I didn't. At check-out she asked for my email address and I gave it to her. I don't know how to not give out my personal information out when people ask. She said bye to "Justin" when he left. I don't know why I pretended to be him that day. According to the tldr notes on the DSM-IV I found on the internet this behavior is consistent with Dissociative Personality Disorder. According to the internet I have many disorders. Sometimes when I'm researching them I still get emails offering promotions for Justin. They always say, "We miss you!" at the top of them. I miss him too.

*

Mine and that boy's bodies were sweating uncontrollably in my bed. It was so hot. It had to be about 1600 degrees. I felt like I was dying. The boy moaned and wrapped his arms around my chest, tightly, like the shirts at clubs. He had offered to buy me a drink at a gay club the night before. When he asked what I wanted, I told him that it didn't matter. I was so nervous. I wanted all of the drinks. I wanted to look at my phone, but you can't do that on a date for some reason. So, my only option was to get as drunk as possible and then forget I had a phone or that I was on a date, whichever came first. He told me he wasn't looking for anything serious, and I grabbed his arm and told him, "good, because I'm not either."

Later after several impulsive shots of vodka, we both admitted to lying about this while stumbling arm-in-arm to my apartment. Over the walk, he told me his entire life story. Apparently, he grew up going to a cemetery for daycare and mentioned that he knew how to incinerate a body. (This didn't scare me. At the end of the day, I think I'd like to be with someone who knows how to incinerate a body over someone who doesn't.) I asked him if he'd rather be buried or cremated. He said, "buried, for sure." He didn't elaborate when I asked him to. He said that less is more. I told him that more is more, and made a mental note to look up the cremation process later. I told him

I'd always felt like an outsider. He said he did too. When we inevitably had sex, it was average, but we pretended like it was extraordinary. I honestly don't remember it that well. It wasn't remarkable. But I do remember feeling like an outsider even when he was inside of me. And I assume he felt the same way.

Eventually, the sun lit up the room like a notification while he held me. I watched dust particles float down from my crumbling ceiling and imagined they were leaves falling on a tree-lined street in some picturesque suburb somewhere. I thought about everyone that had ever stayed in my bed. I could feel the vibrations from the steps of my upstairs neighbors. My apartment was so shitty. The walls and the floorboards were thinner than all of the celebrities I pretend like I don't want to be. I often wonder if my downstairs neighbors can hear me.

*

Rihanna weighs 137 pounds. Taylor Swift: 125. Brad Pitt: 190. Kourtney Kardashian: 105. Troye Sivan: 130. I spend hours every week researching the weights of celebrities, comparing my number to theirs. Lady Gaga: 106, in 2009—140, in 2016. Kim Kardashian: 116. George Clooney: 172. I do it so often that a therapist once advised me to get rid of my scale. I told her it wouldn't matter. The world is full of scales.

*

I just left that boy in my bed. I finally made the move after an hour or a few hours or forever. Sometimes I feel like time doesn't pass in my room, or it passes so fast that it couldn't possibly be recorded. The boy's body was naked and dehydrated like a fish on land. I slid on my running shorts and looked at my body in the mirror. The night before, that boy had told me he loved my body, which was weird because I'd always hated my body. His body flipped over one last time as I was walking out the door. He grabbed my pillow and hugged it next to him exactly how he'd grabbed me. Sometimes I wonder if it even matters who the other person is I'm sleeping with, in a relationship with, in love with. I wonder if it's just the fact that there's someone else in the bed, someone receiving my touch, someone reading and

replying to my messages on an at least occasional basis. I imagined that boy and I were the last bodies on Earth.

The street was full of people. It was cold and they were all bundled up and huddled together. It was fall and I was living in Chicago at the time. Everything was blocked off for a marathon. I pushed my way to the front of the crowd and started cheering because that's what everyone else was doing. We all roared simultaneously like it was the rapture or we were in line outside of a Best Buy on Black Friday or something. Overheated, red-faced, and pulsating bodies all gasping for air, blurred by us. I kept looking for an opening between bodies, but there was never an opening. There were so many bodies. One of them lost control of her footing and tripped. The other runners paused to help her up. Everyone clapped. A group of post-brunching women pushed into me and gave me a look. They were forcing their way to the front of the crowd in order to get a better vantage point for their Instagram stories, like they were nature photographers on the African Plains. I told them I was sorry. I'm always sorry.

*

The largest stadium in the US is Michigan Stadium, located in Ann Arbor. It holds, on average, 107,601 people. I've always enjoyed researching stadiums. I don't necessarily like sports, but I really like stadiums. Something fascinates me about the number of people that can pack into one of those awkward spaceship-like facilities. I often fantasize about booking the next flight to Michigan and buying a ticket to a game. I'd paint my body blue and completely immerse myself in the culture, like a diver breaking the water's surface. I'd high-five whenever the home team scored a touchdown and I'd cuss at the opponents when they did. I imagine there's something comforting in knowing there's 100,000+ people all in the same place for the same reason and you're one of them. At stadiums, everyone shares the same passion. The same success. The same failure. I've always wanted to be a part of something like that—win or loss. I've always wanted to be a part of something.

*

Marathons are so weird. All the competitors were wearing skin-tight brightly colored shirts. I assume that originally athletes started wearing obnoxiously bright colors so their boyfriends and wives and moms and dads and children and friends—their humans—could single out their bodies amongst all of the others. However, now that almost all athletes do it's completely lost its authenticity. It's like how when you're really into a book, so you highlight so much of the page that it all becomes supremely unimportant.

There was a young girl standing in front of me: four or five. She couldn't control her body, it was jumping up and down and screaming. She looked at me in the eye and said, "that's my dad," and pointed to a stocky, middle-aged man who had more bald spots than hair spots. He was sporting a neon yellow tank-top and his body was visibly struggling to make it across the stretch in front of us. He was going so slow that other runners were swerving around him like he was a broken-down Honda without a bumper in the middle of the highway. The girl kept screaming. She was so proud. And she should be. That was her Dad. I screamed with her. I wanted to tell her that I never knew my dad, that I wasn't even sure if I knew myself. But instead I just yelled. After the streets cleared I went back to my room and the boy was gone.

Later that night, I texted him. I said I had great time, even though I had an average time. Time is just time and we're all just doing it. My room was pitch black except for my phone screen. The people in the apartment above mine were moving around. They were always stomping or running or dancing or whatever is the opposite of sleep. I imagine them as the average middle-aged, midwestern, cis-gendered, straight couple. In my fantasy, they have bratwursts for every meal and apologize to each other way too often. The husband is bald and the wife is ever-changing her hair color like Beyoncé between sets. Sometimes when they're moving around, I imagine they're dancing in their bedroom above mine, laughing and kissing and sweating. I imagine inside jokes and illegal apartment pets and clean sheets and holidays and sleeping in and never even thinking about going to the gym. I bet they don't even have phones, or if they do, they only use them to talk to each other. I bet they text constantly throughout the day. I know they love each other, really love each other. I've always wanted to love someone—anyone and everyone—like I imagine how my upstairs neighbors love each other.

*

Urban Dictionary describes being "in love" as hearing a bear roar in a forest. You don't have to see the bear or have someone tell you it's a bear. Once you hear the roar, you just know. However, I'm not sure if I buy this definition. I've never heard this "roar" when I was at a club or on my phone or in a bed. Maybe I'm not a people person. Maybe I'm incapable of it—being in love.

*

The couple above me started having sex. Hearing people have sex is kind of like hearing a bear in the woods or being in love: you can't know for sure, but you just know. I laid in my bed supine, listening to them like it was a *National Geographic* podcast. The sex was loud and confident. It only lasted, like, 14 seconds, but it was the noisiest and longest 14 seconds of my life. I could feel their bed post vibrate off the walls and then through my body like my phone when someone blows it up. The woman screamed like it was the end of the world, like she was going to die. But I guess she was actually screaming because she was so alive. She was in love, in her apartment, with her partner and their hearty Midwestern meals and their loud feet or whatever. After it stopped they were quiet for a few seconds and then started laughing. She probably made a joke about him finishing too early. Or they spilled the lube and made a huge mess or maybe they realized they forgot to use lube or maybe someone farted or something, anything. They couldn't stop laughing. They laughed about the sex longer than the sex itself had lasted. I laughed with them. I laughed because they laughed. I don't think they could hear me, but I can't be sure. I wonder if this is the way dead bodies feel under the ground.

I stared at my phone screen all night. I scrolled through messages and apps and pictures and facts and articles like it would save me, like it would take up all the time until I met someone or until someone met me or until my phone broke or until the world ended or until mine actually started. That boy from the night before never texted me back. I wanted to text him—any of them—but you're not supposed to send more, or double text, unless they reply. I looked up his birth chart and convinced myself he wasn't right for me. I'm more of a

cremation person anyway.

Later, I looked up the results of the marathon. That girl's dad finished with one of the slowest times, but I bet she was waiting for him at the finish line, roaring and yelling and growling and cheering like he'd won. I think her excitement is what true connection is supposed to be like. She would be my vague, roundabout *Urban Dictionary* definition for "in love." I took a screenshot of the results and look at it all the time: at the airport, on dates, when I'm trapped in the elevator with other people, when I'm waiting in line, when I can't sleep. Bears don't growl often. But when they're emotional—in pain or in fear or in love—they make a noise similar to a high-pitched human scream. Sometimes when I go on runs I stop and turn off my phone and just listen. I haven't heard one yet, but I guess I'll know when I do.

CONTRIBUTORS

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