



fugue⁵⁹





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Summer // Fall 2020





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Issue 59

Kirstin Allio

Mant Bares

Rebecca Bernard

Imani Cezanne

Jackie Connelly

Kat Finch

Elana Lev Friedland

JA Haupt

Arah Ko

Cassie Mannes Murray

Cindy Juyoung Ok

Gabriel Palacios

A. Prevet

Tori Rego

Margie Sarsfield

Sanna Sepulveda

Benjamin Soileau

Mei Mei Sun

Elizabeth Threadgill

\$10.00

Poetry/Fiction/Essays



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Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and hybrid/images submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be unread. Visit www.fuguejournal.com for submission guidelines. All contributors receive a 2-year subscription and contributor copies. Please send no more than 5 poems, 1 story or essay OR up to 3 flashes, per submission. We welcome simultaneous submissions as long as you withdraw your work if it is accepted elsewhere.

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**18th Annual Ron McFarland
Prize for Poetry**

Judged by sam sax

Winner:

“Fill in the Blanks”
by Imani Cezanne

*“Fill in the Blanks’ is a remarkable & inventive poem
that experiments formally to explore power,
history, & absence in imaginative and troubling ways.”*

– sam sax

Fill in the Blanks

Imani Cezanne

1. absent

adjective

Not present in an expected place; lacking, nonexistent or non-attending

Examples: The National Women's March™ was _____ of nuance.
The National Women's March™ was _____ of arrests.
The National Women's March™ was _____ of demands.

(Note: A protest _____ of demands is a parade.)

2. _____

adjective

Relating to persons having dark skin; characterized by the absence of light

Examples: A _____ woman was skinned and rawhide stretched across a barrel's mouth.
A _____ woman was hacked from idle mahogany and buried inside herself.
A _____ woman was gutted and split, God's praise sliced clean out her throat.

(Note: No National Women's March™ was organized.)

Practice:

The _____ woman was _____ from the National Women's March™. The white woman did not notice the _____ of the _____ woman. When asked about _____ lives the white woman had an _____ look on her face. Made an _____ reply. When the white woman speaks of all women the _____ woman is _____. If the white woman speaks of _____ women the _____ trans woman is _____. The _____ queer woman is _____.

I didn't go to the National Women's March™ because I didn't know about it. Nobody told me. I wasn't invited either way I had to go to work for which I was late because the city buses were detoured because white women prefer to gather in their own favor and then vote against it. Because I could be shot dead with nothing but my palms in my hands and white women would not have marched for me.

Would not have noticed my _____.

Figs: A Brief History

Margie Sarsfield

18th Annual *Fugue Prize for Prose*

Judged by Leni Zumas

Winner:

“Figs: A Brief History”
by Margie Sarsfield

*“I love this story’s ecstatic energy, its gleeful leaping
across borders of genre, gender, and
nation as it spins a new feminist fabulism.”*

– Leni Zumas

The fig surplus was a result of all men and many children being turned into fig trees. There were fig trees everywhere. No matter the climate, from Siberia to the Mojave, the fig trees survived. Fig trees grew in dark corners where men had gone to smoke cigarettes or urinate, no sunlight to speak of and no one knowing a fig tree was there until the fruits overwhelmed the alley and spilled onto the sidewalk. The trunks grew up through mattresses, roots mixed up in bedsprings. Some women kept sleeping next to the fig trees, woke up with leaves in their hair and fig juice on their backs and sometimes stuck in a swarm of fig wasps.

Some background information: figs are not actually fruits. They are inverted flowers, blooming internally. Fig wasps are born in the inedible male figs which, by evolutionary non-miracle, are shaped precisely to harbor wasp eggs. The larvae mate within the fig, brothers fertilizing sisters. The blind, wingless males devote their lives to digging a tunnel through which the female wasps can escape, bearing pollen and eggs. The females fly to new figs and tunnel into the center, a process which costs them their antennae and wings. They lay their eggs, die, and are absorbed back into the fig. Many female fig wasps wind up tunneling into the female fig—the edible ones—accidentally, where there is no room for them to lay their eggs. They starve to death, alone and full of eggs that will never hatch, but they’ve done what the fig tree needs them to do, which is to spread pollen so the figs can ripen.

Unlike any fig tree species that had ever existed on the planet before, the once-human fig trees produced figs daily. Ripe figs fell throughout the night and new ones would be budding by morning. The streets were messy with figs. When it rained, the fig pulp turned to mud and ran into the gutters, clogging the sewers, stink rising like heat from the ground. It was impossible not to track fig muck into houses, impossible to cover the smell of rotting figs with candles, impossible to abide the flies and critters, impossible to feel like the earth was still a home built for humans.

The date industry fell apart. The dildo industry boomed. Women with bodies thought to be male were hounded for their anatomy. This was harrowing for some, delightful for others. Either way it was better than being a man in any sort of body, which meant you were a fig tree. People who were neither woman nor man, or who were both simultaneously, remained people. The only requirement to stay human, it seemed, was to not be a man. Or a child.

Children of all genders succumbed to transformation. It was unknowable when or why or whether a child would turn into a fig tree. Võ Diêu Hiên came home one day to find her daughter sprouting sweet flowers from her neck, while the same-age boy next door played badminton by himself in the yard. Adi Evavich's son was eight days old and about to be circumcised. The mohel had her shears to his foreskin when he erupted into wood and fig. Not knowing what to do, the mohel snipped off the tip of a branch. Some people described the experience of feeling their babies transform in utero; Amy Sawyer of Deadhorse, Alaska, wrote on an online forum that "it was like getting a splinter as deep inside as you could imagine, deeper even," but later edited the post to include the following: "the pain (well, it never hurt THAT much) has been replaced with something else. It feels the way it looks when a breeze makes all the shiny sides of leaves on a tree flutter in kind of

different directions. It's not painful...it's nice." Many women who would have had to give birth to trees opted, instead, for abortions. Sawyer went through with a live birth, a bonsai-sized fig tree coming out trunk-first after several hours of labor. No one called it a stillbirth, because it wasn't. The tree, once potted, flourished. The tiny, grape-sized figs were quite cute.

Dr. Shakuntala Mahanti presented a paper at the International Conference on Fig Tree Transformation in Nairobi, wherein she posited that the quality of the fruit a fig tree bore could be linked to the quality of human who had been tree'd. The paper was largely panned for its lack of evidence, since some people defended men who hit them while others vilified men who hadn't texted them back. And it was impossible to get any mother to admit her child was anything but Christ-like. And, regardless, even if Mahanti's thesis were provable, it wouldn't help anyone figure out how to stop the transformations from happening. More papers at more conferences were similarly useless, as children continued to turn into fig trees. It was only when people accepted this as their new reality that they could begin the real work of finding some use for all the figs.

Women in the American Midwest fed figs to livestock. They chose only the best figs to feed to cattle, because the endless supply meant they could afford to be choosy. They threw the rest of the figs into trucks and dumped them in the Nevada desert. Figs replaced corn as the livestock feed of choice, but no one knew what to do with all the leftover corn, so that went to the desert, too. Pigs eat everything, including figs. Chickens tolerate figs. Cows famously have four stomachs, which work like a fermentation tank for the optimal digestion of grass and grass-like plants. Eating too much of anything but grass and grass-like plants makes cows sick. But cows had been eating corn, a grain, not a grass, for years with the help of antibiotics, so they started eating figs, too. The cow stomachs fermented the figs, leaving the cows gassier than ever.

The use of livestock as fig disposal systems meant the livestock population remained steady. But with only a few billion people to feed, and nearly whole countries of people who didn't eat meat, the demand for dead animals dropped precipitously. Women who lost their children to transformation were particularly sensitive to the act of taking calves from their mothers to slaughter, so the world faced a concurrent surplus of living veal and scarcity of cow's milk. This didn't affect women in many places where milk was not a staple ingredient, but Baskin Robbins went out of business.

Entrepreneurial women moved into the empty storefronts, selling fig-based beauty products or child transformation insurance or dildos. In Belarus, the sole Baskin Robbins storefront was bought by a company that would hand-carve a lover's face into their fig tree. The business was a huge success and an American corporation bought it out within a month. Copycat businesses popped up, offering laser-cut portraits that were more realistic and cheaper, but plenty of women still paid the premium to have an artist come in and tenderly chip away at the wood that had been their loves.

The desert fig pile was a bad idea. The smell went for miles and wild animals got fat and sick eating the figs and corn. Pretty much everyone was getting sick of figs. Nabisco stopped making Fig Newtons and Newman's Own stopped making Fig Newmans. The figs were useless but wouldn't stop coming. It became unmanageable, a nightmare: figs in the bathtub, figs attracting rats and raccoons, figs making the grass slippery, figs making fingers sticky, fiber-filled figs making the cows fart more, figs in the desert rotting, piri piri figs, fig po' boys, fig à l'orange, fig-flavored corn chips, fig nuggets, fig étouffée, figs in a blanket, three-fig dip, fig à la vodka, General Tso's figs, fig onion soup, figs eternal and emotionless, figs demanding nothing but space, figs that couldn't be blamed for existing, figs that couldn't be blamed for anything.

Either the figs would need to be gotten rid of, or everything else would have to change. Cutting down the fig trees didn't work—they just grew back. Burning the fig trees was dangerous and impractical given how close the fig trees were to the world's existing infrastructure. The only places without abundances of fig trees were places inhospitable for humans to begin with. It wasn't really the trees that were the problem, anyway. It was their infinitely regenerating blossoms, the messy purple fleshes.

The people figured the best way to get rid of the figs was to get rid of the fig wasps. They tried spider mites, but it was soon decided that hordes of spider mites were worse to have than landscapes of fig trees. A similar conclusion was drawn for carpenter worms, darkling ground beetles, dried fruit beetles, earwigs, freeman sap beetles, confused sap beetles, navel orange worms and fig tree borers. Too many bugs were clearly worse than too much fruit. Or, rather, inverted flowers. Even as fig knowledge became common knowledge, it was hard not to think of figs as fruits.

And, as doctors were quick to point out, figs helped reduce the risk of breast cancer. And figs were high in fiber. Figs were also bountiful sources of magnesium, manganese, calcium, copper, potassium, vitamin K, and vitamin B6. Dried figs had even more calcium than fresh figs, as much calcium as an egg. Figs fought free radicals. Though notorious for speeding up tooth decay, figs were not the worst thing to have a surplus of, especially once fig seed oil became a viable fuel source. While not traditionally economical, the overwhelming availability of fig seeds turned a cottage industry into normal practice worldwide. It was challenging to drive with the streets so often mired in fig guts, but this only spurred the invention of tires specifically designed for traction on fruit. Furthermore, jobs like "fig sweeper" and "fig-plow operator" paid well and were satisfying because they truly benefited the community. Every-

one cheered and smiled and waved when the fig plow rolled down the block. Even as, over decades, the people began to think that the figs were not really their enemy, this routine mechanical victory still struck them as a triumph.

Poets rose up in praise, or at least in tolerance: after all, the fig trees meant no harm. Beyond clearing the streets and pressing seeds for oil, the people could only weave more baskets from more branches to hold more figs, and rejoice in the endless surplus. They learned to wade daintily through ankle-deep figs, purple-dyed feet, a new trend that everyone could flaunt. There could be no war, since the only war that mattered had been won by the fig trees. Everything that had once been said about human nature was no longer true. Human nature, it seemed, was defined by the world in which humans lived, and not the other way around. The fig trees brought this knowledge, and the people were grateful for it.

How fragrant was the world of figs. How wonderful was the economy of fruit. What a joy to receive the new issue of *Cooking Light*, now printed on fig bark paper, featuring recipes for fun ways to prepare figs for all your holidays. Every year, starting on the fiftieth anniversary of the transformations, a fig-laden rocket rose over Cape Canaveral, each one aimed towards a new planet, the destinations growing farther and farther away over time, the goal simple: to fill the universe with figs, gifts to others from Earth and the people on it.

The people told stories that made it seem like the figs had always been there, that this was the way it was supposed to be. The stories were as beautiful as any story written before, and the figs were as beautiful as any human: radiant in their relentlessness, surviving in splendor and so, so delicious.

Out of the Blue

Kat Finch

When Jeanne d'Arc died she was not instantly sainted.

She was not given a Christian burial,

as she was already ash to wind. Every woman is part witch. Apples were never an ornament of knowledge until Milton said so. The misfortune of Latin is evil, or apple.

Translation hinges on how the translator eats—

hunger for sustenance sake will never sustain a man.

(By all accounts, ribs are delicious. All fruit. All evil.)

The struggle between fig and apple.

Méliès colored the pyre of Jeanne by hand.

In the west, Hera's orchard shall be found. It will be abundant,

a timely word, 'apples,' of gold in a setting of silver.

Perhaps grains of wheat will frolic in the particles of light from our nearest star.

Perhaps, *perhaps.*

Perhaps it was not apple but evil Eve bit into. (*the obvious*)

In Jeanne's visions she saw the voice of G—.

 Anything so holy might manifest as the fallen. So we eat deadfall. Sins a precursor to contentment.

 The divine lost in a battle of wits between a minor chord and the apple seed. The voice of one is the voice of many.

Prae in the Latin, before the hand, and *currere*, to run.

Méliès could not paint blue into the scene at the stake.

Lapis lazuli was mined for its hue

 and was reserved

for the cloth of Mary's raiment when painted.

Blue is a color of rare origin.

If it is blue it is unlikely blue —

 the previous king

believed he was made of glass.

A tragedy then, when he bit into the golden apple of discord.
 In all likelihood, it was an orange.

Dementia

Elizabeth Threadgill

a tailpipe
firing

a rabbit
dying

a fire
in the barn

and the horses
gone

and the horses
gone

and the horses
smoke

and the smoke
burns

she asks
how did he die

you say
he drowned

and you drown
every time

she waits
for a burning bush

and you wonder
if she'll set fire to lace

does fire jump
like a spider

from thread
to thread

you are both
inconsolable

and the horses
gone

Things You Did After Your Best Friend Died Three Years

Mei Mei Sun

and two personal renaissances ago. You mourn for six weeks, then use her death to excuse all of your shortcomings for the rest of the year. One night, your body full of hunger and youth, you carve her initials into your outer thigh with your father's razor. Later, at a blazing house party, you trace over the scars with a hypodermic needle and black ballpoint ink. This is the memory you always go back to when you sob on the L.A. Metro on Tuesday nights, when even the security officers hesitate to touch you. That winter break, you vomit her blood out on the same bathroom floor where your mother had her miscarriage. Two years later, your computer malfunctions during a software update, wiping with it the only copy of the eulogy you had written for her. After two hours and six hundred dollars, it returns to you, wiped as clean as a child's apology. As redress, you eat only red and black foods for a week. That same month, you show your crush her obituary on your phone screen during a football game. He never talks to you again, and you accept this as a natural consequence of your growth.

Time flows like molasses on a December morning. Fed up with death, you attempt to distract yourself. You think about her as you lose your virginity on a waterproof mattress, silent under the weight of a man who peaked in high school. You think about her as you buy a birthday card for your new best friend, the one who fills her days with clean sand and smiling

children. You think about her as a nonprofit director with two teenage daughters leans you over his granite countertop, slabs of quartz blinking in the sunlight. It never works.

You go to Dallas only once, four months after her father died on a staircase built like jutting teeth. Her oldest sister agrees to meet you at a dim sum restaurant, where you order two appetizers and no drinks. Trying to bridge the silence, you remark on the Vietnamese dishes on the menu. Her sister, half apologetic, reminds you that she was half Vietnamese. You later punish yourself for not knowing this—for the first month of university, you sleep with the window opened directly onto your bed. Unfortunately, you underestimate the worryingly temperate climate of Los Angeles and only catch a slight cold that you drag on for as long as it lets you, a mountain of tissues steadily growing on your windowsill. Later that semester, you go downtown to write, wearing nothing but the slip your cruellest ex-boyfriend bought you. The wind picks up and sends you scrambling for cover. You are reminded of the walk you took on the first anniversary of her death, the one where you read cosmic meaning into rotting hardwood leaves. You can see her even now, watching you across the coffee shop, her last words hanging over you like pollution. You wonder why you never loved her until she tasted the cool metal of her father's handgun, and cry into your hands for the second time in your life.

Girlhood: An Essay

Cassie Mannes Murray

We ran through it. Sometimes one at a time
sometimes holding hands. Often in tutus

left over from gymnastics where we learned
to cartwheel, blood rushing freckles.

This was before Red Rover when hand holding
wasn't rough sport. Cut grass slicked our knees

as we padded through wet dirt, vaulting
the metal spigot ever-turning its head

while we galloped back until we squealed.
In summer the asphalt steamed, washing away

any sign of hopscotch. Before I loved
the boy across the street and used

any excuse to run through our front yard,
I knew well enough from *Tiger Beat* and Britney

Spears to throw on a bikini, unbutton
and fold over my jean shorts like Jessica

Simpson in *Dukes of Hazzard*, when I wanted
the eye of a boy. An eye for an eye

in a certain way. Afternoons, I slouched
next to Patrick on the bus; he poked a spot

between my ribs and hips so that it was almost
pleasure—from sinking, curling over like a bud,

but first a fist, my body alone in its refusal.
We had navels pleasing as seashells,

little waiting rooms. Belly buttons as peepholes
to interior terrain: how our ribs heaved like

stolen parts, how we practiced sighing, smiling
in the rollaway closet mirror of my mom's bathroom:

pout, hunch, look away, roll eyes, swan neck laugh
while clutching your throat with one hand, and how

Ashley's scar from appendix surgery still bled
for a few days afterwards. *How could bodies do that?*

We took turns running our fingers over that ruddy scar
softer than our other skin. (Or anyone's later.)

Our innies proved we could be treasure at center.
Before high school, the birth control, and the boy

who stared at the white sheet trying to find blood,
proof. Before any of our girlfriends duck-walked

the mall, weaving in and out of tank top racks
like calling cards of unlocked virginity, believers.

Long before we bought drugstore condoms,
my mom called out directions, reciting the back

of the tampon box, pamphlet unfolded like a city
pocket guide: directions to stop any bleeding, leaking.

Almost coming of age in that Chevy seat, stained
with oil from garage fix-ups, Brandon Jones thought

we could bless it by the lake. Everyone
thought that was gonna be it, so ready

to give me away. I wasn't thinking about any
of this when it was just the two of us, Ashley

and I, teaching ourselves a talent show dance
in my garage to "Mambo No. 5," hairbrush microphones,

attending father-daughter dances with my brother
because my dad, past sixty, didn't have the stamina.

In seventh grade, when I got kicked out
of the lunch table by signed declaration,

all the girls smiled with no teeth as Taryn
passed me the note, square pizza cooling on my tray,

but Ashley brought an extra sandwich and we fell
into the crack between gym bleachers, the only one

who didn't sign her name. That year, I would dig
the *soap* from my dad's back. Between moles and hair

and scars hidden most of the day underneath
a white t-shirt and business button-up.

I acted like a microscope: find and squeeze
small holes using both my elementary hands,

less a pinch and more a push until a curl
of white shot through, squeezed on a paper towel.

My mom did this before me. But I got old enough
and sat behind him sinking into his usual cushion.

He scratched out quick animal sounds.
At the end—a map of pink splotches

no one knew existed. A comfort: this secret
taught me that desire and disgust are words

God often confused. I don't remember
before we moved to North Carolina, and the pool

we could easily ride a bike to if we didn't
get distracted by the shaded creek bed.

Ashley knew how to throw stones to clear out
water moccasins—to cup the needle

legs of crawfish in her hands, whisper to them
through the oval gap of our thumbs. Our hands

a steeple empty of people, save for one pink
mudbug flicking against the canoe bottom. Whatever

oars they were lacking, we thought we held them;
we thought we knew how to mother. I can rewind

the tape: skip back over the wiggling hose, unchew
the puka shell necklace from vacation into patience,

dry my leotard completely and run back up our porch
and inside to suck an olive off each of my fingers,

my bare feet sliding along linoleum before hearing
Ashley and the girls skipping up the new driveway,

reverse-kissing my dad goodnight that evening.
After he read *The Fairytale of a Little Golden*

Book, which never said love is like breaking bread
with your body, a prayer on both our lips: *Hail Mary*,

full of grace. Who teaches you to wonder
and who tells you when to stop?

Someone told me ache is answered best
with force. But they were talking about muscles.

Growing up we managed the seasons
by taping leaves into journals, smushing

flowers between the pages of our favorite books,
even a full dandelion head pressed between

recto and verso. We passed notes in the hallway
until the internet: chat rooms and AIM

and away messages, T9Word. Dried corsages
slid down the arms of my four-poster bed.

Baby's breath now a dirty white. Nights before,
three barriers between *The Fairytale* and ourselves:

sleeping bag, jean zipper, boxer short;
four, if you counted the promise

underneath all that. *The Fairytale*
had knots in its back like a thorn in my rib

where I sucked in and swallowed instead of breathing.
We spent so many afternoons walking the track

in gym class and talking about whose bodies
we might trade out for our own. Bid on best

butt during locker room changes, rolling
the top of our Softe shorts two or three

times. We were girls, young and compartmentalized.
Once, I stole someone's boyfriend and so I deserved

punishment. Justin leaned against my Explorer's bumper
and kissed me. Under a street light, under an oak

tree shadow, under the desk lamp my father
left on for me in his office before falling asleep.

Ashley and I spent most of childhood trying
to tame things that men didn't like. Things

we discovered like a burning: the speed
we could swim a lap, wanting to be the heat

in a boyfriend's cupped fist on another boy's
face that looked at us wrong. We believed in stars

but only because they're mostly extinct. Final burn
just a pockmark of sky. And maybe this was the way

we wanted to go too. One good burn, one
long burn. *Could I love a boy if he didn't have a fist?*

And the next day after school, the girlfriend's face
pressed against my car window, her hair pulled tight

against her scalp and wheat penny rolls
clutched in her fists. Hoops. Flea market silver

belt buckle. She wanted to hit me, and I wanted
to feel it. Ashley clapped in the back seat,

pumped her fists, told me when to honk,
to run her over, just keep driving. We said

black-out like we knew where stars go
after obliteration. If this is what wanting

looks like, girlhood taught us
to be gluttonous. My dad never liked

Ashley, but we spent school years protecting
one another and summers floating

in a contractor's pool. Until the owner
planted a "No Trespassing" sign, we put

our mouths on the pucker of neon floats
and blew and blew until we spit

out spoonfuls of laughter or until we passed out.
We played *the game* at sleepovers, squeezed

one another until slump. Pink blotches
burgeoned on our necks in a smother. We named

each blush on our fawn skin and mornings
we floated on the waves towards the faux grotto

that Ashley's older boyfriend built.
That was the summer Ashley dated

John or Steve or Nick. I can't remember
his name, but I remember he had a dark

flat mole where the end of his jawline
met his neck, and it made him look more

Italian than his pomade. We liked him
enough to use the pool of the house

he sweated over all summer, house
like a sawdust mine we didn't dare enter

unless we wanted to stand and dry underneath
the skylight in the dining room. It was

just a hole then. We were all living in
the before that summer. When my mom tried

to manage the smallness of my bikinis
until Ashley and I loitered the racks

at TJ Maxx and shoved strings, triangle tops
into the worn front pockets of our purses.

Easy access. Afterwards, we would eat fat burgers
with cowboy names at Red Robin and steal

Coke glasses and forks just to see if we could.
Our shoulders so tanned from weeks poolside,

from playing keepaway with the neighborhood
boys who all had Ninja Turtle abs and tight

bicep buds like buffalo nickels, but weren't
nearly as sophisticated as the older John

or Steve or Nick who could just lean over his skinny
sisters and giggles would erupt into shrieks.

From the pool we all saw Ashley, dripping wet
in her always-black bikini, lean against John

or Steve or Nick, ignoring the toolbelt and pushing
her face into his. His was round and hers came

to a fierce point like a cliff. John or Steve or Nick
watched her skip away every time. Not an act

of claiming but of showing off, Ashley
always a spectacle even with braces.

Before this, we spent so much time walking
to the creek edge. Harrington Grove Drive:

the end of the world. Sneaking out windows
my dad eventually painted shut, accidentally

dropping my lava lamp down the roof
to splatter pink on the sidewalk. Getting even,

I sliced dad's paint job with a box cutter, inching
my body toward the second-story gutter edge

and falling through to the green city trash can
below. On Black and Mild nights, pine tree

shadows blurred, and we let boys push us
into the bark. Hot nacho breath on our necks,

honeysap hair, and our legs wrapped
around their torsos. Busy fluffing

bowl cuts, sweeping aside, grooming intimate
as kneeling to tie a shoe. Playing house

in the woods wasn't like The Fairytale
it was like playing house in what *could be*.

All those pine trees could have been beams
but they weren't. All those beams could have been

a house, but it's impossible now. What we
built didn't need a foundation because

we had lives after this, we were on the cusp.
College, serially dating men who owned

clubs and had accountants, moving somewhere
with more cornfields, hanging out with boyfriends

without parents; must feel like *really* playing house,
stirring macaroni with the powder packet

on the stove. John or Steve or Nick
would eventually disappear, I thought,

and we would hold hands at graduation,
hold hands after glossing Bath & Body Works

A Thousand Wishes Diamond Shimmer Mist
all over our necks and chests, hold hands

drunk walking home to our dorm room
afterwards. We once blew strawberries

on each other's bellies to cause a spillway
of high-pitched sound. In fifth grade,

in the bathtub, we dragged safety pins
through the center of our palms. Shallow

breaths, watching the spike steer. When a little
blood bubbled and seeped at each scrape,

we pressed our palms together: love line,
life line, fate line, until our blood mixed.

The Fairytale almost always starts
"Once Upon a Time" and ends in blood

or kingdom come. Ashley was shot in the head
by Nick—three times in her back, once

in her chest, and once in each arm. Glock 22.
40 cal. I often wonder which shot spent first.

*How should I have protected your body with my body?
Would I exchange ours if given the chance? Bodies*

so easily exchanged in our fantasies, better bodies,
alive, you in rolled-up Softe shorts again. *Would I?*

When I got the call, all the furniture inside
me, inside The actual Fairytale, moved slightly

to the left. We built one another like doll
houses: hanging curtains, frames, one corner

a collection of golden spinning wheels.
Made use of our bodies as small dares.

The girl whose body this is used to watch
the dust motes through the storm

door before Ashley walked up, but maybe
that's just what waiting looks like.

Self-Portrait as Hunter,
Remedy for Poison, Open Lips,
and a Thousand Flowers
(Or, a Walk Through Manhattan's
Medieval Cloisters)

Tori Rego

**18th Annual
Fugue Prize for Prose**

Judged by Leni Zumas

Runner Up:

“Self-Portrait as Hunter, Remedy
for Poison, Open Lips, and a Thousand
Flowers (Or, a Walk Through
Manhattan's Medieval Cloisters)”

by Tori Rego

*“This obsessive, brainy, sensual essay
maps an interior lush with questions and history.”*

– Leni Zumas

*“There are two ways to reach me: by way of kisses or by way of
imagination. But there is a hierarchy: the kisses alone don't work.”*

– Anaïs Nin

A maiden walks through a
cloister : a maiden walks through
a door : a maiden walks through
a picture : through a perfect,
unblemished mirror : a maiden
walks through town and out into
the forest.

:

The rules at the Cloisters are hardly different than
any other museum: check coats and backpacks
at the door. No food or drink permitted.
Information available at the front desk near
the gift shop. Maps. Brochures. Audio tours.
Exhibition information in Braille. Be mindful of

other guests. No flash photography. Do not touch the art. Keep your hands to yourself.

Do not touch the art.

:

The Hunt (i)

She is told to sit, here, in this could-be faerie garden. Enjoy the trickle of river water over rocks. Pop open a walnut fallen to the ground from the tree stretched above. Watch squirrels perform their acrobatics across the grass. The clouds disperse and coalesce. Squirrels nibble at each other's backs. She is told to move the strap of her dress down to expose her left breast to the air.

:

I learn to touch myself in the early hours of the morning. At the dawn of my own womanhood, before any other signs of childhood's passing have broken across my body.

I might rest my head anywhere—in the car, on classroom desks, on the grass, hidden under my bed—and conjure wild things: winding serpents locked in cages, ancient Egyptians cooking four course dinners, bright-haired men who drive multi-colored balloons meant as weapons of war. I am an otherwise good kid, but this often gets me in trouble, this traveling away. Teachers touch my hair or shoulder to bring me back.

One day, these stories I tell myself change—become all bare skin and humid, nowhere places. Strangers showing me things I do not have the experience to render: heavy curtains made entirely of lace, champagne blizzing in a narrow glass. Without the language to understand what this is, I simply call it *imagining*. I call it this only to myself.

I am ashamed by the water on my underwear, by the stray smell of myself that lingers on my hands. At first, I ball up my underwear and hide them in my closet behind old stuffed bunnies and stacks of *The Babysitter's Club*. I run out of things to wear. Panicked, I ask my mom to teach me to do my own laundry.

:

In this place, the seams of time are visible. Past the reception desk and the coat check we find ourselves thrown into another century. We pass through wooden doors and into a behemoth of a room. The sign says we are in a nave. We move along its perimeter, touch the cool stone with the tips of our fingers. A wall plug, painted over to match the peat of the stone, hides itself in the corner behind a black baptismal font that tilts from its pedestal. We almost expect a monk, a wasted figure dragging heavy robes, to come sliding around the corner, reprimanding us for being where we should not.

We think how, just moments ago, there was the roar of trains moving through the subway, the lurch of the car as it shifts at the platform—how we emerged to see Manhattan towers glittering against the sun. The taste of a Colombian pour-over still lingers, fresh on our tongues.

Now, moving in this museum, under the shade of medieval architecture reconstituted, we feel such small things—the texture of splintering wood, an unfamiliar voice calling, an ushered quiet—drum against our own self knowing, like micro-abrasions on the surface of glass. It doesn't take much to shatter all our best, cleanest judgments. A space out of context. A shift in the air. The lights go out. Our eyes meet the patient look of a security guard in black. We are willing participants in this make-believe.

:

Baptismal Font
(ca. 1155 – 70)

In Wellen, it is the year 1155 and Christina is having nightmares again. She dreams of sheep and rotting cabbage. She dreams that she drinks poison. She dreams she drinks poison willingly, that she takes one sip and it hits her throat like a coal. In this dream, she dies and awakens from death. She runs in her dream-death from a great trouble. She runs through the dream-death town in her nicest blue dress. Her feet are bare, catching dirt and bramble. Her breath grows short and she is tired, frantic as she passes lavender fields and houses where women sit

inside by fires, finishing their embroidery while children cough in their sleep. Finally, she sees a church and throws open the doors. Christina feels the trouble close; she can smell a twist of fir and smoke in the air and her heart is striking matches in her chest. She runs through the church and leaps into the only escape available: the baptismal font. She hopes this will be her final death. When she lands into or crashes through the font, the pain is anything but a dream.

When Christina awakens on the floor of the church, she feels a tender lump on her forehead. She is ordered to rest. She is made to eat boiled sage and lick a clean, silver spoon. She is made to pray three times a day. She sits with her hands in her lap and her back erect. She speaks only when spoken to. She gives away all her fine clothes—all the ribbons and beads, her favorite laces and belts. They call her a changed woman. They call her an ermine. A dove. Her parents delight in the newfound simplicity of her character. They take her to church and show her to their

friends. They take to calling her *Christina the Astonishing*. This is a dream from which the town never awakens.

:

We stand on the front of our toes, looking into the font—the great belly of stone high on its gray pedestal. The blackened lip of it is so thick we stretch to see into its depths. Along the smooth skin of its interior, pink stains cut like the history of blood. Pink stains like brain matter, digging its way into the limestone like rot.

:

The Hunt (ii)

Sitting and waiting for a sign of what they want from her next, the maiden has enough time to let her thoughts fly, to wonder about the events that have led her here, exposed at the mouth of this river, smothered in the sounds of a waking forest. She is wet from the morning dew that seeps through her dress.

They told her she was to be part of the hunt. An essential part. It could not begin without her. So she was surprised when they led her, with sleep in her

eyes and with no shoes and no weapons out of the castle gate, into town, down the path through farmsteads, and finally into the forest. She thought that to be part of the hunt was to be considered a hunter. She realizes now how foolish she is; she could only be the hunted.

:

My boyfriend tells me about the time his uncle cornered him at a college tailgate. They must have been holding beers dripping and sticky with the remnants of chunked ice. They must have been standing around taking in the smell of hot dogs and bodies in the sun. They must have been standing a masculine distance apart when my boyfriend and his uncle got to talking about women. All I know for certain is this:

You've got to lock her down, his uncle said.

By her, he meant me. By lock down, I presume he meant marriage. Later, when my boyfriend tells me this story, I say I'm disgusted. But I'm not appalled by the idea that marriage should be wielded as a weapon; this narrative is all too familiar. I am not some cloistered optimist. What makes my mouth pucker and my stomach knot is the thought that such a weapon should be used against me.

I imagine myself chained and captive, the still, feathered air of an underground space where only a few candles burn. Husband the prison. Husband the key-master. I imagine the red rawness of my wrists where chains rub. Hair matted with sweat. I hear

the sound of my own breathing and the key-master drawing close. I feel myself grow hot. I feel disgusted with myself. This self-hatred does little to curb desire.

When my boyfriend tells me this, he might be raking his hands through his hair, his toes brushing my thigh as they wiggle under his socks. I might run my hand along his leg, give his toes a gentle squeeze, sigh.

:

We flicker between rooms—each tall, cold space emptying us into another. It is easy, if we do not look at our bodies—the jeans hugging our legs and faux-leather purses strapped across our chests—to forget what year it is. Until the voices of a family passing through the chancel—a child’s feet scuffing along the stone and his mother chasing after him, arms out and pace quickening, ready to pounce if he should make it to something fragile at arm’s reach—remind us of when we are.

So unrooted from our bodies as we study the relics, safe in glass along the walls: a fresco eaten around the edges, a box for a rosary painted with the worried faces of soldiers, another weeping figure positioned just above eye level. So much gold. We move to study another moth-eaten thing.

We take a polite step back from the sculpture, releasing ourselves from the study of this dog-bear-beast’s face grinning above us. We pivot around it, trying to make eye contact. *Notice us, we*

might say. We examine his many tiny teeth set between wrinkled lips. The swirl of his forearm hints at an otherworldly origin we can’t begin to fathom. We do not carry the required knowledge to make sense of this creature—would not know this beast if we met him in the flesh. One of his front paws is pressed tight on the coiling body of a serpent. The serpent’s head forced down into submission. Something pours from its open mouth. We are not supposed to sympathize with this ugly ouroboros.

:

Lion Trampling a Dragon
(ca. 1200)

A lioness gives birth to dead things.

When her babies emerge, they do not breathe. They do not stir. They do not cry to her for milk. Unmoved, she reclines, nursing her body, which again, however briefly, belongs to her. She closes up the spaces made by their becoming. She sleeps, knowing that in three days, the lion will come and awaken them with his throat’s vibrations. Will sing them into life. He will rest his hot mouth to her babies’ ears and give them something she either cannot or will not give.

Her babies will blink back their mother's insides from the corners of their eyes and they will begin to want so many things from her. Meanwhile, the lion will slink back to some impossible place.

She imagines the lion will leave them to lie under the clouds: to admire the view of his paw in the dust. Stomp another serpent. Fill a space in another legend. And she will be here, in this stretch of wild, with a few living things clutching to her body.

:

A boy I am seeing tells me that his mother is worried I am using him for sex. He tells me this, he says, because he wants me to know that he doesn't think she is right. He tells me this with his fingers wet, just free from under my skirt. I shimmy my hips to shift my underwear back into place. This is not the first time someone's mother has accused me of such a thing.

None of my girlfriends can relate to this problem. I get embarrassed when I bring it up. I blush when they laugh. My stomach twists as I tell them what these mothers think of me, as I note their eyes peeling away from my face. Instead, searching for something inside their locker. Inside their purse. Inside their cellphone. Pretty smiles pressed against their cheeks.

I want to ask them: *What is it these mothers see in me? What is my tell?* A glance I make, or the shape of my face? A desperate

smiling at everything? Is it something in my smell—some mixture of chemicals? *Do you see it too?*

I love my smell. And I love these mothers and their belief in this wanting, subterranean me. I love these girls and all the silences we keep together. Even these omissions are sacred things.

:

The Hunt (iii)

And after she has watched the shadows bend around the trees, and the maiden has grown quite weary with waiting, she hears something stir in the underbrush, within the thicket of oaks, orange trees, and medlars. She raises her hand to her face. The light fragments on his opal fur, cuts across his arched back and the high angle of his neck, which shivers with breath.

:

A man in a driveway raises his face to watch me as a I come down the street, and just like that, passing another house strung with lights, I am all too aware of how unfit I am to meet any sudden risk. I try to imagine what expression will be enough without being too much. It feels a dangerous calculation. Or, I take a step back at a nightclub to catch myself from falling, and a stranger's hand is there on the small of my back, doing the work of catching for me. Or, I am caught off guard and he is tickling me and though my ribs ache I am not so self-assured as to express

the strength of my pain and my desire for this to stop. Instead, I play risk aversion. Laughing, I push my palms into the spaces his seek out—try to cover my skin with the back of my hand. But my body betrays me by showing exactly the kind of woman I am: one who would act as if pain were play.

:

We enter the cloister, pulled straight from Pontaut Chapter House in Aquitaine: a place that exists in fragment alone, much like us. The sun startles us as we pace along the perimeter, caught in a centuries-long ceremony. Carved acrobats dance atop the columns, heads appearing from under their robes and between their legs. They look serious and frivolous both, like the two girls that stand there at the center of the quadrangle—right at the omphalos of the museum. They steal the energy of this place, nestling themselves amongst the thorn apple, verbena, nightshades, and trees blistering in the sun. One girl wears a wide-brimmed hat that drips over her face. She rests a long, tanned arm on the fountain, lifts her leg from between the folds of her skirt. Her friend snaps a picture and tells her to pivot her body to the left.

They swivel around each other, complimenting smiles, looks, postures. Their cameras click and click. We watch from behind the cloister's columns, at first annoyed—*so disturbing, we say, so presumptuous*, doing that vain work in this sacred space?

And then we catch ourselves: this never was hallowed ground, and we never were believers anyway.

Everything here stolen from somewhere else: records of destruction.

And the longer we look, the more we see that the vision these girls make is fucking glorious: two girls dressed in their summer best, hands touching every dead bit of stone. Their cheeks tickled with pink. Taking this space for themselves and letting their faces move to where the light catches best.

:

Chapter House (12th century)

The holy men are worried about the righteousness of the nuns again. They cannot fathom what goes on between women shut up alone. They imagine these women thirsty after so many long, men-less nights, walking around like the undead, ripping hair from their scalps, howling a slew of masculine names: *John, Joseph, Thomas, George*.

Heloise tells Abelard:

Even if the nuns admit to their table only women...is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman's seduction as woman's flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman.

Your hair is so silken, a nun says, running her fingers through her sister's hair. Your skin, so smooth. Your mouth, so soft. They are a riot of closed-door giggles, petting each other's bodies. Petting each other's egos. They all fall between layers of sheets, nestled under the plaits of each other's hair.

Let these thoughts linger in his head. Heloise signs the letter with a firm, careful hand. Her old lover gone mad with impotence. The poor bastard, she thinks. She doesn't miss the things he did to her—doesn't know why she continues to write. Still, when this letter is sealed, she will extinguish the candle and she will go to her bedchambers. She will turn over on her side and close her eyes and think of his hands.

Letters leave and letters return and the nuns will not leave her side. Will not stop speaking love to her. Will not stop praising her spaces. They will cling to her when they are rushed from the monastery for rumors of their indecency. How jealous they are, the former nuns think, while they are packing their things to enter the world again.

How jealous these monks must be of the paradise we had erected. How unwilling to say—or even imagine—our searching and finding each other.

:

The quickening of the heart is a romance. A terror. A body's measurement of time. A relentless uncertainty. I live in this moment—in which the body rises to meet an expectation: blood rushes to extremities. Face hot. Something volcanic gathering behind the eyes.

I am afraid of what happens when my head hits the pillow at night—how all of a sudden I am an echo chamber for the rhythms of this mechanism I forgot moved inside me and kept me alive. With its steady rising noise making itself a presence, I dissolve. It is a pleasant, gathering ache, like a man pushing himself inside me.

:

The Hunt (iv)

The unicorn moves towards the maiden, drawn by an invisible hand. *Good horse*, she says. *Beautiful horse*, she says, taking in every inch of him. His long eyelashes flicker, tail waves. He meets her at the lip of the water, bends his head to her. Her hand gentle on his nose, feeling the in and out of his breath. The birds and rodents of the forest go still. Her fingers whispering over his face. Her wide cheeks and glossy ringlets. Her skin becomes a blistery pink against the cool air. Seeing and feeling this, the unicorn falls in love. He folds his legs in and lays himself down in her lap.

:

After registering the late-night noises of my heart, I believe that my body is both a precipice and a figure on its own free edge.

My body and me, we are standing at that drop against the sky and no one told us, *do not look down*. Oh yes, we look down. Hands shaking, no words come out but a plastic laugh, thinking, this nothing below is a green screen. A false danger. Kicking one foot free from the sheets, I pull back the collar of my husband's shirt and bring my tongue to the bone at the back of his neck.

Kiss him, kiss him again, my body says to me. Put his hand on your hip or on the inside of your leg. Turn over and ask him to look at you from behind. Affirm that something is there. A full woman from waist up and waist down.

Just do something to reconcile this cliff-face with this feeling of falling.

:

Huddled back in the shade of the museum, we find ourselves facing a series of windows. This stained glass is far from the most beautiful we have seen. In fact, it makes a sorry image—the peacock-blue lattice a sad invitation against so many broken lines of beige and gray. We look around for museum attendants, find we are alone but for an older gentleman in a blazer, resting on a chair. We sneak a hand onto the glass, though it is forbidden. We touch the point where the 13th century was affixed to the 20th—marked by a thick black line moving along the edge. These panels were not made for this window, this room, this continent. We feel almost sorry for them—for this unnatural stretching. The bending to their character. After all, what good is a window that neither lets us look in nor lets us look out?

:

Grisaille Panels
(ca. 1270-80)

They morally objected to color—
more specifically, to the threat it

poses to weak minds—so it was taken away. Just like that, all it took was a charge of indecency and all the jeweled glass forced from windows—a thousand chips of ruby, sapphire, amethyst, free spinning to the ground. Crushed under foot. Plucked free. Smashed. Shattered.

Heathen-glass. Decadent-glass. Wanton and womanly glass.

They tell artists to mark the world plainly in black line. In Platonic form. Show things as they are, they say. Better yet, don't show things at all. Art is not life. Sure, a suggestion of ivy here is fine. Fill the empty space with another series of circles. Make a lattice. Make a cosmic geography. Draw the shapes we might see when we close our eyes.

Women, they say, are so often moved by the unreal. By mere representation. Practitioners of idolatry, lovers of false gods—golden goblets etched with lions, murals of handsome men in robes, a bowl of fruit placed carefully on the kitchen table.

They cannot be trusted, so prone to fall in love with beautiful, imaginary things.

One day color will return. Color will move in to fill all the empty spaces. A fresh green will fill a vine that curls along the perimeter. A touch of blue to complete the robes of a deserving saint. Red in the dragon's breast.

After the color has returned, a maiden will walk through this hall. She will be looking for a quiet place to let her breath equalize. Will look down her shoulder for prying eyes and find herself, finally, alone. She will lean along the wall here and trace her finger down the dark ridges separating reds from yellows from blues. She will not be sad that this window offers no vision out, that she cannot see the hills, trees, and water that lie beyond. Cannot see the hunt happening there. Instead, this one-way glass will be a refuge. She will understand that it is neither a comfort nor a triumph to demand transparency.

:

I turn over to give myself space to breathe. Curtains shift along the far window, showing the sky. It is mottled, moonless. I pick up my cup from its place on the floor. The surface of the water is flecked with a thin layer of dust. I drink to see the dark pool of it reflecting back at me as I duck my face to it. To feel the water slide down my throat.

I believe so little in the things I can see; a worshipper of uncertainty. Not even a sheer plummet to nothing can be believed.

We: my body the precipice, my body the figure ready to leap, and I would like to know that if we stepped, we would fall. We need to know that to drop from that cliff would mean to fall all the way down. Don't you understand the urgency of this knowledge?

I am talking about time. I am talking about sex. But all the time and all the sex can't alchemize this feeling of skepticism to a knowledge of feet sure on solid ground.

The blue light of my phone blinks the time back to me. I don't bother to register it and instead move onto my back. I move my hand to my stomach and over my belly button, let my index finger linger in its crater. I move my hand further under the covers, let my fingers pull up the boxer shorts I wear to bed. I lay my hand flat against myself, in this place that makes no noise. I just rest it there, synchronize my breath to its quiet. I go to sleep.

:

The Hunt (v)

This is when the hunters come out. All the while, they have been crouched among the bushes,

eating wild strawberries. Their teeth are stained purple from the juices. They wipe their mouths with the backs of their gloves. The lord, dressed in red and blue stripes, nods to the huntsmen and lymers, to the keeper of the hounds—all these men with fancy plumes sprouting from their hats.

With a first blow of the horn, the hunt rushes from cover. The maiden and her new lover barely have time to look up and register their horror before the chief huntsman plunges his spear into the back of the unicorn, who lets out a furious sound and stomps his hooves, crushing the left leg of the maiden under her thin peach dress.

When the unicorn picks himself up and begins to buck and to run towards the line of trees, the maiden's lap is already a thick pool of blood crusting on her skirts. The hunting horn sounds. The keeper of the hounds lets the greyhounds free. Their baying is the sound of cliff rocks falling into water, of stars pinched from the sky.

*No Alleluia sung in the chapel of
the king is so beautiful... as the
music of the hunting hounds.*

:

We sit around under fairy lights strung up against beige cinder block. We are lounging on bean bags and futons and department-store carpet. It is a Friday night. We drink from whatever vessel we find to hold our Franzia or light beer. We ask each other slow, measured questions. *When did you have sex for the first time? How often do you come? Where was your first time?*

I can't decrypt what the boys are feeling, but us girls are perched at the edges of our seats. We are leaning towards each other. We are looking into each other's eyes, all smiles and teeth. *When did you first masturbate?* I can't remember who asks this. It could have been me.

We swap stories of bicycles, desk chairs, quiet midnights alone, and romance movies watched in the time between getting off of school and when our mothers came home from work.

Why didn't we talk about this sooner? we say. What was stopping us? All those sleepovers and conversations on the floor until 4:00 am. All those bathroom visits during study hall and whispered conversations between library shelves. *Why?* Why were we locked so tight against ourselves? I am so sorry for all our former selves. I want to kiss every woman I see.

:

We are crouched on a stone floor, looking up at a tapestry. We must keep moving our gaze up and up to see the whole thing—the wide fine mass

of it: the band of hunters, the periwinkles and daffodils, the dogs, and the one impossible, rioting creature who bucks and kicks in every direction. We try to take in every color, delicately woven and needled into place so that it is impossible they ever existed separately. We imagine hands crushing madder for reds, dried and rubbed into a fine powder. Weld makes a stew of stems, leaves, and flowers for a greedy, corruptible yellow. The long process of woad leaves pulped and dried, pulped and dried again. Left on the stone floor. Sprinkled with water. Fermented for nine weeks. The whole neighborhood smelling the rancid fumes of blue.

And after the wool has been laid the silk goes on, placed by fingers that have performed these motions so many times they see it in their dreams. The whole workshop alive with hands like these, pulling and pushing threads into place. The din of friendly voices calling for more materials, asking for a second hand to tie it off. Maybe they sing a working song. Someone comes around and re-secures a strand of hair that falls in the eye of one of the workers. Tucks it behind their ear and the weaver says *thank you, friend*. It is a comfort to imagine such a thing.

:

The Hunt (vi)

The unicorn's pupils are full as moons. He kicks out in every direction, breaking the ribs of a

hunter wielding a short sword.
A greyhound runs, face forward,
mouth open and ears back, and
in one swift duck of the unicorn's
head is sliced open like a plum.

No unicorn can be taken by
pure force alone. Only guile and
trickery can master him.

Perhaps they carried out the
maiden again, left to bleed and
nurse her broken leg at the
riverside. Perhaps they carried her
out and, seeing her head rolled
back in pain, the blood muddied
with brambles on her feet, he
momentarily forgot himself.

And this moment of forgetting
created an opportunity; the
hounds were on him, opening
skin on his back. Nails to
haunches. The hunters and the
lord moved in.

:

My bridesmaids are preoccupied lining their eyes with black,
tinging their lips the colors of roses. I lift my wedding dress,
just to look at myself—my winter legs and calloused feet, white
underwear with lace. I am delirious from lack of sleep and
thinking that I want this to be over, when one of my bridesmaids
comes in to press the curls in my hair. She runs the hot iron from

the back of my head, leaving a small spiral ring behind it. She
is telling me how I look, but though I am looking in the mirror,
I am not seeing myself. I am looking at her. Her eyes so focused
on the back of my head, hands steady and smooth. I am thinking
that it is dangerous how much I love her and the women out
there, with their careful looks and silk hanging around their
waists, waiting for me to come out. And I know now that they
were always right to be afraid of what happens between women.

:

We could stay here long enough for the dust to
settle over our skin, grease to accumulate in
our hair, just looking at this thread-heavy horse
stuck with the ivory tusk of a narwhal. But a
voice floats over our heads. It is time to go. So
our husband puts out his hand, helps us to our
feet. We look again, just to catalog one last time
those three drops of blood on the unicorn's
breast, and we leave.

We exit the Cloisters with all the other kicked-
out time travelers. We shield our eyes against
the high sun. Look over the Hudson river. Take
a picture of the whole place from a distance. We
travel the path back through the gardens and out
into the city again.

:

The Hunt (vii)

When they see him now, he
is always happy. A thousand
flowers: sweet violets, daisies,

periwinkle, daffodils, and so many red and pink roses, bloom around him. His collar, embroidered with the outlines of celestial bodies, clasps tight around his neck. He picks at it with his hoof. He cannot reach it with his mouth. Don't be alarmed—those streams of red that line his back—what looks like blood—is merely pomegranate juice. Pomegranates from the tree that sprouts over his enclosure. They litter his small world, bright globes of red, ripe and overfull with juices.

The unicorn will not be killed; will never die. He will stay here, behind the walls of his small, kingly fence. He will be licking the seeds and juice of pomegranates from his legs. He will be walking to the edge of the fence and scouting the land, searching for the full figure and perfumed hair of his maiden, hoping to see her arm in arm with another as lovely as she.

:

Soon, morning breaks. My skin is sticky, has accumulated a thin surface of night sweat. On the edge of consciousness, my husband turns over to run his hand along my stomach, to shield my left

breast with his palm. It is snowing outside and his lips are parted, his morning breath clammy on my face. I wiggle myself into him, searching for the sounds of his internal movements.

A new calculation: my body is both a precipice and a figure falling from itself. And between them, I am an uncertain measurement of time—a number of beats between being grounded and falling. A moment of expectation. A shifting between moments and places in time.

:

A maiden lifts herself from bed : a maiden, silent, closes a door : pulls her hand back from a fading, happy picture : a maiden emerges, hair wet from a flowing fountain : a maiden links arms with a friend, touches the soft, cool hair on her arm, and together they leave town, taking the path back through the forest.

God's Love is Very Loud

Arah Ko

18th Annual Ron McFarland Prize for Poetry

Judged by sam sax

Runner Up:

"God's Love is Very Loud"
by Arah Ko

*"God's Love' is a fascinating poem that plays with
the enjambed line to surprise and mirror
the speaker's complex relationship with faith."*

– sam sax

Though I can hardly hear
over the river
draining out of Eden like a bath
tub, the heady
rushing of the day. I am very busy
being in pain,
and the bottle is so far away.
Demons live
in seven of my teeth and the others
need whitening.
You are always asleep. I don't even
like fruit. How
can you hear anything? Maybe it's
tinnitus. Too
many Percocets. The children
need picking
up from school; the orchard
is overripe.
We must have been happy, once,
but the perfect
love they imagine is an animal
you never
named. The dishes need doing: I
scrub & scrub
but zest lingers beneath my nails.

The Trees are Blooming and Blooming and

A. Prevett

Just then, I'd reached over my shoulder,
slipped out my spine like a string of clowns'
handkerchiefs. I had hoped to demonstrate that my want

is a delicate device. Then, in the kitchen, another birthday party, another
cockroach ripping away its soft pill of egg. The first thing it sees is spineless me. I want
to ask, *Who do you think would win in a race: the hair on my chin*

or the itchy beach grass covering my knuckles? I know
it has no answers which will satisfy. Outside,
the trees are blooming and blooming and

grunting their best secrets, as someone undressing
in front of an open window, robin egg curtains
furrowing in the wind.

The cockroach is cockroach brown. The trees, mostly, are shades of green,
but some have popped into sweet pink discs, crude as baby teeth
and just as acheful. For now, my spine is off-yellow

as anyone's. It's true that my want is.
Cup your palm round a vertebra. You'll feel it, the neurons
still performing their twitchy labor.

Or put your tongue to a process—see how the phantoms
dance across my nape. How behind the molars,
I taste foxfur and caulk. Now take the whole column

and tuck it into your windowsill planter. Watch
how it grows sweet pink discs—tender as gums, delicate
as the want of my device.

Boneyard Pavilion

Gabriel Palacios

By the looks of these paling livery fangs
I'm artificial
Reef now—

Didn't I serve
Self-denyingly, flagellant who kneels to be slain in public spirit?
Concussed as critical practice

Bird you have a pretty umm let's say violent background
You now bedraggled
Finch with grown up human hand hooked onto sunglasses, hatchback keys

The voltage and remembrance collapsed out of you,
In teary defibrillations

I wait out a storm I got a sandbag

Bobby Loves the Girls

Benjamin Soileau

My brother Bobby's swimming in it.

He likes them at least Mama's age, widows some or in bum marriages, but most newly divorced and thrilled to just eat him up.

He said two women at the Country Club got into it over him and smashed each other's windows before coming to an arrangement to share him. One woman he was with had a stroke while they were shopping and died soon after and he went to her funeral in the finest black suit and pistachio tie with a hummingbird brooch on it and said to never mention the name Miriam to him as long as he lives.

It's because he likes things easy. He told me so. Bobby tells me most everything.

Bobby's gorgeous and women can't help but fawn over him, even Mama, and he plays her like a shiny fiddle. Mama and Daddy take great pleasure in thinking he's out there dancing with virgins and plucking grapes like one of those goat men in the paintings of mythological scenes they keep around the house. They say Bobby's in the pink and should be living it up, he who can do no wrong at twenty-one in his oyster world.

They think he manages the landscaping crew at the Country Club and that he's daily shaking hands with the movers of the world and being ushered to high ground, but the truth is he only worked there for a spell as a grunt before he got into the old lady game.

I keep my mouth shut and he keeps me in Marlboros and stories.

Mama and Daddy transferred whatever stock they might have had in me over to Bobby after Daddy walked in on me acquainting myself with a Peter O' Toole lookalike in his new *Field & Stream*, a full-page Winchester ad that I'd propped on the bathroom counter, so that the fellow was smiling at Daddy even. He did me the courtesy of pretending he hadn't seen anything, but when I opened the magazine later that page was ripped out. Our family doctor, an old pal of Daddy's, put me on antidepressants, but I only ever took them for a spell since they clogged up my dreaming time. Mama picks up a new scrip every three months and I deposit them in a dress sock at the bottom of my chest of drawers. We get along and all and they don't even seem to mind much about the cigarettes. But they got their money on Bobby down the stretch.

And that's the way I've learned to like it. It keeps the heat off, and the pressure too, since you can't go letting somebody down if they don't expect much in the first place. Easy. Bobby taught me that.

Recently, Bobby came back home for a few months. He told Mama and Daddy he starts a new job in October doing some fancy bullshit and that he wants to be back with his family relaxing while he can. As to what went down, I don't know. Bobby gifted me a carton of reds and said only that he got sloppy in his logistics and likened his situation to being a cook with too many burners going. He claims he'll be back on top in October and promised me a car when I'm old enough to drive. He took his old bedroom next to mine, and it's aces having him back.

Mama and Daddy own THE hardware store in town with Tuck the crow. He screeches *Helloooo!* each time the bell above the door dings. It's a good gimmick and a lot of folks who come in just want to hear Tuck talk to them. Kids come in after school to try and teach him cuss words, but they don't know the secret, which is to train him with anchovies. Daddy taught Tuck to say, *Bobby loves the girls*, but he only says it when Daddy goads him on.

Bobby's working at the store while he's on sabbatical, what he calls it, and with us two and Mama and Daddy, it's like an old-timey sitcom up in there. And don't forget Tuck the crow. On Saturdays, Mama can get her gossip in with all the neighbors dropping in for the free doughnuts and coffee, and maybe some screws or brooms or WD-40 even. We got that on aisle four.

So it's a lull in the early afternoon and Mama just brewed some coffee and Daddy's bragging on Bobby to an old buddy of his who popped in for wire brushes, saying how him and Mama can't hardly keep Bobby home long enough to feed him with his always zipping and how Bobby's got more girlfriends than Wilt Chamberlain and about that time Bobby ate The Violator, which is free up at Floyd's Steak House if you can put away all seventy-two ounces of it, and then how when we got home, he had a Little Debbie.

"Aww, that ain't all true, Daddy." Bobby sweeps his way out from Pipes and Screws Avenue. "I sit down with y'all for supper every night. I'd be a fool to duck out on Mama's rolls." Bobby throws Mama a wink and sweeps himself back down Yard Tool Lane.

Mama blushes and when the bell dings, Tuck doesn't say shit. This woman glides in with such supreme grace that I think it humbles old Tuck dumb. Her Jackie Collins sunglasses peek out a yellow scarf that's wrapped around her head. She clears the battery display shelf and stands before us in an elegant blue dress, icepick high heels looking like she stepped out of a Turner Classic. She must have been something once. Is *still*, but in a gentler, no-nonsense, 1970s Lauren Bacall sort of way.

"Howdy, ma'am," says Daddy. "What can I do you for this fine afternoon?"

The way this woman commands the room, she could stand there all day and we'd still be holding our breath to hear what someone like her has to say to people like us. When Bobby steps out to see who come in, his eyes pop like Mama's rice.

“Hello, Bobby,” she says with that Kathleen Turner gravel in her voice. She peels off her shades, real sure of herself.

Bobby’s Adam’s apple shucks like a pump gun, and he stutters like he hasn’t done since he was little. “Wo, wo, Rose, Miss Rose,” he stammers.

Nobody says anything. Our eyes bounce between Bobby and this lady, and she lets the uncomfortable sink in before she looks up at Daddy again. “I believe I should get some bulbs in the ground. Lilies, yes? And some fertilizer. Perhaps, Bobby, you can assist.”

Bobby hands himself the broom and looks over his shoulder for a window to climb out of maybe. “Oh, um,” he says. “I um, the toilet’s broken.” He looks toward the back of the store and then sticks me with his sharp brown eyes.

“I can show you, ma’am,” I say, stepping up. By the time she looks back up for Bobby, he’s gone pecan. The bathroom door slams, and I lead her to the back patio, her heels behind me like thunderclaps through the quiet store.

I show her the few bulbs and flowers we got and the big bags of Terrapop Fertilizer, rattling on about getting them lilies in soon, and she gives me her undivided attention.

“You must be Ricky,” she says after my autumn gardening spiel.

“At your service,” I say, trying to sound smart. Her lips tighten and I want to duck under a wheelbarrow.

“Your brother is quite fond of you.” She pulls a silver case from her purse, plucks a cigarette from it and snaps it shut.

“Got to smoke out this way,” I say, and lead her around the corner. She follows me out back. I crack my Zippo to her smoke that she’s attached to an ivory holder with gold inlay. I light my own and we sit there puffing.

Most folks get uncomfortable when I smoke, my being still so wet behind the ears, but not this one. I show off some tricks, the French inhale and some rings too. I sail three good ones between us.

“You favor him, you know,” she says and hands me her cigarette, which I take like it was programmed in me to do. I put my shoe to it and grind out the blush from her compliment.

“It’s that blasted jaw,” she says, going back under the patio. “Grab one of those bags there for my garden. And some of those, sure.” She touches her finger to a small flat of lily bulbs. “Now let’s go see if your brother might have found his tongue in that powder room.”

I can’t toss them bags around like Bobby, but I heft it over my shoulder best I can, bulbs out front wobbling. We get up inside and it’s just Mama at the register. A lady and her kid are waiting outside the bathroom and Daddy’s knocking the door, asking Bobby if he’s fixed it yet. Miss Rose smiles down at me. I call out the items to Mama and she punches them up and the whole time Miss Rose is paying, Mama’s watching her with something like concern on her face. She jabs the wrong tabs on the register a couple times.

I follow Miss Rose out to the parking lot, giddy in her sweet olive wake, to a boat of a Lincoln Continental. The amber paint is so smooth and skittering gold with the metal flakes inside that I’m half blinded. The open trunk is a relief. When I shut it, she reaches into her purse and I do my jazz hands refusal routine, but then she presses a C-note into my palm in a way you don’t say no to.

“You’re a good boy, Ricky,” she says, closing her fingers around my own so that her big rings pinch me. “Astute like Bobby isn’t.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, opening the door for her.

“Keep an eye on Bobby for me,” she says, sweeping her dress behind with one hand to sit down behind that big smooth steering wheel. “For both of us,” she adds.

When she pulls away, I stuff that hundred down in my pocket and fish out my new-word notepad. I write *astute* and watch her fine car float out of the parking lot into traffic, sparkling like a pollen-drunk honeybee in the afternoon sun.

Back inside, Bobby can't catch a break from Mama. She's following him around with her who-what-who, until he tells her it's only a woman named Rose who he did some work for at the Country Club. He says she had a terrible temper with him and his crew. Mama says she'd like to see some old lady cop a 'tude with her baby in front of *her*. Daddy's standing over by the bird-cage, and Tuck belts out, "Bobby loves the girls," and everybody busts up.

What Daddy told about Bobby's always being on the go is true, mostly. Daddy just sprinkles hyperbole on everything, and I'm pretty sure I used that word right. Bobby *does* sit down to supper with us each night, but he'll polish off two servings and peck Mama's cheek on his way out the door before any of us can make a dent. He answers their prods about his plans for the evening with made-up names, always through a mouthful. Sissy and spaghetti, Mary Jane with mashed potatoes, Darlene with fried catfish.

Tonight, it's Darlene again, except mixed up with Mama's stuffed bell peppers and the rolls he'd hinted for. Bobby's in a hurry, and I can tell his mind is somewhere else when he stops after one pepper. On his way out the door he tells Mama that Delores will be a disappointment after a meal like that.

"Delores, hell!" Daddy bounces in his chair like a monkey, howling. "I thought it was Darlene. You best pay attention, Son, or you'll drop all those pins you're juggling."

Mama shews him on. "Don't listen to him, baby. Go on, get," she says and then turns to Daddy. "Girls ain't pins, Bub."

We watch Doris Day and Rock Hudson and sniff Bobby's ghost, that rode-hard-and-put-up-wet, saddle-smelling cologne he wears. The Turner Classic Movies channel is what me and Mama and Daddy come together on, and I guess they take pleasure in knowing I worship a past that they approve of, but I seen *Pillow Talk* too many times and bow out early.

Lying in bed, I wonder about my astuteness. If I was so good at it then I'd have a better read on Bobby, seems like. He

don't kiss and tell like he used to. His stories been thinning out too, and I hate to think he's doing me the same as Mama and Daddy. I ain't never seen him struck dumb like he was at the store though. The feeling I think I shared with Mama and Daddy at that moment was the same one as finding out the truth of Santa. Anyway, that's the best I got to compare it to so far. I look to my *Lawrence of Arabia* poster, and Lawrence's eyes say he sees my astuteness, that I got it in spades, and now that he's got my attention, let's talk about my blasted jaw.

I wake to water hissing through the walls. I flop out of bed, grab my swim goggles off the dresser. It's steamy already when I sit back on the toilet.

"You started without me," I say.

"I got to run an errand before work," says Bobby behind the curtain.

"I wish you would have told me," I say. "Some of us have to work up to our beauty, Robert."

"Aww," he says over sheets of water slapping. "I wish you'd quit that, Ricky," he says. "There's a lot of changing still to do yet."

I sit back and try to enjoy what steam bath I got left. "Bobby," I say. "Was that lady from yesterday, Rose, is she one of your girlfriends?" He's quiet behind the curtain. "It just seemed you were upset, I mean. To see her."

"Godammit," he says so that it makes my knees jerk and my tummy knot. I hate myself immediately for having upset him. The curtain skates open then, and he pokes his head out. "Ricky, I'm sorry," he says. "Listen, she's got dementia. She thinks I'm someone else, and it's upsetting, so that's why, Ricky. It just hurts to talk about her. OK?"

I wipe the lenses to see his head floating in the steam, and I hate that I feel like a little kid. "OK," I say, and he ducks back in and closes the curtain. But a couple tears already sprouted, and they quiver safe inside my goggles.

It's a bum way to start a Sunday for true, and I figure to nix it by spending that money. I cock my James Cagney fedora and take myself down to Paw Paw's Pawn. As soon as I step inside, Mister Ron starts digging under the register.

"I got something for you," he says, coming up with a rolled poster. He spins off the rubber band and spreads it on the glass counter. Marlon Brando's busting out his shirt, grabbing Vivian Leigh's wrist like he could break it or not. I take out my money in a daze and start playing with it. I can see Mister Ron's eyes register it, so I cram it back down in my pocket and flush shamed.

"You got any old cigarette holders?" I ask, trying to sound cool, and it takes all my umph to tear my eyes from the poster and put them on the knives and binoculars and knickknacks down under the glass.

"Oh sure," he says. "I got some of those around, but this is an original," he says, dangling that meat. "Just look at the edges, how they've faded and curled. Kind of like if somebody did it on purpose, but no, somebody loved this one."

"How much?"

"Just imagine the line of people this thing's seen, tacked up outside some old movie house, all those men in hats and their gals in dresses and all that cigarette smoke."

"Like fifty?"

"Hundred," says Mister Ron, taking care to roll it back up.

I squint at a tiny Mason full of rusted tweezers like I'm not all that interested.

"Hell, Mister Ron," I say. "I seen another one over at Bayou Pawn just the other day."

"Oh you did, huh," he smiles, tonguing those nasty gums.

"It was a little more torn up, but it does the job."

"Look it, Ricky," he says, going over to a cabinet and grabbing something. He sets an old stained cigarette holder on top the posters. "I'll throw this in as lagniappe, but that's the best I got. That's the blackest I like my toast, thank you very much."

I feel the sun on my ass walking out of there, like Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend* if he got a free bottle of whiskey to keep his typewriter. Maybe Mister Ron is thinking the same, but it's a sport I'm improving at anyhow. I pop a Marlboro into the holder and light up, standing on the corner outside the Vietnamese laundry, smoking, leaning on a post, and then I see her. I can't believe I didn't before, but there she is, parked right outside the pawn shop. She smiles at me and crooks her finger, and like there's a string running from it to my guts, I'm tugged right to her open passenger window.

"I lost my way," Miss Rose says. "But I saw you just now, and I thought to myself, this must be Ricky's corner. Help me find my way out of here."

Her car glitters in the light like a blob of royal jelly, and it's dreamy sliding inside, up onto the cool leather. The air is delicious with honeysuckle and time. Miss Rose's hair is done up in curls and bobs and is a glossy auburn color in the sun. Her dress is some sort of satin, ruby, and the best is her tan driving gloves with tiny knuckle holes. She eases the ship off the curb and down Main Street, and I tell her that if she keeps on then we'll spill out on Divinity. I don't guess she should be driving around with dementia.

"What's that you've got there?" she asks.

I pop the rubber band. "Original *Streetcar Named Desire* movie poster," I say. "I aim to frame it next to my *Lawrence of Arabia*."

"I like Brando," she says. "My sister, Sharon, she did some catering on *What's New Pussycat?* and she knew all those people. O'Toole. Sellers."

My mouth's wide open, and I don't even know it until she double-takes me. I can see it in her lips she ain't lying. "I mean, did she, were they like friends?"

She drums the steering wheel with her leather fingers. "Sharon gave herself to both Peters as it were. Offered herself

toes to tiara, and those fools just sat there in front of her and argued about Shakespeare, some long-dead fop, and Sharon quivering like an oyster at their big dumb feet.”

I stare out the window realizing I’m only two degrees separated from Peter O’Toole. When I offer directions, she tells me she ain’t lost no more. Miss Rose drives toward my house like she’s done it a hundred times, except she pulls off into Terrapop Park, stops us near the pond. Her hand shifting to park is a thing to see for grace. She pops the cigarette case, offers me a row of Chesterfields. She gets her one too, and we watch the red-winged blackbirds fussing in the reeds and smoke. I got to say, it’s the best cigarette I ever had.

“Ricky,” Miss Rose says. When I turn, she’s holding out an envelope. “I need you to give this to your brother.”

I take it from her and turn it in my hand. I can see cursive writing through the thin envelope that just says *Bobby* on the front and is sealed with a blob of green wax.

“I don’t like going about it this way, you understand, Ricky, but your brother’s insouciance leaves me little choice.” *Insouciance*, I think. “Here,” she says and gives me another hundred. “I want you to put the letter on his pillow as if it were a truffle at the Ritz, and don’t you dare tell him it was you who put it there. Let him fret a bit,” she says and draws on her cigarette. “That’s something you can do for me, Ricky.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

“There’s dreadful strong energy in messages,” she says. “If that energy doesn’t get to where it wants to go, it can be dangerous for the carrier. It can fester. Do you understand, Ricky?”

Her eyes studying me look an awful lot like Ava Gardner’s in *The Killers*. “I can believe it,” I say.

“Good,” she says. “Come by Wednesday afternoon to put those things in the ground for me.” She plucks a matchbook from under the visor and flicks it open with her thumb and hands it to me. The white underside’s got her address on it in beautiful tiny

black cursive. *Noon*, it says. “Watch how Bobby behaves. I’ll make it worth your while for the lilies. I think you can get on from here.”

She looks over the steering wheel at the blackbirds and, as soon as I step out and shut the door, her car is sliding off.

That letter in my hand weighs about a hot ton. It smells like her. I get out my word book and scribble down *insooseance* and float home to put up my new poster.

Sunday evening at the Thibodeaux house is family night. Always has been and always will, feels like. We do different things depending on what’s what, but this night, it’s a dance party. We got the 89.1 on, and Mama and Daddy twirl around and get us laughing when Mama cups her hands on Daddy’s old butt.

“When you gonna bring over one of your gals, Baby?” Mama sings over Daddy’s shoulder.

“Yeah, boy,” Daddy says spinning. “You scared I’ll steal her, what it is.”

“Aww, lookout!” Bobby says and waltzes Mama away from Daddy.

I bust out the Bolero and Jitterbug. I do the Cold Duck like I’m ten feet tall knowing that letter is tucked under my pillow.

I draw out my nightly doings, brushing my teeth twice so that by the time I slide under the covers I have the thought of just keeping the letter hidden as my secret store of strength, the way Samson had his hairdo. My sheets smell like the letter, and I whiff them peeking at Brando. Lawrence pouts beside with his liquid blue eyes, and I can’t resist using the last of my holdout for a dream to console his jealous mind.

I’m calm when I break the seal, knowing wax is an easy fix. I save the crumbles and remove the letter like it’s a live organ. Her tiny perfect cursive loops across the page, inky black as those birds at the pond. At arm’s length, the words transform so that the whole text is as pretty a thing as the letters alone are. I guess if she wrote *go jump off a cliff* and printed out thousands of copies and dropped them from an airplane then everybody who

got one would be doing like those goddam lemmings do. The third time reading it I whisper along:

Bobby Wobby was a boy. Bobby Wobby had a toy.

He wound it tight. Too tight, alright!

And now the manufacturer is giving him enough dough for a new toy to enjoy.

How do you like my poem, Bobby? I'm no Emily Dickinson, I know, but I'm still working on the ending, trying to sort it out, and I'm oh so close. I'll let you know when it comes together. When the words are precise.

I wouldn't ever publish it, though, if you came to stay with me.

My terms aren't so bad, Bobby. It would only be for the short time I've got left. A drop in the bucket, really, for you at your age. And what a grand time it could be.

Would be, Bobby.

I read it a hundred times and can make about as much sense of it as the red bits in the second half of the Bible that Jesus wrote. Nothing's really as simple as it seems. The best I can figure is some sort of a *Sunset Boulevard* situation, except for that Gloria Swanson ain't got shit on Miss Rose. I'm buzzed up with Miss Rose's energy and there's just no way I can hold on to it. So there I am in the wee hours, heating up those wax crumbles to reseal the letter.

I wait until I get to work to give it to him. I tell him I snatched it from the mail that morning, that I didn't figure he'd want Mama or Daddy seeing it. The smell of it blooms out before Bobby can even touch it, that beaded honeysuckle plug tang of hers, and Bobby's fingers flinch before he plucks it. "Our mail?" he asks. "At the house?" I nod and he frowns down at it in his hands. "Fuck," he says and takes it to the bathroom.

The Bobby that steps out of there ain't one I ever seen before. His hair's undone, eyebrows all ruffled to shit, like one of those Coo Coo's Nest patients after a jolt. I feel guilty for being the one who administered it, but Miss Rose is Nurse Ratched in the scenario, and she would have gotten her message to him one

way or another. Bobby goes home sick and, as the day stretches, I feel less like an asshole and more important, somehow. To see Bobby affected like that, and to think that I had anything at all to do with it, sets loose a fanning of wings that ripples from my chest to that peach pit way up between my hips, and it beats hell out of any roller coaster I ever rode.

Bobby doesn't even come out his room for supper, and Mama and Daddy's concern over him grows into an argument. In bed later, I hear Daddy through the walls say, "For shit's sake, Lulu, Jesus suffering! I'm married to your goddam mother." I can't feast my eyes on old mash mouth without Lawrence's weepy blues off to the side mucking it up, and so I spend another dream on consolation, feeling even halfway through a touch of boredom.

Tuesday morning, Bobby tells Mama and Daddy that he's all better and has to get to New Orleans pronto as a sort of dress rehearsal for his job in October. He can't say how long he'll be. He eats about a dozen strawberry pancakes, what Mama made to piss off Daddy, and then finds me in my room.

"Hey Tricky R-Ricky," he says, handing me a carton of reds. "I need you to bring some food and wo, wo, water to Catfish Corner tomorrow."

"What the hell, Bobby," I ask. That's our name for an abandoned shed near a bend in the Amite River where Bobby taught me how to fish a long time ago.

"I'm being b-b-bullied," he says and starts crying. "I ain't safe here." He whimpers and a fleck of snot shoots to his chin. I got to look away from him then. I use the occasion, though, to mention I changed brands to Chesterfields and am relieved when he goes.

The day unfolds like a grenade Bobby plucked the pin from when he split. At work, Mama and Daddy rage on like they hadn't done since Bobby left home the first time. When I'm showing some handsome professor-type fellow to the wasp spray, and Mama shouts, "You can fuck a duck, Bub! Denial ain't

just a river," the man laughs and throws me a keeper smile. Daddy goes out to a bar alone and when I ask Mama what's for supper, she says she ain't my slave. I settle for Raisin Bran and tell her she doesn't have to be a B about it.

"That's a bitchy thing to say, Ricky," Mama says, laughing like she does. "Who's a bitch?"

I'm nervous next day, heading to Miss Rose's place. I change clothes three times and end up with what I started on: my vintage Aloha shirt, with my brown slacks and tammy, the best dressed fellow putting down bulbs anywhere. I take a taxi to the Waffle House near her house and walk the rest of the way. It's down off Highland Road where the oak trees stretch out and hide the country underneath. They line her long driveway. Her car is parked at a funny angle with the two front tires in the grass, but it's not sparkling so much in the overcast. Just as I make it to her brick columns, she spills from her front door in smart white pants and a yellow blouse.

"Ricky, you came," she says, shutting the door behind her like there's a tiger on the other side. "Good." She leads me around the side of her house to a big patio with a swimming pool. There's a table with a martini glass on it and several half-eaten olives scattered about. Besides the purple azaleas hugging the house and some more skirting a gazebo, I don't see any flowers.

"Where should I put the bulbs?" I ask.

"You can have them as a souvenir." She slurs on *souvenir*, settling into a chair, and I offer her a smoke and put my Zippo to it. "The last gentleman left," she says. I thrill when her fingers rake my hand, drawing fire. She leans back. "Did you do as I asked?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say, plopping myself. "I put it on his pillow."

"And..." she says, leaning in.

"Well," I say. "He ain't so insouciant no more." To see the joy flush her face is a feeling I aim to hold on to for as long as I

can, knowing it was me set loose that pleasure in a woman like her. "He's a little nervous," I add. This news perks her right up.

"How nervous?" she asks. "Nervous how?"

"Just quiet is all," I say. I hate to tell on Bobby, but my want to thrill her is too much to resist. "He said you have dementia."

"That's too rich," she says. "Wishing for something doesn't make it so."

"Did Bobby do something bad?" I ask.

"I'm trying to turn it into something good," she says.

I think like I'm at the pawn shop, quick, and so I tell her there's more about Bobby, but that I need to know what trouble he's in. Miss Rose smirks at me. Her eyes wobble slightly but she catches them back up and lays them on me and nods her approval.

"I see you," she says, smirking through a curl of cotton white smoke. "Bobby's got porridge all over that pretty face of his. First, with Miriam, but granted, that was too easy not to," she says. "But Eloise wasn't the sort of bird to just change her will on a dime. She worshiped those redneck grandbabies of hers, and I say bravo, Bobby, for pulling it off, but there's lots of people out there who would be very happy to know what I know." She takes a big drink and pinches out the olive and waves it while she talks. "Bobby has to learn how to play with grownups now. It's like a storm swirling out there, Ricky, and I want Bobby to stay here with me to ride it out. Until it blows over. Do you understand? I want to be his safe harbor, not to turn him out in all of that," she says, and flicks her wrist toward the azaleas. "But it's his choice, entirely."

"Bobby's hiding up in the woods," I say. I can't help it.

Her eyebrows scrunch down and she forms a prayer tent with her hands and laughs into it. "Oh, the baby," she says. "Tell him to come see me, Ricky." She leans forward like waiting for me to say something, and when I don't, she sits back and studies me. "You could come visit us," she says. "I could make you a

bedroom. Everything you need. And the stories I could tell about my sister. And me too, Ricky. I've led a fabulous life," she says, winking, grabbing her empty glass. "Am leading."

"Would you care for a refresher?" I ask. "Do you have champagne?"

"Now what sort of question is that?" She smiles like a girl she used to be.

"My Mama and Daddy say I make a mean French 75," I say, and tip my tammy. She cuts her eyes toward the pool approvingly, like Bobby's climbing nekkid out of it.

I find everything where she tells me I will. Her tan driving gloves are sitting up on the marble counter by her keys like a gift, and I slide them on. Her hands are small, and it's a damn near fit. I can make a French 75 with my eyes closed, and I watch her out the window while I jigger and dash. I picture the two of us shooting the breeze while Bobby plays in the pool. She'd be content then to spread those gorgeous monarch wings out to their full glory, and me underneath, catching all that dust. I can even see myself down the line, sitting in her spot with my very own sort of Bobby. Easy plucking.

She trades me three crisp hundred dollar bills for the drink. "Oh, maestro, yes please," she says, sipping, and a splash of sun falls on her from a cloud break. I see her powder piled, how thick it's caked on, and gritty at the edge. "Each day is a miracle," she says. "A brand new shiny rainbow bubble, Ricky, and it grows all day, and it's astounding the worlds of shit it holds inside, and at the end of the day, always, each time." Miss Rose pokes the air in front of her. "Blop," she says. The clouds blot out the light again and I'm grateful.

"I got to go talk sense to Bobby," I say.

"You can do that, can't you Ricky?"

"If anyone can," I confess, "it's me."

"Please take the bulbs, Ricky," she says. "You can put them in your mother's garden. You'll have to fetch them from the trunk."

"No, ma'am," I say, and motion her to stay. "I insist."

"Suit yourself," she says, easing back in the chair. "I'll have the gardeners put them in when they come Friday." She takes another sip of her drink and smiles. "I like having you around, Ricky."

I go big for Bobby with a bucket of Popeyes and some cold Cokes. It's funny to think the last time I was at Catfish Corner it was Bobby taking care of me. He's like a stunned chimp in there, face stubbled out already after only a day and a half, and his deodorant's gave out. I lie to him about Mama and Daddy making up, thinking it'll cheer him. He asks for a BB gun asap.

"These fucking critters, Ricky," he says through a mouthful of dark and spicy. "They all want to come up in here with me."

"It's like a storm swirling out there, Bobby," I tell him, "and you just got to ride it out." I take his order for next time, and on my hike back through the woods to civilization, I got to smile, thinking of Bobby squatting in that rotten, kudzu-choked shed like a dummy.

I figured ten of my antidepressants would have done the trick, that those gardeners would find her on Friday, but I'm learning not to go figuring on much, because that very night on the six o' clock news, I see her beautiful car accordioned into a light pole in the parking lot of the Waffle House. I guess she crashed through the snowball stand and the gas station before coming to that final stop, the main good thing being that nobody else got hurt too bad.

I hope she decided to run an errand before the French 75 kicked in, her being already half drunk. It's a more fitting end for a woman like her anyway. Way more glamorous than being found after cooking in the sun for two days. That's what I tell myself under Lawrence's glare in bed that night, over and over, until it's admiration I start to see in his eyes. Reverence even, for the boy who turned his back on a world of glamor to single-handedly save his family. I understand something then, and I swap places with Vivian Leigh, so that it's my arm

Brando's twisting, and this time Lawrence ain't jealous at all, but something else. The possibilities are endless.

The next day, I find the article in *The Advocate* so I can show him. I follow Bobby home running so he can clean up and when Mama and Daddy come in, he announces that his employers liked him so much that they increased his pay and sent him home early to enjoy the rest of his summer. We go out to supper to celebrate his success, which is all of ours really. Mama and Daddy act friendly again, and they even get tipsy and let me sip their drinks.

When I go to get rid of those empty pink and purple shells in my medicine sock, I decide to just go ahead and flush all of them. I tell Mama not to get no more, that I'm cured, and she lets it go at that.

And with Bobby restored, we slip right on back into the dog days, easy, just like my astuteness said we would. I dug deeper into what Miss Rose mentioned about Bobby getting himself onto those wills, and it turns out she *was* onto something. But I ain't throwing no stones. Whenever I doubt Bobby's heart, I remember him crying when Miss Miriam died. I saw his shoulders in grief heaving, real lowdown stuff, like that painting of Jesus in the garden, the devastating one with him in that terrific purple sash. And so I seen that.

It's a message I wish Miss Rose never would've gave me. But I was able to finish her poem for her. I think she'd be proud of the job I did. It's pretty goddamn precise. And since I don't aim to be letting anything fester, I'm passing it on. Those anchovies stink up my fingertips for days, but old Tuck's a smart bird. I was busting up at first to hear him say *Bobby Wobby*, but the more he learns, the less funny it gets.

Youth

Rebecca Bernard

*"I came to the conclusion that I am a very normal person a few weeks ago. I decided that I really am very grounded. Being normal, almost, is what makes me different. Then again, maybe this is just an example of one of those little epiphanies I get all the time that usually make the most sense at the time they happened."*¹

It's springtime in the suburbs, early 2001, mid-morning on a Saturday. My best friend, Annie Welch, and I are driving to Laurel, Maryland, to purchase bulk quantities of blank VHS tapes to make copies for an award show we filmed at our high school. In my baby blue Toyota Corolla we crest the pillared highway as it descends into the familiar expanse of empty parking lots, thrift stores, the Pizza Hut with its cathedral-like dome. We fly across the asphalt, wet from last night's rain, as *Slanted and Enchanted* plays on the car's tinny speakers. My mouth hurts from smiling. Annie turns up the music. Sun streams through the windows, and my heart is a dumb balloon. Never have I felt such joy, such awareness that I am, in fact, alive.

The adolescent heart surges against its casing. See its membranes, its wetness, its innocence and its sense that it is new, right. Real.

¹From an assignment for a video self portrait titled "Self Portrait underpaper," written by me in March of 2001, junior year of high school.

When I remember my teenage self, it's difficult to parse between the memory of how much I felt and the knowledge that adolescent minds are chemically altered hormonal machines. We feel too much, and here is the science for it. We feel so much, and yet what is real? What is genuine? What love can we offer to our younger selves? What trust? Or what belief?

"Last night, I said that this Friday I want to take the metro to some park and sleep in the sun. God, I sit in school and I only think how I wish I was having some religious experience."²

As a teenager, I loved the warm asphalt of an empty parking lot drenched in sun. The hot blacktop, rough against the skin, and Annie and I would lie down, feel the heat of the earth and discuss our favorite questions. What did it mean to be a human? How might we come straining into the light? Who else was aware of this world beneath appearances? Our sophomore year English teacher, Ms. Diodati, had made us read Plato's allegory of the cave. Now we knew there were layers to living. Here at last the language for recognizing one's own hand. For seeing the objects that surround us for what they are. Nothing to be taken for granted. What we'd been feeling, and now the words for it.

(For the record, Annie and I also talked about boys. About music. About whether we were desirable. About whether or not we would find love. Be loved. Be wanted. Be known.)

According to Holden Caulfield, the only good thing his older brother, D.B., ever wrote was the story "The Secret Goldfish."

²From an essay titled "One College Essay Just for You," written by me in July of 2001.

The story is about a boy who has a goldfish that he loves so much he refuses to show it to anyone else.

Consider the fingers. The mouth. The teeth. The fluorescent lights. The friendships. The shrink-wrapped bagels with cream cheese. The cafeteria. The track. The discman. High school.

When I was in high school, I learned not to talk about what I really loved out loud. If you really loved something, not a person, but an idea, a book, a song, then you kept quiet. Words ruin things, feelings. Authenticity.

Starting around freshman or sophomore year, I began to envision the inside of my mind as a living room with little chairs and couches. You're never really alone, I'd say. You're just sitting inside of your mind, you and your consciousness.

How comforting to spend our lives with ourselves. How exciting the chance to get to know this little person, to try.

One morning, senior year, I found a tiny plush horse in my box of cereal. All day (for a few days that week?) I carried the horse around in my pocket. I'd decided this horse was God. I didn't believe in God, but it didn't matter. It was the holy that I craved. Something pure and intense and real.

The word "real" expected to carry so much weight here, so much emphasis. I read over my adolescent writings and sometimes it's hard to feel for this girl, this woman so obsessed with the genuine. Not knowing when to shut up. But I love her, too. Sometimes.

Joan Didion, in portraying Joan Baez and her connection to her teenage entourage, writes the universal truths of the young: “The innocence and turbulence and capacity for wonder, however ersatz or shallow...of anyone’s adolescence...the young and lonely and inarticulate...who suspect that no one else in the world understands about beauty and hurt and love and brotherhood.”³

Hello, fingers. Hello, knuckles. Hello, nail beds and scars and moons and flesh and grasp.

As an adult, I get drunk and listen to Piebald or Alkaline Trio or Fugazi, and I’m there again, briefly sixteen, the feelings so voluminous of course there is still space for me in them. I can drop it all, my trappings of adulthood, the house (still a rental), the dog, the husband. I can walk outside, put on headphones, turn the volume up and sneak into the abandoned construction site and lie on the muddy ground and exist and be alive again, as if all this time I’d forgotten I was alive, and the truth is I have. There’s so little time for it these days. So little desire.

I used to say I found consciousness one night sophomore year after a friend’s birthday dinner, around the time we’d been assigned to read Plato. Five of us ate at a restaurant and then we came back to Laura Beach’s house to hang out in her basement by the air hockey table. We sat on the floor in a circle and Kory explained to us that these friendships we thought we valued were really meaningless. They were ultimately based on shallow connections, nothing deep or true. There were levels of existing in the universe, and while some of us were happy to live falsely, others, like him, were not. What was the unquestioned life? In retrospect, it was a

³ Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, Washington Square Press, 1961.

dramatic and cruel gesture toward his close friends, but to me, only a peripheral friend to him, it rang true. What was this hand before me, these fingers I’d never noticed? When I walked the halls of high school, so much did seem to lurk beneath the surface. There were two worlds suddenly, and I wanted the one beneath.

In class, we talk about awareness. I ask my students to look at their hands. Have you noticed these before? These hands you have? How real the fingers and the bones. See them move and age?

In the last five years or so, like many other thirty-somethings, I imagine, I have begun measuring what was and what is, and feeling the difference. We must think our youth is everlasting, bountiful, even as we know it’s finite. Even as we tell ourselves it won’t last forever, inside, the moments feel so long, so rich, of course they will. In memory at least, I tell myself.

“I hold springtime in my arms, the fullness of it and the rinsing sadness of it.”⁴

How easy it is to look down on my teenage self for her belief in seeing the world for what it was. But without her, where would I be now? She is a Russian doll in my belly. A palimpsested portion of every day of the rest of my life. Look at us animals with our capacity for consciousness. The sky changes color. We take nothing and everything for granted.

As a teenager, I often rode the metro into D.C. I liked the feeling of standing on the moving car, holding onto the pole for support,

⁴ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, Knopf, 1961.

and I would imagine the thoughts of the people around me swarming like insects, just how much noise that would be to hear. I think the same thing now when I walk across a crowded square. All these individual intellects thriving, their brains so loud. But I still can't hear them.

Sometime in my early twenties, I began to tell the origin story of my own consciousness to boys, to friends, at parties. First, I read Plato and gained consciousness. Then I saw the world anew. Then I tried to continue living in a state of perpetual awareness, but it was impossible. Then Annie and I jumped off the dock at Ocracoke Island one August because language failed, and I needed to be alive again. If it was possible.

I watch a movie, *Dinner with Friends*, and see the dissolution of marriage, the characters yearning for past youth, past selves, and I pretend I cannot relate. I yearn with fondness, not with envy, I say. Unlike these characters, when we were young, we *knew* we were young, and we spoke of it often. Maybe this helps the transition. Maybe this lets the adolescence lie dead, without need to exhume its corpse. Without feeling like something has been lost.

"I am thirty-five years old, and it seems to me that I have arrived at the age of grief...What it is, is what we know, now that in spite of ourselves we have stopped to think about it. It is not only that we know that love ends, children are stolen, parents die feeling that their lives have been meaningless...It is more that the barriers between the circumstances of oneself and of the rest of the world have broken down, after all—after all that schooling, all that care."⁵

⁵Jane Smiley, *The Age of Grief*, Random House, 1987.

In high school, Annie and I snuck out of the house all the time but not to have sex or drink or do anything typically adolescent. We would sneak out and drive to the country and walk through Christmas tree farms or sit in empty fields or go to empty playgrounds or meet boys at all-night diners or sit on the once sun-warm asphalt and talk about this idea of being a person.

(In college, when I began to drink, to experiment, at first, I was glad I'd waited, seeing how it takes over, how alcohol becomes the focus. Only later did I wonder what I'd missed. My perfect brainy adolescence. Now when I drink, I tell myself I'm really living, I can go back, regain the heightened feelings, turn up the volume, feel it again.)

"I was free and constrained and nothing and everything. But it's more than that; its an intense feeling that what you're doing then is what you're meant to be doing, and you feel sick to your stomach because its almost too much life."⁶

What does the inside of your mind look like? When I left high school, I started to ask this question to friends, strangers, people I wanted to sleep with, people I didn't want to sleep with but who I wanted to want to sleep with me.

I asked at bars. Drunk. Sober. On speed. What does it look like in there? Are there lamps? People? Records? Birds? Some people had thought about it. Others hadn't. One young man at a smoky bar said his mind was "entrepreneurial and shining."

⁶From a practice college essay titled "Parking lot essay," written by me in July of 2001.

I am now thirty-five years old, a coincidence, perhaps. When I first taught Jane Smiley's *The Age of Grief* in my mid-twenties, I remember having trouble explaining what the title meant to my students. In my late twenties, it was a dawning. At thirty-five, it reads like the inside of the heart, the mind.

I still tell my students all things are possible, but inside, we must begin to know otherwise.

When I was younger, I used to like to make my hands into shadow puppets. I remember making them in the basement during a neighborhood party. Shadow puppets are vague approximations of animals. Deer. Rabbit. Wolf. There's little recognizable but we know what they are.

Walking back into high school the Monday after that birthday dinner, that scene in Laura Beach's basement, I can remember feeling as if the world had taken off its skin. Everything was the same, but really nothing was the same. There's what you see and then there's what's underneath of what you see. I used to reject the idea that you could overthink things. To me, to overthink was the right amount of thinking. Everything layered like some fine patisserie. A Russian doll. Skin.

On my hip I have a tattoo in my handwriting that says, "I've left the living room." I got it the day before I turned twenty because I wanted to do a final impulsive thing before I left my teens. My tattoo artist's name was Skizzy. We found him listed in *The Baltimore Sun*.

Why had I said I'd left? Because my perceptions were changing. Already, they were changing.

(Other people's epiphanies are boring. Or if boring isn't the right word, maybe uncomfortable. Sad. Obvious. I put this here to apologize for how I sound. For how I'll see myself in a decade. For my privilege and its wake.)

"Breathe. Breathe. The future. The concept of it is almost pointless. So overwhelmingly everything that I wonder if maybe I couldn't better communicate it with words wearing petticoats, or maybe mini-skirts."⁷

I have never understood the adage that youth is wasted on the young. Isn't youth like the marrow of our bones, what we feed off of later when we're hungry for what was, or perhaps what we imagine what was? What we hoped it was? Doesn't life appear more lovely when it's no longer being lived?

As I've gotten older—I'm thirty-four as I write this (thirty-five as I revise)—I realize that the moments of full living are few and far between, and that this is how it must be. Still, every once in a while, there we are. Alive. What a shy and profound feeling to be aware of. How holy and how tame. Like god in our pocket. Like our younger selves, buried deep inside, the littlest doll. Peeking out.

In the film *I Heart Huckabees*, there is a scene where Mark Wahlberg and Jason Schwartzman take turns hitting each other in the face with a red rubber kickball ball. They sit at a picnic table. *Do you get it?* they ask one another, as each smack restores the person to the moment at hand. I know it's a joke, and it's

⁷From my actual college essay, titled "Breathe," written in November of 2001.

ironic, but it also strikes me as true. How often do we get that good smack in the head. How often do we want it? Do we stop needing it once we're grown?

In August, before senior year began, Annie Welch and I went with my dad and his girlfriend to Ocracoke Island in North Carolina for a week at the beach. All summer, Annie and I had lost the ability to connect in the way that had once felt so immediate and intuitive. So real.

When we got to the island, post-ferry ride, after dinner, we went to the pier and sat by the docks in the darkness, our feet dangling over the edge, seabirds gathering and the brine of the waves refreshing the air. It was silent but for the birds, and it was silent for a while. And then, I broke the quiet as I tried and failed to say everything I was thinking, to tell her everything: the enormity of teenage feeling, the rattling of the heart, the gulf between human beings, the first unconditional love for a person outside the family, the way that growing makes us cruel and sometimes, always, we do or say the wrong thing, the newness of everything that isn't really new, the beauty of it all, the youthful stab at truth, the way that what's beautiful is so often also what's sad and how we want this, we want it this way, we're safe, we're lucky, so want to feel sad, to feel fully. And at the end, Annie was silent. Then, she stood up, moved to the edge of the pier and leapt into the water, oily from all the gathered boats. A moment later, I joined her. We bobbed and hugged and shivered and, eventually, we pulled ourselves onto dry land.

Would I mourn my adolescence more deeply had I not known what it was while it was happening? Do I write here a eulogy, a love note, a missing person's ad, an essay that pretends I don't miss being filled with feeling?

"This is where I should end it, but something I learned through all of this is that although intensity and silence are striking, they don't always mean everything. Most of the time you need to talk. So that's what I do, and that's what I'm doing and that's what makes me, Rebecca, there."⁸

Maybe what this is really about is how the tragedies of adulthood feel different than the tragedies of youth. Divorce, death, loss, failure. What did our young hearts know about pain? See how the pain shimmers less, its neon bulb blown, its dull reality an ache ongoing. Unbloodied and real.

And here we are still. Trying to put the ineffable into words because to say it's ineffable, to believe that if we speak the moment is ruined, broken, dead, is to be young again. And we can't be. I can't be.

⁸From a dramatic essay titled "Andy in a Dramatic Form" for my college application in January of 2002.

Swan Point XXIII./Lost in Translation

Kirstin Allio

1.

Digging in a dead spot in the yard, a tiny disk caught my eye. A penny dated 1974, my birth year, and I couldn't decide if it was a sign from the past or the future, the way the wish-granting forces tend to register the one interpretation of the flicker you could not have foreseen, or were you failing once again to represent yourself, not defending yourself at all, was this an interlude in the nightmare where you kept pressing the wrong numbers on the cosmic keypad?

2.

When men write about their neuroses they're intellectuals. When women win raffles, they are housewives. I myself have a life-long winning streak, but my wishes come true at great cost. In other words, no use wishing on the first star when someone else is just dialing it in.

3.

Dearest Female Friend, Sometimes I wish I could install you in a cabin in the woods so that you would have time and space to read all my drafts.

4.

The trees have gaping haloes, top-heavy beneath their unwieldy loads, the disembodied moon kicked over like a shell in the dinged-up sky. On the way to the river, my stalking shadow startles a smooth-haired mom snapping her baby into a stroller at the bottom of some splintered stairs and she cries out involuntarily, "Hi how are you!" "Sorry, I didn't get that," says Siri, the new bard.

5.

Sunset's peristalsis pushes blues and grays down the façade. Dark notches of ducks, handholds where the current plays both sides. Acorns sorted by caps and jerky, leaf chips, tight rocks, the sky a deathbed heaped with quilts, the water a dark windshield, and I too begin to lose ground, taking the poem with me as I go, soluble as cell service, if memory serves, if it catches my eye, years ago, on the way home from a bar, I could not make myself understood, and so I released the passenger-side door and dropped out of the moving car. I hit the bare wood floor of my apartment (let me be perfectly clear—I don't want to resolve this in the usual way), where I found myself laboring with laughter, sick with shame, imagining him standing on the sidewalk, bewildered and unmooned.

[I Am Blurred]

JA Haupt

I shake
any water out
leaving open pores & salt
seeping drowned miles
down where I imagine it rollicking sea

I am blurred

or I am a sieve & I
chaotically weep
pasta water
scalding & starched into narrow
mines along endless piped dark

There are no more razors in my purview
or bolts askance with whom I wrestle
& as to the wandering boy I ask
what is purpose

I keep on being heard to be saying Warrior
when I ask Are you a worrier
Given the responses
I have ceased to ask

Wouldn't you pocket a box cutter
& name her for when

& keep her safe & ready
Now I am one who makes them curl
in the corner
shake she says

Linda-linda-linda

Mant Bares

Friday

No denying it—when Midge wears this outfit to work at La Reina Linda, her shears are sharper, her clipper lines cleaner, her at-sink scalp massages more relaxing. Simple math. Her daughter Opal’s semi-sheer blouse plus her own pinchy heels plus plunge push-up, tissue-packed to supplement the atrophied padding, equals tips.

This tax-free shopping weekend, the government of Louisiana’s annual gift, guarantees more tips than a month’s scrapings. Enough to catch Midge up, maybe chisel at student loan interest or hospital debt. So after her long night awake with Opal, Midge took time she didn’t have to tease her crown to glory and smooth her bangs glossy as glass. She even remembered to pencil in her beauty mark, right under her eye. She hopes her pride shows more than her fatigue.

“Linda-linda-linda!” Ricardo, the boss, trills as she walks in. Beautiful, like in the salon’s name. Rich—his real name, whenever he’s not out front, flaunting an accent tinting his spray tan ethnic—says the name *Beautiful Queen* sets a standard.

“If you gonna walk in late, mami, walk in looking like that.” He gestures to his own bony chest and fans himself. His under-eyes are chalky with a generous arc of concealer. Midge smiles and watches herself walk in the mirrored walls past the other girls standing at their stations. The mirrors are dizzy with contrast, the geometric, black-and-white get-ups and elaborate hair-show coiffures. The salon smells like the fruity remains of yesterday’s product fumes.

People might think women are the big spenders in a place like La Reina Linda. But this mall abuts a bisque-colored office tower full of suits. Lawyers, admen, low-level politicians. These men spend less per visit than the average woman, but they are weekly fixtures, getting micro-trims and washes every three to four days. These men, able to tell the difference of a millimeter, are why a girl will be sent home for confusing cream with pure white or mismatching her blacks. The salon girls must set an example—or else their shared tip pool will be bare as a country fade.

And what can a woman with dependents do with these commissions? At 39, Midge is the oldest here, and she isn’t working for gas money. She needs bills direct to the tee-tiny pocket, too small for her lip gloss, of her slenderizing pants. Right there’s a perfect example of the untaught knowledge required for survival here—possessing words like *slenderizing*. And it isn’t thinning out the hair, it’s *texturizing*. They don’t dye hair, they *color* hair. Dye is for Easter eggs. *Cosmetologist* is too hard to say, *hairdresser* is old-fashioned, *stylist* is bland. It’s *beautician*.

“Now that’s a beautician,” Rich says as Midge sets up her station. She smiles again.

Midge hasn’t always been a beautician. But she recognizes the mind game of assuming authority so clients will give her their money, their time, their signature lob, and trust her with it. In telemarketing and secretary work, it was easy, just smile in her voice. Not so much touching other people, though. That, she learned at trade school, then again when Opal was discharged from the hospital and her body became a task to them both.

“That was a four,” Midge tells the young lawyer in her cranked-up chair, unsure of how high and how tight his high-and-tight should be. “A half-inch,” she translates. She makes it sound like the best half of the inch. She runs her fingers over his head, appraising her work, then stops. Her palms are dried out, bleeding pitifully, staining his hair and scalp slightly red. She

pulls the towel around his neck up and dabs the blood away. He picks at bristles behind his ear and shakes his head in the mirror. She clips on the next guard. “A three.”

Midge works the duster all over her client’s neck, flinging hair shrapnel everywhere. She watches Phoebe in the mirror, frowning over the head of a client dissatisfied with her keratin treatment. If Phoebe says something stupid and the client complains to Ricardo, Phoebe will spend the whole cash-grab weekend in the back, pouring dregs of conditioners and shampoos and serums into new bottles. But the young beautician grits her teeth and applies oil in light strokes until the client leaves satisfied, running her manicure through the back of her hair. Soon after, Midge’s client straightens his tie and leaves a folded twenty on the chair before going to the register to pay. Midge pretends to brush hair off her chair and pockets it.

As Midge sweeps, Phoebe wipes product splatter from the mirror and says to her, “You see that mop she came in with? I don’t care if her boo’s last name is Petroleum. Shit, girl—I’m a beaut-ician, not a mag-ician.”

Midge’s novelty apron in trade school had that quote on it. Just a year out and she has no clue where that apron went. Opal’s accident has had that effect. Midge spent the months leading up to the graduation torn between school and hospital. Opal had attended the trade school, too, in a GED program for dropouts. They had been on track together. No more would Midge be held back by men! No more would Opal depend on coco to feel good! *Coco* is what the kids call meth now, apparently. As Opal explained—*Getting called a meth-head sucks. But a coco-head? That sounds like somebody to party with.*

Midge sits on the employee toilet in the back, lid down, pants up. Her eyes are hot and dry, like skin in heat stroke refusing to sweat. A powerful cold front moved through the week of Opal’s accident, freezing the city slick. Instead of melting salt, the trade school emptied flood-risk sandbags in mounds on the

sidewalks. On her way to study GED math, Opal slipped in the sand, on the ice, onto the pavement, headfirst.

A fist pounds on the door. “Midge! Are you shitting in there?” Rich sounds like the white guy he is, so this must be serious.

“I’ll be right out,” Midge says. She holds the flusher down until all the untainted water swirls out.

He stands in the doorway, blocking her path. Under the harsh bare bulbs, his eyes are pinked with veins and his nostrils are raw. Thursday night kicks off his weekends. He probably had as long a night as Midge. She stands in front of the sink, the toilet tank hissing behind her, as he tells her what Phoebe reported to him. Midge can deny the money’s existence or hand it over.

“I flushed it,” she says. Through the thin fabric, she can feel the folded bill on her thigh.

“Que? Come again?”

“When I pulled my pants up, it fell out. Went down the toilet. I’m sorry.”

Rich smooths his hair back so hard he gives himself a momentary facelift. “Why, Midge? You think your fellow beauticians aren’t going to be hurting this holiday season? Phoebe has a fire truck on layaway for her little niños. In August. What do you have against her niños? Why do you take food out of their mouths?”

Why does he take daily meds out of her daughter’s mouth? Wasn’t this about him, his Christmas, his nights out, his mouth, his nose? “I wasn’t thinking. Just clearing my station.”

“You weren’t thinking about the money? Or the niños?” Rich’s Spanish benefits from his false accent the same way some words benefit from being repeated in the mirror, until they lose meaning and gain a hypnotic roundness.

“The money. He left it, I picked it up. I cleaned my station like you want us to, the combs and everything. I came in here. I didn’t remember it until it got flushed.”

“So, you’re saying you were going to put it in the tip pool, but you forgot?”

“Yes, I was.”

Rich steps into the small restroom, face close to hers. He twiddles a lock of Midge’s hair, then produces a fine-tooth comb from his shirt pocket and gently backcombs her roots here and there. Softly: “Just because your mistake was honest...” He pulls back to view her head as a whole and returns. “Doesn’t mean it wasn’t a mistake.” He turns her to the sink mirror, where her eyes look guilty and her hair perfectly asymmetrical. Rich’s face is hidden behind her head. Midge’s stomach tenses when his hot, minty breath hits her neck.

“I’ll put ten in the pool.” Still a good tip, percentagewise, for that high-and-tight.

“Is that how much it was?” She nods at herself. “You’ll put thirty. Call it insurance. It insures I won’t think of you first if the pool comes up short.”

Midge rejoins the shop after she wipes her mouth, redraws her lip line, and reapplies her gloss.

In Phoebe’s chair, a middle-aged woman’s arms sneak out from under her slick cloak, her neck stubbornly bent into a complimentary magazine. Phoebe stops cutting and spins her shears on her finger. The woman licks her finger and turns the page, hair dripping. Phoebe visibly bites her tongue. At least if it’s a child, you can ask the parent to keep their head straight. A grown woman, always in the right as a paying client, can’t be controlled so explicitly.

“Miss Roberta, I need you to sit up straight if you want me to cut straight.”

The woman slumps only a little less.

Midge quietly relishes Phoebe’s struggle, watching as she huffs through the trim and long layers and blow-dries rough to mask the lopsidedness.

Opal calls from the neighbor’s phone while Midge is straining her back, trying to razor-cut around an adman’s ear, his wireless earbud left in for his conference call. Two hours pass before she can dip out behind the mall, near the service road.

“Momma...! Out of yarm. Get me some yarm?”

“Opal, baby, I told you: only call me at work for emergencies. You scared Momma.” She drags on her cigarette. “And it’s *yarn*, baby. With an N. Yarn. Like barn.”

Opal relearned walking and talking at a miraculous rate, but the doctors warned Midge that she may never recover full motor function and communication post-coma. Without the expensive recommended therapy, she hasn’t lost a telling slowness. She pauses now as if in thought but Midge knows she’s just muddling words in her mouth.

“Sorry-sor-ry-sorry-sorry! I... need yarn. Can I have... yarn?”

To fill Opal’s days, Midge set up an online store for pencil cups and placemats fashioned out of yarn and flexible plastic grids, learned in hospital rehab arts and crafts. Her dexterity, at least, has improved. A disclaimer on the store’s home page, explaining Opal’s traumatic brain injury, has almost gotten the store in the black. People love a cause.

Midge mentally calculates the cost of each inch of her cigarette morphing into ash. *The money!* Opal would have said 18 months ago. *How can you spend so much to get cancer?*

Smoking dampens the appetite and frees up yarn money. She fantasizes about a food court hot dog while Opal describes today’s work. Opal likes the yarn names: eclipse, yolk, dune, graphite, cobalt. She has decided she needs the one from the catalog called persimmon. *Percy-mont*.

A man unloading boxes from a truck behind the food court comes over and asks for a cigarette. Midge shakes the pack like she needs to check how many are left, then scoots one out for him.

He smokes leaning his back on the dumpster, his leg kicked up behind him. He's Latino but not the kind Rich wants to be, not polished and exotic. His overgrown curls are limp. A scar bifurcates the tip of his nose, and he is tattooed wrists to jaw. He smells like sweat and old cologne. His hooded brown eyes run up her. When she smiles out of obligation, he smiles bigger. His bottom teeth are capped yellow gold—yolk.

Off the phone, Midge inspects another cigarette between two stiff fingers. The man offers his lighter.

"I probably should go back to work," she says. Her phone pings in her purse. Opal has sent an unfocused picture of a skein of yarn held out in front of her face. Midge has told her the neighbor's phone plan doesn't cover media messages. Opal's mouth skews crooked. In the coma, she ground her teeth on the breathing tube and created a valley in her bottom teeth.

"What's work?" He's older than she thought, up close. Still younger than she is.

"Beautician."

He tilts his head in confusion. She fishes a comb out of her purse and carefully redefines the part in her hair by feel. She demonstrates tweaking her ends out and out, spike and spike.

"Ah, *peluquera*," he says. "You cut the hair."

"I do lots of things with the hair."

He smiles, running a hand through his sweaty curls. "What you would do with mine?"

Midge swings her purse in front of her body before leaning over and applying her authoritative touch to his head. His scalp, flaking pink and white dandruff, is warm like a cooling bread loaf, the kind Midge's mother made for her and baby Opal.

"Cut it off." She clicks her tongue.

"Off? Why?"

"Scalp's unhealthy, needs treatment." He looks concerned. "It'll grow back."

He smiles. "I need my hair, *flaquita*. How I'll get a woman with no hair? *¿Cómo lo hago?*" His Spanish makes English feel superfluous, technical. She tries to remember the word he used for *beautician*. She shrugs and lights another cigarette.

"What's your name?"

"Margaret." Her given name is too intimate.

"Maggie?"

"Midge." So much for that, she thinks—but Maggie suits her less than Ricardo suits Rich. "And you?"

"Vicente. But my friends call me Hundo." He whips out a roll of bills from his back pocket and isolates one prudishmouthed Ben Franklin. He shakes the curl out and mouths, *Hundo*. His uncapped teeth bite his wet bottom lip. A tattoo on his wrist below the unfurled bill: a large watch face with scratchy Roman numerals and priceless urchins of diamonds outside, thick blocky links suggesting gold.

Midge can't help herself—she touches the soft hundred-dollar hem. He lets go, meaning to drop Ben in her hand. But she withdraws. It drops to a muddy spot of ground. They both stare, their toes close.

A text buzzes, probably Rich furious about her long break. She steps back, turns, and opens the heavy metal door. "*Adios*, Hundo."

The door, closing behind her, can't fully stifle Hundo's yell—"Bye, *flaquita!*"

Midge's tip share at the end of the day: twenty dollars.

Saturday

"Be the beautician you want to see in the world, mami!" Ricardo goes on his extended coffee break. The beauticians make slow-morning busywork of cleaning and precise self-grooming. Midge hotel-creases towels, sliding them into cubbies. She's

staring off into space, thinking about Opal's unfulfilled orders, when the bridal party stampedes in, hair half-done, faces stucco with dried creams, hobbling in toe separators.

Between the fancy kitchen store and the Chanel retailer with no price tags, Simone's Salon and Spa offers services La Reina Linda doesn't. Not that Ricardo is jealous. *Mamis, have you seen how much a single pepino costs? And champagne? That's not what a queen needs to be beautiful.* Simone's beauticians wear pleasant florals, hair plain but lustrous, lavender surgical masks for mani-pedis.

The beautician backcombing the bride collapsed. Her first weekend working, the first real test of her mild asthma against ozone-eating aerosols and acetone. Simone, like Ricardo, forbids medications up front. No insulin testers or inhalers—avoid clients thinking of illness, they say. Simone apparently feels so guilty she closed the shop down and rode in the ambulance.

Ricardo knows Simone, and he returns making promises on the phone.

Midge, quickest to react, gets the bride in her chair. The pale girl, her hair a teased crest, cries herself puffy. Her matron-of-honor, a stout aunt, tightly holds on to her hand as if walking her through the grief of new widowhood.

"It will be fine," Midge says. The aunt might grab hold of Midge's throat just as tight. "I mean, the wedding will wait for you."

The bride sobs. "I wasn't thinking of being late! Just, Miss Regina had this whole plan for my look and now..." She looks at Midge's hands slowly working through her crown and closes her eyes on a brim of tears.

"Felicity, *cher*, you can still go somewhere else," the aunt says, low.

"Ms. Felicity, I promise you we can give you exactly the look you want. You will look beautiful." The girl nods somberly, sniffing. The aunt purses her lips.

Vaguely repulsed by the binary color scheme and experimental coifs, the party wants to know: does this shop ever do *pretty* formal looks? What about nails? They look to Nuan, a Chinese girl about the bride's age who started at La Reina Linda right out of school. What about their congealed face treatments? Poor, panicked Nuan bends a bridesmaid over a sink to wash the facial gunk off. Water sprays everywhere. The party rumbles with discontent.

"Mamis!" Ricardo hisses when he returns, weighed down by bags of nail supplies. "Should I hold your hands every second?" Ricardo commands Nuan to wipe up the floor and heats a towel. He escorts the damp bridesmaid to a styling chair, ratchets it up to eye level, and wipes the cream off with exacting strokes of the towel. "Reinas, linda-linda-linda reinas. I apologize." The strain of composure slants his accent toward a clumsy Italian. "Don't you think for one secondo we won't serve you with the care and luxury you deserve."

Phoebe spies on Midge's progress as she clips toenails.

Soon Midge's mouth, nose, throat, fingers, black blouse are dusted with white filmy residue from backcombing spray. She coughs, considering the integrity of the bride's bump and fine roots, worried she might end up looking electrified.

The more elongated and alien the bride's head becomes, the more she and her aunt coo over the *fancy*. Then the aunt suggests wisps around her face. "Soft curls. Pretty." She strokes her niece's hairline.

"Oh, my God." Phoebe's bridesmaid snatches the polish from her hand. "This is *Turn the Beet Around*. A berry *pink*. That's not right. *Our* color is *Wine Not*. A berry *red*. They're ruined!"

Hysterics quiver the mirrors. *Turn the Beet Around* is dropped and spills oily, like melted strawberry gelatin, on the linoleum.

"Tranquila! Mamis, this is what acetone is for. Si?" Ricardo yanks Phoebe out of the way and applies acetone to

the bridesmaid's toes with a strained smile. Phoebe—her face is so sour, Midge could spoil just seeing it in the mirror—dabs at the spill with an acetone-soaked cotton ball.

Fumes accumulate into a bank overhead, the scent like what an animal smells before disaster. Midge thinks *asthma* as she teases dutifully, pulling wisps without collapsing the beehive, shaking her head clear every so often. The bride's eyes consistently water, and the aunt warns Midge against tugging too hard.

The teary girl perks up once Midge has, against the odds, corralled the fine wisps into curls. "Beautiful," Midge says.

Midge paints the bride's toes in the styling chair. Part of her is keeping track of mall traffic, of potential walk-ins turned away by the occupied chairs and chaotic chat. Still, despite aches and irritated airways, fatigue and annoyance, Midge sustains a cheerful mood. If no one else, the bride is sure to tip well for a job well done.

The heat outside feels good, after the mall's unnatural chill.

"Wedding?" Opal asks on the phone. Midge flexes her hands, which crimped into shape around the comb and won't relax again.

"Yes, baby. We got the bride ready, and all her maids. We made them real pretty."

Spurred by a group whine about makeup artists waiting at the venue, the aunt hustled everyone out after Midge quickly oiled her thin, stickily bob. The bride thanked Midge in the small voice of a child compelled to niceties. She did look beautiful, down to her *Wine Not* toes.

On their way out, none snuck bills into shaky, aching hands. In the tip pool, there was only a single, crisp fifty-dollar bill—to be split among them.

"What did you have for lunch, baby?"

Hundo's truck backs up to her right, and he pops out of the cab.

"Mac 'n cheeeese," Opal croons. Before the accident, they cooked vegetarian meals, mostly soups, on Sundays and froze single portions for the week. The hospital food fattened Opal quick. Food cravings did the rest. Midge has trouble now lifting Opal or restraining her when her mood swings into inexplicable, incoherent rage. "And two broccoli."

Hundo walks her way, wiping his face with a grimy towel from his back pocket. Midge senses his eyes on her, her wrinkled clothes, her third cigarette. She smoked two before she called Opal. His shoes drag on the pebbly, broken asphalt. She tries to focus on Opal's voice.

"Momma! You hear?"

"Yes, you made another jewelry box. What colors?"

"Choc-o-late and frog." Midge preemptively gives Hundo the whole pack to take one out himself. "Chocolate dots on frog. Mince ice cream!"

"Mint, Momma's favorite. You make that Nevada lady her red jewelry box?"

He wets his lips before bringing the cigarette to them—a targeted gesture. She coolly takes back the pack. His hair is cleaner today, slicked back with strong-smelling gel.

"Not yet. I got no more Mary. Cherry. Mary Cherry."

"Maraschino?" There's a crackling on the phone, then a muffled sound of assent. She's overeating again, munching gingerbread men leg by arm by head. She won't be hungry for dinner. "I'll get you more today, before I go home. Are you drinking water like I told you?"

"Cokes."

"No, baby, drink your water. Cokes are all sugar. Remember you need water to be healthy."

"Remember," Opal repeats. "But the water out, Momma."

"Water's off?" Midge rotates her head against the brick wall, her hair snagging and losing its shape, her skull grinding loud in her ears. "The check should have got there already."

"It's okay! I have Cokes, Momma!" Opal's voice tends toward shrieking when she detects stress in Midge's. Midge thinks back to the night before, to Opal's subdued welcome and the strange near-silence while they ate ramen and white bread. What can her daughter, unobservant as a rule now, tell about Midge's state of mind?

"Okay, baby, you drink your Cokes. And plan the pattern for that lady's box, okay? I'll bring you Maraschino tonight."

"Perry Wrinkle, too?"

"Do you need Periwinkle?"

"I like Perry Wrinkle," she whines after a moment of thought.

"We did them ladies' nails today, too. Guess what their colors were called?" But Opal doesn't understand the puns. Midge labors to explain: the spelling, the song reference, the long phrases for names instead of single words. Opal laughs anyway. Then says goodbye in a rush because she wants to start the jewelry box.

Midge wipes makeup carefully from her screen and pats her blush to blend out any creases. Hundo's eyes have been on her through it all. There was a time she would have been thrilled by this tension, a flirtation with a younger man. But not today. The smell of his hair gel turns her stomach.

"You looking stressed, *flaquita*."

"I'm at work," she says. Like she doesn't even notice him, she adjusts the waistband of her pants, picks at her wrinkled armpits, rubs her lips together to even the pigment. Hundo lets the glowing stub resting on his gold-capped bottom teeth fall to the ground. It glows momentarily on the asphalt then grays like a worry. Midge pops a tab of gum. "Goodbye."

"You not sharing?" His tone more gentle than simple confrontation. Midge can't look at him. She tosses the gum pack in the air and assumes he caught it. She has no time for men, not today, not any besides the micro-trims and careful management

of thinning crowns that take up the rest of her day. She goes home with enough tips for this week's gas and a skein each of Maraschino and Periwinkle.

Sunday

The mall opens at noon on Sundays. Midge wakes up in a puddle of Opal's piss.

Last night, she came home, yarn in hand, to a tearful confession: Opal had forgotten to take her medications for days. Apologies escalated to violent hysterics. Around midnight, Midge convinced her to take the meds and slipped in a sleeping pill. Opal twitched violently in her sleep all night, jerking Midge's squeaky mattress. In the pre-dawn, Midge finally passed into a sleep so deep she didn't stir when the warmth crept under her and soaked through her nightshirt. Opal had never wet the bed as a child, but this is now unsurprising, if not common.

Midge rouses Opal and asks her to go into the kitchen, please, and turn on the coffeepot. She strips the sheets off the discolored, soaked mattress, and sighs so loudly Opal runs in, left foot slightly dragging, to check on her.

Which wires were crossed or severed, done by the brain injury itself or the coma, the doctors couldn't say. What's the point of experts, Midge thinks, if they can't solve essential mysteries?

Midge isn't angry, or even disappointed. This is her daughter. This girl-child and woman who can't keep her *m* straight from her *n*, whose bladder cannot be controlled, who struggles to learn anything new or remember what she once knew, who will never truly grow up—this is her baby. "No, I'm not mad, baby. I love you," Midge says. "Why don't we go clean up at the neighbor's?"

But the neighbor is annoyed with her, Opal says, for using her phone too much. Midge senses more hysterics, so she has Opal strip and scoops water out of the toilet tank to rinse her

off in the tub. Later she will smooth things over with the neighbor, maybe bring them a gift certificate to La Reina Linda.

What is Midge, if not angry or disappointed? What does she feel in the small of her back, deep in her temples, pinpricks on her fingertips, an itch unlike an itch?

She dumps stiff sheets in the washer while yelling instructions for the microwavable breakfast sandwiches. No washing, not themselves or sheets or clothes, no usual Sunday breakfast without water. She's lucky she filled the coffeepot with fresh water before work yesterday. Opal has already accumulated a sink-full of dirty mugs for her Cokes. Midge will call the water company first thing tomorrow. She smokes a cigarette out of the living room window. Opal barely notices. In the bathroom, she wet-wipes herself down and sprays Thursday's once-worn outfit with perfume. Dressing is a coarse act of will. She hears Opal starting on the morning crafts, singing along with the top-40 radio countdown, lagging a beat behind.

Leaving Opal in the house, smelling of piss, doubles that not-itch. But Midge does. Early as she managed to be, Rich still caught Midge with her shampooed head down in the restroom sink, blouse hanging on the door, breasts spilling over the cups of her bra. He didn't chew her out as expected, just walked out.

"Bitches, this is not acceptable," Rich says up front—not Ricardo, even his insults are in English—to the assembled beauticians. "If it's too hard for you to look like beauticians, in my book you are not beauticians." Cat hairs crisscross Phoebe's skirt and tights; another girl wears no makeup at all. Rich himself sports navy rather than black and won't take off his sunglasses. Talking fast, he frenetically licks his lips. "You are common stylists. Long-layer jockeys. I won't have it."

He snaps his fingers at Midge, who has blown volume into her hair already. "Wash your hair before you get here. Too much perfume."

At Phoebe: "Send your kitties out in the damn rain if you got to—this is *not* what I mean by black-and-white." Phoebe nods but covertly rolls her eyes.

He claims the mess they left—nothing more than streaks on the mirror and bits of stray hair—kept him up all night. "What's this on the mirrors, snot? You want your clients to see their faces covered in snot? And there's topcoat on this seat, peel it off and don't fuck up the leather. There, too, on the floor. Bitches, if I don't see this shop spick-and-span before the first client, y'all will be perming mee-maws in your kitchen starting tomorrow. I know you know how to sweep. Grab a broom and dustpan, make your bastards proud." He wheels around to inspect a sink. "And the sink's got scum. Scum!"

Midge walks over to see a slight film under the spout from the muddy face treatments.

"No scum in my high-class establishment. La Reina Linda is better than scum. Better than all of you! God! I'm fucking so—I'm so—all I know is, you better get to it. Fuck, I need a coffee."

He cranks the metal curtain only high enough for him to roll under, losing his sunglasses in the process. Midge is the first to move, fetching the sunglasses and a broom. She cleans and ignores the itch.

"That's that coke-cane," Phoebe says with authority. "He got into that white last night, I'm telling you."

"Where'd he get cocaine money?" Nuan asks, carefully pinning back the long side of her asymmetrical cut to sanitize her station.

"Coffee's the last thing he needs. He'll be walking on the ceiling later, getting dirt everywhere for us to clean," another girl says.

"Would it kill him to bring us coffee, too? Or a pot for the back? Cheapskate."

Midge says, "He's gonna catch y'all gossiping."

Phoebe, dabbing a spot of polish from the floor, scrunches her nose. “He’s gonna catch something, all right.”

But they do stop, cleaning in silence. Midge’s broom collects more spare change than hair, from when a wallet was dropped on Friday and coins went all over. Midge juggles the coins in her hand as she inputs the register code, sure of eyes on her back. She sees Rich forgot to settle the register and collect the tips—bills are crammed into every slot. Midge trickles the coins into their compartments and, with her other hand, peels out some bills without looking to see what they are.

The metal curtain clangs and Midge jumps, tucking the bills deep in her apron while shutting the register. Rich hasn’t returned. A young man pokes his fingers through the curtain, asking why they’re not open when the sign says they opened 20 minutes ago.

La Reina Linda will be able to take him shortly, Midge offers, if he can wait until after they clean up some spilled chemicals. She promises ten percent off his cut, and he leaves his number.

“What if it’s heroin?” Nuan asks as soon as the boy leaves. “Shooting’s worse than snorting.”

“My nephew do that. Not cheap, either.”

“Your nephew does? Freddie? But he’s so cute!”

“Not for long.”

They laugh.

“It could be coco. Like, meth. It makes you crazy like that.”

Midge forces herself not to look up. Opal, on coco, wasn’t like Rich today. She was itchy and sleepy, immobile except in her imagination—not Opal at all. In rehab, they called her Opie. She has a record now, for drugs and resisting arrest. But Rich is still, always will be, Rich. Even as Ricardo, he’s still Rich. He will never have a record of his mistakes, of whatever he stayed up all night doing.

“I still think it’s coke.” Phoebe snaps off her undersized gloves. “Have you seen—”

“Mamacitas!” The beauticians jump. Midge cranks up the curtain, high so Rich can walk in upright, then rushes to clear a product display and clean the shelves. Wild-eyed, Rich throws his paper cup at the trash can, splashing hot coffee everywhere. Nuan flinches from a spot that lands on her arm and unpins her hair.

“Is this what you do when I leave for a second? You wanna talk, Phoebe? Si? Well, vamonos, mami. Go talk to your niños, tell them why they’re not getting anything for Christmas.” Phoebe sits heavily back on her heels, opens her mouth and closes it. “When I hired you, your hair looked like you balayaged with piss. How dare you talk about me? Como dare you?”

Phoebe starts, “Rich, I’m—”

“Ricardo!” His skinny neck bunches into cords. “Ricardo is the owner of La Reina Linda, your boss, and Ricardo says you’re vamonos! Go! Go tell the niños Mommy’s a slob, a big mouth pendeja.” She flees to the back, Rich following and screaming, “I can hire a beautician better than you in twenty minutes. You know how to count to twenty. Uno, dos...” The back door slams.

Quiet.

The beauticians hover over their tasks, exchanging looks. Midge takes the young man when he returns, snips the shag out of his hair, and discounts ten percent at the register. He doesn’t tip, though he does sweetly thank her. This, combined with the itch, almost makes her cry.

Ricardo emerges, less energetic, his hair freshened up. “You look like caca,” he says to them all. “Finish this and clean yourselves up. We’re beauticians, mamis. Let’s be beautiful. *Linda-linda-linda.*”

He clears the register without a locked bank bag, pocketing all the bills and leaving the coins. He looks over the fresh receipt. Midge sweeps hair making as little noise as possible. “Only I decide who gets a discount, mamis,” he calls out, then turns on Midge. “Remember that, Margarita.”

Despite the tax-free weekend, the post-church crowd, stinging and buzzing with children, is the shop's only traffic. La Reina Linda trickles empty again, but Ricardo doesn't launch into critique. He sits in one of the empty sink chairs, texting, his messaging app glowing in the lenses of his sunglasses. The beauticians pretend to be engaged in chatting about the merits of this or that dry shampoo, aware of Ricardo's earshot. Nobody reacts when he says to Nuan, "You can go."

Nuan, folding towels, says politely, "I don't need a break, Ricardo. I can work through lunch."

"I'm not talking about a break. I want you to go." He waves a hand. "Vamonos." Silence. Midge, seeing this in the mirror, has the urge to brand his hand with a curling iron.

Nuan's warm face, round and sweet as a peach, freezes, except her bottom lip quivering. "But why?"

"Because you don't know lowlights from highlights. And look how you fold towels! I guess you don't use them at home?"

Nuan walks out sputtering tears. Midge suddenly remembers she has a nephew at home to help raise and wants to run to hug her. Ricardo turns to Midge like he heard her thoughts. What would make him angrier—being burned with an iron or seeing a beautician go to another's defense? "Go," he says. She thinks about the water company. Periwinkle. Her old trade-school apron. Beautician, not magician. "For lunch. Come back. For now."

The pack smokes itself. She wouldn't admit she's waiting for Hundo, hoping he also works Sundays. Her phone buzzes, ignored, in her purse. Either Opal with her questions, problems, media messages, supplications to come home—or Ricardo has decided she's not welcome back after all. There's no way he can know about the money from the register, or that Midge gave the 230-dollar roll to Nuan in the parking lot and held her for a moment, feeling both warm and cold toward her small, fully functional body.

Doesn't matter. Only solutions. She is not so much anticipating the worst as she is aware of the worst having snuck into the past and changed it, disaster now inevitable.

Midge's advantage over the other beauticians has always been experience, her knowledge of how quickly life as she knows it can flake or tear away.

Once, as a secretary, she was accused of lifting extra computer mouses from the supply closet. Out, with no defense, because she didn't know the real thief. The call center that rewarded high sales with banal trinkets you can get from a crank machine for a quarter, suddenly closed without issuing final paychecks, after a year of employment. A forgotten parking ticket landed her in parish jail after she was caught speeding to her waitress job. She had to sell her car to pay bond, the ticket and additional fines. She was fired when she didn't show up or call the restaurant, but it was too far from home without a car, anyway. She didn't have a child then.

Hundo's truck finally pulls into the lot. Midge almost waves him over like an eager girl in the bleachers at the big game. A bulge in his back pocket, accentuated by him bending over—could she assume another roll of silky hundreds? In the other pocket, his grimy towel, looking no cleaner than yesterday. But he's gotten a haircut, very close to his scalp. She doesn't like what it does to his face, exposes his meaty ears. But his eyes appear larger now, his shoulders wider.

He's one kind of handsome, at least. Midge doesn't look away when he glances toward her.

Opal's father was ugly, but sweet in the beginning. After that, Midge's friends at the time, and even her mother, would ask, "Why you let such an ugly man treat you so nasty?" Luckily, Opal never had to know him. He moved for work right after Midge told him.

And she's been with plenty of handsome men. The most handsome was a pill-addicted chef with burns on his thick arms.

She paid his bills for months when restaurant management switched hands and booted him. And there was a well-off contractor with the lovely smile of an orthodontist's son. When his house flooded, along with half the small town, Midge and Opal gutted insulation, scrubbed floors, stained cabinets. While he went out and profited off everyone else's renovations, Opal discovered the pain of a tetanus shot after stepping on a nail. When the house was finished, so were Midge and the contractor. He treated Opal like she was too smart for her own good.

"You don't have days off, *pelaquera*?" Hundo calls halfway to her.

Midge runs her tongue over her teeth then smiles. "Do you?"

He cheekily tosses his money roll in the air. "Not if I can help it." He watches Midge's eyes watching the cash. "You don't gotta go back? To beautician?"

"Not now." She shifts her weight to round her hips. Up close, his lips are brined with sweat. She has one cigarette left, one she saved just for him, for this, this solution. She moves to place it between his lips and stops short. She remembers all her former seductions as she takes his hands in hers and looks into his eyes. They hold no surprise, only anticipation. She takes the roll of bills and turns around, her ass swinging closer to his crotch. Head against the wall, she wraps her arms around herself, holding the bills hard to her stomach, where the itch still is, but without the same acidity. Later, after she finds her bra clasps bent and pants button popped off, she will discover the bills are mostly tens, two twenties, and that one soft, stained hundred-dollar bill. But as she lets this solution play out, all she can think about are the faces of Benjamin Franklin curled in her hand. What a beautiful, beautiful man.

If without regretting I am telling you every single word

Elana Lev Friedland

To conjure an infinitesimal discotheque I am the motherfucking lyric gesture gestated on the hump of a hind. Hounding an anthem less kind, so let me bang all the pots in the pantry. I bear scars from a box cutter and call them offspring. Have I said a hallelujah for the bedsheet or moaned a lachrymosa for the cyst on my right eyelid? I keep breasts quivered without notching, call bull if that's an option. You see, an optimal influx of Ritalin decreases by speeding. These are the friends that keep me fluorescent. And no accident in supposing. There is a theory in my mythos that standing in the dark with the door closed is its own form of asphyxiation. There is this thing called caffeine that releases tiny bubbles into your bloodstream until you become a god. I know because I've seen it. You can trust me because the only horse I have in this race is the one I've culled from my esophagus. It's like the opposite of a supplement released daily from clear gold capsules or a ritual performed without submersion or a rocket ship powered by God's grace and fuchsia glue sticks. How I'd love to show you the painting my fingers are trailing down the walls with menstrual blood. I have put myself in the corner so call me daddy. The only good thing I got from the hospital was men's deodorant that I spread beneath my dresses. And what a pretty boy I am making.

Look I Have a Lot

Cindy Juyoung Ok

to say about moon
phases but I know
you came here to
hear about yourself.

The gift is always
about the gifter,
we say. Devices
do converge when

free—lullabies,
whiteness. What if
when I say moon
let's say I mean

you. I encourage
praying to moons
without needing
to possess them.

Is that easier now,
yes, to conceive
of yourself among
various satellites

that, it's true, lack
air and amenities,
but do—and this
confuses people

—have gravities.
Desire in the form
of a negation still
is labor, is brief,

will waver in will,
sensation, then,
in a storm, expire.
You can celebrate

it lunarly—slide
shyly, reserve your
angle, pretending
not to be permanent.

Cavity

Jackie Connelly

I: a decayed part of a tooth

My tongue doesn't wait for instructions or even permission. It writhes backwards like a dirty rag trying to wring itself out, panicked and clumsy and heading straight for my throat.

A few seconds ago, I bit down on something hard and spat it into my palm. Against my skin, the gold sheen of the crown is hardly visible, caked as it is with sodden bits of chewed-up beer bread, and meanwhile a grave lies exposed: what's left of the fracture the dentists shaved off when the bacteria invaded, because nothing can protect a lower molar from a jaw gone hunting in its sleep.

Groping around the edges of the fresh wet crater where my backmost tooth should be, my tongue suddenly recoils as if bitten. The site is inhospitable; it's like walking barefoot on woodchips. Like pouring a bottle of hot sauce, thick and murderous, into a yawning, vacant stomach.

*

Space was the first thing they noticed when they moved to St. Louis. Not just in their apartment, three times bigger than the one they'd shared with their ex in downtown D.C., but everywhere: swimming laps behind the worn brick buildings, stretching out like a cat in the sun above the skimpy skyline, slackly embracing all the shabby old cars, no kisses between bumpers, dream accommodations for the unskilled parallel parker.

A park here wasn't just a block-by-block patch of grass with a statue of an old white dude plopped in the center, or a sliver of sanctuary choked between a loading dock and a coffee shop, wincing out a couple of measly benches and an iron fence that slams shut at dusk. Here, a park spread its legs, brazen, two miles long and one across, a standalone planet of lush green, a near-forest growing proud and portly toward the cavernous black expanding somewhere far above its many heads, trees blanketing the ground so generously that on a clear morning, the most delicate breeze might rustle the branches enough to shake out last night's thunderstorm all over their unsuspecting shoulders.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard believes there are two kinds of space: intimate space and exterior space. Here versus there; what's inhabited, private—the home, the body, the mind—and what's outside, in the world. “They keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth,” Bachelard explains in “Intimate Immensity,” a chapter in his book *The Poetics of Space*.

How? What makes us wax, and what makes us wane? Much of *Poetics* explores architectural phenomenology—how the rooms, staircases, corners, and closets in our real and imagined homes can serve as a map to memory and all the inner landscapes from which Bachelard believes creativity is born. But in the chapter “The Dialectics of Outside and Inside,” he zeroes in on the tension between the two kinds of space—how they are in a perpetual state of mutual resistance, how more of one inevitably means less of the other. If intimate space is a sense of self, subjecthood, and if one therefore views that sense of self as a kind of territory, then one must either occupy or relinquish it—actively exist, as an “I” with agency, or else be acted upon. As Bachelard points out, “Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being.”

This could be why they failed to notice their insides were steadily retreating, tucking themselves tidily away, as if in deference to the outside. They weren't trying not to eat—they just didn't feel hungry, or maybe nothing tasted good enough to bother. It's hard to see, sometimes, what should be conspicuous, glaring like a cold sore—the body an edge hanging on itself, for example, that junk-drawer collection of corners and knobs. How under the skin, it's the National Mall on a Saturday in April: cherry blossom season, when everything's crowded and everything hurts.

*

[Those with eating disorders are skilled at hiding their behaviors—from others and, sometimes, from themselves. But considering 89% of bulimics exhibit oral issues that can be detected by a dentist, according to the National Eating Disorders Association, dentists could be the first line of defense in identifying eating disorders in their patients.

The Institute of Dental Research, however, reports that only 28% of bulimia cases are first diagnosed during a dental exam.]

*

Picture it: A few times a week, your teeth crumble into your gums while you sleep. You never realize what's happened until you open your lips to release a word or, occasionally, admit a fork, and suddenly your mouth feels gritty, as if you've taken a swig of gravel.

You feel around with the tips of your fingers, pat your gums gently but irritably; your mouth can generally be relied upon, as far as resources go, and what an inconvenience. But then your hands reemerge covered in blood, little bits of bone.

Sometimes ash, like all your teeth just burned up, cackling, like you were so insolent, so oblivious to their majesty, you didn't even notice them scorching the basin of your mouth black.

Because this is a dream, you're certain it's retribution. When you wake up, you can't remember what for.

II: an unfilled space within a mass

I wrap the crown in a napkin smeared with Dijon mustard, bury it carefully in my pocket—the one with the zipper—and try to forget about it until business hours. This isn't the first time this has happened, and it won't be the last; a crown needs something to hold on to, and there's not much left in the back of my mouth. My teeth attack themselves so violently they've ground their way through two nightguards in four years, my lower molars eroded, now, into pathetic stumps of beaten-down yellow, substance bowing out to spiderweb fissures, every night a self-destruction.

My tongue can't help itself—it resumes its frantic roving, investigating my entire mouth the way my fingers probe my ribcage when I can't sleep: no particular mission in mind, not so much counting as mapmaking. The skeleton is always there, standing silent guard; it's the scraped-out pits the fingers are stalking. They're nervous wrecks, searching and searching and they don't even know what for.

Evidence, maybe. Something sturdier than bone, something so reliable it could unfasten the permanent verdict of the body.

*

They lay down flat on their back in the middle of the park, the middle of the trees, somewhere the streets disappeared, feeling paper-thin. They weren't thinking about the flash of the scale and the bleating of the gut and the buzzing all along their limbs, buzz buzz buzzbuzzbuzz, the lightness. They were thinking about things that can vanish by folding into their own corners: a letter pressed between the pages of a book, an origami crane tucked into the corner of a mirror.

Bachelard is obsessed with the word “vast.” In “Intimate Immensity,” he suggests that despite its assoc-

iations with size, the word does not actually belong to the objective world. “Poetic space, because it is expressed, assumes values of expansion,” he contends. “Whenever space is a value—there is no greater value than intimacy—it has magnifying properties...To give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity.”

In this way, “vast” has the power to reconcile concepts, like inside and outside, which are binarily opposed. Bachelard expands on this idea in “Dialectics” when he suggests that even what is very small—a human wrist, perhaps; the hole where a molar should be—has the capacity to accumulate vastness. “Everything, even size, is a human value,” he writes. “Inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity...the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances.”

It's a stereotype of the Midwest, the sprawling space of the public park, and they remembered the person they were before, the one they left back East, the one who hadn't yet neglected their boundaries, rendered themselves too feeble to prevent everything binding them together from crumpling into a forced kind of nothing: quartered, and flattened, and crushed.

But Bachelard's reading of “vast,” this idea of “poetic space,” seems like a kind of loophole—a way to claim space without actually *claiming* it. Isn't it possible, the teeth insist, to chew without eating? There are all kinds of ways to trick the self into feeling full.

*

[Oral consequences of eating disorders range from minor signs of nutritional deficiencies to “traumatic lesions on the palate and oropharynx” caused by “insertion of objects to induce vomiting,” according to the *Dental Tribune*. Patients with eating disorders often present with dry mouths related to dehydration and are at a higher risk

for cavities due to bingeing of foods high in refined carbohydrates, as well as impaired salivary buffering capacity, meaning their saliva is no longer naturally capable of maintaining an approximately constant pH.

“Dental hypersensitivity is also common,” writes dental hygienist Linda Douglas in an article in *Nature* magazine. So are gum soreness and inflammation, blood vessels which burst during purging, chronic sore throat, and loss of bone density, which “increases the risk of jaw fracture during extractive dental procedures.”]

*

Picture it: Sometimes you wake up and pull out your night-guard and most of your teeth come out with it, in tidy patches, like blank dice. You stumble over to the mirror to inspect your useless gums, open and close your ravaged mouth again and again like a stupid blowfish.

When you actually wake up, your tongue strokes your teeth gratefully, reassuringly, vows to worship faithfully from here on out. But when you drink your first sip of coffee, you hear the sizzle and hiss of something solid changing form. You reach the mirror just in time to catch your teeth sinking into your gums, like thick-soled shoes into mud.

As it turns out, you're still asleep. Because this is a dream, you're sure you'll ignore your Vitamin D pills—they make you ill when you forget to eat something first. You'll floss today, like every day, but not thoroughly; it's clumsy work blind, sans mirror, and you've never liked the way your mouth looks when it's open.

III: a hole in a surface

The dentist shakes his bald head and shrugs. “Since you had a root canal on that tooth, you could technically just leave the crown off and you’d be fine—it’s not going to bother you. A lot of people do that.” That’s what his words say, but his tone is a challenge: “A lot of people are idiots. Are you an idiot?”

I feel like crossing my arms, nodding my head, assaulting his rubber-gloved hands with my meddlesome tongue, all fleshy and insolent: “And why not?” “Imagine your whole body with the nerves sucked out through a straw,” I’d demand. “Imagine your whole life; now, just the surface, like the film that creeps over an egg when you fry it in PAM.”

I could peel it off between my thumb and the corner of the plastic spatula. I could hold it up to one eye and watch my kitchen shrink through a crinkled, dingy lens, dump the rest in the trash with last night’s dinner.

We wouldn’t need any defenses—not anymore. We could give it all up to translucence: the “I,” relinquished and emptied and gone.

*

The middle of the trees is where the panic settled in, coating the underside of their skin like a thick layer of fur. The abyss fell asleep on their chest, sinister, vast, and their lungs whimpered, unable to claim enough air, no matter how slowly and deeply they inhaled.

They yawned again and again, trying to pry open their capillaries as wide as their gasping mouth, but perhaps their body no longer felt entitled to something as widely available as oxygen, perhaps it no longer remembered how to claim anything at all.

We don’t notice the knees until the cartilage disintegrates, leaving bone to scrape against bone like claws on concrete. We don’t notice the hip muscles until they collapse, exhausted, against the sciatic nerve, firing shockwaves up through the ribs. The body is

a footnote until the day it starts to scream, and by then, what's left that's worth saving?

Decay happens slowly, then all at once. There are no poetic shortcuts to resilience; it's always just a matter of time. Bachelard: "It would seem, then, that it is through their 'immensity' that these two kinds of space—the space of intimacy and world space—blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical."

Bachelard finds this notion romantic, full of big possibilities for thought and creativity. But if space outside and space inside are both, in fact, intimate, "they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility," he writes, in an analysis of a Henri Michaux poem. "If there exists a borderline surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides."

Is the line around the self so thin and permeable? "Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it," Bachelard explains. "Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses...One no longer knows *right away* whether one is running toward the center or escaping" [emphasis in original].

*

[The most obvious dental consequence of bulimia is erosion caused by vomiting, which shows up on a patient's maxillary anterior teeth about six months after they begin a regular binge/purge cycle. Vomit has a pH of about 2.0—the same as pure lemon juice, according to the University of Colorado at Boulder—thanks to the hydrochloric acid prevalent in the stomach; during purging, the acid attacks the back sides of the incisors and canine teeth, undermining the palatal surfaces and leading to fractures, chipping and overeruption.

"There is no other erosion pattern quite like it," writes dental surgeon Brian McKay in an article for the *Eating Disorders Resource Catalogue*. "There is no way to stop the hydrochloric acid from the stomach stripping the teeth of protective enamel and exposing the dentin underneath.]"

*

Picture it: "Teeth are a symbol of power," the dream interpretation website explains—the fifth such explanation in a row. "The greater the gore, the more severely your subconscious is trying to warn you: You are losing control."

You cackle and close your laptop, because these words are hyperbolic, high drama, like all the accusations, levied in tones of grave concern: "Jack, eating an apple shouldn't make you nauseous." "Jack, it seems like you're always coming up with excuses not to eat." "Jack. Are you trying to die?" No wonder dream sequences are workshopped out of every piece of writing, you think to yourself, smug, pulling your thighs against your chest, one at a time; they're adversaries, now, they've grown apart.

Tomorrow you'll use your screwdriver to puncture your leather belt closer to its head, wriggle your hips into double-zero shorts, button up comfortably, without even sucking in. You'll parade around the fitting room starving and euphoric, four sizes shrunk in a year and a half, smitten, not with your reflection, but with how little of the mirror is monopolized by it.

This is not a dream. I must remember to remain the subject of my own sentences. I am a shining example of an iron-cast will, chiseled and mighty, I am the definition of control: a conqueror of internal voids.

IV: any hollow place

“But you shouldn’t do that,” the dentist continues, ignoring my silent protest. “Because if you do, this tooth here”—he taps on the molar in my upper jaw, the one located directly across from my naked, serrated nub—“will try to move into the chamber where the crown used to be.”

A slug of drool escapes from the corner of my open mouth, in retaliation, probably. I don’t believe it, I’ve never known bone to be so cunning, it’s not like the spaces it strings together, insubordinate, always threatening to mutate, run away with themselves, multiply. Not bone—bone is content to just sit there, queenly. Asserting its clean, lovely lines, without ever making a sound.

“Teeth are never content to just sit there,” the dentist corrects me, reading my mind after all. “They’re always making moves when they don’t have any opposition.”

*

Perhaps there is a version of them who didn’t dwindle and die, during their panic in the park. Perhaps there is a version who, with great flourish, aired out their body’s crowded corners like they were shaking out a sheet. They unfolded themselves wide to space, inviting it in, indulging, consuming, gulping it down, swelling up with it, feeding it forward, back into their thighs, all along their spindly arms. They deposited generous spoonfuls into each hip, back into their cheeks, granting their body permission to inflate, lift right off the ground like a great big balloon, float up, up, up, giving it the right to beg, to take without asking, assuring it that it deserved, that meaningless word, to be filled to the point of satiation, to be filled and then demand more, more and more and more, to not only take up space but crave it, take generous bites, even devour it

whole. Perhaps this version walked slowly, deliberately, we could hear them coming a mile away. When they opened their mouth to speak, empty fortresses spilled out from between their crooked, greedy teeth, they had plenty to spare. They were fat and fearsome, they wanted and wanted, container of endless possibilities, living proof of Bachelard’s assertion that “immensity is within ourselves.”

But what could possibly define such an “I,” reduced to mere being, deprived of its monumental will, its preferred form of vastness, its authority over the jurisdiction Bachelard might call “intimate geometry”? In a reversal where “intimate space loses its clarity” and “exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of possibility of being,” what’s to prevent the center of the self from blurring, becoming unlocatable, unstable?

If space outside is threatening, space inside is even more so—a potential mutiny, out of one’s hands. Here fear attacks, as in the Michaux poem, from neither outside nor inside—“fear is *being* itself,” Bachelard writes [emphasis mine]. “Where can one flee, where find refuge? In what shelter can one take refuge? Space is nothing but a ‘horrible outside-inside.’ And the nightmare is simple, because it is radical ...In this ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometric homeland.”

Where, then, Bachelard wonders, is one supposed to live? Eventually, he concludes, “life begins less by reaching upward, than by turning upon itself.”

*

[Early detection can help reduce oral damage from anorexia and bulimia. In a report published in the *Eating Disorders Review*, which offers current clinical information for professionals responsible for treating eating disorders, authors recommend several oral health behaviors

that can reduce erosion of enamel: rinsing the mouth with a .5% sodium fluoride solution, flossing every day, using a soft-bristle toothbrush, drinking more water, “promoting salivary flow” with sugarless gum and mints, and using a straw to drink acidic beverages like orange juice and soda.

Bulimics specifically should rinse their mouths with water or an alkaline solution immediately after purging; paradoxically, brushing the teeth immediately after purging can actually “compound the damaging effect of stomach acids on tooth enamel.”

But Douglas warns that patients with a history of eating disorders “must be regarded as medically compromised.” Definitive dental restorations, such as crowns, “cannot be completed while a patient is purging regularly, as acid erosion will shorten the life of the restorations.”]

*

Picture it: You use the tips of your fingers to trace the gashes mauling your third acrylic nightguard, this special material allegedly more durable for those who suffer from severe bruxism. Impressive, if irrelevant, what your teeth accomplish in secret, without being told.

You look in the mirror at this version: the eyes sunk deep and dark in their sockets, the trenches staking their claim on sallow cheeks, the whole face dented with stale air. A bombed ghost town cleaved by a grin, which sighs and settles at the sight of your hardest parts, steadfast in their occupation: yellowed and abused, but safe and sound, thirty-two tidy proofs of your brief, inconsequential survival inside a body. More resilient than all other parts, they could outlast the rest of you by tens of thousands of years, continue reigning dully over a blank-stare plane.

*Is this a dream? Who can keep track?
Satisfied, I close their lips. They clench your
jaw. It's just like a feast, when we swallow
the screams.*

Contributors

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