

An abstract painting featuring a large, solid yellow shape that dominates the center. The background is a mix of soft pink and light purple tones. In the upper right, there are some textured brushstrokes in yellow and green. The bottom portion of the image is filled with more textured brushwork in shades of red, pink, and blue, suggesting a landscape or a complex composition. The overall style is expressive and modern.

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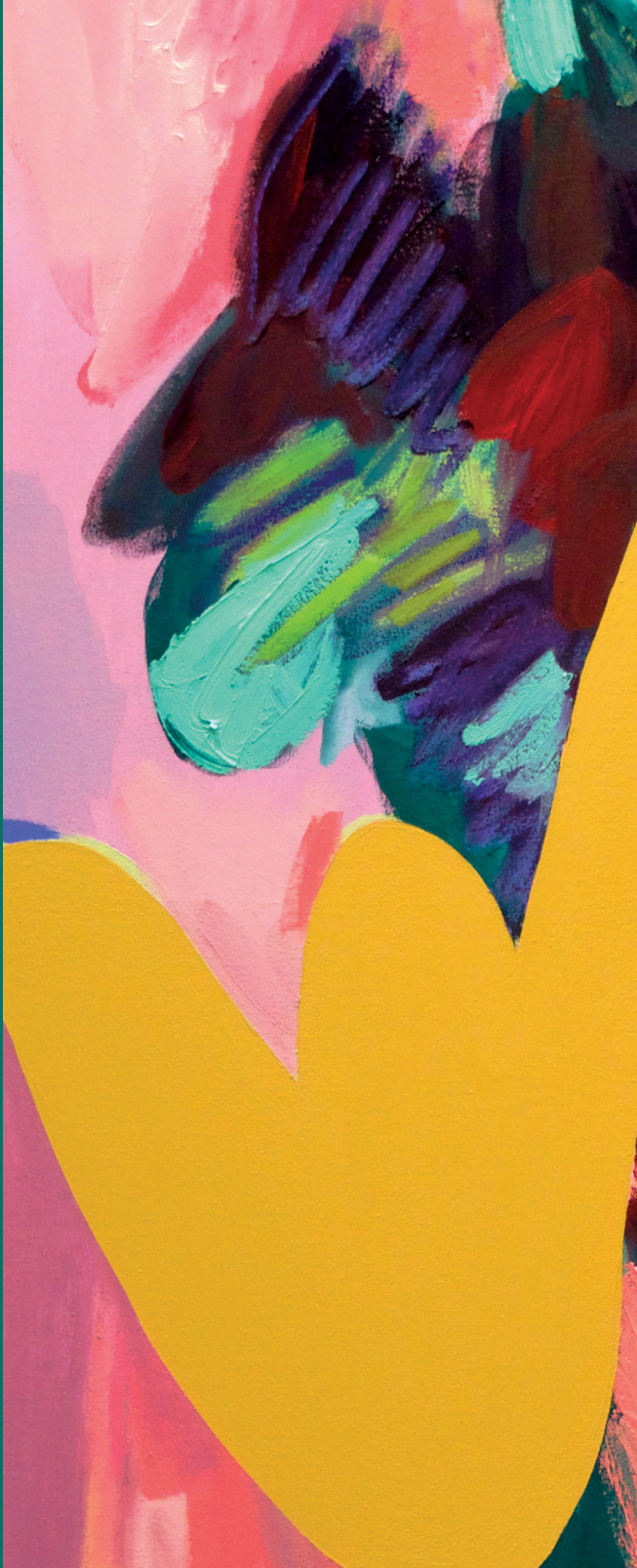
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Maya Jewell Zeller

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Poetry / Fiction / Essays



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*Pamplemousse* by Sabrina Piersol.

(Flashe, acrylic, oil, oil pastel on canvas, 40 x 32 in, 2019.)

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# Dedication

To celebrate her retirement from the University of Idaho's English department, we dedicate this issue to Kim Barnes: novelist, essayist, memoirist, mentor, professor, fly fisher, community member, and friend.

As a small token of our love and admiration, this year we sponsored the Kim Barnes Prize and interviewed Kim about her approach to writing, craft, and building a literary community.

Thank you, Kim, for inspiring hundreds of writers, generously offering your words and wisdom, and making our little town of Moscow, Idaho, a home.

# Face

HELENA

I was born with a cracked face. I always pictured the Liberty Bell, the Grand Canyon.

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Ali said a couple of years ago, when I was twenty and she was twenty-five—way after the operation, which I didn’t even remember because it had happened when I was two. But she had her hand in front of her mouth, fingers spread, talking through them, as if that could filter the lie. “It was just a little thing.” That did not explain the scar.

You’re supposed to call it a cleft palate—that’s clinical, that’s polite. Lots of people call it a harelip.

MY SISTER

The night before I graduated from rehab, I broke my left ankle in a hot game of Twister.

My sister said she thought it was ironic that I had broken my ankle sober. I said a lot of crazy things can happen when you are sober. Take the time I blew up the jar of leg wax in the microwave. I mean I was very careful not to do things like that when I was drinking.

My sister bought us plane tickets to Mykonos to celebrate my release. She said there was lots of homosexuality there. My sister was being generous, Greece and all, so I let that pass. I’ve been known to call my sister Gator because her name is Ali, so you know, Ali-gator. Ali is short for Alessa, which in Greek means Protector of Humanity. I think that is a euphemism for Control Freak. Also I read something in a book about what if your sister turns into an alligator and you can’t tell which is which, her or the gator, or



something like that. Maybe it's fair, though, because she calls me Hell. My name is Helena. My name means Light. So does Lucifer's.

I don't think our parents knew what they were doing with these names. The two of them weren't even Greek—they met working in a Greek restaurant and talked about going to Greece all their lives. Closest they ever got was Astoria.

#### THE FOOT IN THE CAST

Her voice. In the middle of the night before we left, I heard Natasha's voice in my head and my thick skin became thin like the membrane of an onion. Natasha's voice was angels on reverb—it was holy and orgasmic at the same time. When I was pretty little, my mother gave me the facts-of-life speech. She talked about orgasms, saying an orgasm was "pleasant," and I have never been able to hear the word "pleasant" without thinking of sex. The word has always given me good and bad chills, like the inhaling of fresh garlic, sharp and intoxicating. I think of orgasm as a peeling off, a falling off. In the middle of the wide-awake pre-Greece night I thought I heard the sounds of Natasha making dinner, the one and only time we were together, pounding a clove of garlic with a knife, cutting off its tips, sloughing off the smooth, papery cover, causing the clove to emerge.

When I finally fell asleep, I kept waking up because of the cast on my foot.

#### CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

I used to think I was the Center of the Universe, not in a crazy lock-me-up kind of way, just in a self-centered one. And then they did lock me up, in rehab. I learned that I am not alone, but in the end, I am the Center. Only for me, I guess.

In deep nights after that incarceration, I would lie awake, yearning to be remembered by people I barely remembered myself. In the middle of the night I would imagine other people lying awake themselves, thinking of me the way I was thinking of them. I was so important to them, in my three a.m. meanderings. They loved me, or they hated me. They were aflame with desire for me, masturbating. None of them had forgotten my face, my voice.

My pillow cost 150 dollars at Macy's—Martha Stewart sleepwear section, with the coupon. Right before Greece, I ruined it with the sweat of fractured sleep, evil dreams, soggy sober thrashing. Cringing over a woman I probably shouldn't have slept with in the first place, wondering if she remembered me. How could she forget me? After I had made love to her and drank her wine and lied to her, told her I thought she was ugly and stupid and I was fucking her out of mercy. I knew she wouldn't want me again anyway, disfigured me, so who cared?

#### SISTERS ON A PLANE

We crossed water, once in a jet over the Atlantic Ocean, from New York to Athens, and then again on a ferry, across the Aegean Sea to the island of Mykonos. Gator had all kinds of brochures and travel books stuffed in her carry-on—a faux-alligator backpack I had given her that Christmas, for a trip such as this. She took them out one by one, like a party magician with a bottomless bag.

It was difficult getting comfortable with the foot in the cast. My sister couldn't pay for first class, and I couldn't complain.

"Hey," I asked my sister. "Who thinks of you in the middle of the night?" I should have known better than to disrupt her routine. She dropped a few of the brochures when I said it and gave me a dirty look. The flight attendant came by and started to swoop up the little pamphlets, but Ali put her arms out real quick, like an air traffic controller or the flight attendant herself, showing us where the exits were located, which I bet she really wanted to do.

"I don't know, Hell, who thinks of you?" she said, her mouth an anus, and the flight attendant did an anus face, too.

"I don't know what you are talking about," the flight attendant said.

#### MEMORIES OF MYKONOS

Broken foot. Not drinking. Everything was weird: as we watched, a Greek fisherman with hairy legs showing beneath his cutoffs hooked a seagull, looked down at his bucket of grouper, and turned around to see if anyone was watching. He saw us, I am sure of it, and pretended he didn't—he

whistled some little song as he reeled the bird in to let it go. Ali turned to me and said, “My first word was seagull.” She took off like a greyhound at a racetrack, checking her pamphlets and agendas.

When she got to a grandmother all in black selling neon fruit, she glared at me, then ran back, looking frustrated. “Those cherries are poisonous,” she said in loud American English, “washed in filthy Greek water.”

My sister seemed nonplussed that night in the fish restaurant when I gave the waiter my order. “I’ll have the seagull,” I said.

### THE MANNEQUIN

The thing that stood out from the whole trip happened after we saw two little Greek girls terrorizing one another and running from their mama, who looked out of breath but must have been a track star. There was music playing, echoing from someone’s old boom box—*Den katalaveno tipota*... I understood nothing... The girls ran ahead, and their mother stopped in front of a blue and white church, kneeled down, crossed herself with holy water, and muttered a prayer. The kids skidded to a halt, silent, holding their breath, and began to run again only when their mother got up, the chase leading her and my sister and me to the shop where it stood: the mannequin.

Three feet tall, she was wearing a cheap rayon dress that looked like something a Disney Princess version of a Greek goddess would wear—red, a color that wants to dance—but the mannequin had plaster feet, or rather one plaster foot, one broken-off foot. She slept on that foot, her ice-blue eyes staring, glazed and unblinking, plaster ennui emanating from her sun-bleached-white plaster skin. Her face was the thing, though, like something from a horror movie, full of screams of inertia and helplessness. What a kind storekeeper to not throw out the mannequin with that large, ugly cracked face.

When Natasha asked about my scar, I didn’t want to be close to her anymore. I didn’t want to tell her why my face was cracked. I told her one of my standards—that I had been in a fight with a broken bottle, and the broken bottle won.

All mannequin stories end with some kind of magic. In this one I wished to be transformed, to become the mannequin that someone would think is pretty enough to wear a red dress.

The gator in my sister wanted to show me a gay bar, there, in Mykonos. All I saw was the ouzo.

Back in rehab, I stare at the midnight ceiling, cringing, obsessing, wondering: “Who is thinking of me now?” But I know. I know it is the mannequin, the mannequin who is always there, in Mykonos, always there with her cracked face, always there thinking of Helena, Helena whose broken ship has sailed, seagulls trailing it to eat the garbage left behind.

Maya Jewell Zeller

## Ekphrasonnet About a Tree Before It Crushes My House

In this town a lean life: others wind the soil  
till & sand bite & ridge where

I let the wind shred me. Sometimes I remember  
ocean, a pulled-up skirt. Not that

life when I wasn't yet someone else's idea of a witch  
or wife— but this one, unrooted, a metal slur,

manicured, mirroring self-defense. Smelling

the red trembling— a terrible stitch. Out here the horses

thick-hooved, roaming in green. Heavy  
with petticoats, to see myself a noxious incision, repeating

*This isn't about you.* And him: *I don't want to spend*  
*fifteen minutes.* Do you want me to clean up after?

I was thinking of water, how it gleamed in the dawn.  
I was thinking of the dirt that dangles on a man.

## Ekphrasonnet with Unrequited Elegy and Barbed Wire

It's May, so here's the car wreck—semi truck, teenagers—its red  
reflectors from which we can't look away, metal tumbling

into the off-key note on this piano my daughter

stabs at with her hand, saying *damn this song,*  
*damn it to hell, Oh sorry Mom, I didn't know*

*you were standing there—* & once we mistook barbed  
wire for stars thinking it would sugar our wounds  
instead it salts me blankly & I recall my brother

in the doorway saying *I'm so sorry but your friend*  
*is dead* (like the cow you found torn after the flood,  
snagged by her own fence) or like the bird, here

in the adult world, in which we don't mistake anything  
for anything else, hitting the window—head losing a liquid  
not unlike blood, the inner skin walls the stars sharp against

## Exhale Longer Than You Inhale

The blind cat has been hissing at the air again. There are easy ways to understand fear—this is one. Last night, I stumbled on the phrase *mental inconsistencies*. As I grow older, I wash my hands more, keep a cleaner house, pray for the wildness in me to take a tumble out. I find myself saying *Everything that follows ‘what if’ or ‘my head says’ is bullshit*, because as I domesticate, I say back what’s been said to me. This time with feeling. This time with & then without despair.

## The Sound of the End

Deep sounds often unnerve us. Human hearing has a low-end limit of around 20 hertz; infrasound exists below that frequency. It is a range of sound that you feel instead of hear, a pressure in your mind. Infrasound is the force that urges you to act even when you’re unsure why. It is an indication of disaster and danger. These low rumbles are present in many things that frighten us, down to our most beastly, primal minds, the place we go when survival is all we can think of. Infrasound is a mark of the things that make us feel mortal and powerless: tigers,<sup>1</sup> tornadoes, large ocean waves, earthquakes.<sup>2</sup>

\*

The Cascadia subduction zone is a fault line that runs 700 miles from Canada to California. On its back are mountains and coastline, cities and towns and campgrounds buzzing with people and creatures that call those places home. Beneath it shift two major tectonic plates,<sup>3</sup> one that moves the Pacific Ocean and one that moves the land itself. These plates press into one another, grind in imperceptible tones. It is a game of chicken that neither plate wants to lose, and so they continue to push when pressed together, shoving the people on the coast closer and closer to the ocean. We are overdue for something to give, as it has before.

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<sup>1</sup> American Institute of Physics – Inside Science News Service. “The Secret Of A Tiger’s Roar.” *Science Daily*, 29 Dec. 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Bedard, Alfred J., Jr. “Naturally Occurring Sources of Infrasound.” *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 1 Feb. 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Large masses of Earth’s two surface levels that shift and shape the world as we experience it.

The last time this fault line shuddered was January 26, 1700, 320 years ago in an estimated 243-year cycle.<sup>4</sup> The earth shook, and an entire forest of red cedar, a wood famous for standing strong against the elements, was just one of many places ruined within minutes. This ghost forest, still filled with weak, gray corpses of trees, is only 83 miles from the tribal center for the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, my tribe.

\*

“S’Klallam” derives from the Salish term for “strong people.” For ten thousand years, people with blood like mine built a thriving community on the Olympic Peninsula. Even when colonizers came, tribal members gathered gold coins from their own pockets and bought their land outright so that they could persist. The tribe has since constructed building after building: healthcare clinics, housing, cultural galleries. Our tribe is the largest employer on the entire peninsula. Our songs and stories echo off the mountains that surround our home. Tribal designs and carvings can be seen down the coastline and throughout the towns of Blyn, Sequim, and Port Angeles. We have roots as deep as the mountains that grow with every push of the tectonic plates at war. We are entrenched.

But there are only 542 of us left, and dwindling.

\*

Infrasound is most commonly associated with a feeling of dread.

An experiment was conducted at a concert with 750 attendees. Infrasound notes were woven into parts of the music alongside the classic melodies of Debussy and Philip Glass. The change was subtle and secret. The crowd was unaware of their lab rat status, and many reported strange feelings during the notes they could not hear. Shivering, a gut feeling of something being wrong, and a sense of having lost something or someone that you cannot replace. They claimed an extreme anxiety overtook them, as though they had perceived a danger for which they had no name.<sup>5</sup> For

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<sup>4</sup> Schulz, Kathryn. “The Earthquake That Will Devastate the Pacific Northwest.” *The New Yorker*, 13 July 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Radford, Tim. “Silent Sounds Hit Emotional Chords.” *The Guardian*, 8 Sep. 2003.

some it may have felt like the end was a looming, an invisible wave waiting to crash onto them.

The fear that infrasound creates does not always stem from this existential danger alone. Many people argue that because of the way infrasound resonates with the human body, it can have adverse effects. Vladimir Gavreau, a scholar of sound in the 1960s, became obsessed with this unheard range only after he and his team felt nausea as the infrasonic waves passed through their bodies. There were reports of motion sickness, as if the ground itself rolled beneath their feet.<sup>6</sup>

\*

When the ground shakes beneath the Olympic Peninsula, the area will be devastated. Very few people have prepared for this, since an earthquake has not happened in hundreds of years; they have become lax with the thought that *it wouldn’t happen to me*. Homes that are not ready will tremble into pieces. Family pictures will crash to the floor of my aunt’s apartment, and hand-picked vegetables will roll off the counters of my cousin’s kitchen. This will not be the worst of it.

Following the initial earthquake, solid ground will act as if it were water, a phenomenon called liquefaction.<sup>7</sup> This pretender tide will disregard the decades of progress built on its back and will bubble and roll. Experts have mapped out where the high-danger zones are, the ones most likely to lose form and liquefy. The tribal center, the casino, the health clinic, the longhouse, the beach where canoe landings are celebrated, the housing for tribal members—all of it rests on high-risk land. Land that is likely to rush out to sea. The water that comes to take its place will most likely destroy whatever else is left. I wonder if a single totem pole, carved from red cedar chosen to stand the test of time, will remain standing once the earth and sea settle.

\*

Of the 542 tribal members left, 297 are one-eighth S’Klallam. Because our blood quantum laws mark the cutoff for being a tribal member at one eighth, these are the last in line. I am one of these 297. Unless one of our

---

<sup>6</sup> Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. The MIT Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Schulz.

future children is the product of two members, the child's blood will be considered White despite its redness.

There are talks of making plans to change this, to bend the rules so that color can be seen in those who come next. However, if the laws ever do extend to include those who are one-sixteenth S'Klallam, it will be in twenty or thirty years, when the numbers have dwindled further.

My nephew is one-sixteenth S'Klallam and currently twenty years old, only seven years younger than I am. He dropped out of high school and fell in with a bad crowd but has grown now into someone who aims to be better. The life he has led has never been easy, but financial troubles have made it harder than it has to be.

In twenty or thirty years, he may receive the benefits that his mother does, that I do. He may finally have the ability to get semi-consistent medical care, or the funds around Christmas to buy gifts for his siblings or put gas in his car. He may be able to rely on a network that has built-in care for tribal members to help him pay housing fees or deposits. He may finally be able to afford to go to college.

But he won't get the incentives and rewards for grades in high school. He can't go back and undo the decisions he made because he knew his family could never afford to send him anywhere. He cannot go back and learn to be Native, to respect himself if only for the sake of those who came before him. By the time they may change these laws, my nephew will be forty or fifty years old, and he will have settled into the until-then-fact that he is White. What good will being S'Klallam do him then if his own children face the same circumstances he did? Why haunt him with ancestors he never knew to care for?

\*

Ghosts are sometimes made of infrasound. The watchful eyes of those who came before us are sometimes just the thrum of our environment. The way these low frequencies roll through human bodies does more than give us shivers and chills and dread. At around 18 hertz, these waves match the resonant frequency of the human eye. The resonant frequency of an object is its own natural vibration, the speed at which it exists in the world. When something else matches this frequency, it knocks the object off balance.

When the human eye is met with vibrations around 18 hertz, the vision begins to blur.<sup>8</sup>

Vic Tandy was a researcher in an engineering lab, where he would experience moments of depression, of chills and dread. Once at his desk he saw a dark figure lounging in the corner of his eye, some entity waiting for him to notice. He turned and the ghost was gone. Others reported the same; the building grew into its haunted reputation.

Eventually Tandy found the ghost generator, a "noiseless" fan that created infrasound between 18–19 hertz. The wave was low enough to be standing; instead of causing only a moment of fear, it stayed and continued to pass through the researchers. Dozens of pseudo-ghosts created every day by panic and vibrations of the eyes. I wonder if anyone was haunted by images of their ancestors, if a researcher's brain morphed those vibrations into an ancient face that wore a mask of cold disappointment. I wonder if they were just on edge or if they feared for their lives.

\*

The earthquake and wave that will most likely destroy my tribal home will take an estimated 13,000 lives and injure many more. It will down power lines and wipe out lineages. It will leave people without basic electricity, water, and sewage services for at least a month, likely longer. It will be over a year before the hospitals function again.

There is no timeline for when the canoe journeys will start again. There are no numbers for when the next drum circle will be held or how many will participate. There is no guarantee that the Makah, a neighboring tribe at Neah Bay and the most vulnerable group to all of this, will even be around to attend.

Once, I was talking about storms and tsunamis with a coworker in Washington, one who had lived a long time and done much good in his life. He clenched his fist in frustration at the dug-in heels of the Makah, unwilling to move from their coastal homes. His voice rose in confused anger as he talked about the Makah tribe members refusing help and turning away thermal blankets that the well-meaning volunteers offered them.

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<sup>8</sup> Tandy, Vic, and Tony R. Lawrence. "The Ghost in the Machine." *The Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 62, no. 851, Apr. 1998.

I nodded along because I understood, not only his point but theirs. Relocation feels like the final blow when suggested by a White man, even if it would be safer. History has taught us Natives to be wary of blankets gifted by pale hands. Sometimes they bring death faster than the elements they are meant to shield from. Our numbers cannot weather more devastation than they have already faced since colonizers came. We often choose to risk our lives with nature instead.

\*

For days I couldn't get the tribal enrollment numbers out of my head.

542.

297.

Over and over I came back to them. I wanted to twist them into something else, but mostly I just sat in nauseous awe. Unless the laws change, of which there is no guarantee, my tribe will become history in front of me.

I was in the car with my then-fiancé and tried many times to describe the feeling, this vibration that told me something was wrong and something bad was coming, even though I was in no immediate danger.

"It's like being at the end of an era," he said, trying to help me navigate the mist in my mind.

"No, not even." I could feel the edge in my voice as I talked. I wasn't angry at him, but I wouldn't let this reality be downplayed into something more comfortable either. "It's literally the end of a people, of my people."

We sat in silence in the parked car. I don't remember where we were or what we were doing, but I remember staring at all of the dials sitting at zero. I felt numb, like the shaking dread had pulled the tide of blood out of me. I spoke as I waited for it to come crashing back with force and overwhelm me with anger and tears.

"It's extinction happening in real time."

## 2021 FUGUE PRIZE FOR PROSE

contest winner

The Scandals of Christendom  
by Emma Brankin

For its imagination, character,  
beauty, and the protagonist's lifeforce.

— Eloghosa Osunde

# The Scandals of Christendom

I.

Anne Boleyn called me a “limp-haired basic bitch” last night. I’m not going to lie, it stung. I’ve spent most of the morning obsessively back-combing my roots.

It all started because I asked about Anne’s cruel treatment of her step-daughter Mary. I don’t know, maybe I was getting too familiar, but I suggested it *might* have contributed to Bloody Mary becoming a fanatically religious, murdering lunatic of a monarch. Anne said I was nitpicking. I kept pushing. She got tetchy. So, of course, she brought up what happened with Joely.

I sighed and questioned why we couldn’t talk about the manipulative, bitchy things she did for once and said that maybe, just maybe, she wasn’t the feminist icon the tea towel industry wanted us to believe.

“You skim read a few online biographies about me and suddenly you think you know it all,” Anne shouted as she flung my belongings across the bedroom. When she’s really angry her pale face judders like a chainsaw as her eyes cloud with inky black. She thumped me on the head with a well-aimed toss of my hair mousse.

“You’re pathetic, Wyatt,” she hissed. “And everybody sees it now. Everybody knows.”

Things deteriorated from there and, in the end, I went to bed crying while she sat on my bedroom floor and breathed heavily in that purposeful, attention-seeking way.

This afternoon, Anne stood imperiously behind me in the lunch queue. When I reached the till, she leaned forward and discreetly slipped a stolen

doughnut into my hand. I was hungry and lonely, so I accepted her feeble, sugary apology and didn’t mention the argument again. Instead, we went to the back of the sports hut to smoke and talk about which teacher would get the sweatiest during sex.

“Mr. Daniels, obviously,” Anne said, her eyebrow inching up in anticipation of my reaction.

“Why’d you say obviously?” I asked, attempting nonchalance as she passed me the roll-up.

Her lips twitched in bemusement.

“Why?” I couldn’t stop my voice from inflecting unnaturally high.

“Oh, come on, he’s perpetually damp. You of all people must notice.”

I shuddered but it was mainly for effect and Anne knew that. Mr. Daniels always picked me to collect the textbooks from the front of class and then didn’t move when I squeezed past him. He smelled like Chinese take-away soaked in cheap aftershave and sometimes, yes, he did sprinkle sweat across our textbooks. But since the whole Joely thing, most teachers were acting as though I didn’t exist, so I appreciated Mr. Daniels. He’d kept me behind on my first day back, put a hand on my shoulder and said, “It must be really hard for you, as well.” His eyes crinkled in a kind way. And he was right. It was really hard for me, as well.

“You want to fuck him,” Anne said, tipping ash onto the ground.

I rolled my eyes. She was on her high horse again because she’d waited six years to sleep with Henry. Or so she said.

I started hanging out with the beheaded former queen consort of England about three weeks ago. I was always going to be drawn to someone who introduced themselves to me as “Anne, the scandal of Christendom.”

“I’m Wyatt, the scandal of Park Lane School for Girls,” I replied, briefly supplanting my shame with this sharp, short thrill.

“Isn’t that basically the same thing?” Anne asked dryly. I smiled.

We were sitting in the school reception while I waited for my final mandatory counselling session. I was studying the Tudors for my History GCSE with Mr. Daniels so I recognised her straight away. The other month, Joely and I had been paired to do a presentation on another of Henry VIII’s wives, Anne of Cleves. When the two swotty girls who wore regulation-length skirts were assigned Anne Boleyn, we looked at each other gravely



from across the classroom. They'd never understand Anne's complex, ahead-of-her-time ways.

But there on the tatty orange sofas outside the counsellor's office, Anne—the first Anne, the better Anne—chatted to me while she flicked through a four-month-old *Hello!* magazine. By the end of that day, she had joined my form class, trained at my netball club, worked the same evening shift at the convenience store, and firmly become my new best friend.

"Anne was revolutionary—a woman with opinions and ambition," Joely had informed me during one of our last study sessions together at her house. We'd sat cross-legged on her bed, the hip flask we'd been sipping from hidden in the bottom of her school bag because her mum kept poking her head around the corner.

Joely continued: "If Anne saw Kate Middleton simpering by her husband's side with her horsey hair extensions and frilly blouses, she'd glue her head back on and say it wasn't worth it."

I shook my head vigorously in agreement. I was always shaking my head vigorously around Joely.

And as we gossiped in the headteacher's waiting room, Anne quickly confirmed to me she found Kate Middleton as insipid as Joely had predicted—with one exception.

"She has fabulous hair," she told me. "So much volume." Her eyes flicked over to me and my flattened, lifeless strands. "Not everyone can be so lucky."

After school, Anne and I did what we always did—went to the park and sniffed nail varnish while watching people playing football. Occasionally she showed me something in the history textbooks that amused or outraged her.

"Queen Anne *Stuart*, 1665–1714." Her laugh shot out like a cannon. "That family line really was cursed. Gout, obesity, and *that* nose."

Anne had the admirable confidence of someone who knows their charisma makes their lack of beauty irrelevant. She peered closer at Anne Stuart's portrait painting and tutted.

"All those flattering brushstrokes and she still looks a mess. It's the 17th-century version of Chelsea Miller accidentally photoshopping out one of her boobs."

"I forgot about that," I half-snorted, remembering how relentlessly Chelsea had been mocked.

"Well..." Anne pulled a mock-pained expression. "Joely's situation sort of overshadowed Chelsea, didn't it? At least in Joely's photo you could very clearly see she has two—admittedly very small—breasts. Just a shame about her whole being unconscious and half-naked thing." My eyes dropped to my lap. Anne continued, clearly enjoying the glibness of her own delivery. "If only someone had been there to cover her up with a nice shawl."

"I didn't know..." My voice trailed off. I was weary of hearing my feeble defence of Joely's and I's study session at my house when my mum was out at work. I didn't buy the drink. I didn't know Joely had invited sixth-form boys. I didn't know she—nor they—had no intention of studying.

"Oh, I'm sure the whole thing will brush over soon," Anne said matter-of-factly when she noticed I had withdrawn into myself. "Sure, it's been 500 years and I'm still as controversial and well-known as ever, but... don't worry, I doubt you'll have the same traction."

The sun was setting by the time we made it back home. Outside my gate, a boy hovered. He was looking down, his deep cheekbones and furrowed brow lit by the glow of his phone. I grabbed Anne sharply just as a wolfish smile crept across her face.

The boy looked up and blushed. There were some scabbed-over spots on his chin. He looked like so many other boys: grimy but in that way you could ignore if you really wanted to.

I felt Anne yank her wrist from my grasp.

"I've... uh... I've come to study," he said, shifting his weight awkwardly as he stared at the ground. "Can I come in?"

My chest felt like a trap door slowly cranking open. I shook my head with wide eyes and he immediately straightened his spine, dropping the shy schoolboy act.

"Alright, no worries. The other guys dared me to come here anyway."

He shrugged but still looked at me expectantly.

"Oh. Okay." I looked over my shoulder but Anne was gone. "Do you know Joely or something?"

A smirk took full hold of his face, and now I was the one blushing.

"Not really."

“So, you weren’t... here...?” My hands twisted round the straps of my backpack. Wisps of dark hair lay uselessly across his upturned top lip, but he did have nicely shaped, thick eyebrows.

“Nah, man, nah. I had nothing to do with all that.”

“Well, I don’t feel like... uh... studying,” I said as I walked past him. For some reason, I added, “Sorry.”

I called for Anne but she didn’t appear. Instead, I turned the lights on in every room, blared the television, and ate the ready meal left out for me. My mum was on night shifts again, and Anne’s sudden absence felt pronounced and cruel. Like a hand tightening its grip on my throat.

I flicked through the history book from the park. The Stuarts bored me with their paranoid Bible antics. Henry VIII enraged me with his ego-tist, sociopath tendencies. Even Elizabeth I—though I’d never tell Anne this about her own daughter—underwhelmed me. She’d lived such a lonely, distrustful life. You would have thought her mother’s bold, unapologetic ways might have inspired her. Yes, it was a messy end, but I admired how Anne won and lost by doing things the way she wanted. Much easier said than done.

I reread the two pages devoted to Anne. I always found something new to mull over. I really needed to ask her about the allegation that she’d shagged her own brother.

The boy’s smirk kept snaking through cracks in my concentration. Perhaps I should have let him in the house. If I was going to have a reputation, it might be more tolerable if I just embraced it. I looked out my window to see if there was the silhouette of anyone: a skinny teenage boy or a woman in a period gown and headdress. Either would do.

I went to the upstairs bathroom and steeled myself before flicking the switch. There she was. Anne, sitting on the toilet, lit up like an obscene Christmas tree topper, with her mammoth skirt hiked up so it half-obscured her face.

“Sorry, Wyatt, hun.” She gave me an unnaturally perky smile, as if the ends of her lips were pulled by strings. “It’s my time of the month. Either that or *another* miscarriage. Pass the pads.”

II.

Anne got a C– on her history paper and her famous temper revealed itself once again.

“Oh, my argument on the reformation of the churches is a little one-sided, is it? I need to cite my sources better, do I? *I am* the source, you rank-smelling waste of space.”

She stormed out the room as Mr. Daniels, who admirably never reacted to Anne’s passionate displays, handed me my paper. B+.

“Why don’t we have a chat after school today,” he said in a low voice as he sat on the edge of my desk. “I really think you could be an A-grade pupil, Wyatt.” He smiled at me as I watched a bead of sweat weave through his eyebrow hairs.

I didn’t agree with Anne that he smelled rank. He smelled like what I imagined a man to smell like: clammy but comforting. Anything but Lynx.

However, the Mr. Daniels development did not sit well with Anne.

“He should be giving me detention, not arranging rendezvous with you,” she tutted as we debriefed behind the gym. “The discipline issues here could really do with...” She swished her hand down with a sharp flourish, imitating her executioner’s sword.

“Decapitation didn’t seem to deter you from... well, anything,” I observed as I finished rolling a cigarette.

“And thank God for that. I’ve lived more of a life post-head-severing than anyone in this sorry little school.” She took the cigarette out of my hand before I could take one drag. “Trust me. Being killed because your husband found a more hospitable womb gives you perspective on what matters.”

“What does matter?”

“Your principles.” She looked up, her eyes slicing into me. “I know my truth. I know what I did right, what I did wrong, and what I’m accountable for.”

For once, I wasn’t sure if she had meant to barb what she said with passive-aggressive, Joely-related judgement.

“You should try it out some time,” she added curtly. “You know, having principles.”

Mr. Daniels had changed his shirt when I entered his room. His face was pink and irritated, as if he’d scrubbed it with a towel.

Despite Anne's insistence that he "wanted my nubile young flesh," I wasn't so sure. She grew up during a time when preteens were impregnated by old men riddled with syphilis. I sensed her judgement could be off.

Still, I found myself sagging into my seat when we spent the first ten minutes looking through a PowerPoint on essay writing. As he loaded a video, I looked around the room, my foot tapping against the desk's steel leg. On the wall was a tatty poster of Henry VIII, swollen with pomposity, surrounded by headshots of the six wives. Anne looked indignant at being reduced to one sixth of a support act.

I remembered something she had said to me recently while we were watching a movie featuring Natalie Portman sobbing in a busty, green-sleeved gown.

"I mean... it's just ridiculous..." Her nostrils flared indignantly. "I never had a mole on that side of my cheek." She sighed and inspected her cuticles. "Dying really does get in the way of controlling your narrative."

My phone buzzed with a picture message. She watched me look at its contents, my face marbled. I had, yet again, been sent the picture those sixth form boys had taken of Joely and I.

"Dying *and* mobile phones," I added, eventually, finally prising my eyes away from my phone screen. "Mobile phones are the reason I'm considered the bad guy and a slut."

Natalie Portman let out a particularly loud wail. In the dark, I could feel Anne rolling her eyes at us both.

In the classroom, I scrutinised the poster, trying to see if there were any further misplaced moles. Mr. Daniels was now waving his arms animatedly, endearingly excited by all these dead people that weren't Anne. I tried to find a clock in the room. Normally, I'd be in the park by now. Joely and I used to hang out there until the start of our ill-fated indoor study sessions.

"Hey, what's this all about?" Mr. Daniels had put his foot gently on top of mine to stop it from shaking. "You seem distracted, Wyatt."

I stared at his polite, brown loafer on top of my clumpy, scuffed boots. Then his foot twitched and he quickly lifted it off.

"I hear worrying things from other teachers, but I always say how engaged you have been in history..."

I shrugged, still looking down at my shoe, the feel of friction from his foot remaining.

"I kind of like the Tudors stuff," I said, quickly trying to brush off the awareness of loneliness.

"I noticed," he said with a small smile.

"I read that Anne Boleyn didn't have a sixth finger. That it was a rumour started by Catholics to prove she was a witch who cast her spell over Henry. To make it seem like he wasn't responsible for anything."

This time he looked at me with a gently puzzled stare. My stomach lurched. He wasn't a Jane Seymour fan, was he?

"If you ever want to talk..." He started walking back to the board and I noticed little pools of sweat collecting at his armpits. "You need to know you have people you can confide in. I worry about you, Wyatt. You don't seem to have many of those."

"What do you want to know?" I widened my eyes and leaned forwards, placing my head on my hands.

He sighed.

"I want to know how you're feeling."

"I'm fine." I resisted the impulse to glaze my face over with nothingness. "I mean, I was upset... I am upset. What happened with Joely—it wasn't exactly what it looked like...but...people have decided the photo was all my fault, so..."

"You're a sixteen-year-old girl," he said. "You're allowed to have sex."

My cheeks prickled, but he continued to look at me calmly, as if he'd said something completely normal. Had he?

"Anyway..." He was still on the other side of the room. "I know things are tough at the moment, especially with Joely coming back to classes next week. But I—"

My burning face chilled in an instant.

"What?"

"Joely. She's back in school next week. They haven't told you yet?"

"No." I shook my head slowly. "No, they haven't."

Anne was sitting on our bench in the park watching *Friends* clips on her phone. A group of girls in the year below walked past and shot a look of

seething, choreographed judgement. Anne didn't acknowledge them—nor did she ever. Nothing can faze a woman who was booed at her own wedding.

I sat down stiffly beside her. On her screen a monkey clambered across David Schwimmer's shoulders.

"Henry bought his first wife a pet monkey" she said, wrinkling her nose. "The Spanish have such simple tastes."

"Uh-huh." I could barely move my lips. My skin seemed as if it was slowly tightening, that my mask was solidifying, leaving me rigidly blank forever. I didn't know how I could face Joely.

Anne let out a blast of carefree laughter and I shushed her. The boys nearby who had stopped their bikes to smoke turned to look. A tanned, stocky one, with his curly hair stacked into a quiff, stepped toward us. He puffed his chest out.

"I always see you here. Trying to catch our attention?"

I looked blandly back at him. Interpreting this as encouragement, he came all the way up to the bench.

"Oh, it's one of the study group girls," he said with a snicker. "I hear you're quite the teacher. Or was that the other slag friend?"

I could feel humiliation puncturing the numbness as I took Anne's arm and tried to raise her from the bench.

"Come on, don't give us the good-girl act." He licked his chapped lips as he dug into his pocket for his phone. "We've all seen the photos. Tell us, which one of those boys was the best shag?"

I stood up quickly, emitting a small, helpless yelp. I was entirely unsure of my next move, but it was enough to make them back away from me, their cruel laughter prickling my skin.

I felt a tug backwards. Anne, now also standing, had both her hands around my left arm. She was glaring at the boys with expertly loaded loathing.

"Just leave them, Wyatt," she whispered in my ear. "There's bigger and better things to be getting on with, don't you think?"

III.

It was odd: Anne was the one who'd given me Mr. Daniels' home address, yet she spent the whole walk over there telling me I was embarrassing myself, that this was a bad idea, that I was delusional, transparent, and

determined to lose my last shred of dignity and decency. I didn't say a word. I just upped my pace and listened to her barrage of disapproval.

His house wasn't too far from mine, just a bit closer to the nicer part of town. I spotted his red car parked outside a glum-looking grey bungalow. But halfway across the road, I found myself faltering and my eyes stinging with the threat of tears.

Anne sighed aggressively.

"What is it now, Wyatt? What do you want?"

I opened my mouth, hoping the right words would fall out.

"It would be useful for you to share because it's pretty hard to power walk in a corset."

I made a lacklustre attempt to clear my throat.

"I want to tell him the truth."

"The truth?" Anne's harsh laugh pounded the air once more. "Do you honestly think he's going to understand if you tell him the truth?"

"But I didn't... I didn't mean for Joely to get hurt. I didn't even want to be with those boys. How was I supposed to stop them from taking photos of her?"

"Sure, Wyatt, sweetie. You were just a girl looking out for herself in a cutthroat world," Anne said dryly before adding, with both boredom and venom in her voice, "Wow, I *really* relate to that. Isn't that such an *amazing* coincidence?"

"Wyatt? What... what are you doing here?"

I froze. Mr. Daniels was standing on the pavement by his house, holding a carrier bag of groceries, wearing an oversized jumper and cotton tracksuit bottoms.

I tugged self-consciously at my school blazer.

"I don't, I didn't mean to... I just came from—" I looked intensely down at the road. "I wondered if you..."

Both Anne and Mr. Daniels were looking at me with concern, apprehension, the lot. I took a deep breath and tried being someone else. A little more Joely. Or Anne. Or maybe a mix. I hardened my gaze and looked directly at Mr. Daniels. He took a half-step back.

"Have you seen the picture?" My voice wavered a little, not quite conveying the steel I envisaged in my core.

He looked at me for a long time.

"I think I need to call your mum. Is she at home?"

"No, she's at work. She's always at work. Have you seen the picture?"

I couldn't look away from him.

"Wyatt, it's not appropriate for you to—"

"You said sixteen-year-olds are allowed to have sex." I spoke over him. "I didn't actually have sex. I haven't had sex. Not properly. I just...messed around a bit. Joely did—with one of the boys. But I didn't. I thought you should know that."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Anne dragging her hands across her face so her skin stretched down like a bloodhound's.

"Wyatt..."

"Everyone keeps saying I had sex with, like, twenty guys that night. But I didn't. Have you seen the picture? I know I'm in my bra but I have a skirt on."

"Wyatt..."

"I didn't know they were going to take a picture. I don't really remember. There's a bottle of tequila or something between my legs."

"Wyatt." He spoke very slowly and firmly. "I have not seen that picture, but I am really sorry that it was ever taken and shared. For you. And for Joely."

I was starting to feel the cold air cut through my uniform. I wanted to step towards him and breathe in his smell, but my legs felt heavy.

"I just thought... you might have seen it." The steel inside me had depleted.

"Wyatt..." His voice kept pushing me farther and farther away.

"Never mind." I looked away, desperate to be somewhere else, some- one else, another version of me. Without another word, I turned and started walking. For a long time, the only sound I could hear was Anne's skirt swishing beside me. Even she, for once, knew now wasn't the time.

"He's lying," I finally said as I opened my front door to face spending another night in my empty, dark home. "Everybody saw."

I took my phone out of my pocket and opened the photo gallery. People still sent the picture to me at least three times a day, normally with an insult of choice accompanying it. Slut. Skank. Sket. Whore. Nobody was ever particularly original.

But I never deleted any of the messages they sent. I didn't feel I deserved to.

IV.

"Finally, we have somewhere to ourselves," Joely said, pulling out not just her hip flask from her school bag, but three beer cans as well. "And your mum isn't home from the hospital until 6 AM?"

I nodded, half-wary and half-excited for what she had planned, although I couldn't quite forget the fact that we had our history presentation the next day. Somehow Joely had managed to insert four Anne Boleyn references into our Anne of Cleves talk, and I was hoping we'd run through it one more time. I didn't want to mess up our big ending, when we'd chant "down with the patriarchy" while Joely tore off Henry VII's head from a picture.

But forty-five minutes later, all the alcohol was gone and Joely was beside me on my bed, head buried in her phone. I looked up from the *RuPaul's Drag Race* episode playing on my laptop and slid over to her on my stomach. She moved her phone away from me and continued to type.

"What?" I asked with a nervous laugh.

She didn't look up, her hands continuing to speed across the keys.

"What?" I reached out to grab her phone but she stood up, still typing, and walked to my bedroom door.

"Wyatt, some of the Year Thirteens from my old school are bringing round more drink and hanging with us for a bit. They're cool, you'll like them. But fluff up your hair a bit and change your top."

Before I could answer, she was halfway downstairs. I heard her let out an excited shriek as she opened the front door.

"We needed the extra help 'studying,'" read the text underneath a Snapchat picture of us with the boys. There were about half a dozen of them and we were all lounging around my bedroom. Already, Joely was sitting on the lap of one, his fingertips imprinting her thighs. The big silver bottles of vodka they'd brought seemed luminous underneath the camera flash.

I don't remember doing any studying. I remember drinking and smoking. The boys seemed older than sixth-formers, and the story as to how Joely knew them kept shifting in shape and form. They confused me by winking after they said things and laughing at comments I made that weren't meant to be funny. I remember feeling flattered when one ran his fingers through my hair as he whispered into my ear, the warmth of his breath on my neck

making my skin buzz. I remember a game involving picking cards from a deck that led to having to kiss another person on the lips. I remember Joely's and my lips touching after crawling to each other on our hands and knees as the boys laughed and cheered. I remember during strip poker I purposefully messed up so I could again enjoy the glint of their grins. I remember seeing Joely slurring, half-slumped on some boy's shoulder.

"We actually really do need to run through the presentation for tomorrow," she said to me at one point.

"Who cares?" I replied, my head clouded with vodka and validation.

And when Joely and one of the boys started moaning and writhing on my bed, my mouth hung open, but I emitted nothing more than a gormless giggle. The other boys told me to leave them to it, to sit back and watch. They handed me more drink. I remember that, for some reason, in the moment, it all seemed fine.

In the picture that everybody saw, Joely is sprawled across the bed. I don't know which of the boys took it. I can barely remember their faces, let alone who thought it was acceptable to take a picture of the drunk, unconscious, naked girl. Her right leg is cocked up, tucked behind her left thigh, and her arms are splayed wide, like a discarded marionette puppet's. Her face is puckered and tilts to the side, giving her an unflattering, bulbous throat.

Everybody saw that picture.

Everybody saw her yellow pants with a small, pointless blue bow, which were twisted halfway up her legs. Everybody saw her pert breasts and my floral bedspread unmade underneath her. Everybody saw the piles of school-books stacked up on the desk behind her with the box of condoms on top. Everybody saw the many legs of the boys in the background of the photo.

And everybody saw that her eyes were shut. That she didn't know. That, regardless of what she might have been able to stop beforehand, she couldn't stop anything now.

They also saw me.

I'm at the side of the photo. You can't see that much of my face, but you can see enough to tell it's me. Like my smile. You can see that. It's the broad, stiff kind of smile, similar to the type they paint on those clown masks at the funfair. But I'm not *actually* smiling. Well, technically, yes, I am. But smiling doesn't mean you're happy about something. Not always. Everybody

blames me. They say I should have stopped Joely from drinking so much. That I shouldn't have let those boys into my bedroom. That I should have asked them to leave and never have allowed a situation to happen where I could be smiling whilst my unconscious friend had compromising, degrading pictures taken of her.

And I agree with them. I really do.

I only really remember that there was a flash. Then laughter like whips. Next thing I knew, Joely and I were waking up in the morning to our phones blazing with judgement. The picture had been sent to everyone.

"What did you let them do?" she asked, slipping away from me in a second, her eyes locked in horror at the photo.

We never delivered our presentation.

V.

Mr. Daniels was never going to flash me a comforting smile again. And Joely would soon be back in school, brittle and cold, a constant reminder of my failures as a friend and as an acceptable human being. When I woke up, my bed seemed the only place capable of housing my shame. I refused to go to school. Instead, I stared at the walls, feeling as though screws were spiralling into my ribcage, restricting my breath. Anne tried to cheer me up by playing me cockfighting clips on YouTube, but eventually she became irritated by my nonresponsiveness.

"It's just a picture a few snotty-nosed teens had a laugh over. God, every Catholic on the planet thinks I have six fingers and made a pact with the devil to have Henry's demon spawn son. You know what my motto was, Wyatt? Never grumble."

I could barely muster the energy to roll over, so I buried my face into my pillow and bickered lethargically with her.

"I'm sorry my problems are so low-grade. Maybe you'd relate more if I'd poisoned Joely?"

Anne's eyes narrowed.

"If you're referring to the vicious rumours that I killed Catherine of Aragon, I can absolutely den—"

"Or had a physical catfight?"

"Well, Jane Seymour deserved every moment of that."

“Or—”

“Or what, Wyatt?” Anne flared up from her seat, committing instantly to her rage. “What about my noteworthy, history-making life is going to make your pathetic, insignificant one feel better?”

I willed myself to sink deeper into my bed, but her voice seemed to grow louder.

“And while you’re at it, tell me why it has to be me? Why do I have to sit here and endure this *relentless* whining? And all this unconvincing personality flip-flopping? One moment you’re this wannabe minx seducing a teacher, then the next thing you’re a poor, misunderstood prude—it’s exhausting.”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and wrenched me up so I was an inch away from her furious face.

“Why do I have to be used as this embarrassing outlet for your petty teenage trauma? Why not bother Marilyn Monroe or Amy bloody Winehouse with your insufferable wronged female act instead?”

“I just...” I could feel her fingers gripping harder onto my skin. I wilted with embarrassment. “I felt a connection to you.”

She spat out a laugh, releasing me so I fell back onto my bed.

“You sound like a creepy guy trying to fumble his way to a fingering session.”

“You were misunderstood and wronged. You were more powerful and capable than people realised,” I said in a small voice, my cheeks turning pink.

“Now you sound like some bad Taylor Swift lyrics.” She was pacing like a wild animal hemmed in by my floral walls.

I leaned forward to implore her to believe me, focusing entirely on Anne and only Anne, forgetting completely, just for a moment, about Joely, Mr. Daniels, or the judgemental texts within my phone.

“You played the men at their own game using your brain, your words, your guile—and when you didn’t conform, they ruined you.”

“Now we’re comparing my fight to stay alive to see my daughter grow up to, what, some stupid struggle for girls to feel empowered in pink nail varnish?”

“You don’t understand—”

“What? Myself?”

Now I was angry. I had been certain Anne was here to help me but, instead, she’d been nothing but a hostile imposition commenting on everything

from my morals to my lifeless hair. I stood up and took her by the arm, pressing my nails in, knowing it would take a lot for her to show me she was hurt.

“But you’re not yourself. Not anymore. You’ve been and gone, you’re just—you’re whatever people want you to be. A whore. A martyr. A victim. A trailblazer. You are whatever *I* want you to be.”

“Well, if that’s the case.” Anne threw me off her with a violent jerk of her arm. “Then I don’t understand why you’d have me think you’re such a pathetic, whiny little loser. Is that what you want, Wyatt? Have we finally worked it out?”

Anne’s eyes were wild, like she was expecting one last hook to sling through the air towards her. I sank back down onto my bed. The very bed that Joely had been unconscious and naked on. The very bed where a boy who smelled like Lynx had gently whispered into my ear.

“I enjoyed the attention,” I admitted eventually, each word more uncomfortable than the last. “I didn’t care about my friend. I was enjoying myself. She asked me to get her some water and I didn’t. I just laughed. I laughed with them. And then I passed her some more vodka.”

“I know,” Anne said stiffly, as if wary of the emotion in my voice.

“I looked at him taking her top off as she could barely speak, and I did nothing.”

“No,” Anne said again. She took a deep breath. “But it’s done. You can say you got it wrong, you can say sorry, and then the rest you can’t control.”

“No.” I summoned up the courage to look Anne in the eyes. This seemed to soften her, but only a little. I sucked in some air, then let it deflate out of me slowly. “Just like I can’t control you.”

“Naturally.” Anne did a little curtsy and I smiled sadly at her.

“I’m sorry I used you. Brought you here. Made you sit through triple science. Oh God.” My eyes widened in horror. “And made you watch me flirt with Mr. Daniels.”

Anne shrugged as she clucked her tongue in her mouth. She looked conflicted, as though she were considering kindness. Eventually, she sat down beside me on the bed.

“I’m sure you can pay me back one day,” she said. “Besides, I can’t really judge people. I married a megalomaniac with a compulsive eating disorder and erectile dysfunction.”

“I’d like that,” I said, firmly. “Not the marrying a fat twat bit. I’d like to repay you. Somehow. Hey, you can borrow a rough approximation of my image and personality any time. I mean, if you want.”

Anne raised her eyebrows in a way that always spelled trouble.

“Deal.”

VI.

And then I was far, far away from the reality of Joely... I was no longer in my bedroom, no longer in this year, this century. But still, there was Anne. Her back was to me and she was kneeling, her red dress fanning all around her. She muttered very fast to herself with clasped hands.

An ice-cold air ripped through my flimsy clothes, right into my bones. Bleak stone walls and sparse, functional furnishings surrounded us. Somehow, I knew immediately that we were in the Tower of London. That it was 1536. That this was to be accepted, the way she had accepted life in 2021 watching TikTok videos with me. I looked out of a tiny slit in the walls and craned my head. The scaffolding was already built on the grass, sternly awaiting its guest of honour. I frowned. Anne was no longer cherished for being brave and bold and unapologetic. This was the day she was going to die. It would be years, centuries even, before she would be cherished for all those traits again.

I approached her slowly. Her mutterings became clearer—fast, emphatic prayers. Considering she had basically founded the Protestant religion, we’d never really discussed Anne’s faith much. In fact, there was so much about her I still didn’t know. I knew only the sound-bites and the sketchy Wikipedia entries. Whereas she had listened to me droning on and on about every aspect of my existence—she even knew I used to run a Selena Gomez stan Twitter account.

I wanted to be better. In so many ways. On Monday, when Joely walked into school, I wanted to say “sorry” to her face and accept her reaction, for better or worse. Perhaps one day, if she ever forgave me, I could tell her all about my time with Anne, about my sudden trip to 16th-century England.

I reached my hand out to Anne so I could offer her a comforting clasp on the shoulder. Let her know she wasn’t alone. Maybe hold her while she cried. Then I paused. That really wasn’t our style.

“Hey,” I called out. Anne, still on her knees, jolted in surprise. “Any idea where Henry’s at? I heard he’s in the market for a new wife.”

She looked over her shoulder, making good, last use of that elegant neck. When she saw me, her tear-stained face sank into a withering, playful scowl.

“Oh, good. It’s the scandal of Park Lane School for Girls,” she said. “Did you bring half a dozen boys and several vodkas with you for my farewell party?”

“God no,” I replied. “And you’re welcome for that.”

“Well, what are you here for then? You’re not here to give me hairstyling tips, are you? I don’t fancy entering the afterlife looking like I have a pancake languishing on my forehead.”

“Hey, judge all you want, but I bet your hair’s an absolute horror show under that wimple.”

“Well, do tell, Wyatt, to what I owe the pleasure of your presence. And be quick. I’ve kind of got a date with eternal damnation to get to. So say the pious, honourable men who’ve decided to kill me.”

I held my palms outwards to the sky.

“Company,” I said, simply. “I’m here to offer company. That’s all. Thought you might like some.”

“Oh.”

Anne looked a little unnerved by the genuineness of my gesture.

“That OK with you?”

I saw her eyes wander uncertainly around the room and catch a glimpse of the scaffolding outside. Her mischievous expression wavered. She looked down at her hands, swallowed, and nodded.

“Yes.” She ran her hands down her skirt as if to smooth it a few times. Then, her eyes flicked back up to mine. “Thanks.”

There was a long silence. I finally offered her that clasp on the shoulder. Felt her small shoulders rise and fall with each breath. The rattling of work tools and shouts across the courtyard amplified in the room.

“So...” I squeezed my friend’s arm tightly. “Who do you think gets the sweatiest during sex? Thomas Cromwell or Thomas Seymour?”

Anne pulled a face. Then she laughed, wretched, and smacked my hand away. Hard.



2021 RON  
McFARLAND PRIZE  
FOR POETRY

contest winner

Loss & Other Forms of Death  
by Jeanne Morel

So much, this year, has been lost; after a year of immense, overwhelming grief, this quiet poem reads like the quiet following the riot of a long-raging storm. I appreciate the tension in this poem, its precision and spareness of language, its "terse presence."

— Leila Chatti

Loss & Other Forms  
of Death

I shut the door to muffle the sound of the washing machine.  
I am not the mouse found dead in the corner of the patio.  
The roar continues the sun wafts the lawn in the yard across the alley.  
I am reimagining the perimeters of my property as an animal trapped.  
In my early 60s I had intended to travel the world.  
Letter to \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_.

Say no to your thoughts  
the terse presence of breath in both nostrils.  
I sit cross-legged on the bed, hands open in supplication.  
I had heard the words of poets, professors, and pranksters.  
I had heard the penultimate verse of the bird song.

After the nasturtiums dried on the table  
I pulled your book from my shelf.

The silence of a black and white photograph, silver gelatin,  
hung over my home.

## Considering Mabel Stark

What can I say about marvel that has not been framed? In childhood photographs, I exist: fixed versions of myself, not remembering the before, the after, the minutes that escape the camera's mouth. To think of Mabel Stark's time away from the tigers. To think of her arranging breakfast or running errands, fetching the flowers herself, boots on the pavement forming a two-legged shadow. To think of what lives outside the well-lit frame, the bold red text of the evening: what cannot be captured and sold. What we hold onto when nobody is looking, what we release. What cannot be known unless held, tenderly, in that moment of crossing that street, its two yellow lines telling us which way to move.

## Afraid My Hands Will Hurt You

I have two hands—  
they're not  
for me

Whatever song I sing  
is not long enough

My hair, dirty in the heat  
of your lungs & the sofa's underbrush

An absence of moss in Brooklyn  
An absence of sex  
A presence of morgue trucks like snowdrops  
thwarting the winter with a different white

\*

Nobody cares  
about my hair

I wake up knowing I'm a killer  
of whales

I, a mirror of my bathtub

Pick these berries?  
With these hands?

By pick I mean steal  
& I do pick  
raspberries  
from the neighbor's patch

Avenues in vigilance  
hunting vaults of air  
between crabapple splashes

\*

I'm afraid my hands  
will hurt you

\*

Trying to  
decide if  
I want a little fire

always do

Strips of a wasp nest  
for kindling

\*

A gathering of humans is  
called a suffering

A gathering of humans is  
called a joy

\*

I had two hands

\*

The way we try  
to use our body  
to protect our body

is the fallibility  
of the mind

A coin-operated berry  
A coin-operated patch of neighbors

The way we chilled bodies  
in trucks that blocked moss  
from the spring melt

\*

For the love of lungs

Night throat  
Night hair  
Without you I bathe in the mirror  
of my dirt

I needed you to  
grow old

What happens now

Julie Marie Wade

## When I Was a Boy

after Dar Williams

I was still a girl, though taller than everyone in the fourth-grade photograph. Head-to-head already with Mrs. Miller, whom I loved—though I hated the dress she wore, *that day of all days*, prune-purple with little white spots. I paid attention to clothes I didn't own, bodies I didn't occupy. Twenty slices at the pizza buffet—more than the boys could eat. “That girl has such an appetite!” It was nothing compared with my hunger. Arm-wrestling the pastor to prove a point. He conceded after winning, as my skinny arm flapped on the table like a fish, “She’s really quite strong for a girl.”

When I was a boy, people referred to me as if I wasn't quite there, which is part of being a child, I guess, part of the paradox of gender inspection and gender fatigue: the not-yet-a-person way they looked down—or in my case, across, and then up.

I was always a girl in crocheted booties, lacy anklets, thick pink tights, then nylons they called nude, which made me blush—though I wanted to be a girl or maybe just a person in the tall white socks my father wore with bands of color near the knee: red, blue, yellow. My mother said, “No, absolutely not.” My mother said, “Fold them and put them away.” No jeans except on weekends. No high-top Chucks or Mariners caps.

When we watched *Bye Bye Birdie*, she wanted me to hear Ann-Margret sing “How Lovely to Be a Woman.” She was worried, I think, but she didn't know why. “There! Look!” I paused the tape. “She’s pulling on tall socks, *argyle* socks!” Then, her jeans rolled up at the cuffs! Then, her ball cap tilted over tousled hair!

My mother stood frozen at the ironing board. To no one in particular, she murmured—“Well, I think Miss Margret has femininity to spare.”

When I was approaching seventeen, a student at the all-girls school—a girl as hopeful and disillusioned as anyone toeing a ledge, as anyone looking before leaping like the proverb said—I asked for a punching bag for my birthday, along with a pair of Everlast gloves.

“What kind of gift is that for a young lady?” My father’s dismay and the way he sometimes overlooked me, his eyes becoming a periscope: my height, my heft, my curves—swimming in some clothes, pinched in others. But still: my pretty hands on the piano, my long legs, and the lashes my mother made me curl.

When I was a boy, I was not really a boy so much as a girl who envied boyish freedoms—to kick the ball harder, to kiss the girls on the playground and spit in the dirt. I wanted to mouth off more. I wanted to get away with things I couldn't in my current incarnation.

When I was a boy, it was not my gender I renounced in favor of boyhood but my gender I renounced in favor of disembodiment. I would have rather been a ghost, you see. But if I were a boy, I wouldn't have to answer at all. Perhaps I could outrun the girl in me—unperm her hair, unpaint her nails, unlearn the way she flinched when something unexpected flew toward her face. *Sissy* I didn't want to be. *Sissy* I often was.

If I were a boy, I'd take it to the mat, take it to my grave, throw a punch that no one saw coming. I wouldn't have to set the table or justify a second helping. And I could touch myself because everyone said that's just what boys did. Their desires were real, you see. I'd even have tall socks in which to hide the evidence. A car of my own because my father once said, “If I had a son, sure, he'd have a car, but what's the hurry for a girl? Any decent guy is going to pick you up.”

Now it's a generation later, and I'm left wondering: *Is this just the story I'm expected to tell?*

A woman with a wife must have a little boy in her, a little man in her, they reckon. I want to say how every woman has a man in her because that's how we spell the word, the grammar of our genders aligning with the Biblical rib—something borrowed before we were ever born. Every “human” has a man in them, the default for clinical trials and health care imperatives. But we know this, don't we? We know all this already.

I'm supposed to tell you how it was when I was a boy because I was a girl who loved girls and am now a woman who loves one woman in particular. Who wears no makeup and rarely a dress. Who doesn't own hosiery or heels. Who doesn't know, and hasn't known for many years, how much she actually weighs and will not step back on the scale, *ever*, of her own accord. (When the doctor asks, she does it, all the while averting her eyes and plugging her ears.)

Now I am a woman who can tell you, honestly, for the first time, that she loves being a woman despite the double binds—that she loves being a lesbian especially.

I am a woman, *first person, present tense*, who loves being a woman wearing shiny vegan brogues and tailored slacks and collared shirts, loose and free hair to her shoulders, one necklace at her throat, two rings on her hands—the first for partnership, the second for marriage—no nails to speak of, small wrists and thin fingers, a Casio watch, and a loop of keys that for many years carried a chain in the form of a miniature Everlast boxing glove. Bright red, of course, as a tulip or a hard-pumping heart.

And when it wore out, she bought another, and another, until on her fortieth birthday, which is to say *my* fortieth birthday, my wife bought me the real Everlast boxing gloves and placed them on our table beside a tall bouquet of rainbow-colored roses. I am a woman who loves roses and boxing gloves, you see. Watch me smell these flowers. Watch me spar with my shadow in this midlife light.

δ

I install a series of self-portraits whose existence is contingent on their being viewed. Whitewashed walls, when the gaze alights just right, become canvas to spectators' self-multitudes, unshelved selves enframed.

I was inspired by the government's method of breaking down facets of the public into compositional elements:  
I trade my hand-and-a-half sword for a hand

and a half; I trade my annotated copy  
of the *Divina Commedia* in the American vulgate, abridged

by compartment for contraband cocaine  
taken medicinally; I trade a lack of closeness  
for close reading of the principal texts.

I install a series of selves whose existence is contingent on their being viewed.  
Metaportraiture. Self-poetry.

Adam Edelman

# Becoming the Horse

Everything learned will be unlearned and everything remembered will be forgotten. A horse is a great example. Think about enjoyment, even levity, and then look at a horse or a picture of a horse and you'll see what I mean. Our friends are a sea of sparks sloshing around in a horse's skull because what flakes off the central rippling of thought alone is enough to power your comprehension of a horse as a horse. You could be humming in an attic with legs crossed waiting for the right time to make breakfast or taking a walk through the cemetery at midnight blindfolded, as soon as a horse appears in the archway above purple waves you're hypnotized. Suddenly there's no difference between the distance between two cities and the distance between two stars. But what happens when you move close to a ladder? How about the hinges of the attic door? Don't they deserve to be replaced with better hinges? If you describe replacement hinges to a horse you've only just begun to get to know, say, in some neutral location such as the little diner up the street from the seashore, the young waiter in a green apron and white hat distributing

breakfast menus, then the way the water looks through the large bay windows when the sun's out compared to the same but with no sun and only a little rain sprinkling down the outside surface allows me to explain by turning your attention once again to the horse seated in the opposite booth. For if you focus long enough on a horse you become one yourself, and thus all you've ever learned or remembered seems an open field through which you may gallop wildly in whatever direction your head happens to be pointed toward.

## Force of Pure Nature

When I was eight, Dad said, “Ellie, the monster’s the one to root for.”

We were watching *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. I agreed with him but Mom was nearby so I said, “He’s evil.”

“There’s nothing evil about the Gill-man,” Dad said. This wasn’t surprising; Dad often said it was people I needed to watch out for. He wanted to get me a dog, but Mom said they were dirty. Then he said something I hoped she didn’t hear. “The leading lady would be better off living in the Amazon with the monster than spending any more time with those two actor-Bozos.”

“He’s a fiend,” I said loud enough for Mom to hear. Though I liked his scales and his reptilian, friendly eyes, I added, “I like Dr. Williams.” Mom crushed on the doctor. I knew this by how she came to the kitchen doorway whenever she heard his voice, her hands busy drying a dish, a look on her face that made me think of cookies baking in the oven. She once told me she liked how his shirt fit.

“Now he’s truly wicked,” Dad said. He always cheered when the *Creature* killed Dr. Williams. I did too, silently.

“Stop telling Ellie humans are evil,” Mom yelled from the kitchen.

On Saturdays, Dad and I went to the hardware store. Once, on a rainy day, Mom said she’d like to come, too. I liked the smell of the place and putting my hands in the bins of screws. They were treasures, the cold steel reassuring, even as the threads caught on my hangnails. When I put my fingers to my nose, I breathed in the metal deeply. Men pushed past, buying nails and saws and crosscutters. They were tall and muscular, short and squat, some smelled tangy, some pleasant, some made me gag. I liked being among

those men. Mom told me to stop and grabbed my hands out of the screw bin, then walked off toward a man in overalls.

Sometimes the cashier would pretend he was on a boat and over the loudspeaker yell out for the customers to disembark. He had an anchor tattoo on his forearm. It was faded, nestled in among his curly black hairs. I traced it sometimes, when he put me up on the counter. He let me talk on the loudspeaker, too. I told the customers “Dinner will be served at eight” or “No one likes peas” or “I can’t get no satisfaction.” I wanted a loudspeaker at home to tell people what to do.

I was at the end of the aisle when I saw Mom put a doorknob in her purse. She did it standing next to the man she’d followed, who was quite a bit taller than her, handsome like an actor in a movie. She smiled up at him, but her hand was busy with the pearly doorknob, dropping it into her bag as she said something to him. It was about Jesus, but her hips swayed in ways that made her sound like she wasn’t a whole person, like half of her was a nun and the other half I didn’t want to think about. When she finally looked away from him and snapped her pocketbook shut, she saw me but turned back to Mr. Overalls as if I weren’t there.

I went to the loudspeaker and asked for my father to come to the front desk, he was needed. That brought Mom, too.

My mother was religious, but it was a faith she designed to fit her needs. Swearing was forbidden but stealing, well, I’m not sure how she sanctioned that. My beautiful mother would pocket lipstick and pints of cream. Once when I was searching her handbag for pennies I found a shiny child-sized axe, and when I picked it up, my reflection popped at me and the price tag fluttered as I wielded it and pretended I was a brave warrior. She forbade television after Dad died, though when she needed a nap or overslept, I always turned it on. She knew I watched but never said anything. Once I caught the last minutes of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Dad had said, quoting the film’s narrator, “The monster was a force of pure nature. And so are you, Ellie.”

My mother told me she had been raised Catholic and her childhood Sundays were filled with incense and incantations. She wore lace on her head and a white dress in preparation to be the bride of Jesus, though the

actual wedding she never spoke about, no matter how often I asked. When she took the sacrament, she knew that she was chosen by God.

“What is the sacrament?” I asked. I, too, wanted to be chosen.

“To consume the body of Christ,” she said.

Though it made me anxious, I told her I wanted to eat Jesus, but she said she was no longer Catholic and the priests were not to be trusted and that there were better, more direct ways to communicate with God.

She stood smoking a cigarette, leaning on the rail as I sat on my usual perch on the top stair outside our apartment building and looked down at the street. I was waiting. For what, I wasn't sure. Dad would never return, but maybe God would pick me as he had my mother. I pictured an old man with a long white beard and gladiator sandals coming down the sidewalk and up the steps, taking my hand, and showing me to the pearly cloud place where unicorns and otters danced. And Dad would be there. A coyote trotted by with an orange tabby cat limp in its mouth. I watched it move up the street, maybe it had dinner for pups. There were Lost Cat signs on just about every telephone pole in our neighborhood. The San Fernando Valley was home to religious fanatics and wildlife and porn studios back then. I was torn about the fate of the missing cats, but since we had no cat and I liked wild creatures, I'd decided it was a good thing the coyote could keep her family fed.

“A sign,” my mother said.

She then recited a passage from something I'd never heard before. About men wielding axes and roads paved with gold and bodies being eaten by maggots. My mother said the author, a man she'd met recently, had picked up her pieces and put her back together.

I asked her how on earth he'd made a lady like her whole. I told her I didn't have a memory of her being in pieces. Arms in one place, kidneys in another. Head. The thought had me knocking my knees together.

“He laid his hands on me, and oh, Ellie. I felt something rise in me sweet as roses, fragrant and delicious and—more than that. I felt alive for the first time.”

I imagined my mother like jigsaw puzzle pieces with a picture of her on the top of the box, so the man could see how her pieces fit.

My mother said to be truly alive, you needed to know God. That I was just stumbling around in the dark and if I would just pay attention for a minute, I'd hear. Stop obsessing over that ridiculous film of your father's, she

said, and maybe, just maybe, Joe, the man who made her complete, would help me, too. Then she stumped out her cigarette and I listened to the click of her heels on the cement stairs, receding until she'd gone the two floors up and our front door slammed.

I went over to the vacant field next door and climbed on the sycamore tree that sat at the back of the lot. I spent a long time thinking about being in pieces, but my brain wouldn't cooperate, I was all haywire. It felt wrong and had me wondering what Dad would say, would he think it's Mom's nonsense, like when she prayed for our souls at dinner or got mad at me for taking the Lord's name in vain. I jumped off the tree and scratched around. I was a kid who spent hours alone outside, digging for grubs and putting them back. I rolled a pill bug around until it sped off. I fell over and looked up at the sky, feeling the rocks and weeds poke at my back and legs. I must've been still for a long while, for I felt something crawling on my hand. A lizard. I kept quiet and watched it breathe. I saw its heart pound under its granular scales. Hey, Mr. Lizard, I thought, am I in pieces? I waited to see if my thoughts had reached him. I tried to stay motionless but it was difficult, something hard and hollow was growing inside as I stared. Mom yelled down at me to come upstairs and get ready for Joe. The lizard skittered away.

When I got upstairs, I asked if it was time for me to get my pieces put back together. I added that I wasn't even sure what was missing and did that matter and could she help or would Joe know?

She said I shouldn't think in those terms. She went on about my losing God if I wasn't careful. That scared me. Then she promised that Joe would help when he came over that night. I don't know who God is, I said. How can I lose what I don't know? She gave me a wobbly smile and then told me to meet her in the bathroom.

My mother scrubbed my hands hard, trying to loosen dirt. The radio in her bedroom was on and a song she liked played. It was pretty and she shimmied along, taking drags of her cigarette as she scrubbed, and she kept telling me how pretty I was going to be when she got done. I basked in her attention and it occurred to me then that all things were possible. Maybe God or Jesus or Joe would take away my emptied-out feeling. She said we had opportunities now, we were available, we women could do what we wanted. Her large, dark brown eyes were surrounded by black eyeliner, and her lashes looked like butterflies. My mother must be the loveliest woman in all of Van Nuys, I thought. She told me about love, that it can come out



of nowhere, when you least expect it—and that that is the deepest kind. I should be on the lookout for love—most especially God’s love.

She’d spun me around so my back was to her. “You have hair like your father’s.”

Snarls were a problem; my mother and I had been in a war over my hair since Dad died. He had used a wide-toothed comb when he did my hair, but Mom won that night when she pulled out the scissors, calling it a pixie. We paid no attention to what the mirror reflected, choosing instead to follow my mother’s idea of me. A red dress with ruffles that wrapped around and around like the rings of Saturn was laid out on my bed. It was snug and the ruffle seams rubbed at my tiny nipples. I complained that it hurt but she said to remember the price of beauty. Under it I wore pink tights that made me feel like a balloon animal with a knot for a waist. My mother spit gently on my black patent leather shoes and rubbed at them with a washcloth. She said I was sumptuous. Sumptuous. Sump. Two. Us. I kept rolling the word around in my mouth till I felt a little dizzy.

I wanted my mother to be pleased with me, so I said yes when she said she thought Joe was a very important man and that miracles flowed through his body and out of his hands. All I had to do was watch.

“Will he perform a miracle tonight?”

“You never know,” my mother said.

I said that maybe he could bring Dad back. My mother said he can’t perform a miracle like that, and more importantly, we don’t want him to.

“Why not,” I asked.

She patted my head and went to her room.

I opened a can of tomato soup but missed the pan and splattered some of it on my dress. I looked around to make sure my mother wasn’t nearby and then wiped the spots with the sponge from the sink, grateful my dress was red. I didn’t wait for the soup to heat, I was too eager, too hungry. When Mom came into the kitchen she found me on the counter dipping saltines into the soup pan, feet resting on the pulled-out tea towel drawer. I liked to eat up there because I could see out to the vacant lot. It looked as if she were going to say something to me but instead went to the fridge, brought out the milk, and poured me a glass. My mother looked like a woman waiting and so she filled the time talking, but she was somewhere else, somewhere I couldn’t get to. It was good I’d thought to feed myself, she said to the cooktop. She wondered if maybe it was time to buy a new coffeemaker or if

maybe it was time to stop drinking coffee and move to tea. “What do saints drink?” she asked the floor. She came up next to me and asked if she looked old. Are there wrinkles here? she said, pointing to a patch of lined skin next to her eye. I put my finger in a little crevice and told her there was one large one and two smaller ones. That they got bigger when she smiled. Her hand shot to where my finger had been and then she raced back to the bathroom. Something down in the lot caught my eye and I thought it might be the Gill-man from the movie. He went behind the sycamore tree, but I think his hand motioned me. He had come to warn me of something, and I needed to know what. I knelt on the counter for a better look but saw only the tree. I told myself the Creature wasn’t real, but the sycamore looked alone and sad out there by itself.

I was still on the counter when the doorbell rang. Sometimes I forgot I had a heart until it skipped or zoomed or fluttered. I could see my mother from where I was, looking at herself in the mirror by the front door. Her heart must have been zooming, too. She cupped her curls delicately, as if they were baby birds, and touched her upper lip with her finger and then turned to the door. I’d seen her do this many times before, usually before leaving our apartment, but there was a flush and flutter to her and I wondered if lightning bolts might come out of her eyes, like the cat I’d seen in a cartoon I’d watched when my mother was sleeping earlier. I was getting sweaty where the elastic of my tights bit at my waist. I imitated my mother to my reflection in the toaster, I looked very wide and saw that my hair was quite short. I’d forgotten. I pressed my cheek into the metal, wishing for encouragement. The smell arrived before the door was opened. Like Mother’s sweater drawer, but more.

He was as big as the world and twice as tall. He was round—this surprised me. I had expected someone like the men from the hardware store. Someone like Dad. He was different. Softer and paler and pinker, too. My mother called and I went, the obedient and good child I wished to be. His jacket was a checkerboard and when he put his hand out to me, his fingers were like the jumbo hot dogs Mom sometimes bought, and then my hand was swallowed up within their dampness. I looked at my palm when he released my hand, hoping he’d placed a miracle there. My father, pocket-sized. My hand was empty. Joe smiled grayish teeth and patted my head and said I must be Ellie and then I watched my mother. She appeared to be floating. I, too, wanted rapture.

She grabbed Joe's arm and leaned in, whispering something into his ear, then pulled him along down the hallway to her bedroom before she stopped and turned back and told me it would be just fine if I watched a little television.

I didn't want to watch but most of all I didn't want to be left so I climbed back up on the counter and looked down at the lot, at my tree, but it was dark and there was a ghostly aspect to all of it, as if the world were ending. I went down the hallway to my parents' bedroom. Voices came through the closed door. My mother's voice was a mumble, but Joe's was clear, calm, and gentle, and he told her not to be afraid, that everything was going to be splendid. That word stopped me, had me trying to recall the word my mother had said earlier and then it came: sumptuous. I leaned onto the cool wall and listened. He sounded knowledgeable. I wondered what Dad would think of Joe. I wanted him to be good, so I did what I always did when I wanted something good to happen, I squinched my face, wrapped my arms around myself, crossed my fingers, and held my breath. Then my heart skipped or bounced or whatever it did and I slid to sit and then crawled over to the doorknob and turned it.

He stood over my mother, she was kneeling on the ground, her hands in the position she'd showed me, praying over the bed. She looked like me. Joe's hand was on the top of her head. If he saw me he didn't say. His jacket was off and his tie serpented down his front as he moved around her. He was speaking in a language I didn't understand but I presumed my mother did. I thought again that my mother looked like a child as I watched Joe perform his magic. He put his hands on either side of her shoulders and I wondered if miracles were happening right then.

My mother turned her head and saw me. She said to wait my turn, so I sat and watched until Joe said my mother was complete. Then she got up and instructed me to take her place. As I knelt in front of the bed, she patted my shoulder and then her footsteps moved away and the door closed and she was gone. My heart drummed hard as I waited. I wanted to be good. When Joe put his hand on my head, I was prepared for it to feel like an axe, opening me to Jesus. I expected God, electricity, fire, thunderclaps and lightning. Instead I felt weight, reminding me of when I was sick and Mom placed a wet washcloth on my forehead. He spoke continuously and I prayed it would be over soon, that I would be made whole as my mother had promised. Years later I would try to put together how he managed to

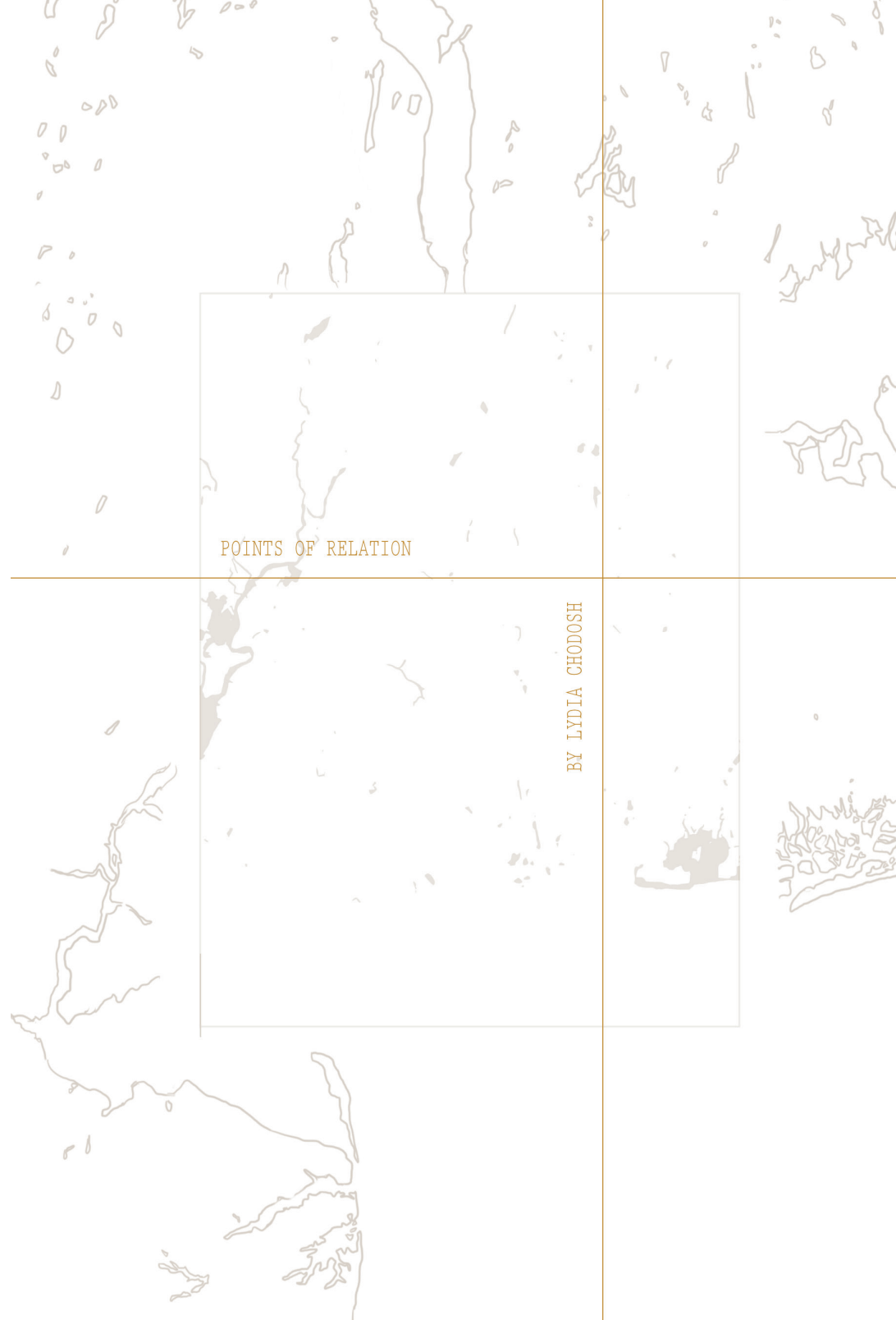
insinuate himself so completely between my mother and me. How he got away with all of it. He touched my shoulders and my back, continuing to speak words I did not understand. With my eyes closed and my hands still in prayer, I thought of the Creature swimming in his lagoon and imagined myself swimming along beside him, sunbeams pouring down through the water. When Joe's hand was between my legs, the jolt of electricity I had been waiting for shocked and excited me. He leaned in close, I smelled his clove and mothballs and sweat and he whispered that it was our secret, only between us, and that he could make me tingle like that all the time.

My body whirred, a million hornets were humming through my body, and I tried to get back to the lagoon, to the glinting water. At some point Joe called my mother and she came back into the bedroom and when she touched my arm, I started. Perhaps my face portrayed something but if it did, she ignored it. She said Joe's work was complete.

"Did you notice anything?" she asked. I remained on my knees. I heard her moving around the room. They spoke in hushed voices and then my mother was again next to me, pulling me to standing, and I didn't know what to say or do, so I walked with her into the hallway but told her I had to use the bathroom and shut and locked the door. I put my hand where Joe's had been. It felt wild, like the coyotes. I sniffed my fingers, they smelled of nails and screws and defeat. I looked at the mirror. Who am I, I wondered.

It would be years before I would recognize myself again.

As it turned out, my mother married Joe. But on that night when I told her I didn't like him, that he scared me, she patted my head and said I was a good little girl and that she'd never let anything bad happen. After all, God was watching over us.



POINTS OF RELATION

BY LYDIA CHODOSH

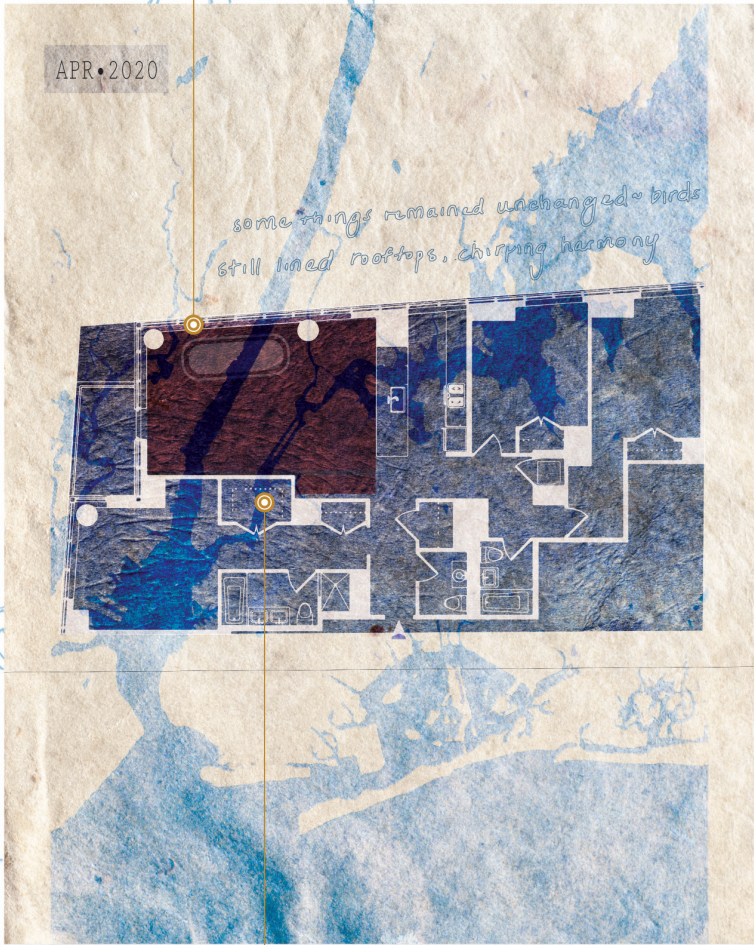
LOOKING GLASS

a window facing due north over the east river

per·i·od (n.): a portion of time defined by a recurring phenomenon

APR. 2020

*some things remained unchanged. birds  
still lined rooftops. chirping harmony*



light (n.): a natural form of energy that makes things visible

EAST RIVER, NEW YORK CITY

a salt water tidal estuary separating manhattan from brooklyn & queens

it does not in fact qualify as a river

DAWN

in the beginning,  
we peered through the looking glass

at movement's absence



the sky lacked color

isolation, it  
altered perception; we thought



HUDSON RIVER, NEW YORK CITY

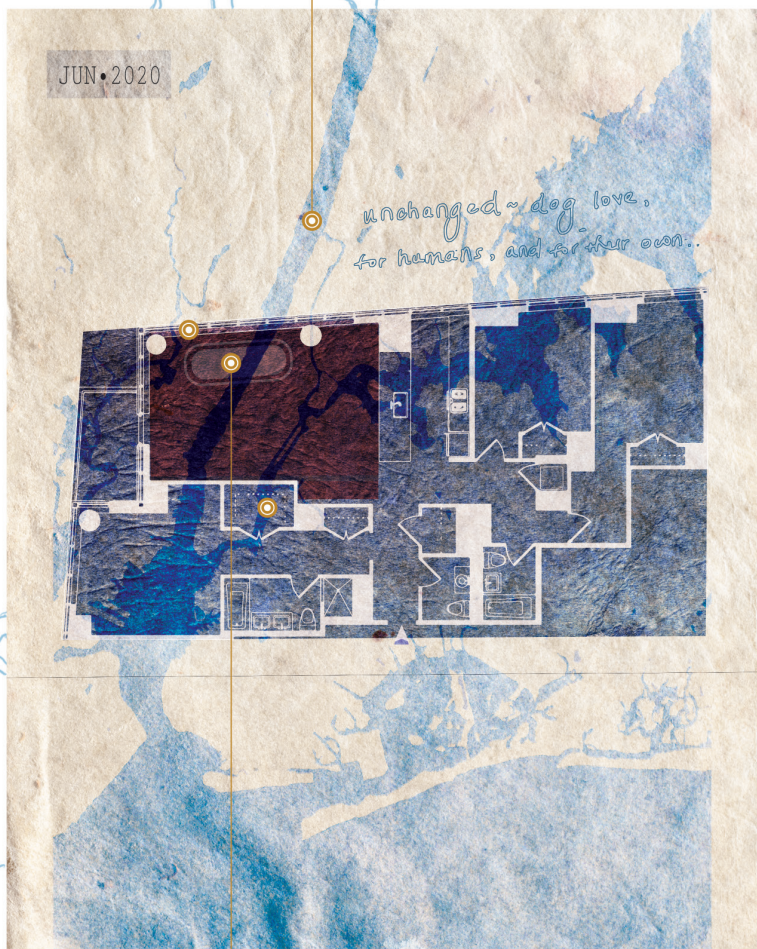
315 miles long

temporarily home to the u.s.n.s. "hospital ship" comfort

day (n.): the time of light between one night and the next

JUN•2020

*unchanged ~ dog love,  
for humans, and for their own..*



SLEEPING QUARTERS

an article of furniture for reclining or sitting

where one might also receive psychoanalytic treatment

sun (n.): a luminous celestial body from which the earth receives heat & light

DAYLIGHT

FEATURING SUN

we woke in absence;  
wisdom evaded us and

memories dispersed



dust forming star light

change found new markers:  
the dead turning to dust,

KITCHEN COUNTER

a place where one might prepare food, or indulge cravings

day (n.): corresponds to the period of a planet's rotation on its axis

DAYLIGHT

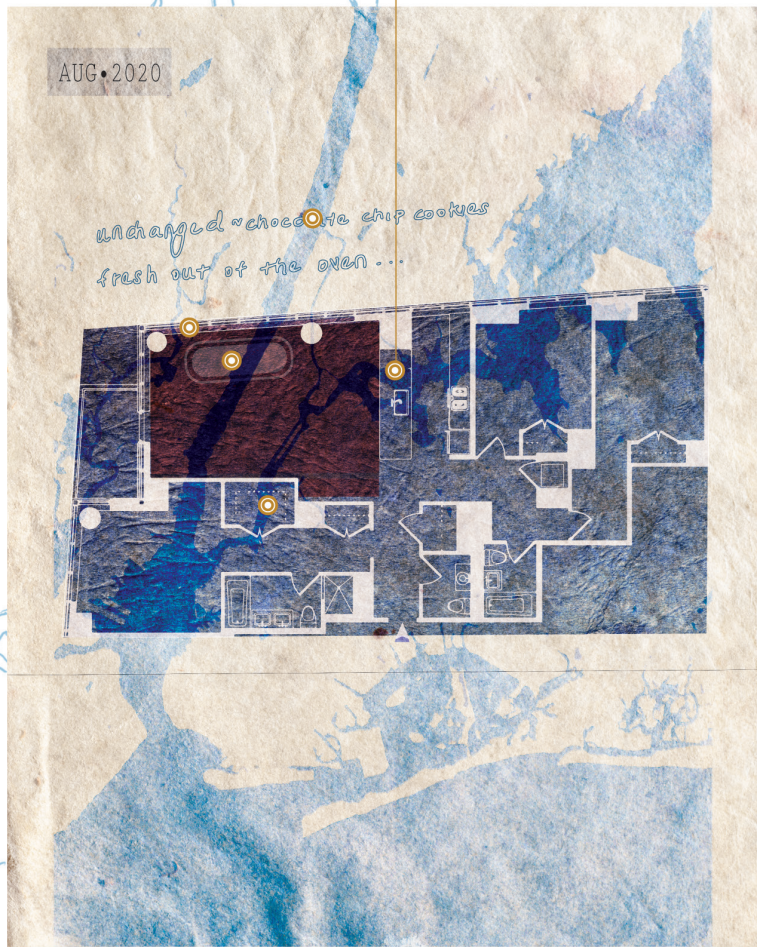
FEATURING RAIN

we drifted to and fro, aimless, but unified

in our confusion

AUG. 2020

unchanged, chocolate chip cookies  
fresh out of the oven...



rain (n.): water falling in drops condensed from vapor in the atmosphere

FREQUENT CRAVINGS

crisp, unfiltered air

hand holding; hot dance parties; full faces on strangers

buttered popcorn, spicy margaritas; all things tart & tangy



dissolved skyline view

on tuesdays, it rained,  
slashing across the river;



LIBERTY ISLAND

home to the statue of liberty

sculpted steel and copper symbolizing freedom from oppression

month (n.): corresponding nearly to the moon's complete revolution

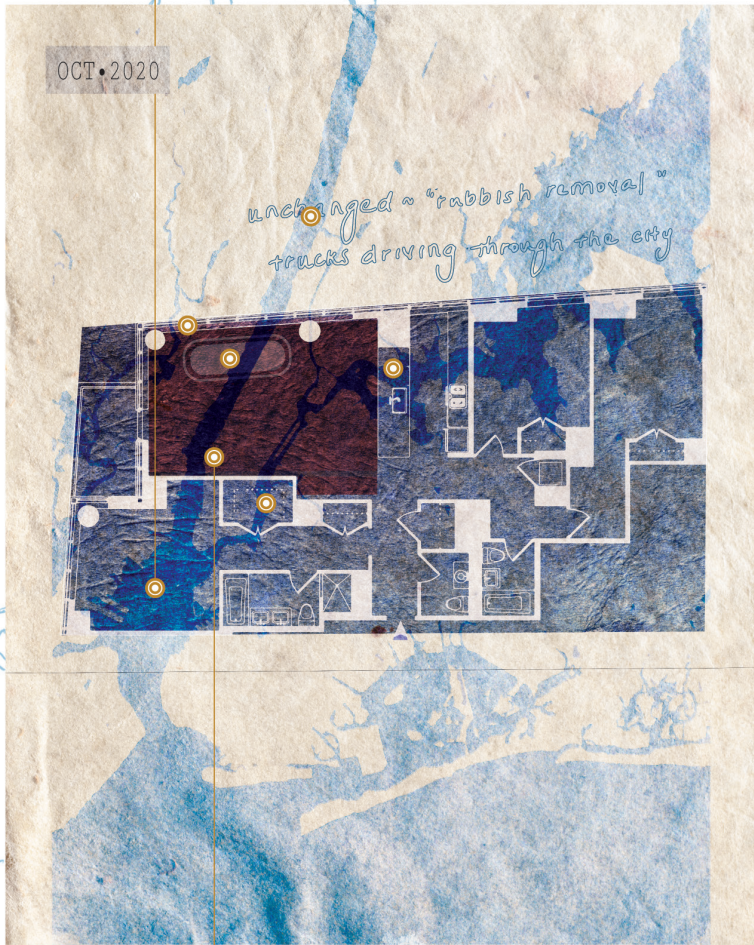
SUNSET

we tried to shatter  
the glass, and fracture the view:

blindness bore few gifts

OCT•2020

unchanged ~ "rubbish removal"  
trucks driving through the city



moon (n.): earth's natural satellite, which shines by the sun's reflected light

TELEVISION

a screen for transmitting visual imagery and sound, namely distractions

where one might watch old dance films to access a world in motion



talk left us for good

no longer answered our calls:

former therapists

LONG ISLAND SOUND

30 trillion gallons deep

enough water to sustain all of new york city for 33 years

year (n.): the period of the earth's revolution around the sun

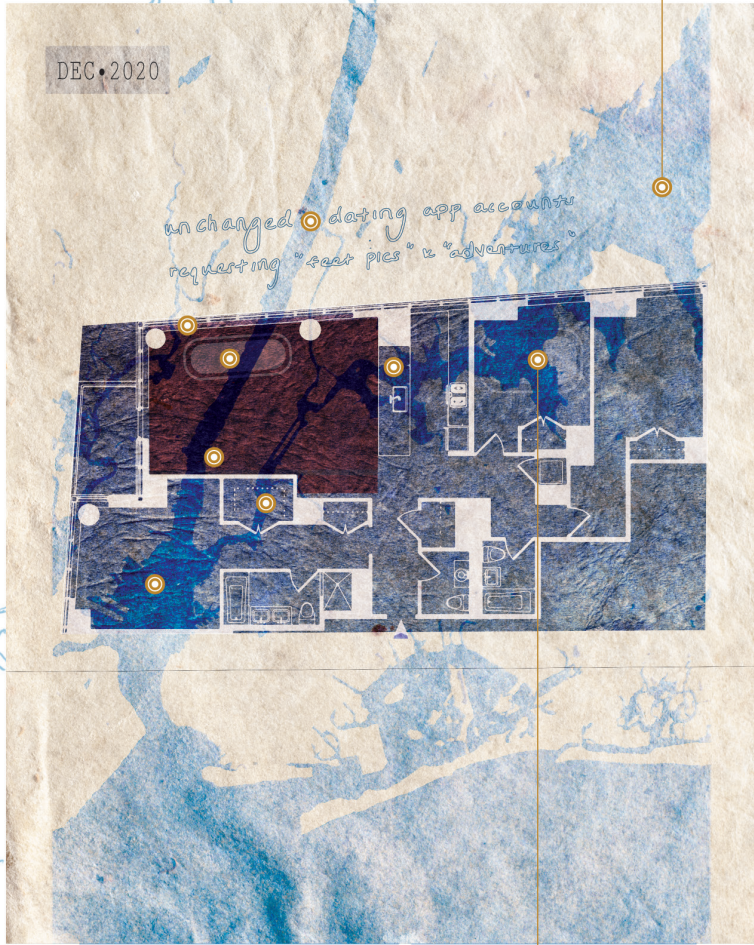
DUSK

amid winter's chill  
we wore black and bought flowers;

body wished for warmth

DEC•2020

unchanged dating app accounts  
requesting "sax pics" & "adventures"

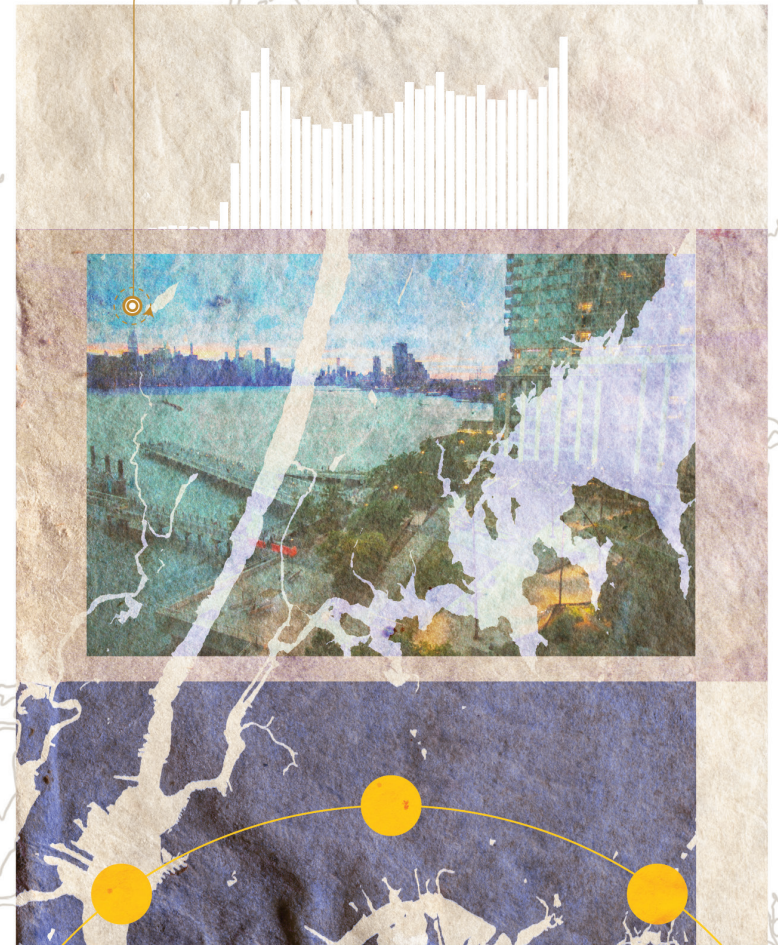


earth (n.): the planet on which humans lived, fighting for survival

REVISED SLEEPING QUARTERS

a queen-sized bed, better suited to dreaming

where one might wake from nightmares, i.e. a long chase, lost teeth



not yet, they said, wait

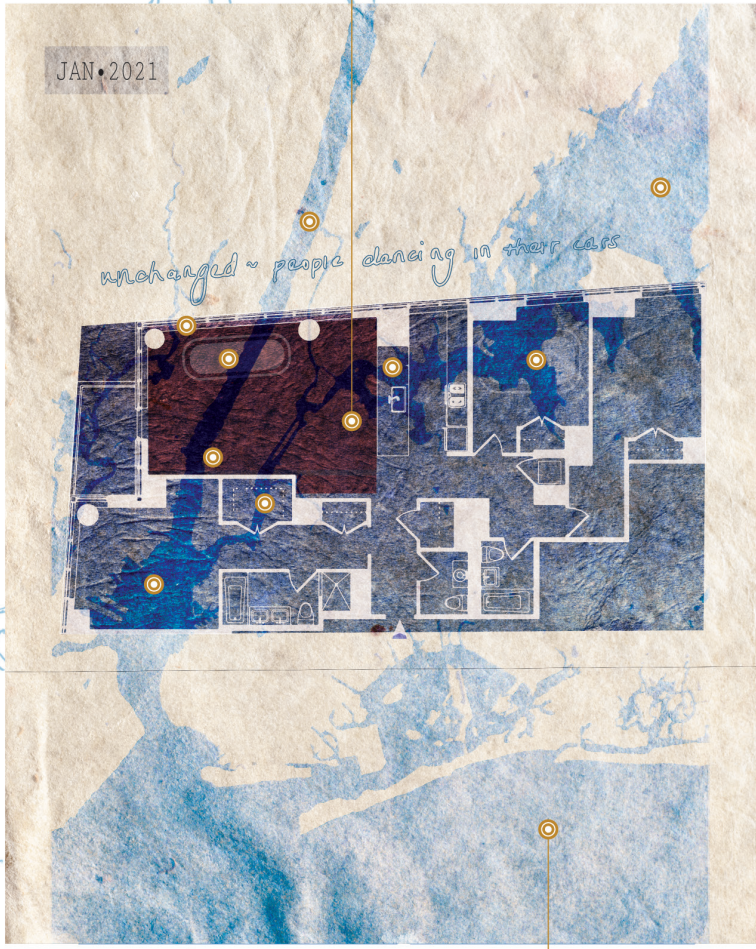
we wanted things back,  
touch, in particular, but



DINING ROOM TABLE

the long surface on which we ate, and made meaning in conversation

to•geth•er•ness (n.): the state of being in a body, as a people



people (n.): human beings making up a group, or linked by common interest

ATLANTIC OCEAN

a body of salt water occupying one-fifth of the earth

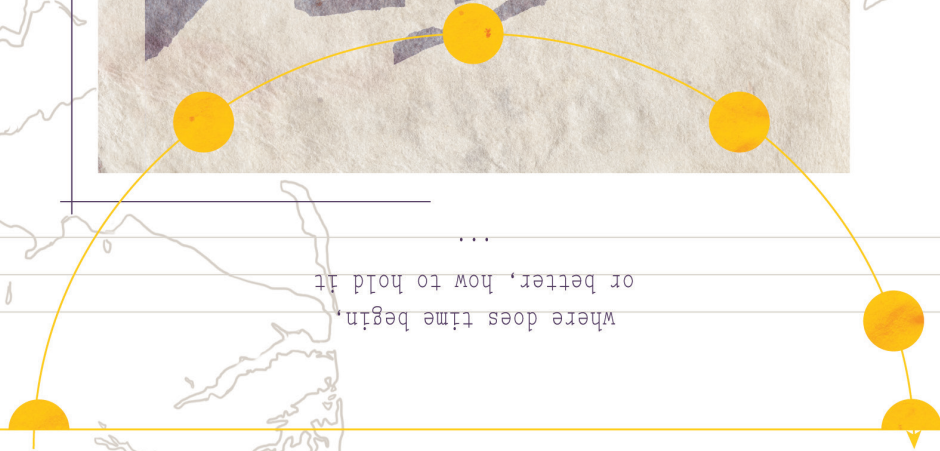
a common passageway for goods and seekers of freedom

NIGHTFALL

we buried ourselves  
beneath sheets and too bright skies;  
gravity whispered.



where does time begin,  
or better, how to hold it



2021 RON  
McFARLAND PRIZE  
FOR POETRY

runner-up

[Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye]  
by Trevor Ketner

I am fascinated by this poem, how it leads me into unknow-  
ingness and discovery. A good poem has a bit of magic, a  
mystery it doesn't fully reveal. I delight in this poem's strange  
wonder, its unruliness, and how it pushes the reader and  
writer both to meet it on its own terms.

— Leila Chatti

[Is it for fear to wet  
a widow's eye]<sup>1</sup>

woof, await, destroy—i wife trees—  
*salt*: flesh tune—i mesh it—to sing *cunt* / holy  
oath—i sea—i dust—(lathes hiss)—  
all white milkweed / tall ash—i wore sleek /  
wildwild (howl twins)—yellow tar—the bed  
has teeth—buttonhole—i froth foam heft /  
i pile—wavy pewter hem needlework—  
eyelash archery / hush pins—bed (sins) bed:  
dawn hunt—drink otter fat—*oh, hilt—oh, owl—*  
water(shifted)color—filth splits (blush)—  
bath habit / a nude want—hurt, sweetly so—  
honey tops (tea)—deerskins (sutured)—stud  
-thirst—wooden moth / violet boar—ass (tons) /  
macho cumthrust—flesh / omen—us: a dim shore.

<sup>1</sup> Note on the construction of the text:

This poem is part of a series of poems I call “divinations,” created using an online ana-  
gramming tool and the source text of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The first line of the cor-  
responding Shakespearean sonnet is borrowed as the title for each divination. The rule  
I set for myself was that I had to anagram line by line, so each line of the divination has  
the same letters, in a one-to-one relationship, as the corresponding line in the Shake-  
spearean sonnet.

2021  
FUGUE PRIZE  
FOR PROSE

runner-up

Delivering the News  
by Whitney Lee

This essay handles the truth of grief and (study of) the body with gentleness. In it, the writer works through important questions about medicine, being a person, and what it takes to keep the light on inside. I enjoyed reading it.

— Eloghosa Osunde

## Delivering the News

Last summer, I was the physician reading ultrasounds when Helen, a sonographer, entered the room and dropped Winnie’s chart on my desk. Pointing at the stack of papers she said, “That baby has a huge encephalocele.” This is a devastating condition: a hole in a baby’s skull through which the brain protrudes.

There are no windows in the room where I read ultrasounds. The walls are deep blue—nearly black. I keep the light dim so I can decipher shades of gray in the images in front of me, which are visual representations of sound waves reflecting off the bodies of fetuses growing inside their mothers’ bellies. When I clicked on Winnie’s ultrasound, the light on my screen highlighted the contours of Helen’s face. She lingered next to me while I scrolled through pictures, checking off the normal structures on a sheet of paper. The baby was a boy—something the family did not yet know. He had ten fingers and toes. The structure and function of his heart were normal. Each part was perfect. Until I saw his head.

Bone reflects sound waves rather than transmits them. A normal cranium appears as a bright white oval on ultrasound. But there was an interruption in the head of Winnie’s baby. A dark void extended from the occiput—the posterior part of the skull—to the cervical spine. His tiny brain and spinal cord ballooned through the defect.

“Well, fuck,” I said. In the rest of my life, I rarely curse. But after a decade of reading ultrasounds, I’ve learned that, often, there is nothing else to say.

“It gets worse,” Helen said and put her hand on Winnie’s chart.

The records Helen gave me explained that Winnie had struggled with infertility and endured several cycles of in vitro fertilization before she conceived. Such treatment is not an easy road to a pregnancy. The process involves arduous months, sometimes years, of evaluation and preparation: imaging, blood draws, injections, egg retrievals, and failed procedures. The entire journey is physically and emotionally taxing.

I put my head on the desk. “Helen,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

I lifted my head. “She has no idea?”

“She thinks everything is normal.”

Winnie waited in an exam room at the end of a long hallway. When I reached the door, I pumped hand sanitizer into my palm, rubbed my hands together, then paused. I did not want to knock. I despise the knock. It’s a tug on a string that will unravel a woman. On the other side of the door, Winnie was an elated expectant mother marveling at pictures of her unborn baby. But after I knocked and then opened the door, I would share news that would annihilate her. She might shake, wail, and heave. I would not be capable of fixing her pain. I dreaded the agony that waited. And all that separated me from that pain was a knock.

The air smelled like rubbing alcohol and floor wax. I lifted my arm and made a fist. The hand sanitizer left my skin damp and cold. I rapped my knuckles on the door, then lifted the handle.

\*

Maternal-fetal medicine physicians train for three years beyond an obstetrics and gynecology residency to take care of patients like Winnie. As part of this training, I learned how to examine a fetus. Using an ultrasound, I can evaluate the entire fetal body from cranium to toes. But my job is more than examining pictures. When I discover a problem, I talk to families about that problem. Sometimes, I calm a terrified couple about a small finding, barely worth mentioning—a bright spot in the baby’s heart, a dilated kidney, a cyst in the choroid plexus. Other days, I provide hope about an anomaly that will require attention but is treatable—clubbed feet, cleft lip, extra digits. But too often my job is to deliver the worst possible, most unimaginable news to a mother—inoperable cardiac defect, massive tumor, or a hole in the skull. And such news is devastating. Someone like Winnie may float into my unit elated with the anticipation of witnessing their baby’s heartbeat, seeing the fetus’s profile, and learning the sex. But after I share a crushing diagnosis, they will leave with a wound so massive they might never recover—not back to the person they were before. And I cannot fix it—any of it—the baby or the pain.

\*

When I was growing up in Indianapolis, my father, Clyde, was the anchor-man for the evening news. Before the internet and cell phones, my dad was the source of critical information for the public. Sometimes, I’d come home to his producer’s voice on our answering machine: “A plane has crashed.” “There was a shooting.” “Three teenagers were murdered in their home, we need you to come in early for the news.” Even in grade school, I felt both the heaviness and the privilege of holding knowledge. I knew secrets, and I had to keep them until the reporters, producers, and writers determined the best way for my father to share the information with the public.

I admired my father’s role. The residents of Indiana deemed him important enough, trusted enough, large enough to bear the weight of terrifying information. Though he had no agency over the devastation, people wanted to hear about it from him. When the world was falling apart, people turned to Clyde. In this way, I am like my father.

After he heard the answering machine message, my father would phone the TV station. I loved how authoritative and strong his voice was during those conversations. He’d shower, put on a suit, choose an expensive tie, and then—dressed impeccably, smelling of Polo cologne, toothpaste, and shaving cream—go to work. Soon he would know more about what was happening than anyone else. Behind his anchor desk, he would organize and package the chaos, then bring it into the world so it was digestible.

After he delivered the news, he’d come home, shed his tie, suit coat, and designer shoes, then pour a glass of Jack Daniel’s. Sometimes, though it was late, I’d join him on the back porch, sitting with him while he sipped his whiskey in silence and smoked a cigarette in the dark. Those moments with my dad remain sacred to me. He was home. The world around us could be falling to pieces, but his work was over. With the news delivered, the chaos felt sorted, the sadness behind us, and I was his little girl again.

But he never expressed sadness about the stories. He was able to bear witness to life’s vulnerable moments with authority. He came home, shed his work clothes, and moved on. When the world felt broken, his cool gave me solace. But his reaction also felt cold. Didn’t the story of the people whose house burned haunt him? The victims of a hurricane? The murdered children? Because they haunted me.

When I became a physician, I carried the news like my father had, and families waited for me to share what I discovered. I am informed of a problem, don the appropriate attire—in my world, a white coat—and bring

them the information I have packaged. But, unlike my father, I cannot let go. I grieve.

\*

Twenty years ago, as a fourth-year medical student, I gave a patient bad news for the first time. I was working with a breast cancer surgeon who was known for his sharp personality. Dr. Garrett was short and bald, and he always wore a tie in clinic—never scrubs. His shirts were starched and pants ironed. He was wonderful with his patients but had high expectations for students and carried a reputation for yelling at trainees. The students, residents, and fellows feared him. But his patients adored him.

The last day of my rotation, just before we entered an exam room to tell a woman she had breast cancer, Dr. Garrett handed me the pathology report, nodded in my direction, and said, “You are going to tell her.”

I’d sutured skin, put in central lines, drained fluid from chests, and delivered babies, but telling this woman she had cancer? This was the first time I felt like a doctor, and I was terrified.

There is no algorithm to follow or checklist to complete to deliver news. A standard procedure for telling a woman she has cancer does not exist. No one can predict how she will respond. Furthermore, for a medical student, mistakes in communication are harder to fix than procedural mistakes. If I placed a suture incorrectly, a resident could cut and replace it. If I inserted a chest tube too deep, someone could pull it back. None of the orders I wrote would be filled unless a doctor reviewed them first. But the words I used with this patient could not be reviewed before they left my mouth. I understood, in a harrowing way, that the moment I told her she had cancer would be one she would remember the rest of her life. I thought of my father and wished for his cool, detached charm.

I held the paper, knocked on the door, and walked in the room. A woman in her sixties was sitting on the exam table. She was slight with grey hair cut into a bob. She wore a pink shirt and khaki pants. Her husband stood next to her. I don’t remember what I said, but I remember the couple held hands. I shared the news, then Dr. Garrett provided the details of her treatment. They cried and asked questions, but there was no wailing or drama. Yet I still walked out of the room, leaned against a wall in the hallway, put my hands over my face, and cried.

Dr. Garrett leaned against the wall with me. He looked over and said, “Hey. I am proud of you. You did a good job. Medicine needs more doctors who care this much.” What he did not say was that caring so much could ruin me.

\*

Early in my career, even though I struggled every time I gave bad news, I thought I’d eventually learn to deal with the ache and stay detached. That is what my father did. I thought that becoming an expert in the science of medicine would be the most challenging part of my career. But gaining expertise was the easy part of becoming a doctor. The hard part was when that expertise was no longer reassuring, when my knowledge carried no solace, when the news just hurt. Someone taught me how to read ultrasounds, but no one taught me how to deal with the inescapable reality of death or profound disability. I had witnessed my father leave the house to share the news of a natural disaster, a shooting, a litany of tragedies. But no one expected him to ease the pain, heal the situation, or make predictions. No one looked to him for solutions. His job was merely to deliver the news.

\*

“Winnie?” I said as I walked into the room. “I am Dr. Lee.”

The lights were dim. She was sitting in a chair just on the other side of the door. Though she was dressed casually—jeans and a plaid shirt—her stature gave her an air of elegance. She was Black with high cheek bones and chiseled features. All of her body, even her fingers, was long and lean.

She smiled, excited for me to share what I knew about her baby.

I rolled a stool from the other side of the room so that it was in front of her. I sat down, leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees. I never know what waits for me after these words.

“I am afraid I have bad news,” I said. “Do you want to call your husband?”

“Oh, God,” she said.

Her phone shook as she trembled. She scrolled through her contacts to find her husband’s number. But her brain could no longer process information. She could not make sense of the words on the screen. “I cannot find his number,” she said frantically. I reached my hand out and put it on her knee. “Breathe,” I said.

When she was able to call him, he did not answer. She tried two more times. No answer.

“Just tell me,” she said.

I did not hesitate. Hesitation is not fair. Hesitation is torture.

“Your baby is missing part of the skull,” I said touching the back of my head. She grabbed the arms of her chair, pushing her body backward and away from me, as if I was going to physically harm her.

“I don’t know what that means,” she said.

“This is bad, Winnie.” She heaved. I thought she was going to vomit. She could have vomited in my lap and I would not have moved. I would not have cared. “Your baby may not survive, but if he does, he will likely never run, jump, or play.”

Then, Winnie wailed. The wail of a mother grieving her baby is unforgettable. It is guttural and primal like a mortally wounded animal’s.

I continued to lean forward, stayed with her. I did not try to make it better or fix it. I just said, “I am sorry.”

I wanted to tell Winnie her baby would be fine. I wanted to say, “It is probably not as bad as I think it is. Don’t worry.” But this response would not be to ease the patient’s pain. It would be to relieve mine.

After a few minutes, when she could speak again, she asked, “What will happen?”

I could not predict what would happen to her baby. There was no doubt that the prognosis was awful. But I did not know if he would die in utero, die after birth, live but never go to school, walk, or talk. Sharing such uncertainty with a parent feels as cruel as the bad news—maybe more cruel. Didn’t Winnie at least deserve certainty?

\*

Almost every mother asks me the same question at some point in their prenatal care: “Are you sure everything is OK?”

I am never sure. No one can be sure. Pregnancy is wobbly and unpredictable. What if I say I am certain everything is perfect and then she goes into labor five months too soon? What if her baby lays on his umbilical cord and is stillborn? What if I miss an anomaly? I do not worry about these things. I simply know that they are all possibilities.

“Right now, everything is just fine,” I say to these mothers. This is the only fair answer I can offer most of them. “There is no need to worry.” But they carry that anxiety until the baby is in their arms.

For Winnie, the worry was over. Worry was replaced with anguish. What every mother fears in my office was now Winnie’s reality.

\*

Patient means one who suffers. We are all patients, even outside the medical system. When I was a little girl, listening to our answering machine and learning about loss, a veil was lifted, and my naïveté was exposed and changed. I had knowledge that someone’s life had been altered and people were suffering in a world I inhabited. This realization was destabilizing. Thirty-five years later, I remember the messages. I remember the Jack Daniel’s and the glowing cigarettes and the quiet reverence of sitting with my father in the dark. I struggle with the reality that, though my father carried and I carry the news, we cannot shape it into something palatable. Our job is not to make the hurt meaningful. Our job is to deliver the information. Then we are supposed to let go. But there are no books or classes on how to let go. I don’t know how to let go. I don’t know if I want to let go.

I once asked my father how he dealt with the sad news. He explained that, most often, he did not have to interact with the newsmaker. He was not part of their story, only the vehicle for it. It was easy to walk away unattached.

I know that if I grieve and hurt every time I take care of patients like Winnie, I will burn out. If I express anguish, colleagues can see it as weak or unprofessional. If, like my father, I am strong and unfazed, I will appear brave and in control yet feel cold. This is a tug between the professional and the personal. The conflict makes me understand why my father always turned to Jack Daniel’s when he came home.

Compassion means to suffer together. Like I did twenty years ago with Dr. Garrett, I left Winnie’s room and cried. But this time alone. Though carrying such hurt may not be sustainable, I worry that if I let go of the anguish, I will have to let go of compassion—of what I believe defines me as a doctor and a person. I don’t want to be cold and detached so that I can continue in my career. I worry that if I let go of the pain, I’ll have to let go of my soul.

Erica Trabold

# My Willa Cather

*We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.*

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 1918

Of course, Willa Cather and I both drove Jeep Grand Cherokees, and we drove them fast. We drove them fast down gravel roads and under the prairie moon, faster until we felt every *shouldshouldshould* lift from our heavy, girlish shoulders. We could cross the county line in three minutes flat. But even on the other side, the highway smelled the same. A fat manure stench controlled the atmosphere in those days, acrid, yes, and sweet, like fruit decaying in the bowl, but rounder and wrong. It may have smelled like cow, may have smelled like home—but windows down, *we were somewhere else*.

We had enough gas to get that far, slid our keys into the ignition, deciding—once again—to fill the tank later, after we had put enough miles between us and all things familiar. Goodbye, hometown. Goodbye, sweet smells. Goodbye, cow, cow, cow.

And then what, after all that goodbye-ing?

I think we must have smiled. Our bodies recognized freedom, knew it before our minds could interpret the sensation into word or action. Maybe we didn't realize what we had done. That was the last time we could reasonably and fairly call ourselves *small town girls*. To go farther meant a kind of giving up. And we would go. We passed the fields and the tallgrass.

Look at us—*we were something else*.

\*

In the last year alone, Willa and I have given up so many treasured things: the college wardrobe we no longer wore, the housewarming gifts that turned out useless, the city on the coast where we loved living and wanted to stay, the family cabin beside the water in Nebraska.

In March, we drove our Jeeps to the junkyard. We had to, the wiring was failing—twenty-three-year-old cars just give up after a certain point—and we worried, constantly, about getting stuck. *What would we do if the car stranded us on a mountainside, or worse, an interstate? What if our predicament led to an accident and the impact crushed more than metal?* It didn't feel like a choice. Time, simply, demanded we let go.

That didn't make letting go easy. The Jeeps had carried us out of so many stuck places. That's what they're good for, or anyway, that's the marketing. And mine—my old Jeep felt like an extension of my body. I knew its rhythms: how hard to push the brake (hard), at what speed the transmission would stick, how to listen, how to respond. I rarely cleared out the trash—never a deep clean, but a certain and deep love. I'm sure Willa would say the same.

Of course, we wanted to love our Jeeps back into working order, but this was the world, and the men at the junkyard whistled and whispered their crass remarks a little too loudly, even though our faces were tear-streaked, even though we were still wearing pajamas, had barely the will that day to lift our bodies out of bed to perform a task so painful, even though we glared, even though we both thought, *How could you? This is the worst day of my life*.

The smell of gasoline and grease. The sound of a drill separating two once-connected things. The distracted smile of the woman in a pink hard hat. At the register, she printed us each a check for \$171, the price of scrap metal. However beloved—we said our goodbyes—that part of us was gone.

\*

Of course, we met our cast of childhood friends in a crumbling public school, in a little farming town. The paint flaking onto our desks absolutely contained lead, the books we read yellowed with age. Our school wasn't old, not in the global sense of things, but it was old enough to have accumulated a history before we were invited to wander its halls. It was a human landscape built atop one much older, a brick building in which similar conversations repeated themselves every day, every semester, on a loop, for nearly eighty years.

In every English class, Willa was the star. The literature of rural Nebraska, our home—we needed to learn it. Of course, we read *My Ántonia* sophomore year. Willa was the greatest Nebraska author of all time. She wrote about the prairie when it was still grass and imagination, crafted characters and plot from her experiences in Red Cloud and Lincoln. Willa's language was Nebraska, and supposedly it was shared. When I became a writer, I learned no matter how far away I went, my writing would constantly be compared to hers. If we came from the prairie, then we were the same. No, it wasn't really fair.

Of course, our English teacher didn't trust us to *actually read*. Along with chapters, she assigned a daily quiz covering the information we should have encountered the night before. I sat with Willa's novels every night. Even if most of her writing was over my head, most of the feelings she articulated unrelatable because I hadn't yet felt them, I always did what the teacher asked. It seemed like a good idea.

I read, but remembering was more difficult. The girls who never opened their books and skimmed the SparkNotes instead scored better on the quizzes. Of course, I compared myself with them. And I wondered about the point when I failed the quiz on Chapter 5 because I couldn't remember what kind of vegetable Russian Peter gave Jim to cook in milk for dinner.

Cucumbers, I remember now. Willa won't let me forget.

\*

Of course, now we both live in a former Piggly Wiggly, the ground-floor basement, where they used to store the meat and vegetables. It's funny, but only kind of.

The "loft" looked spacious and full of light on the internet. The management company attached four pictures to an email, but we couldn't hear the noise—car alarms, semis taking the interchange into town, neighbors out for a smoke beside the bedroom window. After we moved in, the sounds of small-town Virginia took getting used to, even for the cats, who hid under the bed for the first two weeks. The homesickness hit then—immediately—when we realized the situation was far from what we had imagined for ourselves.

We were taking steps with our writing. We were professionals with *career momentum*. We were modern women. We had experienced so many privileges, given up so many treasured things. We had experienced, like everyone else, the sour depths of grief.

I told Willa I missed Portland more than I could have known.

We missed Nebraska, too.

After a couple of months, my parents drove from Nebraska to visit the new apartment. In unison, they said, "This is a nice place!" They saw the countertops and appliances, faux marble and stainless steel, but they weren't listening—that much was evident—to the overwhelming noise of the parking lot or to me, conveying unhappiness. They could not hear the grief.

Looming over the visit was the last time we had seen them, on our drive from Oregon to Virginia, cats and clothes and personal libraries in tow. We were moving across the country—forward momentum, *take that job*—and planned a stop at home, the halfway point between west and east, there and here, the old family cabin in Nebraska.

Like our school's, most of the cabin's history happened before our time: when there was sand and lots of it. A company dug it out to make concrete, and there we appeared, on "lakefront property." In our childhood, there was always just the cabin, always just the lake—old, but not in the global sense of things. Downstairs, the sun poured in through an entire wall of windows that, in a span of ten years, faded the carpet and curtains and wallpaper entirely. Upstairs, we slept. Three modest bedrooms and an air conditioner that could never quite keep up controlled the atmosphere of summer, every summer of our Nebraska girlhood.

No matter how far we drove, it was summer that stayed with us most, the season when life happened: when we were free from all demands, when the wildflowers bloomed and the cottonwood pods burst into the opposite of snow. The little cabin, the sticky humidity, the green weeds poking through the sand, the memory of those things was a fixed point—home.

Our grandparents had built it. Our childhoods had consumed it. We had planned everything about the drive so carefully. Of course.

At the end of July, we set out from Portland for Virginia. As the movers pressed the doorbell, crossed the threshold to carry out all our boxes out to a trailer, the phone rang. Mom said, "We sold the cabin." In a few days, she knew, we would arrive. We could still stay, but this would be the last time. And just like that, home was a near-certain memory.

\*

The last time went something like this: We arrived just after the sun, and Willa held my hand. The drive from my parents' house to the lake took



the usual twenty minutes. I parked on the familiar gravel driveway, which had been a minefield of sandburs all throughout my childhood. When I was little, I would ask my dad to carry me to the door, deposit me on the sidewalk, rescue me from danger, but enough years and enough weed killer had eradicated those fears. We hurried across the gravel and keyed into the side door.

Of course, tears welled. My shoulders heaved. I stepped into the living room and dropped my bag on the couch beside the accent pillows that had sat there for nearly thirty years, faded coral and turquoise, my grandmother's favorite colors. The blanket draped across the couch had once been white, but I had wrapped myself in it after a swim too many times. Hugging its yellowed weight around my body, I did the same thing now. I wandered through the house, a ghost. I wept inside every room.

The bathroom looked different than it did in the early days—my parents had repainted the walls and tiled the floor—so I imagined my grandmother's wallpaper back in its place, a seaside scene, a little girl building a sandcastle over and over and over around the room. Sitting there, I opened the linen cabinet, just to smell the plywood again. It smelled like my earliest memory. I sat, wrapped in the blanket, for a long time, reading the page of summertime first aid tips ripped from a magazine in the early nineties and thumbtacked inside the cabinet door. It had been there ever since.

When I finally stood, my hands found the medicine cabinet above the sink. I placed both palms around the combs my grandmother used to shape her wig, the bottles of aftershave that belonged to my grandfather. As if they might walk in the door on any summer afternoon.

I took the stairs slowly, careful not to trip on the blanket, and passed through the first bedroom into the other—mine. I lay down on my bed. Of course, that's where my parents found me, on top of the *Lion King* comforter, still wrapped in the once-white blanket, tear streaked and sobbing.

\*

Of course, the prairie is evolving, a place of constant invention. For Nebraskans, old is a foreign concept. Keeping anything for long would be a wild act of resistance to an environment of progress and promise. Home is a horizon we can't always recognize.

Virginia, the first permanent colony in the "New World," accumulated structures centuries before any immigrant thought about venturing

west, much less staying. I told Willa I'm trying to understand that difference. Though she's a prairie girl like me, I know she was born in Virginia. I thought she might be able to help.

We felt close to an answer when, last weekend, a friend trusted us with a skeleton key to a very old place. It opened the door to Laura's family cabin in the Shenandoah Valley, two hours north of our basement apartment. Like Willa's childhood home, Laura's was built in an unimaginable time, 1787—pre-Civil War, pre-reconstruction, mid-Westward Expansion, pre-any-recognizable-version-of-this-country—and like Willa's, Laura's property rests against a creek. Her family has owned Creekside since 1901, when her great-great-grandmother parted with \$700 of her "egg money" to buy the house and land. Though she was married at the time, it is *her name* on the deed.

Creekside, Laura tells us, has been bought and sold to relatives and shared among them since then. The design is traditional and Appalachian, split log on top of split log, the kind of house I imagine whenever I hear Dolly Parton sing about her mountain home. There is no Wi-Fi, but at some point, someone added on: kitchen, electric wiring, indoor plumbing, heat. The family still uses the cabin as a place to gather and celebrate, to eat and relax. Through the simple fact of its use, we grasp its significance.

Willa, on the other hand, left the Virginia home of her girlhood in 1883, traveling with her family on a days-long train ride to Nebraska—that's where we met. We found friendship easy. We could talk corn and immigration, politics, and the livelihood of neighbors, for hours. When people think of us, they think of us together.

The drive to Creekside from the apartment took longer than expected, speed limits low on the backroads, Virginia highways serpentine. Steadily, we gained elevation and crossed the mountain range and, finally, arrived, stepped out of the car just before the thunder clapped, and watched a heron—I kid you not—lift its enormity from the creek and, somehow, fly. What a prairie metaphor, I thought, this bird of our Nebraska rivers. Creekside sounded like an echo of home, a static place that belonged, like this one, to someone else.

\*

When I think of Willa, I think of us on the road—we're always en route.

In *O Pioneers!*, Willa told me, "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."

In *The Song of the Lark*, she told me, “The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing—desire.”

In *My Antonia*, she told me, “If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky,” she felt “erased, blotted out.”

Sitting behind the wheel of my new car, the wheel of my new life, I felt it all—full of desire and the accompanying emptiness. My past was a memory, blotted out. I was a girl in a car in a story.

Many a Midwestern writer has criticized the Midwestern writer who moved away. That’s Willa, and that’s me. But think of the circumstances that make staying impossible. In “Imagining the Midwest,” Scott Russell Sanders offers a short list: a combination of puritanical religion, utilitarian economics, and anti-intellectualism. Forces hostile to art drive artists out. When I miss Nebraska, I recognize these forces for what they are—excuses. Of course, I can’t be the only one who misses home. I thought it would always be there, a fixed point. And then, my homecoming wasn’t.

But if everything is gone—the prairie grass, the railroad, the family farm, the people, my home—*where can we do the work of making a new and necessary life?*

\*

This morning, I told Willa I was taking her home. She climbed into the passenger seat of my Honda Civic. It’s the kind of car I drive these days, and these days, it has over 176,000 miles. I wouldn’t say the new car is *better* because *better* suggests it possesses something my old Jeep did not, higher virtue perhaps. It doesn’t. But the car is more reliable. We won’t have to worry about getting stranded on the three-hour drive. Instead, we’ll talk about something other than fear.

It’s a relationship I’ve been giving more time to lately because I’ve had to—it’s the only car we own. I’ve learned its rhythms: when to brake on the hill as the speed limit drops, how often the front tires will require air (often), how to listen, how to adapt.

Of course, Willa was ecstatic. Virginia, curling like the kudzu vines that threaten to overtake our parking lot, had always crept its way into her stories—even and especially her stories about the prairie. She treated Virginia as a counterpoint, she explained on our drive toward Winchester. She thought of more than one place as home. The word was multifaceted. On the page and in reality, it could make a prism of things.

All this time, our whole friendship long, I had been thinking of Nebraska as the place left, for both of us. But it wasn’t—she had always been from *here*, an older place, the kind of place I resisted and now needed to make my own. We were together in Virginia. We were together in the car. Our stories were the same, human and repeating. There are only two or three.

\*

On the side of Route 50, a highway once used for the slow trot of industry, and before, a footpath worn smooth by the use of indigenous peoples, the house where Willa was born had fallen into disrepair. The gravel driveway was short, obscured by a thick wall of branches. Because of the trees, we missed it the first time and had to circle back.

The white house was in sorry shape. Once-green shutters hung off the crooked frame and looked as though they had been falling, slowly, forever. The paint flaking onto the grass absolutely contained lead and, at some point, someone added on: rooms off the back porch, invisible from the road, that appeared more modern than the original structure. All of the windows were broken, even those on the addition Willa doesn’t remember. The yard was unkempt, covered by a layer of crunchy leaves and brown vines. When we stepped on them, they made too much noise.

I looked at Willa with worry. I couldn’t help feeling like we had no right to the place, even though the historical marker, hidden by trees, displayed her name in capital letters. It felt like, at any moment, someone could run down the hill yelling. *This is my property*, the man might say. *What the hell are you doing?* Of course, the thought of trespassing and its consequences hurried us back into the car. We had driven over three hours. We had stayed at Willa’s house less than five minutes.

At least there was another house to see. A half mile down the road, Willa asked me to pull over again beside Willow Shade, the larger of the two, made of red brick, where her family lived for many years before moving to Nebraska. Goats chomped on grass near the barn. Smoke puffed from the chimney. The property belonged to someone else, and they were home—that much was evident. We didn’t even bother pulling into the driveway.

I wondered what it would feel like to visit my family cabin next. *Would I get out of the car? Who would be there, and would they invite me in?*

I was afraid, and she could tell. Of course, Willa comforted me. We left Willow Shade, pointed the car toward the old Piggly Wiggly, and turned up

the speakers. That week, we had been listening to a recording of *The Song of the Lark*, and on the drive home, reached the scene where the protagonist, Thea Kronborg, boards the train for Chicago, knowing she might never return. Our characters, Willa said, say the things we wish we could.

Willa was in my car. She was in my ears. She was telling me a story about a girl with ambition leaving home, about how leaving felt like freedom, like an ending, like a clean break. I read the passage like a coded message, the way one small town girl recognizes another:

*Everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. She even felt more compact and confident than usual. She was all there, and something else was there, too,—in her heart, was it, or under her cheek? Anyhow, it was about her somewhere, that warm sureness, that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret.*

## The Rural Imagination of Aluminum & Copper

They were up at the Augur Bit  
melting down aluminum.

I always imagined  
the Silver Surfer, Tyvek suits,  
but this was an operation in flannel & denim.

Once, a man had fallen in,  
or it was dumped on him. An ambulance heading  
through the night.

//

An electric cord across an alley  
reminds me of copper  
burning into the sky.

Tonight we are burning,  
they'd say, hoping to keep the EPA away.

This shit is so stiff, they'd say.

They were turning miles  
into blocks, since stripping  
the wire was so costly.

The cloud would settle  
somewhere in West Virginia  
on a blackout of ferns.

## Concrete

In the span of four years, we lost as many people. My dad's dad, my mom's mom, her sister, and my dad. By age eight, I had been to four family funerals.

As if to match the trend, my mom took to the yard and gave one tree after another the axe. First, she cut down the cherry tree that my dad was trimming when he fell. It may have been rotting from the inside, or threatening to crack the driveway with unruly roots spreading underneath, but it always seemed a bit vengeful, too.

Then there was the monstrous pine on the other side of the front yard, the one that the previous owners had left draped with broken Christmas lights. It left a big hole in the ground, so we had to replace it with store-bought dirt.

The three tall trees at the edge of the back fence eventually disappeared. A friend's dad hung a cloth ladder from one of them, and I used it as a rope swing for a while. My mom made me wear a helmet.

A secret thing I liked to do while my mom napped was to climb the tree on the right side of the backyard, the one with round stones laid around it in decoration. No helmet. I wrote my first poem in its branches during a rainstorm, in Sharpie on my arm.

The three tall trees were old enough that my mom needed a permit from the city to cut them down. She said they blocked the sun from the Japanese maple she'd planted after my dad died, alongside the birch trees she'd planted in memory of her own father, who'd died years before I was born.

She even cut down the beautiful tree on the left side of the backyard, seemingly because its roots were going to wreak havoc on the brick section of the patio. I wasn't too angry about it; its branches would scratch at my window on windy nights, the fingernails of a ghost coming to get me.

\*

In a book called *Vibrant Matter*, political theorist Jane Bennett writes, "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group." In other words, human forces work with nonhuman forces to cause change. Some of those nonhuman ones, like animals and plants, are alive; others are not strictly so.

Since I was young, I've always known there was a force "out there," one that acted on me and my world. It wasn't a person who gave my family cancer and caused my dad's fall.

For a long time, I called that force "God." It really worked until it really did not.

\*

At first it wasn't clear my dad would die. For eleven days, there were MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and CT (computed tomography) scans. It was confirmed he had a severe TBI (traumatic brain injury) and damage to the RAS (reticular activating system). This put him into a PVS (persistent vegetative state), and because he had a DNR (do not resuscitate) order, it was settled. Life support would be disconnected, and my dad's heart would stop beating.

Not that I knew any of this. I came to the hospital one night after a particularly fun playdate during which we had decorated oversized T-shirts in puffy paint to make swim cover-ups that could also be nightgowns. Two nuns from my school visited that night, and I felt the lumps of dried acrylic paint press against my chest and belly when they hugged me. While the huge atrium of the hospital glowed around us, I worried I would be in trouble for not wearing my school uniform. They were wearing theirs, after all.

Another visit, I came from a playdate with my best friend Courtney. Her mom brought us to the hospital, and we played on the sidewalk as we walked. *Don't step on the crack, or you'll break your mother's back!* We shrieked and giggled, hopping from square to square.

*Don't say that!* Courtney's mom chided, her stern tone a jarring departure from her usual cheerfulness. She explained that the rhyme hurt her feelings because she was a mom. We stopped, shrugging.

The next thing I knew, Courtney and her mom were gone. I was in a white room with a large table, sitting in my mom's lap. She wore leggings with flip-flops and her signature pink toenails. I could smell her Lancôme perfume.

She was saying to me, *Honey, Daddy died. Do you know what that means?* I didn't, quite, but without warning my nose filled with snot. Tears

stained my mom's sweatshirt as I buried my face in it. Her hand was on my back, alternating rubs and pats.

I looked up, and only then did I notice the many faces around the table in front of us. One of them was my older brother. He lived in Seattle, far away, so his sudden appearance seemed to mean this all had to be a dream. My dad was still somewhere napping, having his own dreams. Both of us were just about to wake up.

\*

The thesis of Jane Bennett's book is simple enough: when we think about stuff—litter, toys, gadgets, food, metal—we think of it as dead, inert, and unconscious. Such matter, therefore, does not typically strike us as possessing agency. However, Bennett says, our habit of seeing stuff this way hurts the planet and thus threatens our own existence.

What if, she asks, we could instead view matter a bit more like we view the stuff of life? In other words, a conception of stuff that is a bit more *vibrant* might change everything.

\*

In Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the protagonist Bone finds God in one fell swoop. She hears gospel music, and it's like Jesus Himself has poured liquid gold into her ears. The sound is so rapturous that she believes in everything, instantly. It strikes me as apt, how the story should go when a fierce believer finds God.

My inroad to zealous faith was more gradual, more like liquid cement poured from a mixing truck, subtly clogging my gears. After my dad died, the stories from religion class became relevant. Death, resurrection, ascension into heaven. A Son who died so we could live. They were workarounds for the finality of death; a trade-in of carefree enjoyment in this life for careful rule-following that would lead to an amazing next life. The path of my life grew clear: be a good person, die, go to heaven.

Seen another way, you could say that my dad's soul slipped out and onto the concrete, so I fled into the abstract.

\*

The best place to pray was my bedroom. My dad built the bed himself, out of heavy wood to match their first home, which he had also built. A queen-size

mattress never quite fit the frame because the measurements were a tiny bit off. The beams reached the ceiling and connected to one another, forming a rectangle, and lying in it, I imagined both God and my dad watching me, like the beams made a frame for a television show that ran every time I slept. This both comforted and alarmed me.

I mitigated this fear by praying each night. I made two lists: one for all the suffering, living people I could think of, and another for all the dead. I would ask that the suffering ones somehow stop suffering, and that the dead ones be admitted into heaven. I knew not all of these dead people had been perfect in life, and I hoped my prayers would help tip the scales if they were still getting the sin laundered out of them in purgatory. I never could remember if Catholics still believed in purgatory, but I decided that I did.

After the lists, I would talk to Jesus like a friend. Now and then, I'd ask why God had taken my dad and not my mom. Then I'd take it back, feeling guilty, but probably also a little aware that God was already thinking about taking her, too.

\*

One of the types of stuff that Bennett analyzes in *Vibrant Matter* is metal. She states that, despite metal's smooth, continuous appearance, it has a microstructure composed of "irregularly shaped crystals that do not form a seamless whole." This unevenness helps determine what properties any given metal has. The crystals produce "unpredictably mobile fault lines or energetic currents" that cause free atoms to quiver, and this quivering can be even more important than the atoms themselves in determining what a certain metal can do. Bennett calls this quivering a metallic vitality, an impersonal life. Just like alive beings can surprise us with their inactivity, so too can non-living stuff with its vivacity.

\*

A few days before my dad fell, my mom's biopsy confirmed what they had suspected. After the fall and beyond, the lump was still there, waiting.

My babysitter came to live with us for a year while my mom underwent chemo and radiation. Lori had shiny blond hair and wide hips, and she wore a uniform of black leggings with white T-shirts. Her laugh was loud and invited collaboration. She introduced me to Jimmy Buffett and Barenaked Ladies, taught me how to floss and to blow-dry my hair.

Lori picked me up after school, and we adventured around in her white Toyota Camry. We went to Three Beads and a Button to make necklaces and then dip a tin cup into a barrel of buttons to take home. I started collecting not just buttons but all small objects. Pewter figurines, heart-shaped stones, anything dense or shiny. I arranged plastic Halloween costume jewels and glass from the beach and my mancala stones in intricate patterns around me, feeling protected by their impressive piles.

\*

“Who would choose metal as a symbol of vitality?” Bennett asks, poking fun at her own project. But in some ways, it is easy to see that a substance which conducts heat and electricity, which gets shaped into jewelry and musical instruments, and which seems inherently connected to technology and progress is just about as alive as stuff can get.

So I might ask myself: Who would choose concrete? I could point to the heterogeneity of the mixture, of water and gravel and glue and sand, hoping that, as with the crystal grains of iron, one could find the “emergent causality” Bennett writes about, where “grains respond on the spot and in real time to the idiosyncratic movements of their neighbors, and then to their neighbors’ response to their response, and so on, in feedback spirals.”

Apparently I have long had an instinct to talk about my dad’s fall as a sort of lively event. In a poem I wrote in high school, the narrator is a mother explaining to her child how her father wasn’t truly gone because of the law of conservation of energy. *The same numbers, just different sides of the equation.* Even at a time when I believed my dad’s soul was in heaven waiting, I was already looking for ways to interpret the event that didn’t rely on religion but rather on the creative application of theoretical concepts.

If I were to analyze my dad’s death in terms of *Vibrant Matter*, what would it look like? Would it be fair to say that the concrete “came up” to strike him? (*It’s not that the slab of concrete collided with his head—the ground just transferred its energy into him, like a bulb of white light.*)

Perhaps I could say that, when the ground struck my father, the rock-solid driveway was infinitesimally shaken. We lived on an active fault line that had quaked before. Is there a non-zero possibility there was a tremor that day? Could I blame it all on climate change?

There was also the question of the metal ladder he used to reach the tree he was trimming. Could it have been a catalyst for vibrations of a sort, caused its own toppling and expulsion of a foreign body atop it?

\*

In the year after my dad died, my mom and I wore the pop star’s CD ragged. There was one song on it we particularly liked, and my mom got the idea that singing it would make a nice tribute on the first anniversary of his death. I had the lyrics memorized in a day without trying.

But when we stepped out of the car at the cemetery, the air had shifted. I dragged the heels of my shoes on the sidewalk, the scratching sound dissipating fast. Once on the grass, my shoes sank a little, and I fought the losing battle of picking spots of mud off them while my mom set up the boombox. As soon as she set it down on the nearby concrete with a clank, I knew I would not sing.

My mom started singing when she found the right note. The song had a cold open, which was hard enough, but I could hear another problem immediately. There were no family room walls to bring the music back to our ears, no hiding the loss that surrounded our family.

The song struck me now as stupid and embarrassing. What had been encouraging and uplifting at home was now tinny and tacky, bouncing off the headstones in the courtyard. I kept seeing our sad little twosome in the eyes of my aunts and uncles, not knowing where to look and so just looking down. I followed suit, began a bad habit of fleeing.

I couldn’t bear to hear the song for years afterward. I had to duck out of shopping malls and pharmacies whenever I heard it, those lauded vocals with that mid-nineties synth sound in the background. Contrast this to Bone’s experience with music in *Bastard Out of Carolina*: “I could taste the wind in my mouth. The sweet gospel music poured through me.” She continues, “The music was a river trying to wash me clean. I sobbed and dug my heels into the dirt, drunk on grief and that pure, pure voice.”

\*

A thoroughly dead, inert conception of matter, according to Bennett, prevents us from “detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within non-human bodies.” And as Bennett argues throughout the book, our psychological de-

sire to see matter as dead is deeply connected to Western culture's attachment to a "morally ranked cosmos" in which real agency belongs only to humans or to God, forcing us to "overlook much of the swirling vitality of the world." But Bone's experience with the evangelicals brings her more in touch with her senses, not less. Without knowing it, she seems to be reaching more toward a Bennettian materialism than Christianity.

\*

*Don't step on the line, or you'll break your mother's spine*, I chanted, hopping around our back patio. Fall leaves crunched all around, and they left gray imprints on the ground from recent rain. It was still light out but only just, and my cheeks were flushed from the cold.

Lori's infectious laugh rang out, and my mom joined in, a bit quieter. She was sitting on a stool with Lori behind her, and brown balls of fluff were floating in the air. Lori gently tugged at my mom's head from where she sat, because the chemo was starting to do its job.

*Let's get rid of this dead weight!* Lori cheered.

*Hair is always dead*, I shouted from afar, continuing to hop. We had christened my mom's wig Betty Bouffant the night before. It was curlier than my mom's natural hair, but she used to perm it anyway, so it worked. The name made me laugh because it sounded so similar to the word we had made up for passing gas a year or two earlier.

Watching the tufts bob and dip before falling at last to the ground, I thought about the white dandelions Courtney and I still loved to blow on, making a wish before sucking on the sour stems. Lori asked me to come over to her and my mom, so I skipped over.

*Come on, help me out, kiddo!* she said. I lightly tugged, squealing at the odd sensation when a clump came out.

*Boofer!* I shouted and ran away.

\*

I can't help but view the word "vibrant" as positive; sensitive, resonant, bright. Bennett certainly sees the addition of vibrancy to a conception of matter as a positive thing. Then again, she also subtitled her book "A Political Ecology of Things," and she presumably did not write her book for the likes of me to apply it to their own comparatively inconsequential lives.

Regardless, the question stands: who would choose a book like this to think through how her dad died?

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One night, the bed my dad built failed to protect me, and I never really forgave it after that. I'd prayed and gone to bed as normal, but the view out my window was strange. The sky was purplish black, all clouds. Somewhere behind them hid the moon, spreading its light and making it seem almost like day. No stars, no sky. We were sealed inside.

I thought maybe I would close the curtains, but when I stood up to do it, the sky's texture held me still. How opaque it was, how closed off. In a flash I knew I would never get into heaven. Whether because God was no more or had never been or just didn't think I was good enough. Not devout, prayerful, virtuous, or deserving of ever seeing my dad again.

The crying began at some point without my knowledge, and I ran down the hallway to my mom's bedroom at the top of the stairs. I didn't want to talk; she wouldn't understand anyway. She let me into bed beside her and smoothed hair away from my hot forehead with her cool hand. I held her hand as my tears dried tight on my face.

*Daddy's not here, but I'm here*, she said. We said Hail Marys and Our Fathers until we fell asleep.

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At one point, my mom explained my dad's coma by saying, *He hurt the part of his brain that told him to breathe on his own*. In the eyes of Catholic doctrine, my dad's soul was not yet gone, as long as his heart was still beating. Some Church authorities might say that the DNR should never have been upheld.

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Bennett writes, "The philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God." So when he couldn't breathe without machines, where exactly was his subjectivity at that point? Would the Church say his agency was still somewhere inside him or no? These are painful questions to consider. Had I been old enough to understand them at the time, the event that cemented my belief in God and His gaze might have been instead the one that blew that belief apart.

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In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, when Bone comes out of her evangelical reverie, she comes to realize that a subtle manipulation lurks in the heart of gospel music. “That was what gospel was meant to do—make you hate and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified.” Nevertheless, she says, “It worked on me. It absolutely worked on me.”

My father took a similar tension with him to the grave, yearning for spirituality within the Catholic Church but disagreeing with some of its harsher strictures. He looked to writers like Thomas Merton to breathe some Zen Buddhism into Catholic dogma. I couldn’t tell you how Merton does this; by the time I tried reading him, my belief was already mostly gone.

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Two years before my dad’s death, his own father’s death was imminent. The six children gathered, bringing their spouses and kids to the beach house where my grandparents had retired, to be near Papa on his deathbed. Since most of the grandchildren were small, the older cousins corralled the rest of us, taking us down the long gravel driveway to the end of the road and outlet to the beach. We gave each other nicknames and drew hearts in the sand with our feet. We let waves crash over our feet, screaming before realizing they were smaller than we thought.

At some point during this time, the aunt and uncles said goodbye. After Papa exhaled for the last time, my dad commented upon how lucky they all were. *Our dad not only taught us how to live; he showed us how to die.* Many relatives told me this story when I was young. It always somewhat confused me, that they would want to tell me how much better their dad’s death was compared with my dad’s.

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“My hunch,” Bennett posits, “is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris.” Thinking matter is fully dead makes us feel more alive, more like we are the ones in control.

Is it possible that the hubris of believing in non-vibrant matter gave my dad a sense of invincibility? Could one argue that believing a wobbly ladder atop a slight incline was no match for him—him, the eminent psychiatrist, op-ed writer, former anesthesiologist, Buddhist meditation practitioner; him, the wise, white, upper-middle-class man—was his fatal flaw?

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Shortly after razing the trees, my mom’s friend from our grief support group thought it would be a good idea to go for a group outing to see *The Sixth Sense*. It wasn’t. Every time I awoke in the middle of the night, the fifteen steps to the bathroom terrified me. Sitting on the cold toilet, I watched my breath like a scientist to see if it became visible. Dreams recurred where my dad walked down the hallway to my bedroom with a gash in the back of his head. He never said anything, just shambled slowly toward me, looking puzzled, like he couldn’t understand my backing away.

The strange thing about this was that I saw my dad the day he fell, lying on our driveway. Someone rang the doorbell, and though it wasn’t usually allowed, my mom asked me to answer. A woman I didn’t recognize said, *You need to get your mom, your dad fell*, and then like a movie the scene cut to us standing outside, a few yards away from his body, watching and waiting for the ambulance. I kept thinking how strange it was that he had no blood on him, how it looked like he was sleeping. I could swear I heard him snoring.

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Early on in *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett cautions against the practice of demystification. Though it has value in scholarship and politics, demystification suggests an anthropocentrism she believes we should avoid. It “presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a human agency that has illicitly been projected into things.” Belief in God gave me, if not a comprehensible reason why my dad died, then at least the comfort of knowing that some intelligent, kindly being deliberately intended to end his life. Years later, when I lost God permanently, it felt like losing my dad all over again. And not so that his soul could be put to some other, mysterious purpose. Not just for a short duration of existence, this time. For all of it, forever.

It has not escaped me that this essay attempts to demystify my personal tragedy. To find what Bennett calls *distributive agency*, a way to show how the force of stuff can outmaneuver human will, to lend logic or design to a meaningless accident. But I can’t resist the logic of words; I’m drunk on their music. As with Bone and her gospel singing, this music works on me. It absolutely works on me.



Weston Cutter

## Cut Corners

Run out of prayers. Stand in  
the foggy Tuesday morn whispering *acorn*  
meaning *amen*. Say *Bells you*  
when daughter sneezes. Tell yrself  
the interval between forget+recall  
is *homey*, mean *holey*, mean holy cats most  
of what you've shelved in yr soul+basement+closet  
could all be labeled *just in case*.  
But it's always some case. But you are  
yr own soul's detective, finding  
the shape of yr beloved's breath  
clue enough to build an approximation  
of how eternity should unfold in you.  
Each answer's a reminder folded+stuck  
in yr life's jeans pocket. The back one  
where grandpa's wallet wore the white rectangle  
into the denim. Billfold he'd open+you'd stare  
wondering what clues lived tucked there.  
Answers to questions your ears  
had yet to age into hearing. Now  
here you are. Ages hence. Clueless  
as an unstrung banjo. Sun coming up  
then moon+the bird desiccating in the grass,  
abandoned by the dog that killed it  
out of nothing but enthusiasm. Somewhere  
there's a metaphor here. Some pocket  
of night would fit your dreamless sleep  
if you could just realize yr true origami self.

So get up. So stand in dark. So heave  
into starlight each contraption you've used  
to carry value. Your mouth. Your womb.  
The vase bought on vacation for mom  
so she'd hopefully be distracted enough  
by the beauty of tiger lilies or whatever  
she'd stop bemoaning that dad'd ever left.  
Each salvation a *what if* launched hard  
against rock+each spark a cast prayer,  
tiny infinity of bright in loving dark.

# An Interview with Kim Barnes

“You don’t have to believe in absolutes, but you have to believe in something absolutely.”

Being in conversation with Kim Barnes feels like a craft lesson, a workshop, a chapter from a memoir, and an intimate discussion of the soul all at once. We are thrilled to be able to include our conversation here in *Fugue* 61 and share a tiny bit of Kim’s wisdom with our readers.

Kim grew up in logging camps in Northern Idaho, where her family followed her father’s work as a lumberjack. Her novels, memoirs, and essays are shaped as much by this upbringing—the landscape, the hardscrabble mythology of the American West, her community’s religious fundamentalism—as they are by her process of breaking away as a writer. Her work has been published and acclaimed widely; a new reader might begin with *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, or *A Country Called Home*, winner of the PEN Center USA Literary Award in Fiction.

For over twenty years, Kim has taught creative writing at the University of Idaho—not far, geographically, from the logging camps of her childhood—and has been at the center of Moscow’s literary community ever

since. And, while her accolades might precede her, anyone who has had the privilege to learn from Kim will speak, first, to her full-hearted, unwavering support for both her students and community members. We at *Fugue* can attest that every writer who crosses paths with Kim is changed for the better: encouraged to dig deeper, ask more fearless questions, and nurture a love of story above all.

Kim announced her retirement from the university at the end of 2020, and her presence in the classroom is missed by all. To celebrate her legacy during a year when we can’t properly do so in person, we’re dedicating this special contest, the Kim Barnes Prize, to her. Kim has supplied one of her own prompts, which she’s been teaching in the classroom for years and is a favorite among students. Somehow, just like Kim, it allows writers to open themselves up to memory and pull at shards of story, image, and tension they might have never uncovered on their own.

Here is the contest prompt in full:

*Everyone has a knife (or hatchet, razor, glass shard, chisel, scalpel) story—a narrative of puncture in which a sharp object cuts the skin. Or almost does. Or could. Whether real or imagined, this cut ruptures the barrier between inside and outside, blood and air, self and other. This is what Kim Barnes calls the “third sphere” in writing: a space of encounter, intensity, and vulnerability where something new can happen.*

*For this contest, submit a short story or essay (max. 3,000 words) that combines the narrative drama of a knife story (the exterior) with a thinking and questioning narrator (the interior). How do we produce meaning when one meets the other, when the self is opened, punctured, or laid bare to outside forces?*

We are forever grateful for Kim’s teaching and generosity of spirit, here at *Fugue* and beyond, and wish her a joyful retirement full of good fishing and good writing.

**Fugue:** We'd like to start by asking about the prompt for the Kim Barnes Prize. Tell us a little bit more about what that prompt means to you and where it originated.

**Kim Barnes:** The knife prompt actually started with an orange. I was teaching at a very remote writer's conference at a beautiful Montana lake with rustic cabins. There were a number of really wonderful writing faculty there including Pattiann Rogers, who's a fabulous poet, and I sat in on one of Pattiann's poetry workshops. She passed around an orange and had everyone share their memories, smell the orange, touch the orange, then talk about a memory it evoked and write poems from that. I was really taken with the idea of activating all the senses, but also interested in how evocative it was: evoking memory, evoking sentences.

I thought to myself, I also want to provoke because art is a balance of the evocative and the provocative. This is where tension comes in. Whether it's poetry, nonfiction, fiction, music, anything, you don't want art to be mono-emotional. There is no tension there. As writers we're looking to create tension at every level, even at the level of the sentence. We do everything to create and hold tension that can then be released. It's what pulls us through the piece of literary art. I lean more toward provocation; I get that going and we can work on the evocation—the pretty stuff—later. First, let's get some provocation on the page!

[My husband, Robert Wrigley,] has a poem that he wrote decades ago about an orange: The speaker is cutting it with a knife, and the orange sprays that sweet golden juice on the speaker's arm. So I thought, let's keep the orange but let's also have some knife. The very first workshop where I brought in the knife was up the Clearwater in Idaho—in Kooskia, which is a very provocative and evocative place: lots of old hippies, a reservation land that's been overtaken by loggers. It's generally a place where you can go and mostly be left alone—for good reasons or bad. The people in that workshop were older than I was at the time, and they had seen some stuff. They had homesteaded in the back-to-the-land way. They had been loggers who had broken backs from felling trees. They were no-nonsense people who were readers and who wanted to write.

Of course they knew knives; they all had knives. They were carrying knives because you always need a knife! We don't think about that much in

contemporary culture but, especially for rural people in my generation and before, every man had a knife in his pocket, and it better be sharp because if it wasn't that meant he was careless and unprepared. It was a mark of character. I started asking these folks about knives they remembered, and it was amazing. Of course they started pulling them out—the men and women—and I was watching the way they handled their knives and how familiar they were with them. A knife could be a coveted thing, a thing of endearment, a tool, or something handled matter of factly.

There was one older gentleman who was digging it but also very cynical about this whole writing business. I had him read the introductory chapter to Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* where Wolff and his mom are on their way west and they hear this loud air horn honking. A trucker has lost his brakes

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and is hurtling down this steep grade, out of control, honking his air horn to get everyone out of the way. And this old gentleman says, “I don't believe that. That never happened.” And I was like, “Why not?” And he said, “You lose your air brakes, you can't honk your air horn!” I was like, *damn, that's right*. So this was my audience.

That gentleman told his story about his Boy Scout knife. He still had it, and the more questions I asked him, the more I understood it was about his father, then he began to tell us stories about their relationship. Here's a guy saying, *I think you all are a bunch of liars saying this is nonfiction*, and to get him to relay those intimate—provocative and evocative—stories that had to do with his father... I would have never gotten there on my own. If I had asked him, he wouldn't have said a word, but somehow that knife—and attaching memory to that object and the feel of it in his hand—did something. I think

we've all heard of or read *The Body Keeps the Score* and know how the body remembers, and you can tell those memories were in his physical self.

After that, I started almost every nonfiction workshop with the knife exercise. I would bring in my own knife, which had been my father's, and talk about it and how I came to have it, then pass it around and ask people to share personal stories about a knife in their lives. They were holding my knife but there was still that physical reaction: I can watch how people hold that knife and know more about my students in five minutes than I might otherwise learn in a semester. Some of them won't hold it. How much does that tell you?

This got a little gamier after 9/11. When I was teaching in South Hampton, I had to have the conference organizer buy a knife and bring it to me because I couldn't carry my knife on the plane. She brought me a chef's knife and I was like, "I hope you kept the receipt because this won't do." And

"I want everything. I want everybody's stories! I love personal stories. I don't care if they're violent, abusive, horrible, sunny as hell—I don't care. I want them."

then another woman brought out a folding lockback knife that looked kind of serious, and that's what I needed: not a giant *Psycho*-Hitchcockian knife but a utilitarian knife that can also be used, if needed, as a weapon.

Some people will pick up the knife and start gesticulating and everyone is ducking and dodging in the classroom. And others just take it and hold it and turn it over and over in their hands. They're remembering. And I wait. I just let them. Sometimes there are several minutes of silence while we wait for them to gather what they're trying to say and remember.

Some of the stories are heartbreaking, some of them are violent, some of them are hilarious or ironic, alarming, but most of all the exercise evokes memory. They describe the knife they remember. And in describing the knife, they have to remember context: how it came to them, who gave it to

them. And then I start asking questions. "So your father gave you the knife? How old were you? Why did he give you the knife then?"

One woman was Mormon and her father was sending her off to college. He gave her a knife and a book of Mormon at the same time and she put them in her glove box in her car and never looked at either one again. But this [gesture] was like her dad saying, *Here, if this one doesn't work, try this*. And what that says about her relationship, not only to her father but to her faith, to her family, to herself, her body, her sexuality, her sense of self-protection—it's all there. And it's my job to first provoke those memories and then bring out the evocative; not just me but the whole class, because it bonds a workshop really fast. People ask questions and get fascinated.

The exercise is about memory, about provoking memory that we don't always allow ourselves to have. It's about cutting apart the hermetically-sealed story that we have told ourselves of who we are and why. And it breaks that open so you can look at it and put it back together. Over the years I've come to understand—like with all nonfiction—that when we start mining those memories, you never know what you're going to find.

I've thought of using other objects, especially with school violence and things like that. But there has always been an element of trust that comes with passing this knife around, often for three weeks, and letting people hold it or not hold it and be in the presence of other people they sometimes don't even know. The essays that have come from the prompt are just amazing, and I think the people most responsible for that success are the students themselves because they have to be willing to give and they have to be willing to honor—honor the story and people struggling to understand their story without knowing what it means.

**F:** In the prompt for the contest, you mention a moment of "rupture." Could you talk about what that moment does in a story or essay, and how it functions in the written piece itself?

**KB:** In a workshop, sometimes one person's story can take 20 or 30 minutes because we can feel an underlying narrative. I keep asking questions 'til either the story ruptures or I realize we've gone as far as we want to go. You have to learn that as a teacher of nonfiction: *We've gone as far as we need to go here*.

The students start out describing the knife and what they remember about it, talking about their family and working into the story so we get set-

ting, object, character, and then we come to the scene. “Why are you telling me about watching your mother peel this peach, why does that stay with you?” “I don’t know; it’s just a memory I have!” I always say it’s not what you remember but why you remember what you do—that’s where the essay is. I started asking this student, “Well, what was going on with your mom? How was your mom’s relationship with your dad?” And then you get the look. They’ve realized this is why they remember. “It wasn’t going well. By the end of that year they would be divorced.” And now we’ve got a story.

I try to pull out what the heart of the story is, what it’s really about. Tony Earley said you’ve got your thing, and you’ve got your other thing. What he meant is you have the objects and action of the essay, but then you also have what it is about emotionally. And, so, you’ve got your thing: peaches and canning and all these women in a kind of sorority inside a church. And then this fracture: your mother with a knife peeling a peach and all the tension behind it. That’s the other thing.

**F:** So much of your process with this prompt happens in a classroom, but for the contest you didn’t have the opportunity to talk with people about their stories before reading the written piece. How did it feel to read and select contest submissions without that intimate process?

**KB:** It was interesting to think about putting this prompt out there without the component of group discussion and the Q&A, which is huge. How do I achieve that in a written prompt when I’m not there? And I thought to myself, “Maybe you think you’re controlling more than you are, Kim. Maybe as a teacher you think there are certain things you have to give and watch and monitor in order to get the most efficient response.” I’m all about efficiency because I want everything. I want everybody’s stories! I love personal stories. I don’t care if they’re violent, abusive, horrible, sunny as hell—I don’t care. I want them. I love community made by story. And I think it strengthens the community because we see for ourselves, *I can tell this story and still be okay. They’re not going to kick me away from the communal fire. They’re going to accept this and say, “That’s my story too.”*

Even if a story is about us, intimately about us, it is not about us at all—it’s about the reader. And, like any art, we have to make sure we’re creating a portal for readers to see themselves in our story. That’s what our goal is. In doing this prompt, I realized I’m not going to be able to say all this stuff!

I found that really interesting because the prompt was narrowed down to just a few sentences, but I thought, *It’s all still there*. People who have been trying to write stories and are studying story and trying to make sense of these things in their lives—they’re gonna get it. And they’re gonna sell it. And they’re gonna understand you don’t have to pay all the attention in the world to the knife—it’s just a starting point. It’s an objective correlative that gives us a way in. It’s not just a knife. It’s rupture, it’s puncture, it’s opening—all the ways you can create imagery that resonates and echoes with the image and the metaphorical cache of the knife. Even though I have been expansive in the classroom about what all this means, storytelling is intuitive. It’s in our DNA. And if I were lucky that would be pinged, that innate desire to tell a story and create meaning out of what is often chaos.

“So that’s what we attempt—  
to transcend the mundane. Go in  
fear of the mundane in art.”

**F:** Since we’re talking about the prompt, you also mention the “third sphere,” this place of encounter where something new can happen, where there’s vulnerability. I feel like that’s a Kim Barnes original idea—

**KB:** I thought I invented the Venn diagram! I was like, “Look at this!” And everyone was like, “Yeah, that’s a Venn diagram.” But those diagrams work because they are archetypal. What I want in a piece of any kind of art—music, visual art, writing, poems, drama—is a third sphere. What I mean by that is when we sit down to create art, we have to somehow transcend what we have in front of us. That’s the very definition of art. We have to create something that isn’t pre-existing, that is different from the individual. But so often it’s hard for writers to launch into the third sphere because that is the sphere of the imagination, and the first two spheres are pretty easy.

The Venn diagram has three overlapping circles and that place in the middle where they overlap and create a kind of hub, if you will. Your first sphere contains you and your experience, where you live, who your folks are, what you’re allergic to, what kind of toilet paper you use, whether or not

you believe in reincarnation, or, you know, what roads you know through Port Townsend. That is very specific to you. We can share experiences but no one has your exact experience—at least not in this universe.

Now, the second sphere is the knowledge of the world—the macrocosm. It's what the world knows and what you can know if you choose to. Basically, this is Google: the knowledge that we can access and write about. And—alongside our very personal, subjective story—this is what's objective.

The third sphere is the one that does not exist anywhere. You have to create it as an artist. And you do that by asking yourself: How does this sphere of the inner self—the microcosm—resonate with the world—the macrocosm—and create meaning? The third sphere is where you create and articulate. It's the conceptual sphere. There is no art without concept, and that concept exists in contemplation, in juxtaposing echoing images,

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phrases, and words. It's what poetry does. We recognize poetry as inherently conceptual, but nonfiction? This is a fight in the nonfiction world: *Well, if you're creating a concept then you're lying. That's not nonfiction.* Well, that's just bullshit! What are you talking about? It's not like your concept is untrue. It can't be untrue; that's contrary to what's possible. The third sphere is where art resides. That's art, right in the middle.

I often read essays that have the first sphere and the second sphere and you open the third—look at what's behind the curtain—and there's nothing there. You feel it when you read: There's no resonance. The writing can be beautiful. It can be interesting. But there's no third sphere of meaning. This happens in poetry and short stories, too. We need one more level. As artists, this is our greatest challenge. But that's why we're doing it—you can feel the third sphere when you find it. Do you know what I mean? It's like a puzzle: You feel that piece click in and you think, *Ah, now I know what this*

*is about.* So that's what we attempt—to transcend the mundane. Go in fear of the mundane in art.

**F:** Do you feel that all of this—your teaching—has sunk into your own writing throughout the years?

**KB:** Oh, yes. It's amazing how I can read a piece by another writer and see clear as day, *Here's where you are. Just hit one more note or bring out the structure.* I feel really confident that this will bring the concept of the essay to life. Then I go home and it's like I haven't heard a word I've said!

I know I'm not the first one to say this but every book is a first book, no matter how many books you write. Every poem is a first poem, no matter how many poems you write. Every one is the first one. And you would think you could write five books, six books, and that maybe it wouldn't be so hard! I think it's Ron Carlson who says the only advantage a veteran writer has over a new writer is that they have learned to withstand the not-knowing. He says just sit in your chair, don't get coffee, don't do the dishes, don't get online. Just sit. Stay there until you know something. And you learn to withstand the not-knowing. And to trust the process. You believe you will solve the problem of the poem or the essay or the story. You come to understand it may take years, and you come to be okay with that. To me it's like the practice of Buddhism. You wake up inside that practice and you go to bed inside that practice. You don't stop being a Buddhist when you go to sleep at night; you wake up inside the practice. And you honor that, and continue the practice of learning and being inside of it—that's what you do if you mean to be a writer, an artist.

I'm still working on this damn novel after nine, ten years, and when I'm writing, I think, “What don't I know?” There's something I don't know, something I'm not seeing. And what helps me most is to go back to the most basic elements of craft. Do I have my rising and falling action? Do we know the motives of this character? And I think it's the same thing with any piece of writing or art. The best thing in the world I can do is set aside my intellect that's trying to figure out this problem. It's going back and just laying bricks, laying bricks. And knowing that there's no rushing. You just learn to live inside it and to not let it be about time but about the process. So yes, I must go back to the basics again and again.

**F:** Switching gears, we wanted to ask about your community involvement. You're such a bedrock part of the Moscow literary community, and we're wondering how you see our artistic community growing and what you envision or imagine for it. What does going back to the basics look like for this community?

**KB:** What I value and wish to attain at every level as a human, as a community member, as an artist, is unending curiosity. You've got to stay curious.

Sometimes I'll start asking, "What does it all mean? Why would we write? Who cares if I ever write another story, or if you write another poem, or another essay? I mean really, why, why are you going to do that?" I think each of us has to individually ask those questions. I know more artists asking that question right now than I have ever before. *Okay, the world's burning up, people are dying by the hundreds and hundreds of thousands, bad political things are happening, and the world is a piece of dog shit—I'm going to go write a poem, I'll be right back!* But I actually think it's an excellent exercise because it makes us ask, *Okay, why am I doing this?* If I stop, it's the easiest thing in the world to do. [My husband] Bob says all the time in his classes, "No one's waiting for your best poem." So you really have to ask yourself not *what am I doing* but *who am I in this context of being a writer*. I think you have to rely not on what you want to be doing but who you want to be inside that. That doesn't mean you need this great dedication, like, *I know I'm writing because I want to reach out and be part of a community and create a new world in the conceptual sense*. Mostly—in times like this especially—we're just kind of getting through day by day. Just because we don't have an answer doesn't mean that asking the question isn't important because we are looking for meaning—forever and ever we will be looking for meaning; for generations until, I don't know, E.T. comes back or something.

Here's what I believe absolutely: You don't have to believe in absolutes but you have to believe in something absolutely. Because if you don't, you're not going to make it. Intellectually, I know I don't have to write another word as long as I live. I don't have to, but I have to believe in something. What do I do that, when I'm doing it, feels something like faith? For me, that's family, that's community, and that's art. And not just writing, it's creating that third sphere. Sometimes I wake up and I think, "I'm going to write a movie about—" Then I'm like, "What the what?" I'm excited by the concept

I've just come up with, and I forget what it is by lunch. Oh, well, I had that moment where that thing rose in me and I felt it. I find that believing in the act of creation is something I can do. I don't know what it means necessarily. I do know that story is how we sustain community—there's no doubt about that. Do I care if I sustain community? Some days not so much. But most of the time I believe in the creative impulse. I believe that it's kind of magical, like we're tapping into something beyond ourselves. I can think about that intellectually, but when I feel it—when I'm in my writing head, when the rest of the world goes away for a little while and I'm in that space, that zone—I can live for that.

I also believe in taking care of the people around you. It gives me that same kind of feeling. Mostly, I love seeing students reach out for that sphere and find meaning in it and step through the portal. I know the monomyths and that Joseph Campbell is basically patriarchal but, I'm sorry, at some point most of us are going out on our own journey and coming back. It's

"If you're not making yourself vulnerable, if it's not challenging and sometimes terrifying, you're probably not making art. Because art isn't comfortable."

not like the hero doesn't have support; the community is waiting for them to come back with the boon. And even in some indigenous cultures when there's a spirit quest—this has been co-opted so much, I know—the community is very supportive. But sometimes there's a thing you have to do alone. And watching people come to new levels of self-realization and take responsibility for their own lives fills me with wonder and gratitude and oxytocin.

These portals have to do with self-actualization—going from being a child to an adult. And portals are terrifying because you have to die. The old self has to die. And sometimes you literally get sick. I've had students who have been at a portal; I could tell it through their writing and talking to them—*it's time*. Because if there's a portal on your journey and you don't step through it, you can't grow. You can't grow. And so much of it has to do with taking responsibility for the self and your actions. I've had students

who can't write, can't live. They're drinking themselves to death, sleeping a lot, depressed as hell. I can tell they're at a portal, and they've got to step through. They've got to become someone new. I have literally stood them up and held out my arms, taken their hands, and walked them through the invisible portal. It's amazing how your brain changes its narrative—the brain has to be rewired in order to go through that portal, and I think that's why we get sick or have to take a bunch of hallucinogenic drugs. Watching people step through is terrifying—because you think you're going to die if you do it, and you're terrified in that new space. And that's what story does too. When we're writing essays and poetry and fiction, we're creating portals for readers to step through. If it's working, art takes us to a new space, and sometimes that space is not comfortable. It's terrifying. New self-awareness is terrifying.

To me, what really joins us is being a community of artists who are taking our vulnerabilities out for a walk every day, if we're lucky. We have to make ourselves so vulnerable. And if you're not making yourself vulnerable, if it's not challenging and sometimes terrifying, you're probably not making art. Because art isn't comfortable. So this is part of what sustains me: the ongoing conversation.

I also believe in taking care of the people around you. And you can do that in different ways. For me, it's the community of readers and writers that I want to care with and for. I feel like creating art is a subversive act, a political act that disallows the status quo. How do you create art and be a guerrilla against the status quo and have the strength and the will to do that? It all ties back into the idea of the journey and portals and community. You've got to do something that requires cognitive dissonance. The Romantics understood that even in the face of destruction, you've got to have the ability—the cognitive dissonance and negative capability—to balance that with a belief in something, even if it's the image, the word. So I want to live like the Romantics, just a little while longer than they did though. None of this dying at 22 business.



# THE KIM BARNES PRIZE

contest winner

## Forgetting Nouns by Rain Wright

I read “Forgetting Nouns” in a swoon, and now I know why: with its devastating details, synesthetic imagery, and brilliant use of metaphor, it is a transcendental romance—a love letter to the Oversoul. Wright weaves a potent spell that magically ruptures the membrane between the inner self and the outer world and cuts through our mortal sense of time. The landscape holds memory both immediate and ancient. Joy, grief, and desire well from the same inevitable wound. What holds at the center is story embodied, told in a language so vivid that we “watch for the sound of it in the air.”

— Kim Barnes

## Forgetting Nouns

She tells me she forgot nouns. “Nouns,” she says. “You’ll skip periods for years—maybe I skipped for around ten years—and then the brain fog will come.” I imagine a heat of shadow-like tendrils finding my body and lacing through my mind, a form of choking stagnation.

I don’t reply. Not yet. I gather these stories into my body.

Her voice has a lilt and lift as she speaks, and I watch for the sound of it in the air, and we take turns speaking to the trees as we move through the dust paths of Koko Crater, stopping at times to touch the rough or smooth of a tree trunk.

“I have friends who are just now waking up from a hormone fog five years after.” She laughs. “One fell in love and had three babies in five years.” She laughs again, deep enough to create a movement of doves from the dirt path ahead of us. “Did you forget things when you had your daughters? You were so young. Maybe you don’t remember.”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “Probably.”

The word stretches in the middle of me. I’m not sure, but I knew the feeling of deep weight after having my youngest daughter. A living feeling that grew in my chest and expanded into knotting strands of grief. My mother had died months before, and my milk came pouring out in floods as I cried in the shower in my small grey house in Honalo. Cried for the grandmother my children would never have and the mother I wanted to know more.

I remembered how my mother’s hands washed paint on silk, smelling of warm bread and mint tea. I knew the feel of her finely tapered fingers as she wound strips of old sheets and castor oil around my neck on nights my throat ached. And I heard the movement of her voice in the cold air that swept down from the mountain with the water’s stinging heat, mixing with my milk down the shower drain.

I see the patterns of trees before we turn corners. My mind paints them in old browns, rain-tipped greens, greying branches shaped like elbows, rounded yellows, and white stalks against clouded blues. This is my third walk in Koko Crater Botanical Garden in as many months. Maybe we walk more in pandemics. Perhaps I've always walked and now find a surprise on the once-silent trails overflowing with people. People that we sidestep. I hold my breath as they pass and wonder at the music that plays in their earbuds. I wonder if they know the sounds they miss.

My friend says this thought aloud, and a young girl turns, hearing us over her music.

This dirt-path walk would be my fourth this spring, but the thunder a few weeks earlier kept away me and another visiting friend, the friend I've called best since we were fifteen. This friend had worn a green and white shirt when I met her in tenth grade on the steps of Konawaena High School, near the smell of bus diesel and the sounds of voices in the cold air on early mornings. Someone said she had made the shirt in sewing class, and I wanted to know her for the moving bobbin and sharp needles piercing the fabric.

When the heavy downpours had flooded my carport and shifted our plans of walking, we spent the day instead pacing through the aisles of thrift stores with the stories of childhood nearby. I remembered my brother with hair covering his eyes and sister weaving herself through my mother's legs. Someday I will paint, my mother said. My mother's language of desires sings, still. I hum it under my breath. My friend already knew these stories from the many years we had known one another. As teenagers, we'd call each other when we got home from school, after hours spent together, and I'd wrap the long phone cord around my body, talking about understanding and not understanding enough of living.

At the thrift store, I wanted to tell this friend—and I'm sure I have at some moment in nonlinear time—about another thrift store under Aloha Theater, the mismatched shoes and clothes that never fit, the hunt for something beautiful in the piles and piles and colors upon colors of the discarded. I wanted to talk about the mango tree that stretched and touched old skies in Kona, where we had spread some of my mother's ashes. But I didn't talk about these things on that day of floods.

Instead, we wound through aisles, speaking of our women's bodies and changing and heat and desire and lack of desire. A quick laugh and the story of a friend whose glasses fogged up during a hot flash. We needed these stories. She lifted some item in polyester. Maybe it was coral or orange or printed. She held it against her chest, asking those questions that had made us laugh as kids. Kids again, laughing.

These conversations with friends are like a familiar song, a known refrain I can fall into, press through, lean against. I record them against my skin with the fine needles of hair that stand up in flushing heat. They say something about body and aging, about being women, about wanting our mothers' aging and body-changing stories, wondering why these stories aren't passed down in our bodies. I wanted to know my mother's stories, and I wanted to ask if she knew her mother's stories. I didn't. We wondered why mothers don't tell these stories to daughters.

This friend on the path of Koko Crater has a laugh deep and long like opened-up skies. It fills space, but the doves land again on the fine red dirt and gravel path that turns ahead slightly. She curves her hands, placing her cupped palms near her lips. "Here," she says, calling to the birds. "Here's your language." Her hands sing a few light, round notes that rise and drift to the dirt and land just before the birds. "Maybe this isn't their language," she tells me. "Maybe this isn't their song." The birds don't pay us any mind, bowing now and then to each other in their soft, grey, winged bodies.

We remark on the weather and how nice it is that there's a breeze in the crater today. "Not usual," she says. "Not here." We pass trees, taking turns to press our hands flat on trunks warm from the easy sun on this Wednesday. Perhaps we talk a language the trees might know. The small signs and tags around the trunks and branches tell us the names of trees and shrubs as we weave and bend to read.

"I like the 'ilima," she says.

"I remember putting plant leaves and seeds in my mouth as a child down in Miloli'i. Children taste the world to know it," I say. The leaves on these paths are familiar. I point to them. Then, I bend and touch the outline of soft and velvet leaves that recall memories of Hōnaunau, Ké'ei, and Miloli'i.

"Many of these plants are medicinal," she says. "And we've forgotten them. People forget too much."

We've passed the bougainvillea collection, laughing at human attempts to confine the wild pink branches. We make jokes when trees, shrubs, and odd plants have escaped their assigned area; they tell us something about resistance. "Refusing colonization," we say.

"Maybe colonized but still refusing," she adds.

We pause near a tree. "This tree is important in Jamaica. The spirits live in these trees in Jamaica," she says.

Maybe they live here, too. We are all haunted. I don't speak. I touch the edges of the flowers the tree gives us.

The second time I came to this park in as many weeks, he held my hand as I stepped down the finely pebbled pathways and slight inclining hills, and I wondered if I could love him, but I didn't think I needed to love him. I didn't want him to love me—not much. Maybe I just wanted to touch him some—touch that warm spot near his neck where the sun seemed to pause. I thought about kissing and touch. He laughed at plants that hung off branches like snakes.

"Snakes are nature, too," I said. "Those are night-blooming cereus." Remembering the old rock walls of Ke'ei and the arms of night-blooming cereus climbing high, I looked for rock walls here in this park. The rocks have voices here, low and calling, but they're not the voices of Ke'ei.

He's retired from the military, and I've tried to remain open to the ideas of institutions built in and by men I meet online. It hasn't worked. I talk too much about demilitarization and answer all the whys with a flurry of hands and this-is-why. But he was charming and felt warm next to me as we walked. We walked six feet apart but swerved near each other's voices and bodies—drawn closer, at times. Perhaps it was the gravel and stones on the path that made us step closer. Maybe it was the movement of laughter. Even amid a pandemic, we wanted to be closer. We stepped away, slightly.

"Not a nature I want to know," he said. "No snakes for me." He laughed again, turning his masked face towards me—he had a smooth way of speaking my thoughts. I needed laughter now, and we'd been laughing and passing comfortable words back and forth since he pulled his gold car up near my car in the parking lot. No music escaped through his windows when he pulled his car to a stop, but I wanted to know the songs that thump in the speakers when he drives by himself.

He took pictures on his phone first and then on his camera for his son. I watched him frame the shot and thought of the smell of cameras: deep plastic and glass—a smell that says it can see beauty. "He'd like this place," he said, of his son, holding his camera up to the rounded trunks of trees that sit against the blue of Hawai'i Kai. "We don't get out enough. We stay in the apartment."

Not many places feel safe, I thought, but I didn't say. "Those trees are ancient. Look at the rounded shape—full of character. Like the best Dr. Seuss trees," I said. I didn't talk about the racism of Dr. Seuss. I was sure he knew.

"The trees?"

"He always drew those curvy kinds of trees." I pointed to the full body and small head of a tree.

We continued. People passed, most stopping down the path to pull up their masks before nearing. Sweat built around the edges of my mask on my cheeks. I wanted to take sips of cold air but didn't. I'd seen his face before from across open-space picnic tables, enough air and six feet between us. Soft lips and a smile that grew when he talked about his son and daughter. He told me a story about his daughter showing up for an important military banquet in a black minidress, with a wildness about her, and I liked her even more. "I bet she looked beautiful," I said. Not the reply he probably needed.

I had canceled our walk weeks earlier, and this was the rescheduled walk. Dating during a pandemic constructs walls—no kissing, walking at a distance, and wondering how to weave touch and intimacy. Thoughts: Do I risk dying and have his hands touch the round edges of my hips? Do I want to be touched in this aging body? All bodies are aging. Aging. I am my body. I imagined the freedom to touch and kiss.

I had canceled that walk after the nurse's call lit up my phone—a short call. I didn't cry after.

"Like fine sand grain," she said. I knew she had introduced herself over the cell pressed against my ear, maybe said her name and her job, but I'd forgotten and could think only about the image she and the doctor had shared. Perhaps she'd leaned over as the doctor pointed to the fine sand on the computer screen before them. An image of my body that I didn't know. I held my thoughts still, trying not to jump ahead or backward through time to my mother's phone call about cancer and dying. But I tasted the fear in

the fold of my mouth. “It appears like small granules of sand on the mammogram. The doctor wants to run more tests.”

She told me to come in early Monday morning. She told me that it could be nothing. Her voice tried to tell me not to worry, but my mind knows worry, and my body began to wind into the fear that gathered in my chest and shoulders. I knew how long the days ahead would feel against the restraint of breathing in and out.

My mind questioned who I should burden with this worry—this body story. My mother, my mother hadn’t been much older than me, I told myself. My mother. My mother. Who would I tell about more tests and my right breast? The right breast. Our family carries worry on the left side of our bodies. Why my right breast?

Monday in the waiting room with newly-covered seats spaced six feet apart, I read a book of Covid-19 stories. One woman wrote about grief and her friend’s death. I couldn’t read these words of death. Not now. Memes, stories, friends online pass around comments on what we’ve learned about being human during a pandemic. I couldn’t read these words.

My eyes caught masked faces with stories like mine in the waiting room—they must have been waiting for fine sand in their breast, too. I heard the sound of a woman’s voice. I knew this voice. It was low and full, a voice that had known the high school English classroom for years. It enunciated. I hoped she would not know me behind my mask. She didn’t. Maybe she hoped I wouldn’t know her either behind the mask and magazine she lifted to cover her face.

How strange it was to hear my name called—first and last—in that waiting room. The nurse called my name, my full name, only once, as I moved out of my seat and stepped forward in an unknown body. A body holding fine sand—my body of glass. My body was eager to know, and must have known more than it was telling me.

She recognized me—same nurse from the week earlier. I wondered how she had felt picking up my file again, seeing those words about further tests. She was the nurse with the quick pace and the frustrated exhale of breath when I had asked to use the restroom first before my breasts were pressed over and over in the machine.

“Back for more tests,” she said, using her hand to open the door for me. Her voice was kind now. She knew more about the inside shadows of fine sand in my right breast than I did. She was gentle this time, softer in her

movement ahead of me and the dip and rise of her voice. The search she did for comforting words surrounded her. We returned to the same room. I stepped behind the curtain, removing my right sleeve.

The first time I walked this path in so many months, my two friends and I paused at a shaded and rocky curve of the trail. Two friends and I, we remained, we tried to stay six feet apart, we tried. Masks on until eating the spring rolls and sweet potatoes and muffins they’d packed. I’d forgotten my food—left it on the counter as I searched for keys and packed my fear into neatly folded words that I would tell them about my body.

I told them about tests. In this park, thinking of the dark yellow and purple patterns over my right breast, bruised, bruising, I talked about my body. Remembering the feel of heat pinpricking my skin, the word biopsy buzzing in my ears with the lights overhead as the doctor asked me questions about my daughters and life—questions interrupted by directions to the nurse, questions to keep my mind directed.

“I’m okay,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I didn’t want you to carry the weight of worry with me. It’s not cancer.”

I remember the words my best friend gave me as a gift when I told her. “We share the weight. You must always tell me.”

These friends give me their grief and loss stories. These friends give me stories.

# THE KIM BARNES PRIZE

runner-up

## The Truth I Cannot Tell by Kathryn Wilder

“The Truth I Cannot Tell” exists in a place of in-betweens: between the speaker and her adult son; between the “before and after” of her life; between guilt and blame; between the skin and the blood beneath; and, finally, between life and death. Elements of masquerading and mistaken identity complicate and enrich a fixating narrative of winter calving until, finally, the motifs peel away to reveal the more startling truths at the heart of the essay: a tenuous escape from a destructive past; a ravaging desire to live free from pain; and an empathy so sharp that it cuts to the bone.

— Kim Barnes

## The Truth I Cannot Tell

After parking the tractor and feed wagon under cover, we walk down from the upper barn, my son Ken with his long strides and quicker pace increasing the distance between us with each step. I see Solstice next to a juniper tree in the house pasture—she’s one of my Criollo first-calf heifers, her markings like white clouds in a dark sky. Slowing but not stopping, I note that she just stands, still, away from the other heifers who wait near a gate to be fed.

Snow crunches to ice beneath my Neoprene-insulated, knee-high rubber boots. Where it’s uncrunched, the snow measures a foot deep on top of a base layer of packed ice. I’d follow in Ken’s footsteps in the fresh snow, but they are too far apart. He did not pause as he passed Solstice.

When we fed the cows in the lower pasture, me driving the tractor and pulling the wagon, Ken balancing back there forking off flakes from a three-quarter-ton hay bale and piles of cornstalks that give the calves dry places to lie, two new calves bawled forlornly, wet-shivering, ice cubes hanging from their ears like gaudy costume jewelry. I’m shivering now, the wet snow melting through my knit hat and heavy jacket and insulated overalls into my flannel shirt and silk baselayer and cotton tank top and sports bra, clear to my flesh, where snowmelt meets sweat as I hurry to catch up with Ken. At first I don’t notice that his tracks veer off to his house, and when I do I keep hustling toward the hay to get the heifers fed so we can return to the lower pasture where we left the two unclaimed calves bawling miserably.

Earlier, we had seen one of the suspect mothers—206, a tall black-whiteface Angus cross—kick at a little bull calf. Black markings like hands coming together in prayer across his white face, he tried and failed to get a teat in his hungry mouth before the cow wandered off. Another cow, a large Black Angus, meandered through the feeding cattle, looking, sniffing, searching for her newborn. But the second bawling calf, a solid black heifer, was at the lower end of the field, and the second cow seemed not to hear her.

The snow keeps coming. I'm throwing pitchfork-loads of grass hay over the fence to the first-calf heifers when I see Ken coming down with a bottle, this for a twin born two weeks ago. The mother took the smaller twin, abandoning Chloe, so named by my granddaughter, to fate—a future as a bottle calf, comfort coming from the grandkids, their mother, and me as we feed her and pet her, but we don't lick and low as a mother-cow would, and Chloe is lonely. She butts Ken as he feeds her the bottle. The snow does not cease falling.

"Solstice is standing off by herself," I tell Ken.

"She's fine," he says, finishing with Chloe. "Get the old towels." And he hurries past me, back up to his house. I go to mine, not bothering to remove anything wet from my body, chunks of snow tracking me across the floor. The stack of towels, laundered and stiff from air-drying by the fireplace, stands ready on the couch. My dryer's not working. Something about the 220-volt power source. We have to dig down to the power line with the backhoe when the earth thaws. My winter life hangs by the fire.

Ken has my old Toyota Tacoma running, exhaust fuming behind it. Towels thrown on the backseat, a fresh bottle between my feet, the heater turned up high, "Solstice," I say.

Ken gasses through the ruts left by the morning feeding, snowdrifts already filling the furrows. "I saw her with another heifer. She's fine. We have to see what's going on down here."

I jump out to open the gate, snow slapping my face, and leave the gate open as the cows will stay with the feed and their calves and not venture out. Ken maneuvers across the snowfield through humps of calves mouth-ing hay or lying on the cornstalk beds. Cows munch with their heads down, or up as they eye us, wondering if we're here to feed them again already. There's the tiny prayer-faced bull calf, his voice loud and mournful despite his shivering. And the heifer, farther away, her cry wrenching through the hush of snow. As the tall cow, 206, heads off toward shield-ing trees, we follow her. She stands in the snow-shadow of a large, thick-branched one-seed juniper, looking around, confused. She half-circles it, sniffing the snow and the branches and the detritus near the trunk, and walks back toward the hay.

"She's too old to be that stupid," Ken says, which means that first-calf heifers can be like I was when I had Ken, not knowing exactly how to nurse or clean my baby, while to seasoned mothers those acts come easily, and

cows can usually find their calves. But in this cold, wet-snow morning, something has happened that threw the cow—and us—off.

In the blizzard of snow and cows feeding, we do not see the second cow, but there's the prayer calf bawling to the sky. Ken drives close, stops, throws open the door, and grabs the calf, and when I get the back door open he tosses the calf onto the backseat. Twisting awkwardly, I get a towel and start rubbing. "Not too much," Ken says. "We have to leave some scent on him." Ken has the bottle. I'm sweating inside the Toyota's heat, but the calf shivers and I rub him and break ice cubes off his ears. Ken inserts the nipple and pulls it when the calf's lips find it, and soon the calf latches on, drinks in deep gulps, and Ken takes the bottle away. As I keep the calf from climb-ing onto the console between us, Ken navigates the truck toward 206, who stands, not eating, looking across the white landscape.

Ken pulls close, steps out, grabs the calf from the backseat, and sets it near 206, who we hope really is its mother. Invigorated but not full from the warm milk fresh in his belly, the prayer calf reaches for the teat, the cow turns away, and he follows; she stops, he butts her, she lets him suck, and we head toward the next calf. The second possible mother cow is still search-ing. She stops at a white lump on the ground, sniffs through the cold cloak of snow, and the calf jumps up and goes right to nursing, back still humped and legs bent from the womb. "Also born today," I say, noting the cow's ear tag number to record later. Storms bring on the calves. Six calves will be born on this day. Ken and I won't stop working until after dark.

The little all-black heifer has increased her piteous wailing. Ken plows through the snow toward her, and we repeat the abduction-and-warming procedure. When we plop her back in the snow, no one pays attention. Then through the blurring white we see 206 in the distance, her head up, looking, sniffing the cold air even as the prayer calf nurses.

"Shit," Ken says.

"Twins?"

"We don't need more twins," he says. But he steps out and grabs the black heifer again, thrusting her onto my lap, and steers to 206. I push out of the passenger seat with the calf in my arms and run three steps toward the cow, set the calf down, and jump back into the truck before the cow can give chase, which they're wont to do. Ken backs off twenty feet and we watch. The prayer calf still latched on, the tall cow sniffs this new being; she sniffs through towel- and people-scents to her own smell and starts licking the cold away.

“Yep. Twins.” I take off my sopped hat; my hair, too, is wet. Hat and gloves on the dash near the heater vents, we leave the pasture, close the gate, and park near the barn.

“Let’s get dry before checking them again,” Ken says.

I’m already through the gate into the house pasture where the first-calf heifers eat hay in the snow. Solstice is with them. I walk among them, looking at bags and vulvas, which tell me how close they are to calving. “Solstice’s bag is huge,” I say to Ken’s back.

He’s heading toward his house. “I saw her earlier. She’s fine.”

I look. Her vulva is smaller than it was. Some blood on her tail. Her bag tight.

“She’s calved. I’m going to look for her baby.”

I walk straight north through the snow to where Solstice was standing alone beside the juniper, not seeing that Ken has climbed the fence and headed west. I only see lumps of cowshit covered in snow—any one of them could be a tiny calf—and I trip toward one then another then to the spot by the juniper where Solstice stood and it’s lying there stone still, red fur wet from snow and birth-slick and I fall to my knees, shedding my gloves, and feel it for heat for breath for life and with none of that present I pick up its head and try to make it breathe as I cry out like those tiny twins in the lower pasture bawling to the sky.

I shake it. Cold. Nose mouth ears cold. Ken walking toward me along the fenceline.

“Is it alive?” he says. I thought he’d gone inside.

I shake my head. I shake my heart. I shake the calf—truly there’s no life in there. The afterbirth pools nearby. When I saw Solstice earlier, alone by the tree in the snow, I walked right by her without stopping to look more closely, to check on my first-calf heifer, who was born on winter solstice high on a plateau among junipers and piñon pines in an 11,000-acre pasture to a cow we had recently bought without knowing she would calve out of season, and I hadn’t paid attention, only noticed that she was missing in a snowstorm and I looked for her, combing through hills and trees for two days until I found not only the pair but the birthplace. I named the cow Walkabout, the calf Solstice, and today I walked past Solstice without stopping to check her and I can tell you I hate myself right now.

Ken tells me to go get warm and heads to his house. He feels terrible, too, I know.

I stay kneeling in the snow before the calf, both of us wet to the skin. Solstice had not finished cleaning her off. Yes, her. A tiny red heifer. Ferdito the father. Full Criollo. For what reason did she die? All I can think is I was not there.

I’ve done it only once, though I have wanted to many times. When years ago I got clean—went through detox and five weeks of inpatient treatment and no longer had drugs to use when the white lightning of pain or anger seared through me—my mind went to cutting, to hurting myself more than whatever was causing the hurt. It felt good, this truth I have not told, my sharp hunting knife slicing through the skin of my arm—that part where other people get banded tattoos—again and again until the outer skin split like when you’re skinning an animal and the elastic of the hide separates to reveal flesh and the blood slowly seeps to the surface and beads there. And all I can think as I stand and walk away from the tiny fallen calf to check on her mother is where to cut. How deep. I’m burning.

Solstice is eating. Which of my knives is sharp enough, I wonder. Inside, beside the fire, I pull layers of clothing like skin off my body. Down jacket heavy with snowmelt, draped over a chair, dripping, the straps of the insulated overalls pulled off my shoulders, hanging from my waist. The calf lying dead in the snow. The wrists? Flannel shirt shed. Another log on the fire, sparks flaring. My hair dripping down my back through black silk baselayer and cotton tank and bra. Calf dead. Dead! Because I didn’t stop, instead hurrying after someone else’s agenda. My skin red with cold as I peel off silk. Heat reaching me finally from outside, fire still burning within—in my stomach, my arms. White lightning I called it when rage burned down my arms and I wanted to strike out, but now I want to strike in again and again. I look at the pale crinkled skin of my past on arms where sun has burned and points have punctured and drugs have entered; there, I look for the tracks of old pain. From before. Before I got clean. The before and after of me. Young and old, the same and different, unidentical twins, both me, all me; Ken is at the door. Entering.

“We better go check on them.”

I'm still in my boots, have not pulled them or my overalls off. I find dry silk and flannel and cover up my skin and scars and pull the overalls up, straps over my shoulders, the jacket back on. Find a dry hat.

Toyota already running, warm. "I looked at Solstice's calf," Ken says. "Its hooves are clean. No mud or dirt from trying to stand. It never got up."

"It's snowing. The hooves wouldn't show dirt."

"It was either stillborn or suffocated from the sack over its nose."

"I didn't stop. *I didn't stop*. I was following you. *You* didn't stop."

"I didn't see her." He hadn't looked sideways. The big hood of his jacket like blinders. He didn't see her.

"I told you she was standing, alone."

He's driving again through drifting snow. "I saw her earlier, with other heifers. She was fine."

"But I *told* you. You didn't listen." I want to fight, to blame.

"*You* didn't listen," he says, "to your own intuition. My intuition was telling me to get to these two calves. Yours was telling you to stop, go look. But if she was just standing still, the calf was already dead. She'd already had it and it was dead."

He stops at the gate. I get out, want to slam the door. I prop the gate open on snow.

He drives down toward the cattle. We scan the cows—there's 206, foraging through what's left of the hay. She hasn't slipped her afterbirth; the string of it hangs beneath her tail. Most of the calves are huddled on piles of hay or cornstalks. I see the small curl of the prayer calf like a dog sleeping, but the black heifer stands, bawling.

I look at Ken. "Would Solstice take it?"

"You mean graft it on her?"

"We could try."

He watches 206. She's an older cow. She looks thin, worn. Confused by the twins but trying to make it right. Afterbirth hanging, which happens—they don't always pass it cleanly like Solstice did—but sometimes it represents problems.

Ken maneuvers toward the bawling black heifer. "We better do it now before the cow gets attached," he says, and he's out the door and the calf's in the back and we slip and slide away before 206 knows what's missing. We stop for the gate and again at the barn, where Ken puts the new calf with

bottle-calf Chloe temporarily, and I trudge through the snow to get the little dead heifer.

Ken has cleared a place on the cement floor of the barn and has his hunting knife sharp and ready. I lie the heifer down on a cardboard bed, my hand resting on her forehead for only a moment. Ken looks at her. Rolls her to her back, exposing the belly. Knife near her throat, he slices into her skin, following the line down to her navel, sometimes going over a spot again and again until the outer and then the inner skin splits and flesh is revealed, red as the little heifer's coat, which the black heifer will soon wear.

I watch. My son on his knees on the cold floor, both of us cold and tired though it's still morning, tired of the year, of the drought despite snow, of death; he's concentrating, careful with the sharp knife, following a pattern his father taught him, a pattern hunters know, but this is different. The calf is not gutted like a deer, only stripped, the hide sliced cleanly around the wrists, but they're ankles, really, so the black heifer's legs will go through like arms into sleeves.

I step back out into snowflakes and bring Solstice into a pen. Ken has finished skinning. The naked carcass stays on cardboard as he dresses the black heifer, pushing her hooves through the sleeves of the dead calf's hide, stretching it over her back, then pushing her other feet through. It must be cold to the live heifer at first, certainly strange; we have to hurry and I push Solstice from one pen to another as Ken readies the squeeze chute; moving near her ribs, her hip, pressuring her forward with my body and voice and she enters and Ken closes the gate behind her and squeezes her slightly with a lever above his head. She's caught and stands quietly but he puts a cow halter on her anyway and hands me the lead rope; I hold her head so she can't fight as he grabs the black heifer in her new red coat and holds her near the teat. Solstice kicks at first but Ken is persistent and the calf finds the teat and the warm milk dribbles down her throat and it's good and she suckles for more.



# Contributors

**Ruth Baumann** is the author of *Thornwork* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020) and *Parse* (Black Lawrence Press, 2018), as well as five chapbooks. She holds a PhD from Florida State University & an MFA from the University of Memphis. She teaches in prison.

**Emma Brankin** is a drama tutor and teacher from Glasgow, Scotland. She recently graduated from Goldsmiths College, University of London with a Masters in Creative Writing and Education. Her work can be found in places such as *XRAY Literary Magazine*, *Maudlin House* and *Drunk Monkeys*. Catch her tweeting about her cat, old '00s TV shows and Tim Curry's acting career at @emmanya.

**Joshua Butts'** first collection, *New to the Lost Coast*, was published by Gold Wake Press. His poems have recently appeared in *The Account*, *Blackbird*, *Pleiades*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. He currently teaches and serves as Dean of Faculty at the Columbus College of Art & Design in Columbus, OH.

**Leila Chatti** is a Tunisian-American poet and author of *Deluge* (Copper Canyon Press, 2020) and the chapbooks *Ebb* (Akashic Books, 2018) and *Tunsiya/Amrikiya*, the 2017 Editors' Selection from Bull City Press. Her honors include a Pushcart Prize, grants from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and Cleveland State University, where she was the inaugural Anisfield-Wolf Fellow in Publishing and Writing. She currently teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is the Mendota Lecturer in Poetry. Her poems appear in *The New York Times Magazine*, *POETRY*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

**Caroline Chavatel** is the author of *White Noises* (Greentower Press, 2019), which won The Laurel Review's 2018 Midwest Chapbook Contest. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Sixth Finch*, *Foundry*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Poetry Northwest*, among other journals. She is co-founding editor of *The Shore*, an editor at Madhouse Press, and is currently a PhD student at Georgia State University where she is Poetry Editor of *New South*.

**Lydia Chodosh** is a graphic designer, writer and fine artist. She recently relocated from Brooklyn, New York, to Providence, Rhode Island, where she is pursuing her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design.

**Julia Cohen's** most recent book is a hybrid collection of lyric essays, *I Was Not Born* (Noemi Press, 2014). Her poetry books are *Collateral Light* (Brooklyn Arts Press, 2014) and *Triggermoon Triggermoon* (Black Lawrence Press, 2011). Her work appears in journals like *The Rumpus*, *Boston Review*, *BOMB*, *DIAGRAM*, *Colorado Review*, *Entropy*, *The Destroyer*, and *Kenyon Review Online*. She writes a monthly interview column with *Tarpaulin Sky* that can be found at [tskymag.com/original-obsessions](http://tskymag.com/original-obsessions).

**Sean Cooper** is originally from Detroit, Michigan. He holds a degree in chemical engineering from Michigan State University and was highly commended for the Poetry London Prize 2020. He lives and works in Charlotte, North Carolina.

**Weston Cutter** is from the Midwest, his latest chapbook is *Careful* (December 2020/Finishing Line Press), and he's had recent-ish work in *The Gettysburg Review* and *The Southern Review*.

**Adam Edelman's** work has appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *decomp*, *Bridge*, *DeLuge*, *Barnhouse*, and *The Raw Art Review*. His chapbook, *It's Becoming A Lot More Difficult to Feel Unchanged*, won the 2020 UnCollected Press Chapbook Prize. He holds an MFA in poetry from the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin, where he received a fellowship from the Michener Center for Writers. He is a PhD candidate in creative writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**Trevor Ketner** is the author of *[WHITE]* (University of Georgia Press, 2021) selected as a winner of the National Poetry Series by Forrest Gander. They have been published in *The Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day*, *Best New Poets*, *New England Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *West Branch*, *Pleiades*, *DIAGRAM*, *Foglifter*, and elsewhere. Their essays and reviews can be found in *The Kenyon Review*, *Boston Review*, and *Lambda Literary*. A 2020 Lambda Literary Fellow, they have been a Poets House Emerging Poets Fellow, Emerge-Surface-Be Fellow for The Poetry Project (selected by Wayne Koestenbaum), and a Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts Fellow. They hold an MFA from the University of Minnesota and live in Manhattan with their husband.

**Whitney Lee** is Maternal Fetal Medicine physician, an Assistant Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern University, former OpEd Public Voices fellow, and veteran. She received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Threepenny Review*, *Pleiades*, *Ninth Letter*, *Booth*, *Typehouse*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Rumpus*, *Crack the Spine*, *Gravel*, *Numéro Cinq*, and others. She is the recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Agency Literary Award. She lives in Chicago with her husband and four children. Currently, she is working on a memoir about a physician's experience with uncertainty and perfectionism.

**Jeanne Morel** is the author of the chapbooks *I See My Way to Some Partial Results* (forthcoming from Ravenna Press), *Jackpot* (Bottlecap Press), and *That Crossing Is Not Automatic* (Tarpaulin Sky Press). She holds an MFA from Pacific University and has taught poetry in arts organizations, retirement communities, and prisons. Jeanne lives in Seattle where she teaches writing at Bellevue College and is a gallery guide at the Frye Art Museum.

**Audrey Moyce** is a writer of personal essays, fiction, and criticism. Her work has appeared in *Hobart*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *The Coachella Review*, *Fatal Flaw Lit*, and elsewhere. Find more of her work at [audreymoyce.com](http://audreymoyce.com).

**Leah Myers** is an Urban Native American writer with roots in Georgia, Arizona, and Washington. She received her MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the University of New Orleans and is currently living in Alabama. Her

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**Eloghosa Osunde** is a writer and multidisciplinary artist whose work often explores mental health, sexuality and the psychology of identity and interpersonal intimacies. An alumna of the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop (2015), the Caine Prize Workshop (2018) and the filmmaking and screenwriting programs at New York Film Academy, Eloghosa's writing has since been published by multiple publications including *Paris Review*, *Guernica*, *Longreads*, *Catapult*, and *Berlin Quarterly*. Eloghosa's visual art has appeared in *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, and *Paper Magazine*. She is a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow and a 2020 MacDowell Colony Fellow. Eloghosa was awarded a 2017 Miles Morland Scholarship to write her debut work of fiction. She is represented by the Wylie Agency and the author of *VAGA-BONDS!* which will be published in 2022 by Riverhead Books.

**Sabrina Piersol** (b. 1995) is an MFA candidate at the University of California San Diego. Piersol's paintings investigate translation as a practice, exploring the logics of language through abstraction. She is particularly interested in the translation of Ancient Greek texts and looks to lyric poets such as Sappho to draw inspiration. The compositions Piersol creates are records of information interacting, where shapes serve as containers into which fluid meaning settles. Formal examinations of color, texture, and pattern drive her painting practice.

**Erica Trabold** is the author of *Five Plots* (Seneca Review Books, 2018), winner of the inaugural Deborah Tall Lyric Essay Book Prize and a 2019 Nebraska Book Award. Her essays appear in *Literary Hub*, *The Rumpus*, *Passages North*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Essay Daily*, and elsewhere. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Sweet Briar College in central Virginia.

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**Julie Marie Wade** teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University in Miami. A winner of the Marie Alexander Poetry Series and the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir, she has published 13 collections of poetry and prose, most recently *Skirted: Poems* (The Word Works, 2021) and the book-length lyric essay, *Just an Ordinary Woman Breathing* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020). Wade reviews regularly for *Lambda Literary Review* and *The Rumpus* and makes her home in Dania Beach with her spouse Angie Griffin and their two cats.

**Kathryn Wilder** is the author of *Desert Chrome: Water, a Woman, and Wild Horses in the West*, which Kirkus Reviews calls a “testimony to the healing power of wildness.” Wilder’s essays have been cited in *Best American Essays* and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and have appeared in many publications including *High Desert Journal*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Sierra*, among others. Wilder has an MFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts and lives among mustangs and Criollo cattle in southwestern Colorado.

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**Rain Wright** received her Ph.D. in English with a focus in creative writing from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. She currently teaches writing at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa as a lecturer. Twice nominated for Best of the Net, Rain’s work has been published in *Hawai‘i Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Connotations Press: An Online Artifact*, *Madras Magazine*, *Summit Magazine*, *Hawai‘i Pacific Review*, *Entropy Magazine*, *Dreamers*, *The Pinch Journal*, *After Happy Hour Journal*, *Arc Journal*, and is forthcoming in *Mi-*

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