
Orca
A LITERARY JOURNAL
AUTUMN 2024
THE LITERARY ISSUE

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We Orcans are proud that our journal always contains writing from contributors who live in locations around the world. Issue 17 features stories from writers who call places like Nigeria, Taiwan, Quebec, and England home—and as always, from around the United States.

Since the writing we publish is in English, this points to the fact that our native language is still the international standard for communication. It also reflects on the colonial aggression through which English spread around the world. But whatever the origins of the prevalence of English, we are glad that it allows us to appreciate the great variety of cultures and subcultures that exist.

Culture and language have long been used to divide people, to pit one group against another. Writing and communication are an antidote to that—by allowing readers to learn about other people and cultures from their source—through work that exhibits depth of character, and reveals our commonalities. Since English is spoken in so many places, perhaps we can use it to mend some of those divisions. At least, that's what we are hoping to do at *Orca*.

– Joe, Zac, Renee, Kellie, and the Orcans

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About the Cover Artist

New Zealander Charles Brooks has indulged his passion for music throughout his life. He was principal cellist with the Shenzhen & Guiyang Symphonies (China), the Orquestra de Camara de Valdivia (Chile), and spent three years with the Sao Paulo Symphony in Brazil. In 2016 he turned to full-time photography. He is now based in Melbourne, Australia, where he spends his time as a freelance photographer and indulges yet another passion, astrophotography.

His Architecture in Music project, of which this issue's cover is a part (The Exquisite Architecture of Steinway, Part 1) has been one of the most published photographic series internationally since 2022. Brooks's photos are now in museums worldwide, and have been reproduced more than 16 million times in many of the world's major newspapers and magazines. They have been featured by the most influential art and photography blogs worldwide, and are in commercial use by clients as diverse as the Paris Conservatorie and the CERN Hadron Collider.

In 2025 the series will have its first major international exhibition, running for six months at the Napa Valley Museum as part of the Napa Valley Festival, where the photos will be printed at a room-size scale. Smaller exhibitions have featured works from the series in locations such as Budapest, Stockholm, Prague, and Switzerland in 2023 & 2024.

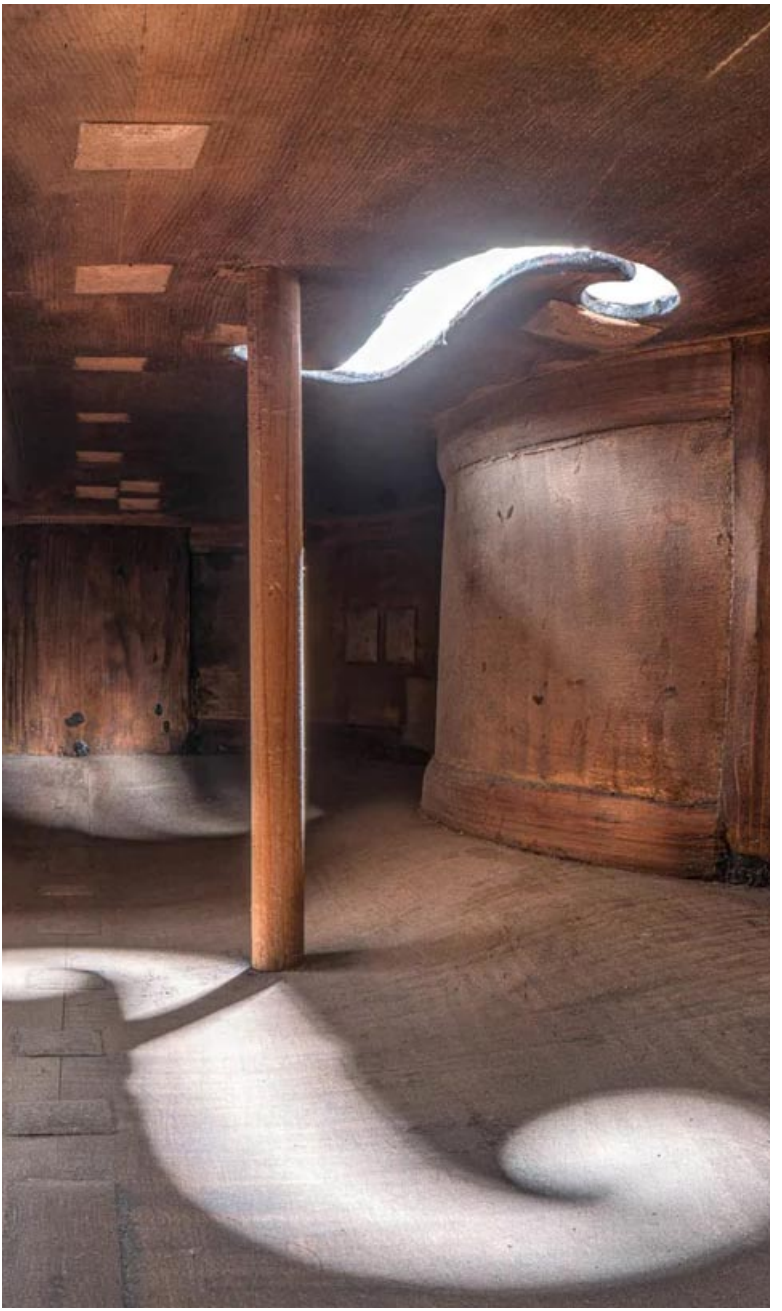
2021 Selmer Saxophone

Brooks explores the beauty and complexity of these unseen spaces using specialist probe lenses and complex imaging techniques. Each photo is a blend of hundreds of frames. The unprecedented sharpness and detail renders these spaces as vast rooms, exposing the tool marks of the makers, repairs carried out through the centuries, and the hidden architecture within.

He chooses rare instruments with fascinating histories: A cello once hit by a train, a didgeridoo hollowed out by termites, an exquisite Fazioli grand piano hand-made from 11,000 individual parts. Each instrument is photographed hundreds of times with ever increasing focal lengths. These frames are then painstakingly blended together to form a single image. The clarity and carefully chosen perspectives trick the mind into believing the space is much larger than reality. A 240-year-old cello looks like the inside of an ancient ship, a century old saxophone becomes a gaping tunnel of green and gold, the keys of a piano become a monolithic temple.

Brooks's other photography series include images of musicians, landscapes and cityscapes, and his Low Light series—a personal favorite of his—featuring images of astrophotography and explorations of glow worm caves.

Many of his images are available in print and poster format. Visit https://www.charlesbrooks.info/ to learn more. For a brief video of Brooks's photographic process, check out this page: https://www.charlesbrooks.info/behind-the-scenes. Additional images of Brooks work are on the following pages.



Lockey Hill Cello, Circa 1780, Part 1

From the Low Light Series of Astrophotography

Ibanez Acoustic Guitar

Chilean Landscape

Australian Yidaki / Didgeridoo

St. Mark's Pipe Organ, Part 2

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Editor's Note: We have not Americanized spellings and grammar native to other English-speaking countries, but have left them in their original form in order to fully convey the voices of our authors. The authors' locations (states, provinces, countries) are noted at the beginning of each work.

Telephone Road

LINDA WOJTOWICK

Back then you told me about the windward and leeward. How it matters.
Which side of the land you're on; which side of ice, which of heat.
Windward is where most want to be, you said. The green water coming at you. Heaving lace.

When you called for help it mattered. We bent ourselves.
And since we're talking again and you brought up old meals—
and the films we'd put on after those meals—well then maybe
I'll bring up a few more things needing brought.
Like how when I called for help it fell down dead.

For weeks I ate glass. But I'm not that same person now.
What I remember is the storms in summer.
Panicked bugs swirling by your uncle's covered porch.
Electric sky, curtains coming down just west of town.
Where the diner went up. On Telephone Road.
Your hair whipped out, white grass in wind.
Hay on fire in the barns.

When she called for help you took your head off and drowned. A million moths lined our bitter screens. A million millions. A million tired things.

How to Name a Wolf

ROSE ENGELFRIED

Watch him. There he goes.

All long legs and muscle. Seventeen: still more dreamer than man. The summer sun launches him like a pebble from a sling. Arms pump, bare feet pummel earth. There he goes, log boardinghouse at his back as he crosses the clearing, enters the woods, bounds over the trout-running stream. There's his hair, *long as an Indian's* his father says, sun-kissed bright as the cottonwood snow that drifts in the eddies of his running.

Watch him, the way he and the boy who shares his heartbeat have watched the deer in autumn; the powerful push of the buck's muscles as he bursts into view of the doe, as he lowers his head to match the challenge that sings in his blood. Watch, as they've watched two eagles fall talon-locked through the sky, as they've tracked a goose to find her mate. Watch as though he's a mayfly, this bright brilliant day everything and not enough, never enough. Because nothing can take it back: love can't be undone.

He's past the stream now. He's in where the trees speak their own language. In his head there's a longing for another language, one that would hold all he needs it to. A language to explain why he did what he did, and how it wasn't so much, really. How if he was his father's son he wouldn't be coming here now. There's a warning

on his tongue. He's the scrub jay crying *hawk*. He's the cog his father shouldn't have trusted.

He looks up as he runs. He can't miss the woodpecker's swoop. After, he'll describe it to Nodin. He'll trace that arc of wings over Nodin's chest, through the coarse dark hair that smells of cedars, Nodin's deep voice in his ear echoing the woodpecker's cry. They'll spill their seeds together into the earth, and wait for something to grow there, and there will be time then, time for everything. Time to run.

The woodpecker's gone.

And when he stops, just a hover, a heartbeat between steps to scan the sky, maybe to breathe, to think, or to not-think, that's when it reaches him. The smell of charred flesh.

Just a breath. A hint. The echo of his own voice.

Just the taste of an ending on the wind.

It began years before. Well, it had no beginning. But if it started, it started with the skunk.

I served my husband the skunk for a couple of reasons. First, it was there. Caught in Mattie's trap, not quite dead but even at sixteen my boy had the knack of the quick blow, quick end to suffering, so there it was, good meat and the snow still deep with ice underneath and not much else around, Matthew himself certainly hadn't put anything on the table in weeks, what with trying to impress the new lumber boss, all the dissent at the mill from the men wanting more pay but no one willing to invest, which, Matthew said, meant the end of forward civilization. So it was meat, and when Mattie came in, red-faced, snow on his shoes, asking what I thought he should do, he'd caught a skunk in the snare Nodin helped him make and yes, he did reek, and should he leave it out for the coyotes or maybe best not to give them invitation, and do coyotes even eat skunks? maybe he could leave it and then hide and watch and see, and Matthew hadn't made an appearance in a week that was longer than it took to scarf his food, except in bed, if that counted as appearance. Well, so, I said No. Don't give it to the coyotes (no, we don't need to lure them in close to the chickens anyway, you know that, Mattie, and I've seen you putting out scraps for them, so don't). No,

just skin it and bring it here, you reek anyway, you won't get any worse, and I'll cook it with the potatoes because, Mattie, you know, your Pa's hungry. Mattie's eyes, oh, that boy, what he could say with his eyes, and that quirk of his mouth, always liked a good joke. I quirked an eyebrow back. Then Mattie went outside and skinned the skunk.

Made a good winter hat from the skin. He gave it to me for Christmas. No, I don't wear it. But I still have it. Always will.

That was one night when Matthew did show up. Kicked off his boots, stood in the kitchen and watched while we finished the cooking. Voices burst through from the dining room, the boarders arguing about something small enough that it didn't draw Matthew, more's the pity. His eyes on my back were hotter than the stove, his mouth's quirk telling a different story from that of his son.

"Woman," he asked finally. "What did Mattie bring us?"

I flipped the meat. His silence wanted an answer. I gave him one. "Supper," I said.

But I might have figured. Might have guessed these tough-hided men would know more than my Matthew did. Skinner, one of three mill hands who joined us that night, gave the game away. "Mm," he said on the first bite. Grinned. "Tastes like pig." Matthew raised an eyebrow. "Skunk," Skinner explained, and swallowed.

Matthew's eyes found Mattie like a hawk zeroing in on the kill. "I won't stand for any blessing being asked over a skunk caught by dirty Indians. That"—Matthew's fist hit the table—"is sacrilege."

His voice cleared a silence big enough to lie and die in.

"Matthew." I hadn't served myself any of the meat, but Matthew wouldn't notice a thing like that. "I think you just called your son a dirty Indian."

"Our son, Mary. *Your* son. You know full well he consorts with them. With your blessing—"

Mattie, face red, eyes tracing the table.

"Boss," Skinner said. His plate was half-empty. "You know, 's good. Mm. Sorry." He swallowed. After Matthew's searing look, the man probably didn't eat again for days.

Matthew gave Mattie his beating after, while I was in the

kitchen washing up. Late that night I brought Mattie supper because seemed like that's what a mother did. He wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't open the door. I left it. Then I found my way outside. Mattie hadn't cried when his father hit him. He hardly ever did. Boys were supposed to run to someone in times like that but, again, he never did.

Two things I heard him say after the blows, before he blew through the kitchen and on up the stairs. First: "Yes, Father. I did catch it." That note of pride in his voice. Food on the table. His food. His.

Matthew's voice, a low thunder.

And Mattie: "I wish I was. I'd rather be an Indian than your son."

First it's just the woods, breathing.

Leaf-rustle, maples bright as beacons, a green that shines. Winter's birds waking up to the idea of spring. An otter slides down the stream, another tumbles after, a deer's white tail flicks. First it's just Mattie, waiting, breathing.

Snap of twig.

Mattie hears Nodin before he sees him. Leaf-shadows haven't let him go yet but there's his voice, low, murmuring, humming. It's been ten days, Nodin and his uncles gone to the meeting grounds thirty miles south, and here's what Nodin's brought back with him: this warbling new tune. It's a wren's song, or the note between wind and rain; it's Nodin's low voice, laughing. It's a happy song. *Slow down* Mattie wants to say, because he can't catch the words—it's in Lummi—and he wants to.

No, he doesn't need to. Here's Nodin, and Nodin is the song.

He's wearing the fur coat he's had for three winters now. There's a leaf stuck haphazard in his hair. Mattie wants to put another there. He likes the cedar smell of Nodin's hair. What he has now, though, is just Nodin: long legs running-strong, and long fingers, a reed flute between them, he's twirling the flute, it's a new one, he must have traded for it. Nodin can't whittle; Nodin can't sit still that long. Nodin sells furs for the things he wants. Mattie's wearing one of

Nodin's furs. Beaver, a warm embrace he doesn't need in this spring sun.

Nodin's thinking the same thing. He stops at the edge of the stream, shrugs off the coat his wrists outgrew a while ago. A year ago they were both fifteen and Mattie couldn't even say what Nodin looked like, if he was tall or if his muscles rippled like a trout's, if his eyes were like rich spring loam or like the spaces between the stars. Nodin could sing any song after hearing it once; Nodin knew every bird by its voice; Nodin could mimic anything and anyone. Mattie isn't sure when he first noticed the way Nodin's skin soaks in the sun and radiates it back. Now, Mattie can't touch Nodin without heat filling him up, heat like Nodin's taken the sun and made it better. One day last fall Nodin said he liked the tang of Mattie's sweat. *Taste,* Nodin said; brushed a finger down the hollow of Mattie's throat; tipped that finger to Mattie's tongue. Mattie had been surprised. Nodin hadn't been. *People like us happen,* Nodin said.

Nodin looks like his voice: golden, strong, ready for anything.

Now Nodin sits, his coat between his body and the spring-damp ground. He leans back on his hands, his bare arms pushing the ground with muscles Mattie wants to run his hands over. He will, in a moment. In a moment Nodin will look up and stop his singing. Now, he tilts his head back, lightening his voice a little. The words start to form meanings, spiraling out into the spring.

I've nothing else to give you, so I'll give you my song
Call it my name, call it our beginning…

"When a son takes his own name, is he still a son?"

Matthew grunted. "What?"

I asked again.

The night crept through the chinks in the logs Matthew hadn't patched yet. Mostly the boardinghouse was just quiet sleep-rustles, someone snoring. Our pine bed seemed too big when Matthew built it a decade ago, too much mattress for even Matthew's strong heavy limbs to fill when it was the close of him, the heat of us that both of us wanted. Beds don't shrink on their own but this one somehow had. Matthew rolled over. I scooted out from under his

flung hand. He raised his head on his elbow, hair a mossy tussle round his face.

"What kind of a question is that?"

The kind a woman asks. The kind a mother asks. "Never mind."

Head thump to pillow. Sigh. Matthew never-minded.

When a son takes his own name, is he still a son?

This was later, after the skunk. Snow petering out into spring. Skinny muskrats in Mattie's traps now, winter creatures waking up. Only, "Mattie"? I'd heard his friend, Amitola's son, call him something else that morning. I'd gone out a little way into the woods to find him, bring him home in time to wash for dinner for once so Matthew wouldn't have to tell him: *What kind of filth have you been playing in? Get out, wash that brown off your skin*. There was Mattie in a fringe of trees and then the other boy's voice, echoing, "Hemene, wait!" And Mattie did wait, poised, a coyote caught mid-run: my son only when had he ever been my son, really? Especially now, his voice dipping like a man's, the long strong limbs of him. Or: especially since the first time I held him, wide-eyed foreign animal in my arms.

They call me the Mother of Puget Sound here. Like I'm to mother this whole bay. But spring days like this I'm still remembering Mattie's first quickening, like a little tadpole, some squirming thing in my deepness that I shouldn't have swallowed.

Bring your own mothers, I want to tell them. And find one for me, too.

So Mattie waited and there Nodin came, long legs and black hair streaming, to press something into his hand, a feather, some treasure they'd found together, him and my boy-child-man I rarely saw in summertime. Even last winter I'd lost him; Nodin's wild laughter warmed him better than our woodstove. He taught Mattie to make snowshoes from sinew and all the daylight hours they'd been out there in the cold, in the snow, whistling bird calls to each other that made the winter woods sound like May. And wouldn't the short days keep him home? Not if the Lummi's winter lodge of cedar poles held more appeal. Which of course it would. Boys learned to build snares there and track deer and call the spirits with

a drum's skin; here a boy, at least Matthew Dowell's boy, at least the heir to Dowell Mills, learned things like profit margins and how to buy investors. And how to survey trees; how to mark which tracts would profit, how to know the woods like the back of the hand—which Mattie could have learned from the Lummi, the People of the Sea, but at least when Matthew took the talk that way the boy looked alive. I left them to it in the dining room every night—every night Matthew wasn't at the mill. I'd hear their voices, mostly Matthew's, muffled ins and outs, as I lay on the bed Matthew made, and pretended there was no one else in the world.

Something Matthew doesn't know: that when I was pregnant, cramping far too early, so dizzy the earth became sea beneath my feet, and Matthew wouldn't get the doctor—they were who I disappeared to. When I stumbled in the forest gathering herbs, under watching eyes that held more sympathy and forgiveness than any preacher…well, that was all it took. I stayed with them five days, and for those days I thought I would never leave. A woman who told me her name was Amitola took me out that first night, told me to spy the moon through the corner of my eye. *Our children will both be boys then,* she said, one hand on her swollen stomach. Boys are easier to bear, everyone knows that. And they're easier to hand to a husband. The earth turned to earth again after the first day but I stayed and stayed from crescent moon to full, till the morning Amitola's father sat by me at the fire and said to me *He's looking for you* and the rest, what he didn't say, was what Matthew would do if he found me, which would be, for the Lummi and for me, two different kinds of ending.

So I went back. So I didn't leave him. So I never told where I learned to make the tea he drinks when his throat's raw in winter, or how I knew what poultice would draw the poison from that rat bite last fall. If I did, Matthew would never speak to me again.

Such a tragedy. No more *What?* No more *Never mind.*

Last winter, when the fever swept through, I heard Nodin tell Mattie his mother had died. Mattie asked me later why I was crying. I didn't tell him.

It would have been nice to think my old friend Amitola could

have been there at my son's naming, if I couldn't be. Well. It would have been nice to have been there myself.

I rolled over. Matthew huffed and sighed. When he spoke, his voice was full of gravel. I thought he'd fallen asleep an hour ago. "I gave him a name," Matthew said. "I gave him a *life*. Matthew Dowell. Tell me—God Almighty, tell me—what else am I supposed to do?"

I didn't answer. I lay still and evened my breathing, till Matthew's evened too, till he grunted and his body went lax. I could ask Mattie about the name in the morning. What did it feel like by the water, and was it Nodin's grandfather, Amitola's father, who summoned the spirits and spoke the new name. I could ask. Maybe he'd tell me. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe there were things he didn't want his mother to know.

Maybe (beside me: Matthew's heft in the bed)—maybe I didn't blame him.

This is the gun he brought to the woods because he thought he might see—what?

One: a rabbit, white tail a signal for the hunter's eye to follow, meat to spark his father's eye to pride; fur the make a muff with, to make his mother smile.

Two: a white man.

Three: the wreckage a white man leaves behind.

This is the gun he brought to the woods because some things are worth defending. And some things aren't, and sometimes a man has to choose.

A man: seventeen.

A man has to choose how much of a man it's right to be.

This is what he knows about bodies: that they are very easy to stop. He has thought about pain, and he knows how to turn it off quick. This is what he knows: bodies know only themselves. They don't know fire. They don't know lead.

This is what he knows about endings:

Mattie was chopping wood when his father came to find him.

November: sweating cold, breath white. Six winters now he'd been old enough to swing the ax alone. It felt as good now as it had that first time when he was ten. Up, the ax head catching the low winter light; down, just so, hitting the seam. The sharp bark of noise as the wood split. The seasoned sappy smell. Another pinch of sawdust on the chopping block. Cut log small enough to burn.

"Son? A word."

He wasn't done. He'd wanted to get the stack finished tonight, so he'd have nothing to keep him here tomorrow morning. Nodin had found a beaver's lodge further up the creek; the animals would be out again at dawn, reinforcing for the winter. Svelte heads cutting the creek's surface, branches skimming water as if by magic, floating upstream above two just-visible roving dark eyes. *Trap them?* Nodin asked Mattie with his eyes as they crouched together in the bare red twigs of dogwood. Mattie didn't need to answer. The pelts would bring in money, sure. But they had enough meat still from the deer Mattie shot a week ago and money didn't split the water silver, money couldn't slap its tail down and shatter a morning. Which the beaver had, a change in the wind warning of the two watching presences. Mattie had hoped all day the creature would have forgotten its caution by morning.

"Put down the ax, Matt. I want to talk to you."

Crack. Iron blade once more into wood, but this log split sideways, splintering out so the ax blade stuck sideways in the chopping block. Mattie hauled it out, face warm even as the sweat cooled on his forehead. His father hadn't taught him to swing like that. But his father hadn't taught him, either, how to keep chopping through his own presence, through the voice that was a tide that always, always got where it was going.

"Put it down."

Up, swing, down once more till the blade quivered to a stop, bit halfway into the scarred edge of the chopping block.

"Sit." His father lowered himself onto the wide block and patted the space next to him. He wore his mill clothes—crisp bowler hat, tie. Clothes that made investors mouth the words "uncouth millers?" and scratch their heads. The real miller, Mattie's

father had explained, doesn't actually work the mill. He doesn't touch the logs. He touches men.

Mattie took a step back, out of touch's reach. He didn't know when he'd ever looked down to meet his father's eyes.

He stood there. He looked down. He sat down on the ground, balanced on his heels, thin hide shoes his resting place, a tree against his spine.

Looked up at his father.

Who said, "Don't you know what sodomy is?"

Who said, "Are you my son, or aren't you?"

Who clapped his hands together, stood up. Said, "I came out here to tell you two things. You're a surveyor now. I'm giving you your own team. You start tomorrow morning. And…" Off somewhere, a jay squalled. "Indian boys get what they deserve."

"It's woods work."

"…"

"I mean, it's spending my life walking around in the trees. That's what surveyors do. They learn the forest. I'd never have to leave. Nodin, *I'd never have to leave.* To wear a suit like my father. To—"

"…So tell him." Gold voice, river-slow.

Mattie takes in a breath. Lets it out, *huff*, too soft. The feeling's still inside him, muddy, a stream bank after the raccoon's done. "My father," he says, "looked at me." He looks at Nodin. Burned cedar-wood eyes.

"So," Nodin says, gold voice, river-slow.

Mattie says, "…Tell him?"

It's the clearing. It's the far side of the stream, where the trees speak their own language. It's a place where the hollows of the ground know the bodies of men. They are men here, at least they think they are, at least they feel what they think men must feel, though it's a hard thing to say, an easier thing to do. Mattie's fingers know the landscapes of Nodin's body the way his feet know the forest paths. Nodin's lips shape Mattie's being like he shapes a warbler's call. "Did we used to not be like this?" Mattie asked once, against Nodin's heartbeat, eyes lost in blue sky. "Used to doesn't matter," Nodin said. "This is now."

Now, earth hard beneath them, it's Nodin's head on Mattie's chest.

"You're skin's too white," Nodin says. "You need to get more sun."

Sun is the feel of Nodin's fingertips brushing the side of Mattie's face. Down his jaw, cross his collarbone, there in the hollow where breath catches. Mattie tries to breathe, and when he does it's spice of worms' leaves, mud and creeping winter life and flowers' memories of dying. It's chill that raises goose bumps up his too-pale arms and it's warm that travels into his blood, so much heat it's like boiling water, burning cold again. It's too cold to be here and here they are; it's too deep into winter. Mattie's too white. He needs to get more sun.

This is now.

"Would you do it?" Mattie says.

"Would I work for a white man and cut trees the white man way? No."

"…"

"You asked."

"…"

"So, then? Tell him you will." Nodin props himself on one elbow; Mattie has to sit up. Nodin's arm flexes and Mattie's stomach shivers. "Here's what you do. You walk into his study. Wherever. His bedroom?"

"His office at the mill."

"His office at the mill. You pause in the doorway. So." Nodin takes a breath. Only a few muscles in his face shift but all of a sudden his mouth quirks and it's Mattie's mouth, the mouth he sees in the mirror. "'Father,' you say—"

"My voice is deeper than that."

"Your voice is exactly that deep." (It is.) "You say 'Father, I'm honored. Please make me a surveyor. Let me earn an honest living walking around and measuring trees.' Then you— Stop laughing."

"I don't talk like that."

"Yes you do. And then *he* says—" Nodin's voice drops, words hard as river stones falling. There's a swelling in his voice; stones turn

to an avalanche fast. "'Son, you've made me a proud man. Today you've set aside your wild ways. No more will I have to despair because you act like a dirty Indian. No more—'"

"No."

"What? He'll say—"

"*No.* I mean it."

Mattie means it. His voice is like that ax.

Silence between these two usually tastes of summer's last honey, or of cedar smoke, or of sweet sweat. This silence tastes like silence. Like iron on the tongue.

"Don't talk like my father," Mattie says.

"…I got it wrong."

"No," Mattie says. "You didn't."

"…"

"I can't stand that," Mattie says. "I can't stand hearing him come out of you."

There's a silence. This one tastes like rain.

"So," Nodin says.

Mattie picks up a fallen fir cone. Twists off one seed. Another.

"So," Nodin says again. "Don't tell him."

Don't. Tell. Mattie drops the cone and draws his knees up to his chest. He's too cold, needs skin against skin. Needs Nodin's heartbeat thumping against his. Mattie lets his face fall, presses his nose into Nodin's shoulder, breathes Nodin's breath more than the words that Nodin says. But those words have gotten inside him, too. A splinter from wood he wanted to be soft. Though soft wood—isn't it?—is only ever soft when it's rotting.

"Tell him no?" Mattie says.

"You could."

Mattie sees his father's face. He sees it reflected in the blade of an ax. An ax his father taught him how to harness, how to hold.

"I don't know if that's true," Mattie says.

The face the word "no" makes in the ax won't look at Mattie. There's something else, something better, his father wants to see.

It's never a good sign, a man's nose in the kitchen. It always means

he wants something. Usually the kitchen is a place he likes to pretend doesn't exist. Food doesn't get made, and nobody does the making. "Nobody" had sweat running down her face, even though the frost had bit the last of the squash vines a week ago. I had the stove burning hot, all my glass jars boiling for canning, though not for long. Since becoming one of Matthew's lead surveyors Mattie didn't cut the wood much anymore. He'd promised me he would. But he was a man now, his eyes said.

Don't let anyone tell you that you can shape them. Pray you can't. Pray you are helpless. Tell yourself they would have come out that way, whatever you did.

"You look exhausted," Matthew said. A better sign. Those were good first words out of his mouth. It was nice of him to notice. It also meant I could narrow down his wants. He'd followed his stomach here, not the thing between his legs, if he was seeing straight enough to catch the apple seeds in my hair. But he ignored the apple I offered him, its tight skin still sun-kissed and rosy. Asked, for maybe the first time in his life, "What in hell did I do wrong?"

My paring knife bit the pad of my thumb. Blood welled, apple-red.

"He's still seeing that Indian boy. Don't lie to me, Mary, I know he is. One of the men asked me the other day. 'Was that your boy I saw out hunting geese in the marsh with an Indian? Running around half-naked in the forest with savages?'" His savage voice. I sucked my thumb: salty blood, sweet apple's juice. "I don't understand," Matthew said, and then again, "I don't understand. All I wanted was a son. A *son*."

"That's what you got," I said. But I knew what he meant. I'd also expected something I could recognize.

I reached for another apple, slid my knife underneath its fine skin. I'd watched Mattie disappear as usual that morning. One moment of clear-breath stillness in the clearing out back of the house. One glance at the log pile he was bound to chop one of these days. Then it pierced the air, Nodin's three-note whistle, a trill left over from springtime. His mother must have taught him that. He had to have

her touch, too, the way Mattie's eyes would glow when he came home.

"Millers: Dowell and Son. The boss and his foreman. Why did I work so damn hard for this job? So he could have it, that's why. So he could grow up and take my shoes. Build his house, marry his wife—" Matthew choked. "His *wife*. Do you know what they do?"

"More than we do." Great lump of him in bed.

Matthew blinked at me. "What?"

"Never mind."

No, I didn't know. But I wanted to.

Had I followed them? Maybe. Just far enough. I never took Mattie's animal trail. I had my own path, not all the way, just close enough, just so I could half-glimpse their place through the trees. Branches hid the stream but not the stream's laughter; nothing hid the laughs of the two of them. It made me shiver. It made me feel loose in my skin.

"I want you to tell me," Matthew said. "What did I do wrong?"

Oh, you, Matthew? Maybe beat him one too many times. Maybe called the boy-man whom he loved a dirty Indian. But that wasn't what Matthew meant; he meant something deeper. A bigger lack. One I also thought I could name.

Lately, I'd been watching Matthew's voice play on Mattie's face. Everything he said cast a different shadow there. Sometimes it was one of pride. When Matthew bragged in front of one of the foremen how his son's survey team covered the most ground, Mattie glowed. But is there a word for glow's opposite, a sucking in of light? Then there's a word for Mattie, any time his father tipped back his chair and said *Money. Future.* Any time the word "Indian" came as "dirty"'s afterthought.

"You showed him how to go after money; you never showed him how to be a man," I said. "Who else was he supposed to learn it from?"

I grabbed another apple, started peeling, eyes on the blade, so I didn't see the look that passed through Matthew's eyes. But the look was in his voice too. "I'll fix him," Matthew said. "I'm going to fix him if it's the last thing I do."

★

"You thought you could get away with it, didn't you. A son lying to your father. A worker lying to your boss. A Christian boy—aren't you?—lying before God.

"Well. Don't consider yourself a surveyor anymore. I don't care how good your work is, I didn't give that post to an Indian lover. An abomination. An unnatural bastard. Yes, I did call you that. Yes, I wish you were. Consider yourself such. My seed didn't make you.

[*Crack*]

"Oh, you felt that, did you? Where's your *lover* to kiss and make it better? That red devil's spawn. I know all about it. My men have seen you, out in the woods.

[*Thump*]

"Can you see him from there? Can you see him from down there on the ground?

[There is a silence. A jay screams a warning. Forest sounds. In the distance, a group of mill men coming in from the forest.]

"Get up. What's wrong with you? I won't say it again: Dirty Indians get what they ask for."

Which means what? wonders the mother, who startled the jay, who watches her now as she watches the son not get up from the ground. His eyes follow the jay's flight but he doesn't move his head. His eyes fall from the jay and meet her own.

There's only one thing he's "asked for," the mother thinks. She knows how her husband's mind works. Does the son know, though? Does the son know enough to know what to be afraid of?

"If you weren't my own boy," the father says, "I'd kill you, too."

"What did he do to you?"

Mattie angles his face toward the ground. Still he sees Nodin, misty in twilight. The twin smoke-puffs of their breaths diffuse into one. Mattie came out here to think. To be alone.

"I can't touch you," Nodin says, "because I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

"You won't hurt me." Never. Never. Never those hands.

But when Nodin's thumb brushes his jaw line, his face twitches anyway.

"Hemene."

"I can take it," Mattie says.

"I can't." Lips still. Stillness looks wrong on Nodin's face. Silence looks wrong.

They're in the forest. They're at a place where great trunks sink toes into the earth, where little brush grows because it's been so long since the ground felt the sun. Sun's what Mattie needs now, something to warm him. He was walking when Nodin found him (when he found Nodin), when they were walking, suddenly, the two of them. This is how it is in the forest. Walking, the two of them.

"Leave?" Mattie says.

Nodin looks at him. Dark eyes, level. The same height, the two of them. Lips the same height. Mattie moves forward.

Nodin moves away.

"I can't," Nodin says. "And neither can you."

There's a moment. The trees are breathing, the boys—the men—who knows? Softly Nodin reaches out. Takes Mattie's hand, but not for comfort. Takes Mattie's hand and holds it up, wrapped in his own.

"Look," Nodin says.

Mattie looks. Work-reddened fingers: his. Work-browned: Nodin's.

"It doesn't matter," Mattie says.

"He beat you," Nodin says. "He'll kill me."

He won't. That's what Mattie wants to say. The words are in his throat. He won't, he's my father, you just don't know him, he was proud of me once, I saw it in his eyes. Mattie also saw, once, his mother's chickens, the hard choking masses of their crops; they'd eaten dried rice, and it had swollen inside of them.

Mattie swallows. "We could go." Voice a croak.

"Where?"

"Your people?"

Nodin's fingers tighten: brown over red.

"I won't give you up," Mattie says.

Nodin's eyes, twist of lips: And you get to choose?

I woke in the caught-breath space between night and dawn and dream. Dream that hadn't been dream; dream of father's voice. *If you weren't my son.*

I woke in the caught-breath space of Matthew, not sleeping.

If he took his gun, I'd say it. I'd find Mattie; I'd make sure he knew. Knew that empty threats and Matthew had never coexisted. *Your father is a man who does what he says. If he says payment, that's what he means. You can't risk it anymore, Mattie.* That was what I'd tell him.

And he'd end it. Even though. Even though the golden creatures I'd seen beyond my scrim of branches didn't look capable of ending anything.

(It would only stop—Mattie would only stop—if someone ended it for him).

(Mattie, my son, who had never been fully mine).

Matthew rolled out of bed, fumbled for clothes, and did not take his gun.

He was already in the kitchen when I got there. Heavy boots on, empty plate awaiting. The paths his eyes took didn't tell me enough: over me, past the window, down to the table, to a printout from the mill. Up again. Up, the window, the outside: the woods.

There was a place in the woods; they met there; when I needed Mattie I could find him, though usually I didn't, didn't even go close enough to call him. What was it I knew then, really? I knew the space to stand and watch them, just long enough so my heart caught some of their heat. I was a mother; I'd tried to be. Mother to someone new and strange. In some sense I'd created the capacity for joy, this creature: Mattie.

I wanted to believe that he still belonged to me.

So I didn't look out the window, just fried Matthew the one egg we had. I didn't look as I sliced his potatoes. His potatoes, and Mattie's, because here he was, my son. I went back to the stove. Split a line down the frying egg.

"I'm on my way out," Mattie said.

So I did look; looked and met Mattie's eyes.

Brown eyes, flecked with a forest's green secrets. When had Mattie become taller than me? Behind him at the table sat Matthew,

a thirty years' echo: Matthew's cliff of jaw set firm in Mattie's face, his hard lips set firm, too. Once there'd been a softness in Mattie's eyes. Once there had always been laughter. Now I knew where he laughed. Who he laughed for.

Mattie, warn him.

I opened my mouth.

"Stay for breakfast," I told him.

But Mattie was looking past me, at his father, and "I'll eat on my way," Mattie said, and then he was gone.

Matthew grunted. For a moment or a year that's all there was, Matthew's grunt, and the silence Mattie left that I had not spoken into. What would it have taken? A *Be careful.* A *Mattie, stay.* A *Come back in a minute (when your father's gone), I have something to tell you, and once I do, you will run. You will leave. You will leave me behind.*

Is a mother still a mother. If her son. Leaves her. Behind?

So I flipped the two halves of fried egg onto Matthew's plate. So I forked on the potatoes and placed it down, steaming. I knew nothing for certain; what warning did I really have to give? I scraped potatoes onto my own plate, scraped them back into the pan again. Matthew pushed back his chair and, empty-handed, left the room.

And if, somewhere in that space that exists beneath knowing, I knew Matthew didn't need a gun, never needed more than his fists; if I knew that Mattie knew how to track long before he met Nodin, because Matthew taught him; if I knew that what Matthew said, Matthew did—if I knew that, I also knew what my son's eyes said when he looked up and saw Nodin coming. I knew how a forest creature, once warned, will find its mate and flee. I knew an ending Mattie wouldn't choose and one that he would.

If a son takes his own name, will his mother ever see him again?

What might she do, to never let him go?

I knew where to find them: down that path that led to the stream, to the ground that held their bodies and the beats of their hearts. I knew how close I'd have to come—scrimmed by branches still, out of sight—to shout the handful of words that makes a warning.

And like two wolves bonded for life, they would prick their ears to the wind—both of them—and flee. Gone. For good.

I knew what Mattie would choose.

So I gathered Matthew's dishes. Pumped the wash bucket full. Tossed the leavings out for the chickens. And I told them, those squabbling warm hens, that what was coming might not be today. After all, Matthew didn't even take his gun.

"An Indian boy," Skinner said, pushing back his chair at the noon meal. "Beaten first, then throttled. Then just left in the woods for the bears. Couldn't do a Christian burial, of course, but I burned the body. Figured it was the least I could do."

Silence. Stillness. Then *slam* as chair hits floor. Another slam: kitchen door. Now Mattie's gone.

Breathe in: the taste of endings on the wind.

Endings are copper-strong, blood-iron on tongue. Endings are mulch, beetles' passage. Endings are words unsaid, grown stale under the tongue.

Watch: nothing moving.

The gun lies next to him. It's his father's gun, not his own. His own would have been too small to brace against the rocky ground, muddy with ashes. Even so, the stone that took the gun's weight has shifted. His face is a bigger, messier gash than he would have planned. Already the forest floor knows more of him than it ever has before. Across the clearing, even, the earth drinks his blood.

It tastes good.

The bullet that was a white arc through his brain is dead lead now, self-buried in the stream. With it, it has taken: regret. With it, it has taken: knowledge. Had he known less of his tawny golden lover's body, that body wouldn't have been taken from him. Had he let himself see, he could have spoken a warning in time. Had he lived he would have given his life to regret but he gives life to nothing now. He gives life to the forest. It will sink its roots in him.

From the forest, now, comes the woman. Watch her pause at the edge of the clearing. Watch her nostrils take in the smell.

Gunpowder first, overlaying charred flesh, before the smell of the blood. Her blood? Can it be?

That wriggling tadpole child's face is gone.

She kneels down. Later she will not wash the flecks of ash and blood from her knees. Later she will sit for long hours fingering the cloth. But now? She bends and takes him in her arms, and stops when the movement shifts him, when even that lifting makes him less, gives him more to the earth. She cannot move him and keep him intact, though nothing will keep him intact, there is no him now, just herself, curled on the ground next to him. She lies there long enough for the shadows to spread themselves. For the stream's song to welcome night. He feels the same as the earth does. She feels this way too.

She stands.

The next day, the man with whom she created this boy will come to the clearing. What he finds will wrench a cry from him, but she won't hear. A whole man will enter the clearing and a broken man might leave it, might not—this woman will never know. The man, either way, will be the same one she once asked, *What happens when a boy takes his own name?* Maybe now she knows the answer.

Maybe, not.

She takes the answer with her, either way, across the clearing. The trees' arms brush and open. If she stepped through, would they close behind her? She has always wondered. Today, she finds out that they would.

In the clearing, nothing breathes.

tenderheart

KELSEY L. SMOOT

Legally,
I am a man now,
according to the Georgia Department
of Driving Services
It feels surreal,
three decades later
and my paperwork no longer lyin' on me
I think I am supposed to feel
like the truth now
I think my driver's license
is a transgender death certificate

This is made complicated
by the fact that I refuse
to eulogize the Black girl,
disappeared by my surgeon
so good it's almost like
she was never here

This is not a death
Me and that imaginary girl are just
on the run together
Hiding under sunglasses
and too-large hoodies
and trying not to turn our heads
when someone calls us by our old names

It's funny how the world
only searches for missing Black girls
after they've confessed
that they never really were girls
just *Black* and *missing*

Perfect in their unwillingness
to be what the world said
what a nigga said
what I said yesterday because
I reserve the right to change my mind—
change my hair and
pop my shit

Rewrite my name over
and over and over
with different letters
until it starts looking right
make you memorize every new spelling,
and then forget them all
if I say so

And maybe today I am a man—
yesterday a Black girl
and while I'm asleep,
I'm nothing but a pyre of 'almosts'
and 'never agains'
The sparks between my synapses
threaten to catch ablaze
and engulf every version
of the person that I performed today

The first time
I swim in a lake after top surgery,
chest bared to the wild
just like twenty years prior
I register
that I am topless and tasty
and terrified
I am torn open
and suddenly so much taller
I get a mosquito bite
just above my nipple
and for some reason
this feels like a gift to me

Afterwards my sister's friend
and I laugh about the blood tax
for wanting to go shirtless in public
I tell her how scary it was
And how absolutely thrilling
I wonder if I'll ever be able to strip myself
without a moment's hesitation
Toss my shirt to the ground
and run for water

She says
'yeah, isn't it funny
how they make it all about the body
Being in the *wrong* body
Needing to change your body
Like,
I'm sure you thought it was your chest
that was holding you back,
and now
now you realize
it was the shame'

Wõiksape

JIM GENIA

A week after his uncle died and already Elliott Red Feather could feel the resentment creeping in. Not at his uncle's passing—the ravages of cancer had made death a mercy. No, what smoldered within Elliott came from the responsibility his uncle had burdened him with, one that kept him tethered to a reservation in North Dakota he'd happily left. "I need you to look after my friend," his uncle had said, and now Elliott was stuck, stuck living in dismal tribal housing, cooking boxed mac-and-cheese mixed with canned commodity pork, taking care of a two-hundred-plus-year-old dwarf named Heck who murdered people with a tomahawk.

"Aho," said Elliot, standing in the kitchen, leaning over the dented stove with wooden spoon in hand. "Dinner's almost ready."

From the recliner in the living room, the dwarf said nothing. On the TV, violence and gore. As usual, Heck alternated between chuckling and outright laughter, ugly sounds that made Elliott think of growling res dogs and mean-spirited badgers.

In the week since his uncle had died, there were no thanks for the meals prepared, no gratitude for keeping the fridge stocked. If Heck didn't occasionally grunt at him, Elliott wouldn't be sure the dwarf knew he was there.

"Aho," Elliott said to himself, wooden spoon in hand and resentment creeping in, when there was a knock at the door.

It was nearly ten at night, and no one ever came to this corner of the res by accident. Elliott opened the door unsure of what to expect.

His uncle was standing there, which Elliott knew was impossible. As per tribal custom, his uncle's ashes had been scattered along the riverbank.

"Hello, neph."

Elliott didn't know what to say, didn't know what to think. He had the urge to reach out, to pull the thing close and see if it felt like his uncle in his embrace, but Heck was suddenly there beside him.

"Hmm," said Heck, his thick, meaty hand between them, pushing against Elliott's chest, stopping him in his tracks. "No."

Confusion at how fast the dwarf had moved from the recliner to the door.

Confusion at the car parked in the driveway, and the man getting out of the driver's side door to watch them.

At the thing that looked like his uncle, except it no longer looked like his uncle. It was an ugly dwarf with an upturned nose, protruding brow, beady eyes and sharp teeth—features similar to Heck's, but with shocks of white hair marking him as older. Elliott didn't know what to think of any of this, but then his eyes went to the curved knife in the dwarf's hand, and he was frightened.

"No," said Heck, this time to the dwarf. One hand was to Elliott's chest, and the other held his tomahawk. He gestured at the darkness beyond the driveway, at the tree line casting shadows on the moonlit snow. Then they were gone, impossibly fast and impossibly quiet, creatures whose existence Elliott had been ignorant of a little more than a week ago.

The man trudged up to the door. Said, "Don't mind them. They're just going to kill each other."

The man made himself comfortable at the kitchen table, his bones creaking with the chair, and by way of introduction said he was Fontaneau, a Kootenai from the Flathead Reservation and a friend of Elliott's uncle.

By way of explanation, said, "Their medicine is very old. Much older than ours."

By way of apology, said, "Your uncle was a good man. My little friend, he shouldn'ta done that."

Elliott fought the urge to say he didn't want this responsibility, that he didn't belong there, that he should be far away, taking classes at a community college with the short hairs and not babysitting a monster.

Instead, he scooped mac-and-cheese-and-pork into a chipped bowl and set it on the table before Fontaneau. Handed him a fork. Asked if what he said about them killing each other was true.

"Geez, your uncle didn't prepare you for this job at all, did he?" said Fontaneau. "They believe dying in battle is their path to the afterlife." A forkful of food into his mouth, noisy chewing, and Fontaneau said, "My little friend is sick, so…" His voice trailed off. "So this probably won't be much of a fight."

Elliott let what Fontaneau said sink in, and when it finally did, he shook his head. Said "savages" with so much disdain it was as if the word tasted awful in his mouth.

"Aho," said Fontaneau. "You sound like a colonizer." Another forkful of food. Noisy chewing. "They were the original Natives. We have to respect their ways."

To Elliott, Fontaneau sounded like every white college counselor or outreach volunteer trying to justify overlooking a res Indian's alcoholism or meth habit. He told him as much.

"You got a lot of self-loathing in your words," said Fontaneau. "You hate your people, or just yourself?"

They dozed on the couch, the TV before them muted but showing CNN reports of things happening a world away. They woke with a start when the springs of the recliner groaned.

Heck, short for *Hecesiiteihii* (the Arapaho name for his kind), was sitting there. In his hand, the remote control. Dried blood stained the sleeves of his flannel shirt.

"Aho," said Elliott.

Fontaneau stood and his bones creaked. He straightened his

clothes with wrinkled hands. To Elliott, he said, "My job is done." To Heck, he said, "*Hohóu*. Thank you."

The dwarf said nothing. The channel changed from CNN to HBO, to another episode of *Game of Thrones* for Heck to laugh at.

Elliott saw Fontaneau out and began to prepare breakfast.

When his uncle had asked him, Elliott said no. But Heck had saved his life, saved him from a trio of oil pipeline workers out for Indian blood, and now Elliott felt duty-bound to stay.

Fontaneau was right. He hated himself for it.

Editor's note: Wóiksape translates as "duty."

The Weeping Corn

ERIC FISHER STONE

Carmen asks what's wrong
when we kiss and her hair
smells like apples and I cradle
the small of her back and say
I can't stop thinking about Lear's rants
on the heath that replied with thunder.

Senile brains putrefy to madness,
bird bones crumble through dirt, a snowflake
kissing the desert a thousand years ago
melted on a mesh of creosote sticks,
mountains grinding to dust, stars
like snuffed fires in a lake of oil.

I tell her my Grandpa planted corn,
acres of glittering ears, a golden glut
each autumn among cantaloupes,
his fingers cocooned to butterflies, his lips
singing grass. From wild horses' graves
white sycamores grow a palace of owls.

After the last bird drops, the world
will burn to a cinder, each book smoldered,
every word flame-erased, darkness
replaced by a deeper dark. I read
with Carmen in bed, ignoring
the inevitable, infinite night.

When Carmen dies, let her taste buds
thicken to new planets
forged by supernovae and the abyss.
Let corn tassels become comets
across the stars so night remembers
that kernel-sweet ache we call grief.

The Cat of Nagasaki

ERIC FISHER STONE

I lick my dingy ginger paws
and bat marbles down the gutter.
Below the fish-headed moon

I drink cups of milk monks left
for cats and squirrels. What is death
besides becoming the whole world?

Ghosts mist pompoms of sedge.
Crickets carol bamboo woods
on an Earth as strange as newborn hands.

I stalk nooks where scrumptious rats loiter
and the dead blow midnight spores.
Spiders knit gossamer pies,

owls wake in oaks' bitter bark
and sleeping lovers grow their hair.
Each dawn the sun's cherry rims the sea.

A plane drones. I hear whistling,
thunder's voice. New light bubbles.
Morning arrives. I am ready.

Flitcraft Weather

BYRON MACBRIDE

Years ago a woman told me a story I've been worrying over ever since.

We'd been set up through friends. In San Francisco, at that time, maybe still, meeting online was so much the norm that going out with someone you couldn't ghost felt dangerous, even a little indecent.

But coffee in the Sunset went well. She was tall, long dirty blonde hair, slightly smokey voice. She'd been an athlete at a prestigious university, had been invited to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship. Could have been anything. Became a private investigator.

Truly, an honest-to-God private eye.

I didn't think those existed anymore.

Or, maybe, had ever existed outside movies and novels.

But, turns out, they do.

She had wonderful things to tell. Some simple logistics: She spent almost no time in stakeouts, a lot in public records and on social media. Never investigated a murder, mostly tracked down hard-to-find persons. She took only women as clients, had a reputation for helping them get what they needed from difficult situations. Now, in her early thirties, she was doing as well as anyone

in her profession could expect. She told me all this frankly, without bragging and without underselling herself. I believed her.

Problem was, I found myself more fascinated by than attracted to her. Couldn't tell if she was into me. Probably she wasn't. I showed up to our second date thinking—maybe hoping—she was going to let me down easy.

We met atop 17th and Stanyan for a walk through the Sutro Forest. After the hellos, and without any introduction, she started the story I've never forgotten.

She talked in her matter-of-fact way as we walked, occasionally revising a sentence as if ensuring each event was described exactly as it happened.

I was more surprised by than interested in the telling, and confused about her intention.

You see, back then, we thought we were living through a particularly fraught America moment—the many misdeeds of men; political and racial acrimony; droughts, floods, fires. But, with 2020 still ahead, we were all such innocents.

She told me about a man who'd left his Silicon Valley office one wet spring afternoon and never came back. He didn't meet his fiancée for dinner that night despite making reservations hours earlier. Neither she nor his family saw him again.

His name, my date said with a wink, was Flitcraft.

I thought the wink was an amorous signal, exciting and unsettling. Then I realized she was simply protecting client confidentiality. A wink, therefore, not really his name. Years later I realized why she chose that particular pseudonym.

Anyway, Flitcraft and his fiancée had been madly in love, to hear her tell it. The wedding was only months away. They had the venue, food, flowers all lined up. His family had put down much of the cash.

His career at Google—or maybe it was Facebook or Apple—was taking off. Something about funding and the company's philanthropic activities. Everyone said he was bound for greatness. He'd paid off his student loans. He owned a hybrid. They lived in a comfortable apartment and, rare for the Bay Area, did not fear the rent.

The logistics of his life were well sorted, but not so completely as to be in preparation for vanishing. For example, he was due to finalize a lucrative collaboration with another company two days after he vanished.

He'd left a laptop, which his fiancée could get into. Because of saved passwords, they had access to everything. There were no lascivious text messages, dodgy social media interactions, or even unexpected activity on his credit cards or bank accounts. No one knew of another woman or a hidden vice, though neither could be completely ruled out.

On the day he vanished, he'd been asked to join lunch at a corporate retreat an hour away on the coast. His co-workers remember seeing him leave the office, but no one at the retreat saw him arrive. His car was never found.

"He just," she said while opening her fist into fingers, "went."

By this time, I was as struck by the story's puzzle as by the puzzle of why she was telling it.

"That was years ago. The fiancée had hired me to discover everything I just told you. I left feeling I'd failed her. But then, earlier this year, I got a call saying her friend had seen Flitcraft on TV. On the news about the wildfires in Australia, of all places. After sorting through news footage, I found him. In the background, behind a newscaster reporting on the political response to the wildfires. Only a few frames, but I'd seen a lot of pictures of him from when I worked on his disappearance. So I went out to Sydney. A long shot, but I couldn't stand not trying. He was working for a start-up with which the government was consulting. He'd found some way, which I still don't understand, of creating a new name and identity.

"Though his paper trail was fake, his work was real. He'd already secured an impressive amount of funding for the start-up. Something about AI that might model the path of wildfires. He had a townhouse, an electric car, was engaged to one of the start-up's software engineers."

"He felt no guilt for what he'd done. He didn't think he'd ghosted his fiancée since he'd left her 'where she could land on her

feet.' The only thing bothering him was making his actions understandable to me. He'd never told his story before, so now he tried for the first time.

"I thought it'd be the usual self-justification for toxic masculinity, another footnote on the #metoo Wikipedia page. And, in this job, I have scrolled all the way down to the deep dark bottom of those footnotes. But the more I understood, the more interesting and upsetting his story became.

"His first fiancée never did get it. I didn't blame her. She thought he was a sociopath, and maybe he was. It was harder on the family. But after what he'd done to them, no one was anxious to welcome him back. So, I left him there, and life went on for everyone.

"Here's what happened to him. The day he drove to the retreat, heavy rains flooded some roads. A detour took him up into the hills where the previous year's wildfires had destroyed everything. He was second in a short line of cars. They were far up and away from everything when there was a landslide. A boulder came bouncing down and slapped the car ahead of him clean off the road. It swiped his hood, spun him around. That left him watching the mud sweep away the three cars behind him.

"It was all over in seconds. He got out of his car and into stillness. Five feet ahead of him the road had been snapped off. Five hundred feet below him, four other cars were crushed and buried, their drivers unmistakably dead. But Flitcraft was untouched but for a short gash on his cheek.

"He had the scar when I saw him. Would rub it when we talked in a way that was, strangely, affectionate. He had been shocked of course. Deep down shocked. Like someone had just opened the hood of the world and showed him how its engine worked."

Flitcraft had been a good son, a good boyfriend, and most of all a good citizen. He'd been helping a major corporation do good in the world, posted about injustice and climate change, recycled. Not because anyone had compelled him to become those things. He'd been raised that way. Everyone around him had been raised that way.

The world he knew was a sane, clean debate between

humanity's immediate needs and its long-term responsibilities. He slept on an organic mattress. He understood the division between liberals and conservatives to be reductive; there were rationales for both perspectives, and solutions would come from good citizenship, discovery of common ground, analysis of actions and consequences.

Now a landslide had shown him that the world was none of those things. Or, maybe, wasn't any more. He, the good son-boyfriend-citizen-environmentalist, could be wiped out on a drive. He'd intellectually known about the world's capriciousness; people died every day of car accidents, rare cancers, beams falling from construction sites. Throughout history, humans lived when blind chance spared them.

"But the world had changed; its engine was running faster, had been made to run faster and would do so for decades if not centuries. Whole cities, states, countries could be caught in the landslide.

"He'd always known that was a possibility. But now the reality of it was in front of him, had nearly buried him under five tons of ash and mud. He'd always thought he'd arranged his life to be in step with that problem. Now he saw a sliding hillside could snuff him out in seconds. Attempting to address the problem of the world had gotten him out of step with the world. He'd never know peace until he got back in step with his new understanding.

"By the time he put his car into reverse, he knew how he would do it. The world could end him at random with its disasters, so he would change his life at random. He loved his fiancée and family as much as he thought was normal, but his old self had died in that landslide. If he went back now, it'd be only a ghost that did.

"So he drove north. Just kept driving. He had some cash on him, enough to get him to Tacoma. Here's where his story got vague and probably illegal. He wandered around the Northwest for a few years, picked up with one then another of the environmental activist groups that bloom and wither like weeds up there. He made friends fast and was always an asset to any group he joined. He met a software engineer working on AI and interested in climate change. She didn't look like his old fiancée; she had the kind of shrill

Australian accent most Americans have trouble understanding, but the two women were more alike than they were different. You know, the kind of highly competent woman who drinks fairtrade coffee, has only ever bought one Patagonia fleece, knows everything about the latest big issue. When the Australian wildfires became the cause de jour, they joined a start-up out there.

"Flitcraft wasn't sorry for what he did. It seemed to him the only reasonable reaction to the world. And yet…he said his start-up wasn't going to stop the wildfires, that probably nothing could. He was more concerned about finding a venue for the upcoming wedding. He and his new fiancée were arguing about the catering. That's what got me, the thing I keep coming back to, how unaware he was that he'd fallen back into the same groove in Sydney that he'd been knocked out of in San Francisco. He adjusted himself to the land sliding out from under him, then it stopped, and he adjusted himself to it not sliding."

It took me a while to realize my date was at the end of her story. "Fascinating," I said honestly, lamely.

We continued our hike. I made one of my usual overly academic observations, that we were hiking in a eucalyptus forest and eucalyptus had been imported to San Fransico from Australia during the Gold Rush by crackpots who thought the trees would be good for industry when in fact all they were good for was increasing fire hazard.

We never went on another date. Not that either of us ghosted the other. Our friends seemed disappointed that we didn't hit it off, but our lives went on. I met my future wife.

Then the world went on tilt in 2020. That September, a combination of fog and wildfire smoke blacked out the sun over San Francisco, covered the city with a post-apocalyptic glow. The Orange Day, they called it. I remembered Flitcraft then, but I worried about it only so long as I could be distracted from daily life.

Like so many of us who grew up there, my wife and I had to leave San Franciso for economic reasons. Though we couldn't live where we wanted to, we were fortunate enough to start the kind of comfortable life I'd hoped for.

Meanwhile the news detailed wildfires in Brazil, then Canada, then southern Europe. But it was the Hawaiian fire in Lahaina that changed things for me. The horrors everyone there went through so suddenly, so capriciously. It made me think, again and again, of Flitcraft. It made me wonder how many more ghosts had been knocked out of their grooves.

I began to wake up at night, thinking about fires and the detective who'd seen things clearly. I would walk around our comfortable house, watch my wife and our infant daughter sleeping. This beautiful, fragile life I'd fallen into.

All the while, in my mind, people fleeing Lahaina, some swimming out to sea.

Ghoster Apologia

JO ANN CLARK

Ours is not the hardcore
art of the cold, cold-turkey cutter off
whose stunning-swift
severing leaves a soothing wake of rage
that, over time, may
overtake abandon's stark and echoing
hurt. We follow instead
our haunted halfheart whose warm
affection and attentions
wander off, peter out, cool… Thus
do our diminishing
needs leave behind this hounding
hounded sense—hope's vain
and very essence: all-but-too-late comings-
back of the prodigal,
incremental comings-to of the comatose.
Thus however in-
advertent, we have honed the crueler
craft of vanishing
in a fashion dearer for all involved—.

After a certain disappoint.
And some measures of grief, irresolve, relief…
Some degrees of despair.

I've Said Too Little

LAINE DERR

I've dated guys with Daddy issues,
they wander naked to my door, mist
drifting from their eyes, tongues like
drops of dew enfolding floral phrases—

For depression, my doctor recommends
bees for breakfast. A bowl will do the trick,
she says. I was diagnosed as not giving a
flying fuck. They call it something different
today (I don't mind) but the pollen makes
my hands hum, a hallucination, they tell me

 not skirted legs parting but the itch beneath
my skin, gimlet-eyed, waiting for you, I feel
its purpose, a honey bee to alight. Disoriented

engorged with promise, I am dappled, I am light.

Waiting for Stevie Nicks

HOPE JORDAN

Maybe she was back in the '70s, but Stevie Nicks is definitely not cool now, not in 1985. The blond mullet, the lame videos, the sugary pop. Only white trash girls are into her, little toy doves in their bedrooms. Dressing up in platform boots and long skirts. You wouldn't catch me dead. I rip my t-shirts and pin the holes together.

That's what I wear on Wednesdays when Jimi and I go to New Wave night at the G-Bar. G for Generic. That's where the punks are, where the deejay wears guyliner and sprays his bleached hair with Aqua Net and plays The Cult, Talking Heads, maybe a single Rolling Stones song, *Paint It Black*, as a throwback. Maybe some Lone Justice.

The G-Bar is where Jimi and I met. We both like to dance with the punks. Neither of us badass enough to be real punk, but we both love the scene—the music, the hair, the black clothing, the clove cigarettes. Cigarettes that make your mouth numb. The third bathroom labeled, "Whatever."

Jimi and I share a summer sublet in this college town while the students are on break. It's cheap rent, and we get along. He has a car, and I have a job at the pizza shop. I don't know where he gets his money from, but we split rent and groceries.

One day Jimi comes home from the grocery store, dumps the bags on the kitchen table and leaves everything for me to put away. Orange juice, bagels, chips. He flops on the couch in the living room and lights a cigarette, turns on MTV, calls back to me from the dark.

"Elise, I love your hair today. What did you do to it?"

"Slept on it. Wet." I never let Jimi know how much I love his compliments.

He rolls off the couch, takes a bag of potato chips, goes back to the TV. He's barely taller than me, which isn't very tall, and sometimes he wears padding under his jeans to make his butt look better when we go out dancing. He stops eating.

"Hey, my girlfriend is playing over at the fairgrounds next weekend."

"What girlfriend?" I go to the doorway. A commercial shows Stevie Nicks, glittering and swirling. Jimi gives me his "awe" face—wide eyes, dropped jaw, mouth a cave of wonder. I can hear the awful synth of her latest hit behind the announcer's voice. Tickets available now.

"Stevie," he whispers.

"Have fun," I say. I go back, finish putting away the groceries.

Jimi is in the doorway again.

"Please?" Nobody else will go with him. I'm his only friend who will go.

I fold up the grocery bags and stuff them between the fridge and the wall. Jimi says he'll buy my ticket, offers to let me borrow his car sometime, thanks me again and again. I finally say yes.

It's hard to say no to Jimi, with his huge eyes and heavy mop of black hair—too much hair for a skinny person. He wears a Star of David necklace with his shirts unbuttoned. He drives past men sunning themselves at the park. He slows the car down but never stops. He talks about going into the woods with one of them. Maybe don't do that, I tell him.

"I'm just looking," Jimi says.

On the way to the Stevie Nicks concert Jimi has a cassette in the

Datsun's tape deck and a bag of chips between the seats. It's an outdoor show, open admission, so the sooner we get there the closer we can be to the stage. He turns up the stereo and at first, Stevie's raspy-ragged voice doesn't sound too bad, but then the tape starts slowing down and speeding up and even Jimi can't take it anymore and hits eject. I have the start of a headache.

"Did you hear about her face?" Jimi's mouth is full. "I heard she damaged her nose so bad she can't snort her drugs anymore. She has to pay a guy to blow it up her asshole."

"I don't believe that." It sounds like another one of those made-up celebrity stories, like Rod Stewart having his stomach pumped for semen. But maybe it's true. My last roommate had been a surgeon's daughter who dealt coke and woke up with blood crusting her nostrils. "Does it even get you high that way? The asshole?"

"The anus is just another mucous membrane. Gets into the bloodstream the same old way."

We get to the parking lot so early, Jimi's Datsun is the only car around. The air is gray and heavy. It feels like rain, but neither of us have a raincoat. I'm trying for a look somewhere between cool and invisible, no makeup, a button-down shirt and loose khakis. Jimi wears a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. He takes a blanket out of the trunk. It's patterned with pink and red roses, edges trimmed in pink polyester satin.

The blanket would embarrass me in my mother's back yard. I ask if there's something else we can use. But Jimi said it's his favorite blanket. Also, the gray sky doesn't seem to bother him. He starts singing, "I'm a few years older than you…my love."

"What is that song about, anyway? High school boys?"

"John Lennon."

"What? I don't get it."

"I know. Want to get stoned?"

We lean against the Datsun and share a joint. I check the pocket of my pants for my hard pack of Marlboro Lights. Jimi takes out a supersized bottle of vanilla.

"Are we baking Stevie a cake?"

Jimi laughs his silent laugh. "It's grain alcohol."

"Give me some."

The day gets muggier. I feel sweaty already and we haven't even left the parking lot. We pass the bottle back and forth. The alcohol tastes nasty, but it smells like vanilla.

Jimi and I take the pink roses blanket and vanilla bottle and make our way into the concert venue. There are a few people gathering near the stage, some roadies setting up, but the place is still mostly empty. Jimi finds a spot directly in front of the barriers before the stage and spreads out his blanket. The pink roses look even girlier here, on the patchy dirt and grass.

We smoke another joint. Some guys, the kind you see on the quad in winter wearing loafers and no socks, form a clump next to us. I wonder what they think of Jimi's blanket. These guys don't have a blanket, and they don't have raincoats either. They do have a great deal of beer, which they generously share with us. I would have guessed they were more the Van Halen type.

"Are you guys all Stevie Nicks fans?" I ask. One of them tells me he plays football for Harvard. I'm skeptical. He tells me they got tickets at the last minute. They were just looking for a party. Then he shows me a joint. "Can you help me?" he asks, "I couldn't possibly smoke this entire thing by myself."

I help him out, hand it back to him, but he waves the joint toward Jimi, who partakes.

The area in front of the stage begins to fill up. I go to the porta-potties and it's early so there's still plenty of toilet paper. I wipe myself and see blood. I am not prepared, so I take a wad of toilet paper and fold it up and stick it in my underwear. I take another wad and put it in my pocket, next to my cigarettes. On my way back to the blanket it starts to rain.

The frat-boy guys are smiling when I come back. They are talking to Jimi and seem to be in a good mood, but I have seen this type of thing turn before. The last fraternity party Jimi and I crashed turned ugly. It degraded into Nazi salutes. As we were leaving, we'd heard the president of the frat say, "I draw the line at goose-stepping."

"Welcome back," Jimi turns to me, his black cap of hair already damp and bedraggled from the rain.

"We draw the line at goose-stepping."

"Ha, ha." Jimi looks at the frat boys, looks down at the blanket.

"Should we hold it over our heads? Try to keep off the rain?"

"Why not?"

So we do, for a while anyway, and we wait for Stevie.

I'm getting tired of standing but there's no dry place to sit down. Jimi's blanket is wet. The frat boys are wet. Even the stage is wet. We watch one of the crew use a push broom to shove a puddle of water away from a microphone stand, and the puddle comes back, over and over. I think about all those electrical cords.

I go back to the porta-potty and take off my bra, which is wet and has begun to chafe. I fold it up and put it in my pocket next to my cigarettes and the damp wad of toilet paper. I'd like to switch it out for dry toilet paper, but that's all disappeared. I head back to the stage, hoping my pants are so wet any blood won't show.

Everybody keeps drinking and smoking, and it keeps raining. The ground gets muddier. At some point I lose track of Jimi's pink blanket. I realize it's part of whatever is making up the muck beneath our feet. There are beer cans and food trash and god knows what under there. I realize I'm going to have to throw away my sandals.

Underneath the surface high of the beer and the pot I can feel my period cramps creeping across my lower back. I can feel the blood leaking out of me. The rain has soaked through my hair and my clothes. It's finally getting dark. I'm tired of waiting for Stevie Nicks.

"Please? Please?" Jimi is asking me. Something is happening near the stage. One of the roadies has a camera and is filming the first few rows, sweeping the lens back and forth. Another roadie is standing next to him, pumping his fist in the air, trying to get the crowd excited. I think, it's not Judas Priest. It's Stevie fucking Nicks.

Jimi is pulling at me. It takes me a while to figure out what's happening. The roadie without the camera has long curly hair, like

Peter Frampton. He is almost as wet as the rest of us. There's a chant taking shape among the frat boys and the rest of them in the front row, and the roadie with the camera is pointing at me, and the curly-haired roadie without the camera is pointing at me and holding something. Tags on a string.

He is saying something to Jimi. The frat boys are on my left and they are soaked and shouting and jostling each other and some of them are looking at me. Jimi is on my right and he's smiling with all his big teeth, the way he never does in front of other people. Everyone looks strange in the light coming from the stage into the wet early darkness. In front of us the spotlights are glowing, and the same roadie with the same push broom keeps trying to make the same puddle go away.

"If you lift up your shirt, we get backstage passes!" Jimi screams in my ear. I can't believe Jimi is asking me to do this. I look down. The button-down I'd worn to be invisible has molded itself to my body in the heavy rain. Engorged by hormones, soaked to the skin, nipples stiff, my breasts are pornographic.

The chant is growing louder. Something feels like it's building. Lifting my shirt won't show anything that's not already more or less on display. But they want me to agree to it, they want me to want to be the show. I hold up both my middle fingers to the cameraman. He films it. The roadie with the backstage passes laughs. And then I do it. I pull up my shirt for the camera. There's a sound, not a roar but a crowd sound, a sound like pressure released through a valve. I pull my shirt back down. They turn away.

The roadie with the backstage passes heads away from us toward the stage but Jimi grabs him. He won't let them rip us off. So Jimi gets his backstage passes, and he hands me one. I don't want to, but I put the string around my neck. Now that they've seen me half-naked, I wonder if one of the guys is going to try to touch me. But nothing happens, and finally the concert begins.

After the show, we take our passes and look for the backstage area. There's a gate and the guy doesn't want to let us through, but we insist. Once we're in, Jimi and I drape our passes over our soaked

shirts. It's very dark, and there are quiet trailers all around us. If anyone is having fun in these trailers we can't tell. If anyone is drinking or blowing coke up anyone's ass, nobody is inviting us to join in. Jimi is quiet. We leave without seeing anyone.

By the time we get to the parking lot my teeth are chattering. Jimi starts the car and turns the heater up high. He goes out, opens the trunk, and finds a beach towel, blue and green striped. There are empty bags and fast food trash in the back seat. The windows are fogged. I take off my wet shirt and wrap the towel around my shoulders. My skin is clammy and my pants are soaking wet. I feel subhuman.

Jimi stops at the first gas station we see. He parks at the pump, goes in and comes back out with a bag of cookies and a cup of coffee. The coffee has Cremora instant creamer in it. The coffee is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted. He gets back out to fill the tank.

A Jeep drives up and parks behind us. The rain has almost stopped and I have the window down. I look in the rearview mirror and the guys in the Jeep look like the frat boys that were next to us at the concert, but it's dark and hard to tell. The Jeep's driver honks. Someone in the back throws a half-empty beer can out the window and it seems to be heading toward Jimi but they miss by a mile. I hear it clank-splash on the concrete. I hear muffled shouting. "Faggots!"

I close my eyes and see Stevie Nicks, as she finally takes the stage. I see her in the spotlights with her long blond hair. I see her body heavy and fragile under the witchy shawls. She slips in the puddle near the front of the stage and falls. She doesn't just stumble, but goes completely down. She is nearly forty. It is five and a half months into her tour. A few weeks from now the tour will wrap up and she will check herself into the Betty Ford Clinic. She gets up quickly, she keeps dancing and singing, but it's too late. The cameras are rolling, and everyone has seen her fall.

Get On It

TRAVIS STEPHENS

Maybe because I work in the trades;
welders, electricians, machine operators,
my white pickup tribe scattered
across this vast sun stage of Los Angeles,
my vocabulary has gone to shit.

Most of my co-workers
slogged through high school bored and contained
like it was being at the house of a relative
you don't like or know.
They somehow graduated and swore off books for good.
The older ones, my age, communicate
in a grunt and bumper sticker to condense
all the fuckedupery of this life.
Gadsen flag, Union made. Harley.
Star Trek versus Star Wars. Video Game scores.
The younger got rap beat into their bones
and won't wear red, like never.
This hillbilly nods along, ignorant crow.

So I blame them for my having said to
a Lexus slow off the light,
"Man, get on it."
This ain't academia, pal.
We get paid by the hour.
In this six cylinder rhyme of highways,
poetry one slow death at a time.

Heart Monitor

JOANNE ESSER

The morning when I unstick my heart monitor from the skin of my chest, its adhesive itchy and gummed after wearing the patch for the last two weeks, I press it into its box to be mailed back and wait for the lab to analyze my rhythm. I wonder what the data will reveal, its ups and downs charted on some kind of graph the cardiologist can read, a record of fourteen days and nights of slow and fast beats that until now only I could read, from the inside. It was on this same morning that I watched a neon green beetle climb across the surface of a grey boulder at the lakeshore. Again and again its six hairlike legs stepped forward over crevices and cracks, its long dark antennae reading like a map the subtle currents of air passing through. It stumbled, more than once, and when I placed my fingertip in its path, it turned and, without missing a beat, kept on its way in a new direction. Regardless. Just carried on. It never arrived anywhere, all the time I sat still and watched. It kept marching along, leg after leg after leg after leg after leg after leg.

Uhtceare

E. J. FRY

I lie in the dark and consider the issue of a list. So far, you would be losing. You would be surprised by that, I think, and that would probably be another entry into the 'con' column: your lack of awareness. But I have not officially started my list-making yet and I should not admit half-considered entries. Not on a subject of such importance. That would be unfair.

Before I fully engage with the issue of a list, whether I need one and what might be on it, I allow myself a moment to listen to the hum of our new fridge-freezer. It has been a good investment, I think. Perhaps the best we've ever made. It has more storage space for a start, twice as much, and all the batch-cooking that will allow should mean we make our money back within a couple of years. Maybe sooner. I told you we could probably make the money back within eighteen months if we ate less meat and if we stopped getting takeaways, but you didn't really look at the spreadsheet I showed you. With your eyes fixed on the TV, you slipped your mouth to the left of your face and told me it was important to live a little. *You can't take it with you, David*. That's what you said. But that depends on where you're going, doesn't it, Matthew? Beyond the grave? No. Beyond Margate? Yes.

I wonder, if I did write a list and if it did go a certain way,

would I get to keep the fridge? I did buy it after all. I don't think you even really notice it—I've never heard you say anything about its ice function, for example. Not even last Friday when I made us margaritas at five o'clock, put yours next to your laptop, and said, *ice*! You didn't seem to think that was a strange thing to say, when really it was quite strange. Especially as it was the first word we had exchanged since lunch. I stood next to you trying to think of something else to say, something less strange, maybe even a little joke about breaking the ice, but in my head it all sounded too cringey, too sad, and so no words made it past my lips. You were silent too. In fact, it was so quiet in our little flat, our home, that despite you having your headphones on, and despite them being the noise reduction ones I got you at Christmas, the ones with the cups which sit flush against that soft, warm skin which surrounds your ears, I could still hear how unhappy Tim was, with you, your team, your results, so I crept away, unnoticed, and poured my margarita down the sink.

I wonder what Tim would say when you told him? Perhaps you wouldn't tell him: you're all home-based since they closed the office so it might not come up for weeks or months, not until you had your quarterly sales meeting in Hastings. And you might have found someone new by then. Or be happily single. I would be old news. In that version of the future, you might even give in to Tim's requests to join the team on a night out rather than telling him that you have plans and then coming back to me and to Margate, to our battered sofa and tiny TV. Which is lovely, and would almost certainly be a pro, that you always choose to be at home, with me, rather than somewhere else, but I need to give it some proper thought.

Because the other side of that, of course, is that we don't ever go anywhere. There might not be many places to go in Margate, but now that summer is nearly here, it would be nice to think that we might do things. Coastal things. Walks, even. Nothing that costs. None of the kayaking and paddle boarding and kite surfing that seems to have popped up overnight, with five percent body fat and year-round tans, all clad in neoprene and with such certainty about

its place in the world. None of that, no. A walk and some talking, that would do me. Maybe stopping at one of the huts if it's warm and sharing an ice cream. Although the gulls might come for that and I really don't like them, so I'd probably rather just have some own-brand on the sofa. That'd be fine. Nice, even. But we need to do something, some things—you always choosing to be here feels less like a pro when you never want to be anywhere else.

You're stirring now and so I am lying still, holding a breath. I hope I haven't been talking out loud again. I think you're just having a fidget: rolling over, pulling at the duvet, rearranging your heavy limbs. And yes, here comes your arm, flung across the bed. Flung across me. With it comes your scent: thick, masculine, and fine, I'll admit it, sexy. It shouldn't be. When we lived on Clifton Street, on the ground floor and with our bedroom facing the road, we couldn't have the window open. I would slip back into our room after my morning pee and be assaulted by the accumulated smells of the night. Even one whiff of that heavy, dank aroma should have ruined your scent for me, but it hasn't.

See, I have always liked the heat of you, the way you radiate throughout the night, a six-foot furnace simmering beneath the sheets. But now we have a bedroom on the third floor, with a window that faces onto the communal paving, and the context of your scent has changed. The window can only open a fraction, ten centimetres or so, but that is enough to keep the room a little fresher. When you move in the night, especially if you lift an arm or throw one across the bed like you have done tonight, I get a whiff of you and I am completely undone. I can smell what you haven't been able to or haven't wanted to tell me about your day, or at least the emotional signature of it, the emotional impact. I feel so close to you then, so intimate, as though you are finally sharing yourself with me. If I do make a list, your night scent will be my first pro and I'm not even going to apologise for that.

The motor on the fridge-freezer has whirred into action again. You turn away from the noise, your back to me, and sleep on. The old fridge-freezer was much louder. You made me close the kitchen door because of its 'whining'—that's what you called it. This one's

too quiet to intrude on your sleep, so I get to listen to the hum and I like that because I can use the sound however I like. Sometimes I use it as white noise, drowning out everything else and just allowing myself to be a person. No, less specific than even that: a body, a weight. A weight in a bed, suspended, with no thinking to be done or decisions to be made. I am just here and that is all I owe to myself. All I owe to you.

At other times, I use the fridge's hum as a reminder of what it is to be certain about something; that change is needed sometimes and that I am capable of making it happen. The hum also reminds me that I can make good decisions. Even if it didn't have double the storage, or the retro 1950s looks, the fridge is double A-rated. Our old one was a D. You didn't care when I said that that was embarrassing. We all need to do our bit for the environment, I said, where was the point of recycling our bottles and cans when we had Mr. CFC chugging away right next to the council's colour-coded bags? We even had that guide white-tacked to the door for a while, but I took it down when I realised that you were never going to sort the rubbish. So I peeled off the white-tack, put that back into its packet, and the guide went into the blue bag (cardboard and paper).

Where is the motor's hum taking me tonight? Or is it this morning already? It could be. In my mind, mornings start earlier now, at 4 a.m. That is a change I have made based on what that jockey said on television the other day, when you were flicking between channels, looking for something to fill another shapeless Saturday. She was doing a bit to camera and some unseen reporter with a lovely deep voice asked her if Cheltenham meant spring for her too. She said that no, spring was when she got to the yard and it was already light. The reporter asked what time she got up. About four, the jockey said—a bit smugly if I'm being honest—and as I don't think jockeys are night workers, or shift workers, that has changed my understanding of when morning starts, rolling it back by an hour and making me feel less insane when I lie awake and wonder which day I'm filling with my jumbled thoughts about lists and fridges.

It must be about that now, I think. Four. Or maybe even later.

The sky is certainly lightening and normally I would check my watch, flash the backlight on with a quick press, but you have pinned my left arm with your shoulder and I don't want to risk waking you. Instead, I will watch the sky. If it is clear at sunrise then I'll know where I am; the BBC said the sun was due at 05:01 today.

Before you came to bed last night, I read the instruction manual for the fridge-freezer again. I understand most of it now; as you said, it's not complicated. I just want to be prepared in case it should break. Some of the reviews said that this model broke all the time, and that one poor man seemed to have had an awful run—you remember, he left all those reviews on Amazon and you spent a Sunday morning reading them to me in bed, doing your best Larry Grayson impression until I had to beg you to stop because I thought my laughter was going to give me an asthma attack—but ours has been as good as gold so far. If it did go though, I'd want to fix it myself. Not just because of the cost of an engineer, although that doesn't help, but also because the night time hum is such a comfort to me that I'd like to return the favour. Hence reading the manual. That's also why I cooked all the fish fingers and chips the other night—we'd crammed too much into the freezer and the door would barely shut. I felt bad, and then I felt worse when I threw those last chips away but you said you were stuffed and I'm trying to lose a bit of weight, what with summer coming.

That might be another con, I think. That you don't seem to care about how I look. Obviously, that's my responsibility really, not yours, but it would be nice to have some support, or even some criticism. Some engagement. I'm never going to look like those neoprene men, even if they invented a wet suit which was shaping somehow, contouring, but I could look better than this if you wanted me to. If you helped me to. And if we stopped getting take-aways.

But the light is here now, so I'm going to stop thinking about the list. I've reached three possible cons before dawn, and they again outnumber the probable pluses. To be fair, one of the pluses, your smell, is a definite plus, but it was also yesterday's plus, and last Tuesday's too. Your Larry Grayson impression would also be a defi-

nite plus, but somehow that was a year ago now, that morning. That laughter. So I don't know if I could count it, which leaves me at three new cons and no new pluses.

They're all still maybe cons, of course, and not just today's, all of them: I haven't given any of them enough thought yet and I might feel differently if I was writing the list for real. Which I think I should. Not today, I'm going to be too tired, but perhaps this weekend? I could do it whilst you watch TV. I could sit in here and if you agree to put your headphones on, I could listen to the hum of the fridge-freezer and that would help my thinking. Then I could make the list, followed by a decision, and we could move on with our lives, one way or another.

You have left the curtains open again (con, and I'm not sure that needs much further consideration, but I will put it through due process, I promise—I won't be rash) so the morning's sun is on your skin, in your hair, turning your stubble golden. And you are beautiful. You must have felt my eyes on you because you have turned over, and now you're putting your hand out to my face, putting your fingers in my hair. You are smiling at me. You ask if I have been awake for long and your thumb strokes my cheek as you say that I look tired. Your eyes are soft and kind and clear. *I wonder what goes on in that head of yours, David Murray*, you say. *Oh*, I start to reply, *not much*. But you are already on your way to the bathroom and so I lie here, listless.

Paris or Maybe Hell

WREN DONOVAN

Stricken by sadness
and the scent of crushed petals
on pavement, I wait

for some footsteps returning
to the once-girl I was and the lover
that you might have been.

Silly, I tell myself
thinking of outside, of flowers.
We lived in a box

with white walls and silk sheets.
New York Extra-Sharp
and an Interview magazine,
headphones, two chairs, and
the spare room full of albums.
Dead air, I imagined
but never believed
might be love. Thank you

for Bowie and Faulkner and Lou.
I wasn't afraid (your last words)
just despairing, of what I came seeking

of what you couldn't get to, no segue.
You, lost in lyrics, in letters
from Queens, from the Chelsea

the Sid Vicious suite. Me, lost in velvet,
your voice through receivers. I was young then
and thought you were older.

Mouse

MARY THALER

Lucie's sister wouldn't brush her hair for her until she'd demonstrated what Denise called sincere effort. Lucie had therefore learned to approximate the task: tilt her head so the hair fell over her right shoulder, eight or ten strokes, then let it fall over her left shoulder and repeat. When Denise finally hung up her apron and made Lucie sit between her knees, she found that the area above Lucie's nape had been completely neglected.

"What's this?" she would say, working her fingers into the tangles. "A mouse is going to come and make his nest here." Then she would lean down until her lips buzzed against the back of Lucie's ear, and sing, "*Dans mes cheveux une souris bleue? Encore bien heureux qu'il n'y en ait pas deux!*"

Denise knew where to find wild grapes under the railway bridge, and how to bake a tourtière and change a bike tire, and Lucie found out that she was right about this too, for a time came when no one brushed Lucie's hair at all. Denise began often to be away, chauffeured to appointments by a kindly neighbour. Mama, as usual, was busy sewing, and neither Michel nor the twins believed they had any responsibility for their baby sister.

In the mornings, Lucie would creep into the bedroom beside the kitchen to see Denise's tired smile over the edge of the quilt.

"Sorry, coco, I'm not feeling well," she said, day after day; and so Lucie's hair grew as thick and tangled as blackberry brambles.

It was night-time, and Lucie was lying in the girls' room with the twins snoring in the other bed when she first felt a deferential claw tickle the base of her skull.

"Mouse?" Lucie breathed into the stuffy air of the bedroom, unsurprised that the creature had come as Denise predicted.

It was quiet. All evening, as Lucie changed into her nightgown without being bidden and climbed under the covers, she'd had a sense that something was about to happen. On the ground floor, Michel was defiantly eating fish and chips that he'd bought from the all-night casse-croûte, and the smell of fryer grease and mayonnaise rose through the heating vents. Mama's sewing machine had finally stopped for the night, and for hours now nothing had come from Denise's room but quiet.

It was the time of day, Lucie knew, when mice began to wake up. Last winter, one of them had come through a hole into their kitchen, and Francine, the more beautiful twin, had shrieked so loudly that everyone tumbled out of their rooms to see who was being murdered. But a few days later, while the older children were at school, Denise had beckoned Lucie into the kitchen with a finger on her lips, and made her look behind the fridge. She saw the tip of a pink tail poking out from a ball made of shredded twine, frayed snippets of fabric, and golden hairs that must have belonged to Francine or Huguette.

The mouse was snug and safe, she thought, curled in the hairs at her nape. She parted her lips and sang to him, from the back of her throat where the words clicked and creaked, "*I saw a green mouse in the grass, I caught it by the tail. I took it to the gentlemen, alas to no avail. They said, dip it in water, dip it in oil*—"

Someone banged on the front door directly below her. Lucie broke off the nursery rhyme, while the mouse froze as if he'd heard an owl. She felt his whiskers vibrate as Mama's footsteps crossed the hallway and men's voices rose through the floorboards. Lucie rolled on her side, but the room was as dark as the inside of an oven. All she could see was a humped shape that might be Huguette. She

tried to think why men would be in their house—gangsters? Police? The neighbour Jean-Pierre?

They're here for Denise, the mouse said in his whispery voice, and Lucie stiffened beneath the heavy blankets. Then she heard her mother say, "Oh *Léo*," almost sobbing. The illusion of strangers vanished like a spell, and Lucie recognized the voices, infrequently heard in this house: the deeper one was her Papa, and the lighter one her stepbrother Gilles, seventeen years old and big enough to go with their father to the prospecting camp in Matagami.

"It's all right," she told the mouse; but though he quieted, his unease had affected her. She stayed in bed, even after she heard Michel come out to greet their father, his gruff voice diminished now that he was no longer eldest male of the house. A few minutes later, the rattle of water hitting the bottom of the kettle, and the hiss of fat on the griddle, told her a meal was being prepared for the travelers.

She felt the mouse's heartbeat trill like a loose spoke. He could sense the darkness outside, criss-crossed by a hundred trails. Danger was coming along every one of them, a danger so enormous that Lucie could only see the edge of it.

Lucie twisted her elbow to cup a hand over his soft back and whispered, *We're all right here. We're all right,* and at last the weight of the full, sleepy house pulled them back under.

Lucie could tell her father hadn't been expecting the situation he found when he came home. Normally, the men appeared three or four times a year, and each visit made Lucie shy at first; but once she remembered who they were, she adored these enchanted intervals. Instead of boiled potatoes, there would be crispy shards of black pudding, sizzling sugared hams, and airy cakes drizzled with coloured icing. Even the plain, earthy vegetables arrived transformed, heaped and lucent with duck-fat like the jewels of a maghrébin prince. A record player would be borrowed, filling the house with saxophone and smoky female voices, and Papa's friends would come over to drink whisky out of the good glasses and compliment his daughters—the pretty blonde ones, were those his?

This visit was nothing like that. This time, Léo was lucky if he had boiled potatoes put in front of him, and Lucie saw pinched lines around his mouth when he poked one and found it either hard or watery. These lines tightened when Michel couldn't explain where he got the money he spent on chips and comic books. They deepened into furrows when he surveyed a bathroom full of lipsticks and strange trash, and looked up to see his older daughters watching with insolent suspicion from their end of the hallway. He didn't like that Lucie was always underfoot. He liked it even less when Gilles stayed in town all day, looking for girls, or cash, or who knew what glittering temptations. Léo said often that he should have left his son up north, where his firstborn, Marcel, could keep an eye on him.

Lucie had grown very wakeful after dark, now that she had the mouse to talk with, and so she overheard Papa trying to speak with Mama.

"Why haven't you written to the nuns at the home?" he asked her.

Mama didn't reply. The letters she'd written hadn't been to the nuns, nor her husband, but old classmates who'd moved to Montréal, people who might have power to get Denise into shiny hospitals with modern treatments. Nothing in life to this point had taught her to expect grace, but these pleas gushed out almost without volition, like a body trying to protect itself.

The silence hardened, and finally Papa's tread moved to another part of the house. It was two days later when Lucie saw the neighbour's car pull up and a woman in a blue dress get out. Papa kissed her on the cheek and gave the neighbour ten dollars.

The woman was Papa's sister Antoinette, a spinster thirteen years his elder who lived in Lanaudière. As soon as she arrived, she washed their dirty linens with borax, threw away Francine and Huguette's shortest skirts, and having subdued them adequately in cardigans and thick shoes, she made them go with her to evening prayer for the first time in their lives.

Mama reacted by locking herself in the bedroom, and Papa, at the end of ideas and patience, finally took refuge in a downtown

bar. Left sole possessor of the field, Antoinette unearthed the twins' trove of make-up and threw it in the trash, causing Huguette to fly into such a rage that Lucie hid herself behind the stair railings, and Denise actually staggered out of her sickroom to see what the hubbub was.

"What's this?" she scolded. "Why are you giving your Tatie Antoinette so much trouble?"

Everyone stared, stricken at having broken the household taboo of disturbing the invalid. Huguette got her tongue back first; unable to bear the reproach of Denise's hollow-cheeked face, she exploded, "Shut up! You're not my sister—we're not even related, so just shut up." She slammed out the door, probably to find a ride into town if Francine hadn't already got them one. Antoinette let her go.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said to Denise, a little out of breath. "Care for a pig, and it shits on your porch, don't they say? The coquine needs her ears boxed."

Lucie could never in a thousand years have imagined her aunt calling anyone sweetheart, but now she beheld Antoinette looking at Denise with warm eyes, saying, "Léo used to give me lip too. They don't mean anything by it."

She was going to say more, but Denise's unsmiling eyes met hers. "You shouldn't touch their things," she said with self-composure, while her legs trembled from the effort of standing.

Antoinette's eyes widened as Denise went into her room and closed the door. Lucie catapulted down the stairs, but before she could touch the door handle her aunt yanked her backward so hard her feet flew off the ground.

"Disgusting," she growled, pulling at Lucie's greasy hair. Lucie was caught off guard, but she twisted like an eel on a hook as her aunt marched her to the sink with a hand on her neck and shoved her under the faucet. At the first shock of cold, the mouse curled up as tight as a walnut, but that was not going to save him. Antoinette took a comb out of her pocketbook and started ripping through the knots. Lucie knew it would score the mouse's delicate ribs with lines of red, tear its seashell ears like paper. She shrieked for her sister at the top of her lungs.

The silence from the other side of the door was the most terrifying thing out of everything that was happening.

Lucie kicked her aunt's shins, kneed her side, everywhere she could reach, and Antoinette shook her until she was dizzy and flung her into the laundry room, shoving a sideboard in front of it so she couldn't get out. Lucie crawled into the corner beside the utility sink, itchy dust smearing the tear-tracks on her cheeks. Her neck hurt from jerking side to side, and her heart was pounding the way it sometimes did on the playground when the bigger children encircled a victim. *Il court, il court le furet,* they would chant, faster and faster, and no matter what she did Lucie couldn't make them let her go. *Run, ferret, run,* with the mouse's tail slipping just in front of their sharp teeth. But her own mouse had relaxed as soon as the door slammed.

This is a dark place, he told Lucie as her breathing finally slowed. *Nothing will get us here.*

Antoinette's bad mood simmered all next day. Lucie had crept back under the utility sink, this time carrying some of her mother's quilting cotton. She'd discovered she could make it fluffier by plucking wisps from its smooth nap, but while she was adjusting her nest, getting it just right, the door banged against the washing machine. She froze, ears pricked up and quivering.

The voice belonged to her aunt. "You took that girl in when you didn't have to," she was saying. "You married her mother and provided for her—but she isn't yours. Remember that."

Lucie saw the bottom of her father's trousers and heard the mumble of his answer. Antoinette—knowledgeable, older Antoinette, buttressed throughout by a steely faith—replied, "Yes, well. Jeanne will have to pull herself together and remember what her duty is."

Mama was in Denise's room, sitting in bed beside her, and they were smiling. Neither of them had any resemblance to the twins, of course—their hair was darker and their foreheads narrower. But they reminded Lucie of Francine and Huguette when they were being friends with each other, arms woven around and behind,

wrapped tight in twofold secrets. The mouse trembled, his flanks strained for flight, but at that moment Mama saw Lucie peeping in. She lifted her head from Denise's shoulder and held an arm toward her. Lucie cupped her hand over her neck and went forward, climbing over Mama's legs to wedge herself against Denise's side. Denise winced at Lucie's knees, and Mama noticed and dragged her youngest daughter onto her own lap.

"Seigneur!" she said, as these adjustments brought the foul mat of Lucie's head below her nose. The mouse had begun to relax, but as he sensed the attention his pink nose quivered.

"Denise needs to brush it," Lucie muttered, but her hand slipped a little from where it was clamped protectively.

"She can't right now, chérie. Just let me—"

Mama twisted to look for a comb, but the table beside Denise's bed was covered with medicine bottles and saucers of rags soaking in vinegar, so instead she extracted her second arm from the warm tangle, and began to work on the surface knots. She made a face as bits of dirt and mysterious white fluff fluttered onto the quilt.

"De-*nise,* De-*nise,*" Lucie chanted, weaving her head back and forth to evade her mother's fingers. Finally Denise, with closed eyes, groped across the quilt to lay a hand on her sister's head. The mouse shivered with pleasure and went still.

The three of them lay like that for so long that Lucie was dozing when Mama spoke again.

"I don't want you to go," she said.

As soon as Denise opened her eyes, her mother wished she hadn't spoken. Her terror was so selfish and trivial, it contaminated even her sorrow. But there had never been any question of hiding it from Denise, her accomplice, her more-than daughter.

Denise said, "Jean-Pierre will keep driving you into town. He'll help you get your pills." They both knew she wasn't referring to the thicket of bottles on her own bedside table. Though her voice was quiet, she spoke with such intensity that sweat sprang up on her skin as she said, "You don't have to have another one."

"Antoinette—" Mama managed to say.

Denise shook her head. "Antoinette will leave. You'll show Léo

that you're fine, and he'll send her away when you ask. You'll keep taking your pills." There was no room on the crowded bed to move, but Denise leaned her head against Mama's shoulder. "You had Lucie. You've done enough."

Neither of them spoke for a long while. The wooden crucifix watched from above the bed.

"When you were a little girl," Mama said, "You played in the corner of my sewing room, and you were good as gold no matter how late I had to work. I had no one else to leave you with. There were only the two of us. And whenever I had a dress to make, I gave you the scraps to use as clothes for your doll. Do you remember that?"

Denise didn't answer.

"Little bits of lace or taffeta. Sometimes I would cut pieces from perfectly good fabric. You were playing so quietly, so helpfully, and I didn't have food to give you. I would have let you have anything."

Denise cracked an eyelid. In a rusty voice, she protested, "I wasn't *that* good."

Lucie woke a few seconds later, teary and out of sorts at having her rest so rudely jostled, and saw that her mother was laughing so hard she'd started to cry, real, hearty sobs that freed instead of stifling. Then she and Lucie had to go out again, because what Denise really wanted was a nap; a nap, she claimed, would set her up solid as the Pont-Neuf.

The day their neighbour finally drove Denise to the convalescent home, Mama helped her get dressed in a wool skirt and blazer. Denise had already summoned Huguette and Francine into her room to talk to them separately before her departure, and she even sought Lucie out, painfully and with many pauses to conserve her strength. She found her little sister in the space under the utility sink, which was now lined with soft rags as well as the quilting cotton, and one of Denise's missing sweaters.

"Be good for your Tatie Antoinette," Denise repeated to Lucie, stroking her filthy head. "Just not too good, eh? Remember you'll need to think for yourself." And the mouse remained calm as Denise led Lucie out of her hiding place by the hand.

The mouse knew that in the darkness outside his nest there stooped a huge shape with rending teeth. He knew it, just as Antoinette knew that a time was coming when Lucie's hair would have to lie damp and straight over her ears and she would wear black shoes and sit in perfect silence on a hard pew, beside an adult who was no longer any more than the shell of a parent.

But the mouse was balanced on the point of a thousand necessities, and fear was just one of them; curiosity, companionship, and imperious hunger all rose to drive him out beneath the sky. Lucie blinked, dazzled, as Mama held out Denise's valise and the twins hovered, frightened and affectionate, on the stairs. The neighbour Jean-Pierre had brought extra cushions, and everything was as much as possible like a Sunday excursion, like a weekend in apple-blossom season.

Only the men were standing aside with self-conscious decorum. Gilles, who probably knew his stepsister the least well of any of them, held a cigarette awkwardly between his fingers. Michel was doing his best to copy their stance, the bluff unease of men who spend their entire lives out of doors and then look up to see neighbours and fence-posts crowding round them.

But Michel's father never looked his direction. His thoughts at that moment were far away with his absent oldest son Marcel, the one to whom Léo always turned first for any help, and certainly before the woman to whom he'd tied himself in marriage. The child of his youth, who stood in a prospecting camp eight hundred kilometres from this turmoil, drinking coffee under the dripping pines.

Plastic Orange Lei

CANDICE M. KELSEY

August and an unexpected twist. I am
alone in the car with my boy. Hips
level to the bend of our knees a semi-
fetal posture in our Tiguan VW womb.
It holds mother and son while steeling
the faux-festive glow of Dollar Tree
flowers on a string. My son's effort
to fit in. His first day of senior year
and the plastic orange lei wears him.
He is sad. Lifts both hands to summer
hair and vents the morning's mishap.
WSA's senior car parade into the lot
of cheering underclassmen. He drove
his own car but got separated en route.

Why didn't anyone wait? His fists
contract as the air thickens. I labored
him second born and easiest. Last
year of high school and here his face
wears the rust of disappointment.
My buddy this golden butterfly hero

rush of good energy and optimism
has worn a lei twice before. At five
he wanted to match the blossom
of Orange King zinnias and Japanese
camellias at the Huntington Museum's
Children's Garden. In third grade
he hulaed to ukuleles for a class Luau.
Over his head and flung to the back
row this third lei has lost its charm.

Now he is crying on my shoulder.
I refuse to let it define my senior year.
Sometimes all a mother can offer
is space and food. I pull my breakfast
orange from the dashboard half-peeled
we sit like a Dutch still life. Private
study in pulp, we shred the sour rind.
How I wanted my mother to love me
like she loved my brothers. Floral
bright like I love my wounded boy.
Our hearts easily split. We are encased
in the suffering of those we love.
Behind metal and glass we transform
into a 21st Century Pietà on wheels.
Parked so close we hear the first bell.

Whatever I Am Now

HONOR GIARDINI

I am not a princess in a tower of flesh.
a princess would hesitate; a princess would.

walking down the gravel road in her crop top

she would cringe. she would,

as she lifts her arms to reveal that rust-brown hair.
'cause when she does this she feels like her years.

looks at her pits one brick for the tower and god, how
her mother beams

a peasant, wouldn't do that.
she'd wear brown bags
to the supermarket
at three am and laugh
at her
own jokes.
punch
the men who touch
her
like they are the artists of
her waist
afraid of feeling
pretty. I
hate pretty
like prey
hates panic

I hate pretty like prey hates panic.
I hate it like hide in my shirt and pretends
my boobs aren't ornaments
aren't anything but boobs; feel
like a peasant in the armor the air
The armor of nothing to see here

Even as I write this sad, angry poem

i'm dying to tell you how the ocean,
smelled,

how my feet feel on this wood soft, like sand

and the three worn women with clocks for hands who turned the dials of a typewriter in a foreign town and taught me how to write; one punch at a time.

all those women one punch

Ow, Ow, Ow

HONOR GIARDINI

I.

ow ow ow she says,

the little girl, when she crashes her bicycle and tastes teeth. when the paint chips

and blood
trickles
down her knee
when the dirt is hot.

like the sunshine and the but tastes

washcloth and
in her mothers belt ring the door key

silver, laughing, is enough.

II.

"why are your poems all so dark?"

she's asked when she's older.
when she's crashing and the stone
in her stomach grows heavier.

ow ow ow she says.

the little girl,

when she is not a woman. when she wipes
off her face because
she is not a slut.

when dress-up becomes dangerous and
she yells: don't touch me
whenever she goes
anywhere when:
you

lives at the back of her throat, tries to eat

her when like bad weather she shakes.

is stuck in the waiting room; patient,

Ow, Ow, Ow

III.

weigh her, ask how she's doing

she says I forget to eat
and the golden headed
nurse opens up her rib cage and says *i wish*
i could forget to eat

and cackles like her teeth aren't nets.
little girl smiles

gets heavier. the stone
the scale stays silent.

IV.

ow ow ow she says.

The little girl,
when they call her intelligent
she forgot she had to prove
it. Now she proves her shadows
wrong she's
avoiding light
she's trying to stop
her following her and: she's not smart.
She's not smart
no matter how many pages she turns or how

many
times she tries

to tell her teahers that no;
"this"
(Her hand outlines the corners of her flesh)
is not an enigma
no i am not bright i am dark no but i'm working
on it i'm working on it i'm working on
it she says until her grades drop below
and she pretends not to care until
she doesn't.

///

and she's dumb because hurt is
not eloquent it isn't like a broken
moon or a rose bud or a shattered
glass window it is like a woman
crying in a corner, in the dark, for a baby
that is her. it is the same sad
words *over and over and over* again
Until the body is nothing but that one,
round, utterance.

She hurts, says the little girl b

ut can't find the words

Yarona, Superhero

MUTI'AH BADRUDDEEN

I feel my son's presence before he speaks.

'It looks beautiful.'

I smile, faintly. I do not raise my head. My grip tightens on the pencil, just for a fraction of a second. Then I force the muscles to relax. Time is of the essence; I cannot afford to ruin this piece. Tom will be here soon, and I have yet to outgrow the little girl who lived in fear of being a disappointment.

Praise for my work should not affect me anymore, not this way. God knows I've heard it all a thousand and one times, by now. From him especially. Before the world ever saw his mama's drawings, years before the avalanche of accolades began pouring in, Salihu was always my most vocal supporter.

I still do not believe it.

Unfazed by my lack of a reaction—he, too, has learned to live with what cannot be changed—Salihu peers over my shoulder, careful to leave me the requisite elbow room.

'Is that our old house, the one we lived in when we first arrived?'

'Uh-huh,' I concur, absentminded.

I am shading furiously. Trying to render the complexity of nature's colours into black-and-white, to hold in a still drawing the

play of sunlight on the moss and tendrils that had nearly taken over the doorway of that house. The ones our otherwise perfectly agreeable, if rather eccentric, South Asian landlady had vehemently refused to trim. I heard it said that she inherited the house when her much-older husband died, and maybe that explained her strange attachment; those plants capture the essence of the house. Where it all began.

We fall into silence. Well, he does. I barely notice. Until—

'Did you ever regret it, moving to England to be with Baba?' Salihu searches my face for the answer his impatience would not give me time to articulate. 'Leaving Alhaji and Gogo, and my other grandmothers, behind. I mean, it must have been hard for you too, right? Our families, your friends, everyone we knew and just…the expanse of life in the village. Moving to that cramped apartment, trying to adjust to the perpetual cold and aloneness.'

He spins away. 'You were so young too, then. You must have hated it. God knows I did. I hated it!' He spins back. 'And the sudden insistence that I was somehow behind my peers, I needed to start school immediately. Where the other children laughed at me; my looks, my clothes, my accent. Even though I was trying my best to speak the blasted language. Then Baba—'

This time I look up, no longer cataloguing his movement through the side of my eye. I wait, but he doesn't continue, not that I expect him to. Even now, an entire lifetime later, he loathes to discuss those early days of our life in this country. Living with a man who, it had been glaring from the start, did not want us. One who never meant to be a husband or father.

It is a painful memory for both of us, my flailing attempt to mother a child alone in a strange land, after realisation dawned that the dream I'd raised him on—fanciful visions of being reunited with his father—had become a nightmare we had no way of escaping. That the union my and his father's mutual relatives orchestrated with the fervent desperation that marriage would save a man, the man they insisted would embrace his role once we were finally together, had become a trap.

'Zo, ka gani,' I say after another moment of silence, reaching for

my mother tongue like the comfort of a well-worn blanket, flipping my sketchbook several pages back. 'Look at these. You haven't seen these ones, ko? I did them the last time you stayed away for an entire day.' *You know I hate it when you do that.*

Salihu doesn't take this bait either. He tilts his head this way and that, trying to get a closer look.

'Our first snow!' His chuckle seeps into my bones, like warmth from a cosy autumn fire. 'That was fun, at least. I remember it was so cold: everything seemed cold back then! But we got to see snow in real life, to play in it, with it. Except you kept winning against me at Charapke. And I wouldn't go inside until I won. Hmm.' He attempts—and fails—to raise a single eyebrow. 'Now that I think about it, you let me win on purpose, didn't you?'

I smile a mother's smile, demure and telling all at once. Memories of the freezing, white quiet of that long ago afternoon, picturesque with TV-worthy snow drifting quietly down shards of daylight, filled me with a paradoxical warmth. The peals of my son's childish laughter, the hours of playful abandon, the fleeting sense of joy we both snatched in the midst of our harrowing reality.

We botched our first attempt at that quintessential Turawa pastime we'd only ever read about until then, building a snowman, before settling into a more familiar one. I remember the obstinate curve of his mouth, he'd been so determined to out-do me at a game I'd played my entire childhood. Slyly escaping the watchful eyes of my three mothers, nine big sisters and every older female in the village, long after it was deemed unseemly for a girl my age; running off after my brothers and their friends, gloating when I trounced them all.

There was no way he could beat me at it. I played Charakpe for more years than his truncated village childhood allowed. Playing a modified version, using snowballs instead of rocks like back home, of course I let him win. It was that or we'd play until our fingers fell off into the East Midland snow. Or until his father returned…

Salihu is still flipping through pages. 'So, this next bit will be early childhood, eh? Do your readers—are they still called readers if there are no words? Anyway, will they finally get to know when and

how Yarona got his superpowers?' He wags both brows, then leans into my face. 'How *did* I develop the powers of immortality and the ability to *not* be physically hurt, Mum? And why didn't you tell me this all those years ago when the kids were bullying me?'

We laugh.

It had been Salihu's idea to show my work, products of the hours and hours of sketching that I had spent most of my marriage hiding. At first, he only insisted on showing the newer pieces, the ones I drew in That Place—the only good things to come out of my time there.

I hate thinking about being in That Place. About the desolate blur of time that followed my waking up with a huge chunk of my memory gone—*and no one would tell me anything!* Thankfully, most of my recollections from That Place are blank, except the hour or two daily I was allowed to sit in the corner of the big room.

There, just in that room, for that hour or so, I could find some modicum of peace, losing indeterminate swatches of time in recreating images that were very much alive in my mind. Part memory and part wishful thinking, sitting in that room, I could relive our history, in vivid pencil-rendered drawings. I clung to those drawings, those memories, and willingly paid the price for them.

In exchange for access to pencils and papers and that one hour of peace, I submitted to taking the prescribed pills without 'causing any trouble.' Even though the pills made me absent; covered my mind with a fuzzy gauze, left me unable to focus, blended time into a blur of nothingness. Until Salihu showed up.

He's always been smart, my son. My stalwart protector well before a child should have to be. Once he found a way to sneak in during the nights, usually after the wailing woman in the bed next to me finally tired herself out for the day and dropped into a comatose sleep, the days weren't quite so unbearable.

At first, he didn't stay long, wouldn't say much. Except to insist I tell no one about his visits. *Why wouldn't they allow my son to visit?!* But Salihu was adamant about this, and I heeded. Soon, he taught me to hide the pills, and found a way to extend his visits.

Maybe I could have been out of That Place earlier. If I hadn't

started talking about my heroic son. I didn't mean to, it's just what mothers do. We talk about our children every chance we get, even when they are not remotely relevant to the conversation. I dare anyone to invest that much into anything and not talk about it!

For some reason, though, that did not go down well with the People in White. They went crazy. They questioned me endlessly—*when, where, how often did I see my son? Did he say anything? What did he say? Did I see anyone else, hear anything else?* It was torture. They increased my pills and watched me incessantly, and I recognised my mistake almost immediately. Why hadn't I listened to Salihu and kept my mouth shut? I tried to walk back my story—*no, that's not exactly what I meant*—but that only made things worse.

Salihu, with the carefree air he hadn't displayed since we arrived in this country, something I forgot he possessed until he snuck his way in to visit me, laughed it off with the casual cruelty of eighteen-year-old boys.

'I warned you, didn't I?'

His only suggestion was for me to ride it out. As long as I didn't take the pills, he'd seemed content to wait. When the Decree Absolute of divorce arrived in the mail mere weeks later, he wouldn't let me put him off any longer.

'The world needs your talent, Mum!'

His insistence that I had to show someone my drawings amused me, but I humoured him. It is a habit I have never tried too hard to break. It was easier to ask the youngest of the People in White for help. Unlike everyone else in That Place—mean, miserable, or a varied combination of both—she had been nice. Kind, even.

She got them to inform me when the meat being served was pork, and argued for me to keep my headwrap. She sat with me when she wasn't too busy with someone wailing or trying to smash in their own face. She listened to me talk about Salihu, and pretended I was recounting memories.

I still see her sometimes, that young woman with skin of gleaming, dark lustrousness that reminds me so much of my mother's. We had an understanding, she and I, and sometimes I pretended she was the daughter I lost to her father's treacherous fists.

Maybe she just pitied me. I would never know. I knew, though, that she had been convinced of the futility of my errand.

'I will send just *one* email!' Her warning, unmistakable even as she eventually caved to my incessant appeals, sailed over my head.

I had no expectations. This was just something else mothers like me do. Another ineffectual salve applied to the injured childhood I'd been unable to protect my child from. I certainly hadn't expected that one email containing I-forget-how-many samples of my work would bring me my first visitor—apart from Salihu, of course—since I woke up in That Place.

A man, self-important and solicitous in equally incongruous measures, showed up asking to see me, clutching a file with prints of my drawings. He asked so many questions I almost shut down. Like I did in those early days, whenever the People in White took me into that stupid room. The one with the uncomfortable chairs, venue of their weekly interrogations.

'Do you understand what happened that night? Can you tell me more—'

But time had passed enough by then, I'd become better at the question-and-answer thing.

No, I really do not remember.

Unfortunately, I cannot recollect.

Sadly, I have no memories of those events.

That should have been the end of it.

But, whatever I said or didn't say, the man showed up again a week later, clutching a different set of papers, and I was moved Here. Where I occupy a regally-appointed single room, on the first floor of this fairytale castle, surrounded by an unending expanse of green, Scottish countryside.

I love it Here. There are no demands on my time. Not of a man, motherhood, nor money. No rules or expectations on me to be somewhere, doing something. Here, I simply am. I decide what I want to do, daily. I read, I draw, I sit and do nothing. Sometimes, I spend time with others in the common areas: the dining room, the parlour, or the grounds, most often. Other times, usually when

Salihu is visiting, I stay in the comforting solitude of my room.

Here, my son visits at all hours.

The People in White here—although they actually wear a nauseating shade of vomit-green—are nice and quiet, almost deferential. Their speech and movements almost calibrated to blend into the ambience, like rich velvet tapestry covering the cold bleakness of ancient stone walls.

I have learned, too, to accept that they genuinely mean well. To tolerate their occasional subtle prodding, to not dread the Room with Chairs here. It is almost fun now, going in there once a month, rambling about what I thought, what I did, and with whom.

We do not talk about the past, or my son.

I am told ten years have passed since my move, but time has little meaning Here. I had been so overjoyed that he got me out of That Place, I gave that man—Tom—all of the drawings I'd done. I offered him the old ones, too, if he could get them from my old house, from my ex-husband.

Now, Tom visits me a couple of times a month—more frequently when we have a 'deadline'. He prods me for stories about Salihu, whom he has never met—I learned my lesson well enough in that horrid place, thank you very much! He constantly urges me to finish the 'next instalment,' and can be almost animated during those latter visits. Then, what he calls his 'typical Scottish stodginess' falls away as his excitement mounts.

I do not always understand Tom when he rambles, my Northern Nigerian high school education and years of Care jobs does not always keep up with his Turawa, but I am content to let him prattle on. About my 'textless graphic novels' and how it is 'redefining the genre. No, literature'! And of my 'readers, fans and followers' waiting eagerly for the next 'book in the series'. About things like my 'conservatorship', his 'protecting your best interests' and our 'maintaining the mystery'. It is nice to have the occasional company of someone other than my son. It tickles me, the thought of my work being 'read' 'all over the world'!

Or so Tom says. I like Tom. He is my peephole into the world I have no intention of ever returning to; safe to peek through, not

wide enough to let danger in. We spend hours talking and laughing, making up silly tales that may or may not end up in *Yarona, Superhero.* An old-school gentleman type, he is courteous to everyone with a gruff, restrained manner. Sometimes, I imagine he is what having a white uncle would be.

After his first, and last, disastrous attempt to bring another woman to see me and my work, 'a writer to help flesh out the story, maybe write the dialogue', he accepted my drawings as they were, scrupulously returning them a few weeks after I shared them with him. He brings us the finished products. Vibrant, colourful books where my modest sketches, arranged in order, tell the beautiful story of Salihu as a child superhero.

Immortal, impervious to physical injury. The way it should have been.

Everyone here loves my boy. Every instalment of *Yarona, Superhero* occupies a place of pride on the bookshelves of the common room downstairs. They are well worn and stained with evidence of being read. Finally, the world gets to see my son as himself.

'If your ex-husband had any idea what these could be worth, he would never have handed them over so easily. Hell, he would not have gone through with the divorce at all,' Tom had chortled the first time he presented me with the many sketchbooks I hid in different compartments of my old life.

Salihu had agreed. 'He would have stuck around to control the money, the bastard! After having you locked up, no less!'

Knowing he wouldn't listen to my admonition on this, his animosity towards the father whose yoke he refused to recognize around his own neck, I had distracted him. It was an old trick perfected over years of living on eggshells; tip-toeing around a man who beat me to cover his own shame, and a teenager growing up in his image. Like many women before me, mine was the legacy of trying to love a son into not becoming his father. Predictably, my illusion shattered the moment I thought I'd succeeded. Years after we gained some measure of peace from the man who had, thankfully, abandoned us to a life of near abject poverty, just when things were finally looking up for us.

Salihu was heading off to university. He scored high enough on his A levels to get scholarships, despite being called into too many headteachers' and principals' offices through the years, over silly teenage boy problems. As if cutting class, smoking behind the stands or punching out a bully or two made for a devil incarnate. I can still see every one of those women now, wringing pasty hands until they were blotches of pink and red.

'Sal is smart, really smart. If only…' followed by a litany of faults.

But they did not know my son, not the dutiful and sensitive boy I raised. Yes, he was occasionally prone to outbursts, but they were usually precipitated by being a witness to the injustices of this crazy world from such a young age. Everyone understood teenage exuberance until it's a Black boy displaying it.

His righteous, sometimes overblown actions were labelled 'anger issues', with no recognition of a demon acquired honestly from genetics and a half lifetime of watching his father.

The father who, like the proverbial bad penny, had turned up out of nowhere. I tried to get a leash on it, to explain to Salihu that his father wasn't there to harm me. He wasn't even there to contest the divorce our son had finally convinced me to file. That had been our bargain: Salihu would go to uni, if I filed for a divorce.

I knew, of course, that the man only came by to make sure I would continue to be quiet, to keep his secrets from folks back home. By the time Salihu came home, I had all but assured him of that. Speaking for myself and my son, for everyone from our tiny Maiduguri village, we had a lot more to worry about than whatever he got himself up to in London! Everyone back home lived with the daily possibility, and occasional reality of a Boko Haram raid. Down here, I lived under the physical and mental exhaustion of manoeuvring financial landmines, juggling two jobs with the 'low-skill' appellation that justified paying us in metaphorical peanuts.

I tried my best that night to fulfil my own end of the farce, to mollify father and son. But our collective baggage got dragged in, and we fell into previously defined patterns. That fateful, final confrontation was a blur of too many things left unsaid for far too

long. Our wounded souls spilled out their insides in a bubbling lava of irredeemable words and irreparable motion.

A father's hand raised in habit. His son's in defence. A wife and mother once again cowered. Ashamed.

Suddenly I was in tears. Pushing Salihu out the door, keeping an eye on his father, prone and bleeding, as he lay groaning on the threadbare rug behind us.

'Run! No, wait!' My voice rang shrill, frantic. 'Take the car. Go somewhere public. Somewhere with people, make sure you are seen.'

I tried to shake Salihu out of a shell-shocked stupor. His six-foot frame trembling under my tiny ineffectual fists. He latched onto my words like the little boy he hadn't been in a long time, eyes wide with pleading and the certainty that I would protect him. *I had to protect him!*

'Remember, you were never here,' were my last words to him.

When the police showed up, a scant hour after the ambulance had peeled away with my husband in it, my only thought was that the reassurance of the paramedic team had proven false. Despite what they said about a 'surface wound', years of watching *Grey's Anatomy* had instilled a healthy fear of head injuries.

Was he dead? In a coma? Should I have gone with the ambulance? Or at least, scrubbed the blood off the floor? Do—

I was still dithering in this manner when I opened the door. Shaking so hard I missed snatches of the policewoman's speech. Except nothing she said made any sense; she wasn't talking about my husband. She didn't know about the ambulance from earlier, or where he was taken. She went on and on about another ambulance, another hospital. Paramedics. An accident. Black ice. My car…

Everything faded.

'Mum. Mum! Hey, where did you go? It's all right, I'm here. I'm here, Mum.'

Salihu's voice soothes me back to consciousness, as it did the first time I woke up in that horrid place. I relax. *He's here. Everything's alright.*

Allah seriki! I hate it when my mind travels back to that night.

'Ga shi.' I hand him my sketchbook, getting up. This smile is forced. 'Look through this while I go to the bathroom. Maybe you will remember something I don't.'

He makes a joke about mothers putting their children to work while profiting off their sacred childhood memories. His off-colour accentuation of my native tongue makes the statement funnier. I am laughing as I step out into the corridor.

Each room here has its own bathroom next to it, and again, I marvel. W*hy weren't they designed en-suite? It would be much more convenient.*

I handle my business in the loo, then wash my hands and perform wudhu. Being in a state of ritual purity at all times is something I try to do, to honour my mother, who did the same all through my childhood. It is a habit I have kept, from the moment they broke the news of her passing to me, years after the fact. It washes away some of the sting of knowing I would never again see her. My last sight of my mother had been that fateful afternoon when everyone in the village gathered by the roadside, waving in reflected euphoria as the car drove me and my little son to the airport, in joyful anticipation of the life we thought we were starting.

Salihu would sneer at my wet limbs. He sneers whenever I return from making wudhu. Especially because I have yet to regain the habit of praying regularly, five times a day, like I used to before I woke up in That Place. He snorts when I try to explain how time has little meaning Here, every minute blending seamlessly into the next, until I only manage three of the five on most days—anchoring them to waking up, sunset and the eventuality of nightfall.

Then again, my son mocks anything concerning religion. What does he know? Raised in this world of hostile secularity, indoctrinated by the vitriol of a father who blamed Islam for every fault he was determined to pin on me.

I push these thoughts away and look in on the old lady in the room adjacent to mine. Her door is open. She is so old—white, wrinkled and practically bedridden—and she has no one. So, even though she never replies, staring past or through everyone who addresses her, I make my usual inquiries.

How are you doing today, ma'am? It's lovely outside, want to stroll the grounds? I could join you?

I can't, of course. Not today. Salihu is around. But I always offer.

Self-appointed duty done, I smile at the young Irish man sitting with her and he walks me back to my room.

'Poor woman. No visitors, eh?'

'No,' his smile is a taunt. We both know I'm fishing. That they never give away any information. 'What about you, have you seen your son lately?'

He looks around my room, poking his head through the door, then back at me. His gaze attempts to be casual but I am a mother who had to 'bird and bees' a prickly Hausa-British teenage boy. I am fluent in Expressions of Young Males. I peek at him. Is this the occasional throwaway question that brings up Salihu? Or is he trying to trip me up? Do they suspect that Salihu still visits? Have I said anything?

It doesn't matter, I remind myself, they can't prove anything if you don't confess. I do not dare to look at Salihu who is doing a bad job of hiding, and making as much effort of smothering his chuckles. *The wretch!*

Instead, I smile at him, this young Person in White—well, in Nauseating Green. It is the smile my son calls my 'I dare you to say something' smile. One I perfected over years of being the abandoned new bride; my cousin-groom left the country a day after our families insisted on the consummation of our nikkah, and did not send for me for seven years. I deployed that smile again, as a foreign, single-in-all-but-name, mother of the son who always found his way to Trouble. It was my armour against the disapproval of other mothers; at PTA meetings, at kiddies' parks or neighbourhood supermarket aisles.

'No.' I answer him now, baldly. 'My son is dead.'

Irish beams. A smile earnest as that one goody two-shoes teacher when a problematic pupil finally masters something, anything. I almost feel sorry for deceiving him, for deceiving them all. They're nice to me Here. He, especially, always spares the time to talk to me. All the People in White here talk to us, not at us. They

offer help when we need it, even those—like this young man—whose only duty seemed to be with the old English woman. *Is she really a titled Lady?*

Then I remember my horrid time in That Place and how I got here. The relentless questioning, the pills that stole my mind.

No! This is the cruel game they play, all of them!

I cannot afford to let down my guard. It had cost me dearly when I hadn't understood my part in this farce. Salihu helped me see that this is how it must be. I say what they want, and they, in turn, leave me alone.

And I am happy Here. Finally. At peace, with my son and my art and this calm where nothing happens. Crafting wordless tales with just a touch of fictional magic, a tiny bit of exaggerated joy woven into the recollections of a childhood. It is how I share my son with a world that insists he's dead.

I bid the young man 'good day' and shut the door behind me. Salihu steps back into view and gestures towards my sketchbook.

We smile.

Upside Down Omen

MARY BIRNBAUM

in the Tarot's burning sunset,
the Hanged Man erupts,
dreaded phone rings,
repeating, a painful thought,
one I didn't know I had.
The Hanged Man kicks upside down,
from a wand sprouting feet,
sign to nowhere, branching highways,
no paths, and I ask myself,
am I alone crazy?
Following the Fool,
the Lunatic falls on us,
swings from his looped ankle,
to see mystery through the ground.
His head gives off light,
eyes closed, images of the Arcane
shuffle in a flickering mind,
little ghosts, skilled at sliding truths,
from ornate paper suits,
explain things to a slow pupil:
Beyond the patient weaving
through fingers, other lives,
neurons, quarks, spirits,
over here, suffering faces, there,
spectacular color, beatific,
the Hanged Man smiles,
grows up, answers the call,
grows down again into a child,
falls out of the eyrie of fools,
flying with borrowed angel feathers.

Logan Garner

I'd Like To Fold Billie Holiday's Voice

THOMAS R. KEITH

I'd like to fold Billie Holiday's voice
neatly into quarters
slip it in an envelope
cover it with stamps
and mail it to a country
in which I've never set foot

so that when they opened it
the desert or the tundra
would be filled with *Easy Living*.

The words might be as strange
to them as old Sumerian
but I know they'd understand

the smoke in her throat
the twinge in her chest.

They might even start to cry
without much cause
except they just now found out how heavy
the sky really is.

Lipstickfingers

ROBIN HUANG

There is a hint of bruise-purple on my fingertips as I chew on them, the remnants of lipstick smudges. Delicious, delicious nails, the soft crunch that gives way to the tear, the slow ripping between the realm of what is mine and what is free to the world… I set what I can free—my crescent-shaped nail fragments lie there in the bathroom sink, going down the drain, free to tumble wherever the water flows. The less attached something is to me, the better off it is. The blood staining the nails thin out in the water. But more fresh blood pours forth from the wound, which I continue to terrorize with my teeth, not at all discouraged by the pain that each bite induces. In fact, the pain spurs me on, eclipses the outline of the man who had been sitting in front of me all evening, blurs his stubble, dulls the prominent mole on his left cheekbone. It is only when I briefly stop my attack of canines against hangnails, easing up on my barbarity, that my vision comes into focus again. Yellowed teeth, sunken pores, that mole, now elucidated and inescapable, belonging to a man whose name I do not care to remember.

I vaguely recall a flash of a suede bomber jacket, a peek of graying chest hairs from under his V-neck. He surprised me by pulling out my chair, explaining that he is the old-fashioned kind,

even though nothing about this date is old-fashioned. In return, I acted as the perfect lady, content with nodding along to everything he said, for men like him hate correction; they are unable to reconcile with the possibility that they may be wrong. These days, he said, it's always political correctness this and that; beware the great offender! God forbid anyone have humor anymore, this sensitive new generation. Not to sound old or anything!

He did sound old. He *is* old, by my standards. Fifty or so, I remembered his online profile said. We look like father and daughter, the waitress probably would have remarked so if she wasn't getting tipped so much (I understand; I am in the same boat). When we opened the menu, him with his fumbling sausage fingers, swiping past the pages as if it were a screen—these San Francisco techies—I suppressed the rising bile in the back of my throat for a pretty flash of my teeth instead. We'll have two glasses of your best Cabernet Sauvignon, he announced, and a plate of paella and white-wine-broiled shrimp. We'll share, family-style.

One thing I can't complain about is the free meals that these dates bring; it's even better when it's luxurious food like this, but it doesn't matter, any small mercy given to my measly bank account is appreciated. When I tasted the wine after clinking glasses with him, perhaps something of a sweet bliss came over me, relaxed my features, because his lips immediately twisted into a smirk, smug that I was enjoying myself on his dime and therefore would have to pay the favor back. I was sure he had always expected it anyway, but with every sip, I felt like I was cornering myself into a trap until I could only cower and abide by his whims. Is this really the only option?

There is certainly a choice, I know that logically, but only one of my options involves having eight hundred dollars, which means a bag, a nice trench coat, formal and floral dresses alike, and perhaps even a pair of quintessential nude pumps. Before you accuse me of vanity, think for a minute: eight hundred dollars for a single date! Now, isn't it smart of me to accept this deal, so very obviously in my favor? I just have to subdue that sticky little thing called dignity and grit my teeth through our interactions. So I asked, in a sickly-

sweet voice, smiling like an American girl doll, how was your day, knowing that what all these men really desired was someone to listen to them.

Oh, it went well, he said. All I remember is spoon-feeding my clients a whole lot of data and advice; consulting work's like that, the more you hold their hand through it, the more they trust you, the tighter they grip your hand, and thus a bond is formed. Though, they don't really need any help; but hey, they pay me, so who can complain?

I parroted his laughter. The customer's always right, eh? That definitely applied to my line of work, both day and night. If you've ever wondered how to get big tips even while smelling like cooking oil and hash brown grease, make sure your smile is plastered on. Tighten the mask until it sits flush against your face; don't let even the tiniest of slip-ups through, the faintest hints of annoyance. The most obnoxious of customers receive the biggest of smiles, ear-splittingly big, the chirpiest *Hi, what can I get yas*, to quell the complaints before they even arise. Same thing here; the same old tricks are in play. Being a consultant must be really difficult, I remember saying, boosting his ego. You definitely deserve a break.

Good thing you're here, then. He winked and my stomach trilled; the bile was bubbling up, reaching the threshold… In the nighttime, a hazy halo shrouds the periphery of everything and leaves you wondering, is it real? Is any of it real? He certainly didn't seem real, just an amalgamation of all that I despised in men, that was, until that wink, when everything re-gained its reality, and viscerality overtook fantasy.

Then he asked, I can't help but be curious. Is this your first time coming out and doing this? It's okay if you're not as experienced; I'll guide you through the process. You're gonna be A-OK in my hands. You trust me, you obviously do, or else you wouldn't be here!

I smiled, careful not to express my disbelief at such a train of thought. No, I said, it's not my first time doing this. Though it had never been at night, I failed to mention. But I couldn't present this weakness; I'd rather anything than be taken care of by him, the thought of him tender, fatherly—I shuddered. The thought of my

own father coming across this scene. But wouldn't he understand, eventually, that is, wouldn't he understand that I wasn't asking *them* for money for my own materialistic indulgences? Boundaries maintained, lines drawn; they had a life, hard enough as it was, and I had my own. I reap what I sow.

And what rewards are reaped? Tonight's purple chiffon dress, these emerald tear-drop earrings that dangle just out of reach. These rewards, they had taken hard work. It was often more exhausting than I would've thought, sitting in a barstool all afternoon at a hipster café. Entertaining them had taken a toll on my nerves and my nails. The more beautiful they were—none of them really came close to really being beautiful, but nonetheless—the more beautiful they were, the more tolerable they were too. Tonight was by far the worst, to put it simply.

In a flash, he caught my eye, my wandering, glazed-over eye, as if a palm smeared its grease across the windowpane. I bet it's a fun time for you, he said. I mean, feasts, festivities, a fine man; what else could you want?

I chuckled, the sound coming from the back of my throat, the gurgling of a drowning man. Unable to bite my nails in front of him, I resorted to picking at them with my other hand under the table, tearing at their weakest points.

The waitress returned with our paella and shrimp, and with a graceful dip placed the plates on the tablecloth without even the softest of thuds. I must have arrested her attention, for her brows arched and tightened in a look of sympathy, understanding the situation, but well, it wasn't really any of her business at the end of the day, was it? I didn't know what I would have wanted her to do…save me? I could save myself. I could get up and leave right now, never look back—I was no Orpheus, he was certainly no Eurydice—but instead I ripped another strip of nail from my fingers. And again, and again; in sync with when he called me sweetheart (more times than was bearable), finding solace in the repetition of this simple movement that grounded me in reality. And again, and again…but at some point you run out of real estate, or a stubborn hangnail would cling on, or your right hand, stubs of their

former glory, would seethe in pain upon any sort of contact, and then what? You'd have to use your teeth to bite it off. I ignored his hawk-like eyes fixed upon me, ignored his third story about his past sexual conquests both in his youth and on dates similar to this (why would this even be a topic on the table? For what? To impress me? To satisfy some carnal male urge to peacock?), and wrestled the remaining sliver of nail from its roots, wine-purplish lipstick staining my cuticles: satisfying, painful, bloody. It was too vicious a tear, too ambitious a bite. I ventured too close to the nail bed. Fresh streams of blood slithered down my finger, a ribbon uncoiling itself, a Christmas day present.

Are you okay? Don't be so nervous, alright sweetheart? He feigned concern and I said yes, yes, excuse me, I just got to go to the restroom, I'll be right back. I wrapped my hand around the bleeding finger, pressing against the wound to stop the spurt, and shadowed myself within the borders of the passageway. Stepping into the restroom, dark blue tiles all around, I approached my reflection. The lamplight mumbled a spell, twinkled in awe, and I, caught inside this skimming line of shine, stared at the mirror. It begins (and ends) with a grave need to possess beauty, for some may argue, and many have, that I look merely mediocre, a plain Jane. All I can see, looking in the mirror, is a set of doe-brown eyes, mousy brown hair, and an upturned nose—nothing dazzling or particularly head-turning. Cute, perhaps, but where is the it factor? Many don't realize, reciting their kumbaya happiness platitudes, that this it factor can be bought. Dresses, jewelry, makeup, hair care, facial treatment—each enhances your looks slightly, and combined, you go from pretty to beautiful. Looking down and seeing one of my few good dresses and my ugly, ugly nails—I am aware, yet I can never stop biting them, my hamartia, I suppose—I realize that my mediocrity gives off a rotting stink, a stink I had already grown far too accustomed to.

Funny how the light climbs up the sides of the locked glass chamber beauty is chained in, up in a sharp angle, a triangular formation. Beauty: to be glimpsed and envied by the common folk, but never possessed, for only the wealthy could afford the key. How can I resist the key being in reach now, as someone who lives in a

furniture-less hovel, dim and damp, with roaches crawling the peeling walls? Someone who used to dress in the same few old clothes, what with there being no surplus money for so-called superfluous things like fashion and accessories? Beauty has always stayed just one step too far beyond my reach, a tantalizing glance of what can be in store for me one day if I just wore down my nerves until they were limp like used thread, and succumbed to his desires. After all, I just have to stomach the experience for an hour more or so; disgust is temporary but beauty is forever.

Call me crass, but this is my only conceivable way to wealth and thus beauty. If you come into the restroom now, you'll find me at my most rational, despite my outward presentation as a bloodthirsty beast ravaging my nails. Cold, hard facts against the weak, paltry emotions of a too-dignified woman. Eight hundred dollars against shame, against disgust. Unbeatable.

I can hear those around me scoff: living on a waitress's salary is hard enough—how could something like beauty, reserved for the elites, for those who can afford to sunbathe an afternoon away on a chaise lounge, come to mind? Little miss princess, with her head in the clouds, I can hear them mock. But I challenge them this: life is not worth living without beauty. Anything less is a shadow of an existence, muted, for light dare not shine on the ordinary. I am still in my prime, or at least as close as I could approach it, but soon my looks will start to deteriorate even more and then what? Stew in ugliness until that is what I become, in essence, in permanence? That is a worse fate than ceasing to exist altogether.

In the back of my mind, a silly, stunted area, where the sun doesn't shine, I think of love, the kind that would arrive provided that I am beautiful enough. I think of men who would previously never give a second thought about me doing a double take at my newly keratin-treated hair that reflects the light with its high-gloss sheen. I think of picnics under the sycamore trees, kisses between bites of jelly sandwiches, the taking of a hand, warmth blooming from its entanglement. I see all this and more in my future, a future where attention swathes me like a cloak and being noticed comes as second nature.

There is a will, and now there is a way, this thorny path toward beauty. I take one last bite of my nail, clamping my teeth down hard until there is a *clack*, and leave the bathroom. Gone is my refuge, but I am calm, looking up at the vaulted high ceilings of the restaurant and the chandelier, scalloped with twinkling crystals, hanging down, swaying ever so slightly (or it may have just been a trick of the light, brought on by my tipsy state). When I pull out my chair again, I turn my head away from him and breathe in the beauty permeating the spread presented before us: the soft crumble of the feta, the glossy veneer of blushing shrimps.

Don't be so nervous, alright sweetheart? he says, with eyes that crinkle up in laughter and age. He says it again when we are in his apartment—the logical conclusion—him leading me up the stone stairs, almost bouncing, giddied by alcohol, and I, calm as ever. In a way, his giddiness for me satisfies some primal desire in me to be recognized, to have my beauty, a mask of carefully-painted on makeup, validated. Any response is better than the silent void that engulfs you at night, looking at a blank screen. Sometimes, I would open my mouth and try to sound out words to break the silence, and they would return as echoes, the only sound boomeranging around the room. At some point, I suppose, you realize without beauty, you will always be alone, never a priority; but at least you have the whole apartment to yourself and you could sing your heart out because your roommate is always staying over at her boyfriend's, so there's always the upside. That's how you get through life, don't you know?

He inserts the key into the lock and twists it, revealing an intricately decorated apartment. Perhaps he is aware of his ugliness, and tries to make up for it with material possessions as well. Arch-necked vases and jazz records spinning under the prick of a needle adorn the mantelpiece. Big ornate windows let the moonlight in, filtered by sheer, burgundy curtains. A fake fireplace flickers; before it is a leather sofa, with no creases or signs of being sat on. An arc floor lamp glows faintly in the dark, drooping over the sofa like a branch heavy with fruit. These objects of beauty, they croon a soothing tune. As long as I do not look at him—him, irreparably ugly—I am calm as ever, calm as ever.

From under the moonlight, the catastrophic isn't that different from the sublime. I look at the window reflecting my translucent body, its borders and outlines only hinted at, a layer of ruffled purple sheen hovering over the twinkling San Francisco skyline. Half-there, half-alive, but oh so immaculate.

It is only when he grabs my face and smashes his lips against mine that I realize I can't avoid him forever; even if I closed my eyes, I would still feel him. Now and then the rough ridges of his palms graze my cheek, giving me the answer of a texture, an answer I never wanted. I feel like I am cutting myself on the jagged edges of his half-shaved stubble; amidst a sharp pain, I open my eyes and see his yellowed tongue positioned between pursed, salivating lips, approaching closer, closer, like an inexorable missile. Mouthing a motionless whisper, I pray that the space between us won't close, that I won't have to feel the swell of his beer belly, that nothing of his will touch the sacred expanse of my body, but to no avail, alas.

Don't pity me; I knew all this was going to happen. I went in knowing the taste of sour spit and dried wine, the way they kiss like gaping fish out of water. But when he undresses both himself and me, I understand that reality has descended, or rather, reality has always been here; I have just chosen to dismiss it. The windows are open; the night chill bites into my bare thighs. I subdue my reaction; I pretend at demureness, arranging my body to compose a perfect triangle; the men would be dissatisfied otherwise. He tugs my underwear off and with clumsy hands in the dark, tries to unclasp my bra. While he fails over and over again, I lay there, unwilling to help, prolonging the time before my flimsy barrier of a bra comes sliding down, before my breasts, exposed, become pervious to the gropes of a lonely man. I do not deny him, but the fact is: he is being denied. As he stumbles onto the bed, a great mass of shadow looming over me, I find the words stuck in my sandy throat; I swallow a mouthful of lies to soothe myself and of course, the mantra that pounds in my head: eight hundred dollars is riding on the line here. I can't find it in myself to stop this, even as he takes off his own underwear and presents the epitome of monstrosity, even as he jabs a fat finger into a reluctant, dry opening, pumping it

half-heartedly once or twice before readying himself for the taking. I close my eyes, trace the still-smooth edge of my last long nail, and bite into it as he plunges in, tearing the young bud off in one swift sweep, tasting sweet, sweet blood.

It is then that I feel a paralyzing pain course through my entire body—not from him, no—but an internal flash as the essence of my being starts to coalesce into something of an immaterial form. Slowly, ever-so-slightly, it tears itself from my helpless body splayed out on his bed, head knocking against mahogany. The words I am using now are insufficient—I am infuriated and disappointed—but nevertheless, I shall continue. The separation is clean and gradual, as though you were peeling dried glue from your hands, or, in my case, a nail from a finger, but the pain accompanying it is almost unbearable, that is, if I didn't have something worse to compare it to. So I twist and seize the thread that leads away from my body, hauling my essence up this rope of spikes, pain branching out in rivulets; to let go would mean snapping back to that body, that terrifying space of physicality, where grunts and sweat remain as constant reminders of reality. Climbing upwards and upwards, I see his mottled arms holding my quivering body still, and though I feel every spasm of pain with the tear, I no longer feel him.

I cut the cord.

The tactile, the tangible, forced inside the innermost parts of me, the fleshy orifice, thin as soap-film… the rupture was always destined to come. Detached from my body, I gain a lightness, skirting along the ceiling, gliding even you could say, with a pep in my step.

I cast one last glance back at my body, but that is of no concern to me anymore. I turn my attention toward the wan moonlight shining on the balcony instead. Pulsing to the beat of a half-heard melody, the moon secretes its molten wonder. I could float now, I could fly; would it really be out of the question to drift up to the moon and pluck her out of the sky, to plant the softest of kisses on her craters? The curtains gather themselves in and swish right through me, my invisible form. I step onto the balcony, passing through the window panes. I no longer cast any shadow. I am, in

many ways, free, never to be blown this way or that again, never to be helpless before the breeze again.

When I start to hear a male voice again, now almost familiar, I hate to say, I consider leaving the moon, stepping off the balcony, eventually returning to my body, but I linger for a little longer. Just a little longer, I bargain with myself, even that would be enough. When the evening chill wriggles into my pores, I no longer have to keep my head down, tuck my hands into my armpits. I spread myself out, infinitely large because there is no border to my incorporeal form, tilt my head upwards, and embrace the cold.

I know not to indulge myself for too long. I have my vices, yes, but I know my limits too. I keep true to my promise and return to the bedroom; as much as I hate the pain, the grotesquery, the perceptions that come with a body, I know my body is necessary for my existence. Now I reach out but never quite touch anything; I do not exert any influence onto the world. I am invisible, which is a step away from ceasing to exist altogether. So I catch up to my body, sitting up now, hands hugging her knees, cradling herself.

He says something muffled, a question perhaps (his inflection rose towards the end), but there is no response from my body. She acts as if she cannot hear him, and when she does open her mouth, nothing comes out. Her eyes stare at the chipped edges of the exposed brick wall, so intently that they almost bore a hole. But there is no substance behind her gaze, no glimmer of the iris, no dilation of the pupil to indicate some sort of understanding, some sort of soul. Pilfered by the whims of some benevolent or cruel god (I haven't made up my mind yet), I float around, idle. I relish this weightlessness, but something throbs where my gut should be, a phantom syndrome, and directs my attention to my body, now standing up and moving on her own. She heads to the kitchen island, where he left her eight hundred dollars. As her hand brushes the bills, I realize that I must merge back with my body, or else this all would have been for nothing. No matter that this means restoring my tangibility, losing this freedom, losing this rather boundless feeling; no matter that this experience of invisibility

comes once in a lifetime—for those eight hundred dollars and many more to come, I must return to my body.

Shooting straight like an arrow, I launch myself at my body, hoping to meld together at the weakest points, the mouth, the half-torn fingers, but I pass straight through to the other side. I try again, and I land again on air. She is approaching the door, close to turning the handle, so I try again, again, but each time, I fail to enter my body. Then she pauses, turns back—does she see me? Does she know I'm here, and that I'm her? I have no mouth anymore, but I must scream for release: hear me, see me, take me!—only to stick a hand through me and reach for her purse on the counter instead.

I scrape my throat raw with my futile begging. There was a time, I'm sure, when we all fantasized about not having a body, but absence, the complete absence of all feeling, is so much more terrifying up close. This life that I would be resigned to, one without a body, is devoid of all sensation; the nerves that once jolted and twitched at a stinging gust, in happiness and in dread, now fizzle out in dying embers. I, the soul, am as necessary as air, but I am as invisible as air too, condemned to exist in isolation, without perception. No one shall see me, no one shall hear me, talk to me, caress me. Human touch will be a thing of the past. Beauty will be a thing of the past. For how can something invisible be beautiful too?

She exits. I follow suit, passing through the door as easily as a hot knife slices through butter. I know she is about to head home on the tram and so I float ahead of her, dashing past red lights and careening buses that almost topple over as they make a turn, down to the tram station. She sits there at the station, still staring at nothing in particular, then also on the tram as it dashes down Broadway, down Hyde. I suppose she doesn't look sad, but then again she doesn't look like she feels anything anymore. Which is better? Tragic and great…perhaps I could have at least amounted to that, but now even that appellation escapes me. I sit opposite her, but not soon after I am reminded of my incorporeality as people sit right down in my seat, passing through me as if I didn't exist.

As we get off the tram, her on autopilot and me following her, she hobbles toward my shabby apartment. But this time, I no longer

smell the neighbor's cooking oil that wafts over at odd hours of the night, nor the soft scent of my freshly-washed blanket that I immediately bury myself in. Instead, when all the night air comes crashing down with its sudden, immense weight, I curl up into a ball, waiting for her to tuck herself into bed too, longing for any kind of human utterance, any kind of human warmth.

Author's note: The line, "I have no mouth anymore, but I must scream for release: hear me, see me, take me!" was inspired by the Harlan Ellison story, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream."

Contributors

Muti'ah Badruddeen, a current MA creative writing prose fiction candidate at University of East Anglia, is the author of *Rekiya and Z*, a 2022 winner of the SprinNG Women Author Prize in Nigeria. Longlisted for the 2022 Commonwealth short story prize, Muti'ah's work has appeared in *the other side of hope, Brittle Paper*, and *The Shallow Tales Review* among others, and has been nominated for the Pushcart prize and *The Best Small Fictions*. She's on Twitter and Instagram as @/deenprogress.

Mary Elizabeth Birnbaum was born, raised, and educated in New York City. She has studied poetry at the Joiner Institute in UMass, Boston. Mary's translation of the Haitian poet Felix Morisseau-Leroy has been published in *The Massachusetts Review,* the anthology *Into English* (Graywolf Press), and in *And There Will Be Singing, An Anthology of International Writing by The Massachusetts Review,* 2019 as well. Her work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Lake Effect, J-Journal, Spoon River Poetry Review, Soundings East,* and *Barrow Street*.

Jo Ann Clark is the author *1001 Facts of Prehistoric Life* (Black Lawrence Press). Her work has been featured in *Hot Sonnets* and in the best-young-poets anthology, *Reactions 4* (Pen & Inc Press); it has also appeared in *Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, *Boston Review* and

elsewhere. She directed The Hudson Valley Writers Center and CITYterm, and taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and at secondary schools in Italy and China.

Laine Derr holds an MFA from Northern Arizona University and has published interviews with Carl Phillips, Ross Gay, Ted Kooser, and Robert Pinsky. Work has appeared or is forthcoming from *The Amistad*, *J Journal*, *Full Bleed + The Phillips Collection*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Portland Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere.

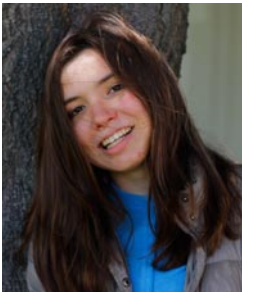
Wren Donovan's poetry appears or is upcoming in *Poetry South, Chaotic Merge, Anti-Heroin Chic, Harpy Hybrid Review, Emerge Literary Journal*, and elsewhere in print and online. She studied creative writing, folklore, and literature at UNC-Chapel Hill and University of Southern Mississippi. Wren also reads Tarot, practices dance meditation, and talks to cats. She lives in Tennessee and lurks on twitter @WrenDonovan. Links to published work: WrenDonovan.com.

Rose Engelfried holds and MFA in Creative Writing from Western Washington University, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University, where she studies the power of narratives to shape our identities. She is a queer writer who uses writing as a means of making sense of her own history and the world around her.

Joanne Esser is the author of the poetry collection *Humming At The Dinner Table*, the chapbook *I Have Always Wanted Lightning*, and the forthcoming *All We Can Do Is Name Them*, (Fernwood Press, 2024). Recent work appears in *Echolocation, I-70 Review, Wisconsin Review, Third Wednesday,* and *Plainsongs*. She earned an MFA from Hamline University and has been a teacher of young children for over forty years. She lives with her husband in Eagan, Minnesota.

E.J. Fry lives, works and writes in London, England. They have work published or forthcoming in *Juxtaprose, Litro* and *The Wild Umbrella*, amongst others.

Jim Genia—a proud Dakota Sioux—mostly writes nonfiction about cagefighting, but occasionally takes a break from the hurt and pain to write fiction about hurt and pain. He has an MFA in creative writing from the New School, and his short fiction dealing with Indigenous themes has appeared in *MAYDAY*, *Sage Cigarettes Magazine*, *ANMLY*, *Roi Faineant*, the *Indiana Review*, the *Baltimore Review* and more. Follow him on Twitter @jim_genia.

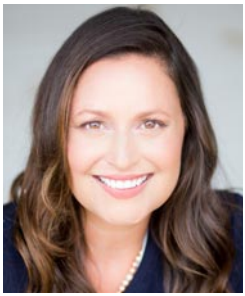


Honor Giardini is a writer from rural northern California. Honor is a California Arts Scholar and senior in high school at Marysville Charter Academy for the Arts. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Cultural Daily* and Roxane Gay's *Emerging Writers Series.* Honor is an alumnus of the Iowa Young Writers Studio and the recipient of the Herb Alpert Award for Emerging Young Artists.

Robin Huang is a fiction writer from Taiwan, currently studying psychology and creative writing at Stanford University. She enjoys writing strange and lyrical stories that delve into the crevices of the human mind, interrogating the reasoning behind our actions, the thoughts that are too shameful to share. Other than writing, she also enjoys playing bass and doing street photography.

Hope Jordan's writing has appeared in such journals as The Blue Mountain Review, Twyckenham Notes, Split Rock Review, Black Fox Literary Magazine, and Angels Flight Literary West. She grew up in Chittenango, NY, and holds a dual BA from Syracuse University and a creative writing MFA from UMass Boston. She lives in NH, where she was the state's first official poetry slam master. Her chapbook is The Day She Decided to Feed Crows (Cervena Barva Press, 2018).

Thomas R. Keith currently resides in Austin, TX. His work has appeared in several literary journals and anthologies.



Candice M. Kelsey [she/her] is a writer and educator living in both Los Angeles and Georgia. A finalist for a *Best Microfiction 2023* and longlisted by *Wigleaf's* Top 50 Short Fiction in 2024, she is the author of seven books; her latest chapbook *Postcards from the Masthead* has just been released with boats against the current. She mentors an incarcerated writer through PEN America and reads for *The Los Angeles Review*. Please find her @Feed_Me_Poetry and https://www.candicemkelseypoet.com/.

Byron MacBride rereads *The Maltese Falcon* every few years, and halfway through this time around, woke in the middle of a snowy sub-arctic night from dreams of a gender-flipped climate-changed retelling of that novel's most famous passage, the so-called Flitcraft Parable, but he's feeling much better now; thanks for asking.

Kelsey L. Smoot (They/Them/He/Him) is a full-time PhD student in the interdisciplinary social sciences and humanities. They are also a poet, advocate, and frequent writer of critical analysis. They are the author of a chapbook titled *we was bois together* (CLASH! an Imprint of Mouthfeel Press).

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who lives and works with his family in California. His book of poetry, *skeeter bit & still drunk* was published by Finishing Line Press.

Eric Fisher Stone is a PhD student and composition instructor at Oklahoma State University. He received an MFA in writing and the environment from Iowa State University. His publications include three full-length poetry collections: *The Providence of Grass*, by Chatter House Press, *Animal Joy*, from WordTech Editions, and *Bear Lexicon*, from Clare Songbirds Publishing House.

Mary Thaler lives in Quebec City, Canada, where she works as a scientific editor, writer, and zine-maker. Her verse novella, *Ulfhildr,* was published by Untimely Books, and her short fiction has appeared in literary journals including *Prairie Fire* and *The New Quarterly.* You can find her work online at marythaler.wordpress.com.

Linda Wojtowick is co-creator and writer of the podcast *The Ghosts on This Road*, and can also be heard on the fiction podcasts *Knifepoint Horror*, *Tag Till We're Dead*, *Campfire Radio Theater*, and *Acephale: Horror Fiction*. She is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and her poetry collection *The Hosted* is available on Amazon. Her work has most recently appeared in *Bloodletter Magazine*, *Grim & Gilded*, and *Cathexis Northwest Press*.

The Organs

Publisher/Senior Editor Joe Ponepinto is the author of the novels *Mr. Neutron* and *Curtain Calls*, as well as dozens of short stories published in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. His major literary influences include Zadie Smith (whose novels somehow convinced him he could become a writer), Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño, James Joyce, Bernard Malamud, Ted Chiang, Joan Didion, Yasunari Kawabata, Margaret Atwood, Tobias Wolff, and dozens of others. Best book on writing: *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, by George Saunders.

Publisher/Senior Editor Zachary Kellian, a widely published author of flash fiction and short stories, is finishing up his first novel. He is also the co-host of the podcast *Literary Guise*, encouraging men to use literature as a way to discuss their thoughts and emotions. His major literary influences include Dylan Thomas, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Yukio Mishima, Anne Proulx, and John O'Brien. You can find him online at zacharykellian.com

Managing Editor Renee Jackson is a multi-disciplinary artist currently splitting time between the U.S. and Argentina. She has a passion for new work and a background in theatre where she has had the pleasure of assisting in the literary development and staging of several plays including *(Non)Fiction* (Jillian Leff), *The Wildling* (CJ Chapman), *Minotaur* (Teagan Walsh-Davis), and *Gothic Arch* (Jeffrey

Fiske). Renee's literary influences include Samuel Beckett, Sylvia Plath, Denis Johnson, Albert Camus, Dylan Thomas, John Donne, and Paula Vogel.

Assistant Editor K.A. Tate is a tech turned fiction writer living in the Northern Shenandoah Valley with two great partners who are quiet when she's writing and the same number of parrots who are not. Her work is focused in rural Appalachia where she was raised. She has her MFA from West Virginia Wesleyan and has so far been published in *BULL* with other publications upcoming. Her biggest literary influences include Stephen King, Otessa Moshfegh, Alice Munro, Shirley Jackson, Larry Brown, and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya. She has a website where she writes about craft for people who don't know they're writers yet at katatewriting.com.

Readers

Rebecca L. Jensen is a writer and professor of English currently residing in South Florida. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Florida Atlantic University but focuses most of her writing time on her literary novel-in-progress. Her work has most recently appeared at *Musing Publications, The Moving Force Journal,* and *HAD,* among others. She can be found online at www.rebeccaljensen.com.

Kilmeny MacMichael resides in small town British Columbia, Canada. Primarily a writer of speculative and historical short fictions, she sometimes makes poetry. As a reader she gravitates toward mystery, as a viewer of film she falls back to classic noir, and as a podcast and radio drama listener she's a sucker for a good baritone. Her favourite authors include Miriam Toews, Terry Pratchett, Hilary Mantel, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Guy Gavriel Kay.

Anne McGouran's essays and short fiction have appeared in *Gargoyle, The Account, Cut Bank, The Smart Set, Mslexia, Notre Dame Magazine, Queen's Quarterly.* Her hybrid essay on the 1850s Irish Workhouse was cited in *Best Canadian Essays 2019*. In her work

she's explored cultural displacement, generational trauma, ageism, the rural/urban divide.

Brendan McLaughlin's stories have appeared in *Menda City Review, OBELUS, Crow Name,* and *Kairos Literary Journal*, which named him runner-up for their 2020-2021 Editors' Prize in Prose. He is the author of the forthcoming young adult novel *GlowFish*. When not writing fiction, Brendan provides editorial services to conservation and human rights organizations.

Ronak Patel is a first generation Indian-American writer, researcher, and educator. His research interests include racism in education and the model minority myth. He has published reports and data narratives for non-profits, school districts, and state agencies in Washington and Hawaii. Ronak's fiction explores narratives of the South Asian American experience and his literary influences include Juhmpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, T.C. Boyle, Michael Chabon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Arundhati Roy, John Cheever, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.

René Zadoorian is an Armenian writer finishing up his undergraduate degree in creative writing at California State University, Northridge. He was born in Tehran, Iran, and now resides in Los Angeles. His short stories lean toward themes of queerness, SWANA culture, and bugs! His literary influences include Ocean Vuong, Khashayar Khabushani, Sabrina Imbler and Kiese Laymon.

James Morena holds an MFA in Creative Writing. His stories or essays have appeared in the *North American Review, StoryQuarterly, Another Chicago Magazine, storySouth, Orca, Litro Magazine, Pithead Chapel,* and others. He has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize.

Youn Rourke is a writer of short fiction, poetry, and the occasional screenplay. Her writing can be found in *Story, The South Carolina Review, The Saturday Evening Post, Jabberwock Review*, and *The First Line.* She is currently at work on her first novel and her favorite authors include Yiyun Li, Sally Rooney, and Emma Cline.

Kathy Seifert is a flash fiction, short story and creative nonfiction writer. Her work has appeared in *Flash Flood, Emerge Literary Journal, Five South, Waiting: An Anthology, The Life of Pie Anthology* and on CKUA radio's *The Road Home*. Her flash fiction was selected for *Wigleaf's* top 50 in 2023. When not writing, Kathy dabbles in photography and creating hand-made books.

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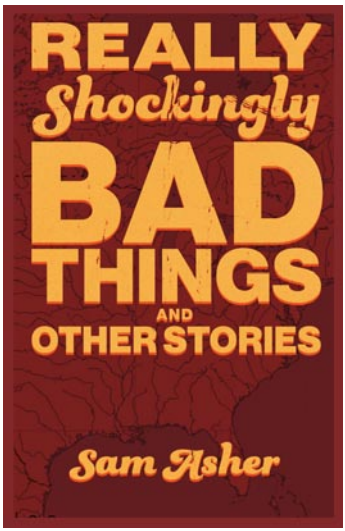

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