REED

CALIFORNIA'S OLDEST LITERARY JOURNAL

No. 154

Cliché

Fiction Nonfiction Poetry Art

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SINCE 1867

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CALIFORNIA'S OLDEST LITERARY JOURNAL

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COVER: *Roger stood me up at the Diner*, DaQuane Cherry

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And a special thank you to Prof. Cathleen Miller, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, for her guidance.

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REED MAGAZINE

CONTESTS

John Steinbeck Award for Fiction

$1000 Prize

Gabriele Rico Challenge for Nonfiction

$1333 Prize

Edwin Markham Prize for Poetry

$1000 Prize

Mary Blair Award for Art

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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

From behind our surgical masks in the grocery aisles and deserted public squares of the Covid-19 era, we in spring 2021 still marvel at the transformation of daily routines—from hurried commutes and coffee-to-go to home-office-kitchens and ccCatps padding across keybbbbboardts during staff meetings.

Is this what the high-tech marketeers meant by "disruption"?

The assault and threat of coronavirus has shaped public life across the globe, including that at San José State University, the home campus of *Reed Magazine*. By CDC, regional, and local edict, *Reed* editors and students dispersed one year ago to complete the production of Issue 153 remotely. Now, with many new staff members and a resolve to maintain the journal's grand legacy, this year's team proudly presents Issue 154, the *Cliché* edition, born of circumstances that are anything but.

Staff members of *Reed Magazine*, like most of our colleagues and classmates in academia, recognize one of the principal privileges our industry affords: we can work from home. Despite the inconveniences and inefficiencies, this year's team—dialing in from California, New York, Massachusetts, and beyond—has taken full advantage of that edge. We have wrangled through myriad technologies to organize an elegant virtual gala featuring recent contest winners, coordinate our first-ever discussion panel and online exhibit at the AWP Conference and Bookfair, produce a limited-edition letterpress chapbook (to be available at reedmag.org), host an evening of the SJSU Legacy of Poetry festival, and curate the very best fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art we could find to maintain the magazine's proud heritage.

The best homage we can pay to our history and our readers is to continue delivering literary excellence. Intellectual inquiry and high art help move our species toward a broader and more robust ideal of living. Once the essential business of life is accounted for—food, water, security, love—the human spirit reaches for more. This *more* is the province of the literary journal.

Despite its lofty perch in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the literary journal, certainly in the case of *Reed Magazine*, can serve a highly practical function: it provides its student staff applied experience in the creation and circulation of the written word—one of the most significant endeavors in human civilization. It is

no great leap to connect a free and active press to the very foundations of a liberal democracy. Thus, its value reaches far beyond the staff that produces it.

While our team looks forward to abandoning Zoom breakout rooms for the familiar chaos of huddling around editorial desks and cold pizza, our perseverance in the last two production cycles stands in noble stead beside that of previous *Reed* teams who persisted through world wars, cultural revolution, and the turns of two centuries. Readers of Issue 154 profit from the talents of some extraordinarily devoted editors: Managing Editor Ryan H. Smith, Fiction Editor Timothy Cech, Nonfiction Editor Allie Maier, Art Editor and Social Media Director Sarah Nolte, and Poetry Editor and Copy Chief Anne Cheilek. This team, having previously benefited from the leadership of the estimable and much adored Cathleen Miller (Editor-in-Chief Emeritus), has been pivotal in keeping deadlines and rising to every occasion as I've rattled around in the big shoes she left to fill.

In this peculiar epoch of redefined normalcies and a tentative yet refreshing return to truth, it is a triumph to publish an anthology devoted in equal measure to the real and the fanciful. And yet *Reed Magazine* has done it again—such a magnificent cliché.

Helen Meservey
Editor-in-Chief

FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

When my team and I first proposed the theme of "Cliché"—from our laptop screens, stuck at home—we had a hearty group laugh and considered the wild possibilities. As the weeks went on, those wild possibilities became exciting, genre-pushing opportunities. We were sold. What started as a simple suggestion that made us smile turned into a wide-open range of complex artistic adventures. In the face of such a singular theme, our contributors did not disappoint.

Our Mary Blair Award for Art winner, Q'shaundra James, will give you pause with her powerful piece *Wait for a Smile*. The small child in this painting almost looks through and beyond you. The winner of the fifth-annual Emerging Voices Contest, Tvisha Gupta, offers readers a revelatory piece about a young girl's journey with Tourette's syndrome in "Jerk." Scott Bade, winner of the Edwin Markham Prize for Poetry, pierces readers with his sharp existential questioning in "Preemptive Elegy for a Job and my Dad." This year's Gabriele Rico Challenge for Nonfiction goes to Joseph Sigurdson, the winner of the 2019 Markham poetry prize. "Wishbone," Sigurdson's tale of one man and his dog in rural Alaska, may just be the emotional release we all need in these trying times. The John Steinbeck Award for Fiction celebrates twenty years this issue, and Alex Gulis's experimental, narrative-bending "Falling in Parts" will leave you reeling. And finally, following *Reed*'s first-ever panel event at the 2021 AWP Conference, this year we feature three winners of the AWP Intro Journals award. These pieces have found a home here, and they're sure to please new and familiar *Reed* fans alike.

Small presses are nothing without excellent content, and *Reed Magazine* is no exception. Our thanks to the nearly 2,100 people who sent us their fantastic works this year. It's not lost on us what a big decision it can feel like sifting through the seemingly endless cache of literary enclaves. A huge thank you must be given to my editorial and production teams who put in the long hours and made the hard decisions, so that you, the readers, can reap the rewards. And special thanks to the team of leads who enthusiastically accepted when I asked them to stay on another year: Tim Cech, Anne Cheilek, Allie Maier, and Sarah Nolte. You all have made this year worth it for me. You make my job look easy because you're all so talented. I

wish everyone had a team as cracking as I do. Thank you for your professionalism, your energy, your friendship, and for sticking through this journey together, even as it got rough.

I never intended to stay for three years with this journal, but it got its hooks in me in the best way. It gave me goals and deadlines, events to plan and look forward to, some self-assurance; but I've now been in this role as managing editor having only met 25 percent of my team. It seems inconceivable that my time with *Reed* would culminate in more than a year of pandemic isolation. I was first given the chance at leadership by Dr. Keenan Norris, and asked to stay on by Prof. Cathleen Miller, who then offered me this position to serve alongside the tireless Helen Meservey. It's been wonderful. I love this journal. I hope I left it far better than I received it. Most of all, in a year in which we lost Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others to hate or disease—when attacks against AAPI and Trans+ lives have increased—I hope we provided a safe space for people to create, engage, and breathe.

> *We have to raise the consciousness; the only way poets can change the world is to raise the consciousness of the general populace*.
>
> —Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Ryan H. Smith [he/him/his]
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ISSUE 154: *Cliché*

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POETRY

EMERGING VOICES

ART

FEATURED PROFILES

Smiling Face
Hector Ledesma
Acrylic on canvas
40 × 40 in.
2010

WHICH ONE

SKYE JACKSON

"It is very uncommon for young Black men to
commit suicide, let alone by hanging."
—*Raymond Winbush*

i hid the gun
when my father
told me to

my little brother
told my parents twice
what he planned
to do

they were alarmed
after all
their oldest son
had chosen
rope instead

his body bent limp
into dangled bloat
the brown skin
around his neck
peeled off into strips

they tell me suicides
always leave a note

but my brother
who often wrote
and always drew
somehow forgot
as he slipped down
into the noose

as i tucked the gun
away in my dresser
and buried it
under stacks of clothes,
like a gift
hidden away
to surprise a friend,

i heard my father's voice:
your brother's dead
breaking cool like ice
that august night
and i couldn't bear
to ask him
which one

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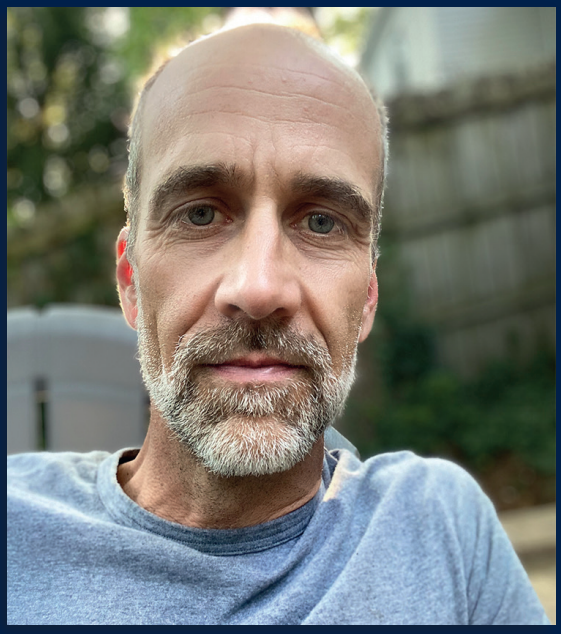
EDWIN MARKHAM PRIZE FOR POETRY



Scott Bade

Writing an elegy means that someone vital has been lost. Writing a "preemptive elegy" is somehow even more tragic. Scott Bade's poem, "Preemptive Elegy for a Job and my Dad," swirls together the speaker's grief about the government, mortality, and art. Bade's similes and metaphors are painfully precise: "Alarming indeed the administration's stone approach / to transparency. Like sewing a wound with railroad / spikes" and "Is it fear in its finest dress, rain beading / on its padded shoulder coat?" Such specificity combined with such yearning and uncertainty is, as Bade might put it, "something else."

— Matthea Harvey

PREEMPTIVE ELEGY FOR A JOB AND MY DAD

SCOTT BADE

—after Rainer Maria Rilke

To cry about someone you love is a thing; but, oh,
the mind's shifting enchantress is something else.
To bitch about the pay cut is one thing; but, oh,
greed's flabby bloating gut worm is something else.
Alarming indeed the administration's stone approach
to transparency. Like sewing a wound with railroad
spikes. For my Dad, it's not the cancer doing him in,
it's the cancer treatment's lazy approach to accuracy.
If you hit everything, everything gets hit, including
the violets who only wanted a clean well-lighted space
between the bricks. Including his hands that never
hit a living thing. To watch your father succumb
to mortality is one thing; but, oh, the heart's steady
raging djembe spirit is something else. When the music
you've been holding inside, for so long, is wrapped
in cellophane and presented to you as acclamation,
as a material fact, is it music anymore? Is it art's
purest arrival, manifestation of thought incarnadine
and haired? Is it fear in its finest dress, rain beading
on its padded shoulder coat? Maybe it really is just
what it is. A whale is a mammal who lives in the sea,
said to be soft-spoken but difficult to corral. A calamity
is a disaster, but Jane, she was so sympathetic what with
her drunken tenderness and love for children. Human
is the beginning of beauty and terror. And the watching
helpless son-boy is one thing; but, oh, a father lost
and losing his body's war is something else.

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No. 154

JOHN STEINBECK AWARD FOR FICTION

Alex Gulis

"Falling in Parts" does the magic of great fiction—it uses the narratively familiar (a fraught love affair, a dramatic plane crash, a humiliating school play) and liberates it from the banal to make the cliché resonant and strange. This strangeness of the familiar is accomplished through the repetition and reshuffling of images. We, the reader, are startled to see things we know in unfamiliar places. A parachute deployed from a nose-diving plane is made out of a human heart, and then, later, a human heart is made out of a rabbit. In both instances, though we know all the images at play, their company—and the way we encounter them—is startling and dramatic. "Falling in Parts" is an innovative and tragic story that communicates the trappings of a ruinous love affair with novel eloquence.

—Rita Bullwinkel

FALLING IN PARTS

ALEX GULIS

1

Ask the beautiful boy in your bed to tell you about that dream he had, the one in the burning airplane, where his heart is a parachute, and he jumps without checking it for holes. After he tells you how he fell, reshoot the scene to make the ending happier.

New ending: he says, "I'm falling, but there's a genie in the clouds, and it'll grant me a wish." He'll wish for a trampoline, but you'll wish that he just wished he wasn't falling anymore.

Here comes the twist—

The genie puts the trampoline on a deserted island.

Play the credits in reverse to convince yourself a sequel comes next.

The sequel: you say, "I'm waiting for you at home, and there's a genie here, and it'll grant me a wish." You wish for a map to the beautiful boy. It comes in the shape of everywhere you've never been. You'd crash hundreds of planes into the ocean for the chance to drift to his shore again.

2

Imagine hypothetical-A:

The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy sits in his seat with his heart beating in his lap. He straps it to his back and jumps without checking it for holes. There are holes.

Imagine hypothetical-B:

The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy sits in his seat with his heart beating in his lap. He finds no holes in it, but when he jumps, it stays closed after he pulls the cord.

In both scenes, neither genies nor sequels are real.

In both scenes, he boarded that plane to visit you.

He will break apart when he hits the ground.

No twist endings.

3

There is not,
But pretend there is hypothetical-C:

> The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy has a heart shaped like a parachute, but he doesn't jump. Something miraculous happens: the plane lands where it should while a familiar song plays in the background. You've memorized your lines. The curtain is in position, and it's red and pretty with the yellow tassels:
> You fall into his arms at the baggage claim.
> He is only bones and burnt things now, so promise you'll collect bits of yourself in jars to rebuild him.
> Drift for months in the space between his ribs.
> Feel his hand on your thigh.
> Record the feeling. Record it like a glove to pull over your fingers, something to help you pretend when you are alone.
> "You'll never be alone," he says.

Consider the three hypotheticals:
In which is someone falling the hardest?

4

The beautiful boy is falling, and it's time for you to save him, so you're running over parking lots toward the black dot in the sky. Imagine he loves you. He loves you very much. Run harder. This could be a big scene, with a crescendo and crying and him screaming your name.
There's no trampoline, of course.
And you can't run harder, of course.
You're screaming his name. You think that talking backwards will make him fall

up instead of

down.

Forget your lines. Stutter about genies and sequels and hypotheticals and twist endings. You're close enough to see him now:

The black dot in the sky, the black dot with an arm, the black dot that loves you very much, the black dot with an arm, flailing, maybe or maybe not screaming your name.

The credits won't play even when you yank at them like curtains.
The beautiful boy is falling, and it's time for you to save him,
but your heels are bleeding.
You're leaving little toes behind as you crane your neck
to his meteorite body.
Pause the scene.
He's crashing headfirst.

5

The beautiful boy crashes headfirst into your bed.
You snap his neck into place and his eyes light up on cue.
He says:
"Love,
when I peel my skin back,
there are millions of little needles."
You don't know what this means, and as you look back to him, he's already gone, already falling again.
The beautiful boy crashes headfirst into your bed, again,
and again,
piles of him stacking up—

6

You're in bed with the beautiful boy—
Turns out the bed has never been a bed. Turns out the two of you are on an airplane, and any airplane with the two of you on it will always crash. Turns out the bed is a sheet of strung-together logs drifting across the Pacific, and

the sunset a velvet curtain, all red and pretty with the yellow tassels. Write it down. Make it a moment:

YOU
(shivering)
Maybe if we drift long enough, we'll have to eat each other.

THE BEAUTIFUL BOY
(beautiful)
What? I can't hear you!
(YOU and THE BEAUTIFUL BOY hold hands
drift a little
he's looking at your lips)

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF SCENE)

7

There are thirty beautiful boys on stage, all touching at the shoulders.
Go on up—they've stopped talking to look at you.
Each one has written his own script, memorized it, and tossed the evidence somewhere you'd never look. Your stomach is churning, and you know that one special boy must've slipped his script between your lips without you noticing. Go down the row. They'll recite their first line to you:

1. Nice to meet you, really nice to meet you
2. Should we go backstage? It's too crowded, let's go backstage
3. It's time to wake up, love
4. You look nauseous, are you okay? Fall into my arms
5. I'm a surgeon; let me see what's eating you up
6. Feel my hand on your thigh
7. God, you're handsome
8. I'm falling, but there's a genie in the clouds
9. Nice to meet you, really nice to

That's enough. Maybe you can help him now.
Take one by the hand and pull.

8

You've never made a stage before, but the beautiful boy is about to kiss you, and the scene needs to be perfect. It's a park scene at the perfect hour between dusk and the last swan. The pond is a resin mold and the beautiful boy has eyes that look at yours on cue.

"Beautiful boy—" you say,

and he looks.

For the sake of the plot, assume he loves you.

Here is the love, on your thigh, in the form of his hand. Here is the love, written on your palm, in the form of your lines. Here is the love, on your palm—now smudged

because you can't keep your hands to yourself.

The beautiful boy kisses you. The moon hangs by a string.

Sometimes it says, "The curtains close."

Then the curtains close.

The beautiful boy pulls back, now smudged. He loves how you spat into him, but now the show is over and

how-could-you-touch-him-that-way.

Hear the applause through the curtain.

Here is the love. Here is the mark on his face.

The spotlight is yours and then it isn't and

everything goes backstage.

9

FADE IN:

INT. THE BEAUTIFUL BOY'S HOUSE – NIGHT

His bed is tall, center-stage. It's king-size. YOU and THE BEAUTIFUL BOY grope beneath its covers. He's king-size. The floor is long and vacant and dark, and everything is you and the beautiful boy and the bed and the stage and his hands and his hands and his hands. A spotlight drapes down all red and pretty. He pulls on you and the light flickers. It sounds like a bug in your ear. Someone

must have forgotten to change the batteries before the show. “Someone” will get fired.

YOU
(warm with cold toes)
I think I love you very, very much.

THE BEAUTIFUL BOY
(beautiful with a bug in his ear)
What? I can’t hear you!
(YOU and THE BEAUTIFUL BOY kiss
what a taste)

(LAUGH TRACK)
(BLACKOUT) and the light flickers
(END OF SCENE)

10

The beautiful boy likes quiet boys.
A quiet boy you’ve never been, so you take your vocal cords in wrapping paper and kneel at his door with them. *Look at what I did for you. Look at this hole in my neck. I’ll take myself apart for you*, *see?*
Best scenario-A:

He loves you very much. He loves the tragic sacrifice and the blood on his doorstep. He loves the sweat on your face. You want to say, *The sunset is coming. Let’s go to the lake, where you can push my arm as you laugh and*

hold my hand.

Best scenario-B:

He tries to thank you. Spend hours cleaning up. Look at how the blood gathers between the wood. He wants to help you, but not in the way you want. You know this, so you want to say, *I’m afraid of myself. Let’s go to the lake, where you can push me away and*

hold my head underwater.

11

He's crashing headfirst
and you've forgotten your lines.
Now he's all over the concrete and the spotlight is on you. It's like the sun is in your eyes, and it hurts, so all you can do is look down at his broken parts, at his parachute heart deflating. The cannons peek through the bushes. Remember when you filled them with confetti, back when you believed you could run to his shadow and catch him in your arms. He'd be like a feather. A familiar song would play, and the confetti would float. You'd lay him on that velvet curtain, crowds would throw roses, and he'd love you for it.
Now he's all over the concrete. Now he's disappointed.
He expected you to catch him. He expected you to break your arms doing it.
But there's nothing heroic here. The cannons are clogged.
There's a chirp in the audience,
a mumble behind the scene.

12

You're in bed with the beautiful boy—wait, no.
You're in bed—well, you were in bed.
You're crumpled against the corner of his room, and you've just been inside him. You've just been inside, and now you've seen his skin on the wall like a coat. He's naked, and you're naked, and you're watching him hang something next to his skin. It's wet and it's beating. You swear it came from somewhere inside you.
Feel his hand on your thigh.
Feel his hand on your thigh.
He's back in bed now. Did you feel that? He spent hours doing it,
making you pathetic.
He says,
"If you never wanted to come back, I wouldn't blame you."
Ignore the laugh track. Prepare every night to leave something behind:

Fingernails under a dresser, some hair on a lampshade.
A tooth on a rug.

13

Imagine hypothetical-D:

The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy sits in his seat with his heart beating in his lap. He finds no holes in it, so he straps it to his back and jumps. Still he hits the ground breaking, with a rimshot, two snares and a cymbal, the *ba-dum tss*, the audience laughing at the inevitability.

Imagine hypothetical-E:

The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy sits in his seat with his heart beating in his lap. "None of this is worth it anymore," he says, and it isn't,
so now everyone is throwing tomatoes,
everyone is booing.

14

FADE IN:

INT. HIS SHOWER – NIGHT

The shower is a white box, center-stage. A hose tips into it from a corner, pouring onto YOUR back. You need to be comforted, so the water is warm. Due to budgetary constraints, the water is not warm. Cry, but do not shiver. THE BEAUTIFUL BOY waits in bed, offstage.

THE BEAUTIFUL BOY
(offstage)
Come back to me. I'm getting cold.

YOU
(cold)
What? The shower is too loud!
(YOU lather the soap
everything goes away)

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF SCENE)

15

You and the beautiful boy play a game of house, though it's not an ordinary game. It's a game with a hostage situation. It has dynamite, and fire, and a dramatic scene on the cliffside where he saves you from a dangling cage and everything evil. He pulls you in and says,

Love is a dangerous thing, baby.

It's cursive, with violins.

The irony is that love is never dangerous in a game like this, because a game like this is always scripted.

Presenting a script, unscripted—

THE BEAUTIFUL BOY: *Love is a dangerous thing, baby.*

YOU: *I am the dangerous thing, baby.*
I take what I love and make it mine, or, at least,
I'll act like it's mine, and obsess over it,
And wash myself with it until I bleed all over the tub,
Then I'll scream, and you'll run into the bathroom,
And—oh, I'm the dangerous thing.

16

You're in an airplane with the beautiful boy. It's on fire, and the two of you plan to jump. You've got a parachute made from your heart, and he's got one from his, but they're knotted together at the veins. The doctor in the next seat says it's surgical. He can pick them apart. He brought his examination table.

Don't worry. It's king-size.

You're in bed with the beautiful boy in a burning airplane. You take the anesthesia together, like you're at home, like it's just another drug, and you're holding hands waiting for something colorful to happen.

The beautiful boy asks you why you're crying.

You're crying because you've never seen hearts that look like animals. They're red, a little papier-mâché, a little we-did-this-to-ourselves. One is a jackrabbit shaken up, convulsing like it will eat the other and love it. You're crying because you know the jackrabbit is yours, and you're crying because you've never been so hungry, and you know that hearts don't eat, that they must wait to be fed.

17

Imagine hypothetical-F:

The airplane is on fire, and the beautiful boy sits in his seat with his heart beating in his lap. He decides that nothing is worth jumping out of a plane for, so he crushes his heart with his own hands.

18

You're in bed with the beautiful boy when he opens his body to you.
There is warmth and a ribcage and a hand pressing against a lung, and you dig too deep, like you always do, organs spilling over your arms as you pull away. He looks at you as if he knew this would happen. Is this how you wanted it? A comet caught will always burn through the hands that catch it. A cow grazing in a field of needles will still lower its head to feed.
The beautiful boy is falling, and it's time for you to save him,
so, you catch him with your mouth and swallow him whole.
Now you've got him, and he's looking at you as if you're about to say too much,
which you are—
Am I doing right by you, beautiful boy? Am I leaving you behind, beautiful boy? Did you find the razor in the fruit basket, beautiful boy? Tell me—
How can I ever pay you back?
You're in bed with the beautiful boy when he recoils in pain.
"There's just too much to take," you say,
so you leave him in bed and walk out the door.
Count the lonelinesses: the last apple in the bowl, the skin stuck between your teeth, the stutter of a jet engine,
the black dot spiraling out of the sky.

19

The beautiful boy sits naked on the edge of your bathtub,
a pile of teeth cupped in his hands.

"I once met an older man," he says,
"He came up to me—I had never seen him
before—and he said he loved me more than I
could ever know.
"He said it many, many times, and—
"I saw, on his collarbone, a little red mouth peeking
through the neck of his shirt.
"I ran, and—
"Whenever I'm in bed with
someone, the first thing I do is
unbutton their shirt to check—
"Just in case."

20

Imagine hypothetical-G:
The airplane is on fire, but this time it's empty.
Nevertheless, as it spirals into the ocean,
a feeling of tremendous loss overwhelms you.
Why is this?

21

A hand is a hand.
A hand is a beautiful hand if it belongs to a beautiful boy.
A boy is beautiful if his hands act like this:

1. *Please, please*
2. A fireplace, belonging
3. Folding at the crease—a dove
4. Folding you—*please*, an arc of doves
5. Feel his hand on your thigh

A hand is a hand; a boy is a boy. A boy with a hand, touching you, is a boy with a hand, touching you. Beautiful, beautiful—you've crossed the precipice again. It always ends up like this, with too many hands, too many doves for the cage.

22

You're in bed with thirty beautiful boys.
Cut the act.
You love it.

23

You've torn the sunset curtain down and thrown it over your shoulders. Atop the airplane wreckage, you build a monument to the beautiful boy. You tear it down, just to build it again, just to say *goodbye* again. Your vice is the repeated action: to love and then love again, to take and then take again. You know this. You've kept the signifiers in a box beneath your bed: a bag of hair, a spool of thread, a lost glove. Call it *love*, like you do. Call it *infatuation*. Infatuation is to twirl on an ice-skating rink until it bleeds. The beautiful boy has burned out of the sky, and atop the airplane wreckage you say to him, "I'll bury you on this island and put your ring in my pocket when the helicopter comes." This is where the story ends, the plot a bonfire with a red ribbon on top, and on the ribbon the word *love*.

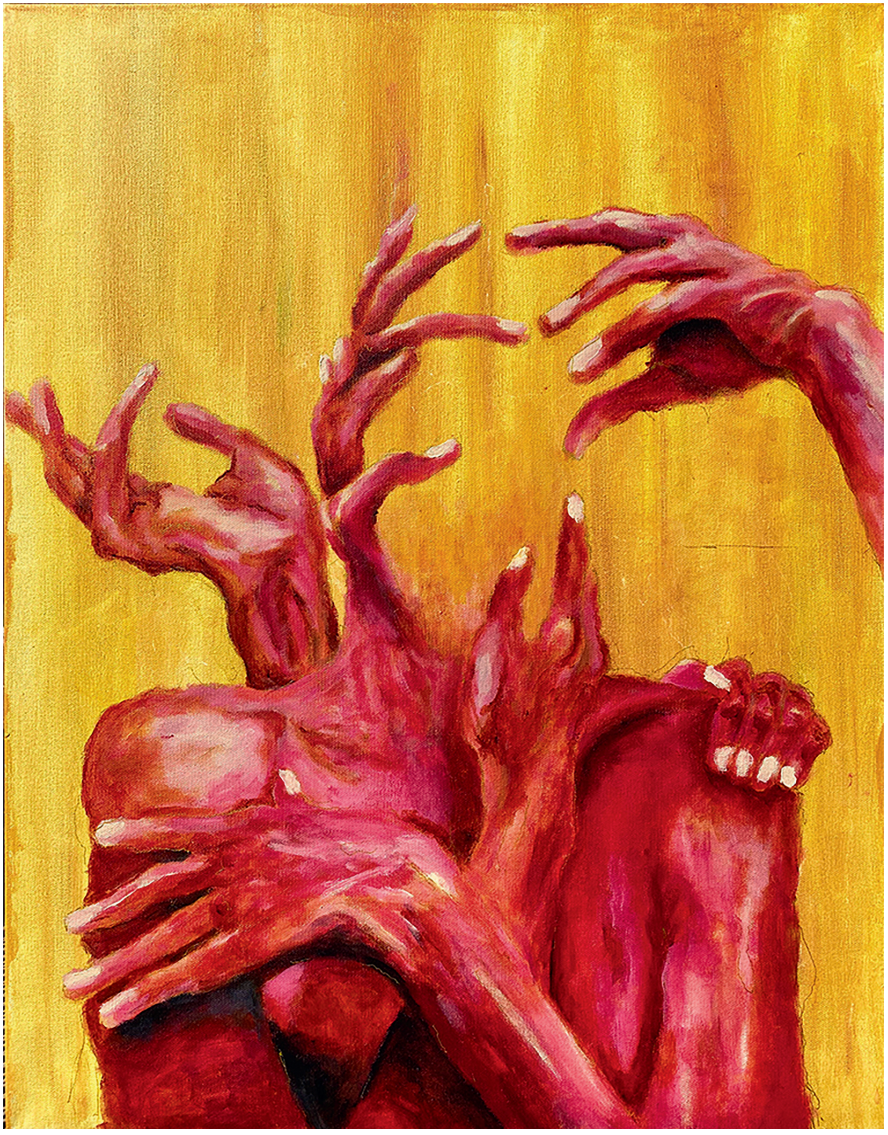
24

A rugged man walks into your body and says,
"You're the prettiest thing. Let me hold you." So, he does.
He promises not to kiss your neck, kissing your neck. Now his hand works inside you and he spits oil down your throat. You're his skinny ashtray, a burning airplane dropping slag onto gardens. Wonder how it came to this, how it came to a clear sky, with a nosedive, with you dropping smoke into the blue. You'd crash hundreds of planes into the ocean, but dear, this isn't the ocean anymore. This is a contract.

This is a cycle of *if*-followed-by-a-*then*.
The inseparable conditions of sex are:
If he must fuck to hold you,
then be held.

A rugged man walks into your body.
You thought you were capable of this.

Where is your
beautiful boy?



The many hands that make me
Alex Gulis
Acrylic and gel pen on canvas
28 × 22 in.
2020

COMING TO AMERICA

JOSUÉ MONTIEL

The story starts midway through March in a small country in the Caribbean, in a world where time appears to move backwards, where raindrops traverse through thick cement roofs and mold grows perpetually on the poorly maintained public works that once inspired architects around the world. A place where the structures that were once recognized as Monumental crumble quietly, without the crash of airplanes or the humming of news cameras. Once it was known as a paradise, the bed-and-breakfast for millions of explorers, a country rich in black gold and diverse, exotic landscapes. Today, this land is a barricaded door, a polluted lake, and miles of famine-infested fields.

As airplanes took off from the runway and touched down on the landing strip, a grizzled economy plane packed with more than six dozen people unloaded on Bay 12. A young girl, a teenage boy, and an adult woman stepped off the plane, each clutching a single suitcase and a folder filled with documents as they hurried towards International Departures. There, they were to await their next flight, the one that would take them out of the country. The group of three walked in synchrony, hand in white-knuckled hand. Internally, they each swirled with the most complicated mixture of emotions any one of them had ever felt: excitement, sadness, anxiety, indifference, rage, love—how much of this can a person carry?

"How long until we go?" pleaded the young girl, fumbling with the files in her hand.

"Not as long as you might like," the boy answered evenly. He held his folder close to his trembling chest.

"It'll be so cool seeing Dad again!" she chirped, almost bursting with excitement.

"We'll call him once we get to sit down and catch the Wi-Fi—our phones are already canceled," assured the adult woman, her tired smile shining on the girl to her right. She held her folder at her left side, clenched between fingers of iron.

After walking across the airport, the trio sat and waited to hear the call from the megaphones announcing the boarding of their flight.

"Do you have everything we need?" pressed the teenage boy.

"We've been preparing for years now, of course I have everything," reassured the woman, continuing to flip through the files that she had been scrutinizing for hours.

"Hopefully, there's not going to be any problems—it's not like we have the money to make them go away," the boy muttered, mostly to himself.

"There won't be a problem. Everything will be fine," she said. The boy wondered if she was lying.

The announcement came through hours later, garbled through staticky, noise-infested speakers. Together, the three rushed to the gate and joined the line for the airport security checkpoint. Soon, their bags would be searched; pockets emptied of their lint; and visas, passports, and permits checked and stamped for departure. Nervousness slowly consumed them, tinged with excitement—the thought of leaving behind the house they had owned, the college they had dreamed of, the family and friends they had built their lives around—their stomachs roiled and agitated with strange new feelings.

Bags registered, passports and visas checked, they arrived at the front of the line, greeting the airport officer with burgeoning hope. As she looked down at them dispassionately, a morbid silence settled over the trio, pervading their throats and choking each one, from the forty-three-year-old woman to the six-year-old girl, with an unmistakable dread. The official's beady eyes darted around as she typed wordlessly on an obsolete computer. Every few seconds, she reached for her phone, talons clacking furiously, before vanishing it beneath the desk again. The boy could feel his mother's and sister's pulses quicken. The clock slowed and the air seemed thick; he thought if he tried to take a step forward, he would move as slowly as if he were at the bottom of the ocean. Leaden stares were interchanged between the family of three and the jittery woman inside the cubicle.

Meeting the official's gaze, a second bureaucrat approached the cubicle. In clipped speech, she ordered the family to step out of line, brusquely stating that their documents would be held and checked. The boy watched his mother turn over the small folder to an official who would not meet her eyes. Other passengers streamed through the checkpoint, and the minutes slipped away without answers. Over the loudspeaker, the family heard their names called again and again, warning them of the plane's imminent departure. As beads of sweat began to dot the girl's forehead, the woman stood up and approached the cubicle, requesting the return of her

documents. The officer did not respond. The mother began to carefully explain, but as each question went unanswered, her frantic tone approached a crescendo—until the official finally deigned to acknowledge her.

"Listen, we can't verify your paperwork authorizing the two minors to leave the country. At this point, everybody is on the plane and they've already called for you. I don't think you can fly today."

"How can that be?" she cried. "That's simply impossible—we signed, fingerprinted, registered, and verified everything with the lawyers as soon as we bought these tickets, that's why we have all of this, my husband signed all these documents!"

Her distraught voice was drawing glances from the crowd waiting in line.

"I just don't see a way you can fly today, miss. My system says this document is invalid and your plane is about to leave."

"But what can we do? I can have my husband call me, you can ask him any questions you want, just let me and my family go!"

The airport security officer paused. "Let's do that, quickly."

Looking around frantically, the mother yelled a plea for somebody to share mobile data with them. Her appeal was answered without hesitation by a shaggy-haired youth, stopping as he passed by the checkpoint. Quickly, the woman got her husband on the phone and explained the situation, her words tumbling over each other as she handed the phone to the airport security officer. Her voice achingly slow and robotic, the officer asked question after question. She first doubted the validity of his signature. Then, his name. What is your date of birth? Where were you born? The harried father emailed document after document, satisfied doubt after doubt. But each successive act of desperation earned no reprieve—not for the man, nor the family that quietly watched. The seconds drained away faster with each inane question. Suddenly, the speaker crackled to life and announced their flight's departure; all passengers were on board.

"*Please* let me go! The airplane is about to take off and I need to take my kids out of here, everything is in order!" the mother screamed painfully.

The two hyenas in the cubicle conferred for a moment. As the boy watched, he felt the ground sliding out from under his family.

"Go."

The woman and her two children sprinted to the gate. The boy gripped his little sister's hand, pulling her faster.

Before the airline manager could greet them, the mother spilled out her explanation between great gasps of air.

"I'm Wendy, you've been calling me and my kids to the gate, the checkpoint officers didn't let me through, but we've been here for hours!"

The massive desk loomed over the family, blocking the gate. The airline manager who sat behind it glanced up from her phone. "We can't let you through. The airplane already took off."

"Please, you have to let us go, you can't keep us here, the airplane is still there, I can see it, the loading bay is not retracted yet! Please, let us go!" Wendy begged as desperate tears poured down her cheeks. The makeup she had carefully applied that morning smeared and blackened her eyes. The daughter dissolved in tears and her brother hugged her, soothing her with soft words. Though he addressed his sister, his dark eyes never left the woman behind the desk.

"I can't let you go, the airplane has already left," the vulture repeated calmly and coldly.

"You can just open the door! *Please, let us go!*"

The boy watched his mother plead and wail as she dropped to the floor, kneeling in front of the young woman, who looked upon her with a callous and indifferent stare.

"You can't board." It felt like the world fell apart.

Superorganism
Kenneth Zenz
Watercolor and ink
10 × 7.5 in.
2020

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A WITHERED FLOWER

JONATHAN ENDURANCE

In this room is a dead monarch fly.
Because your breath is proportional

to a wildfire, my body, too, is the closest
thing to a half-bitten apple.

For all the broken fingers and bruised ankles
I carry with me, hidden beneath the confines

of sleek dresses, my blood is bathwater,
nightfall enveloping the cloud.

I wake to your anger tearing down
curtains of tranquility. What is it about loving

halving me like a knife slicing through apple flesh?
This body: a city bordered by matchsticks and gasoline.

I housed a dove on my palm in my sleep, I do not know
if joy comes with loving everything soft and tender.

Outside, the trees whistle in succession, to rhythm
your blows sweeping through my ribs.

Anger gives the body what it cannot hold. If loving
is a switchblade, I am the orange flesh.

THE BOXES

DANUSHA LAMÉRIS

It's a faint memory now—a hot day in June.
A stranger's house on a hill. Packing the sheets,
the towels, the books. Myself and others—no evidence

of blood or pills spilled on the rug. No length of rope
hanging from the rafters. Only the stale dishes, left in the sink.
Cups, and plates, and by the door, boots, still crusted with dirt.

I tried not to look at her—the sister, bereft—
her face flushed and blank as she moved about the room,
picking things up, putting them back down, tossing them
into the boxes on the floor.

I kept my eyes downcast, an interloper, trespassing
among the ruins. And all the while, I felt—*how
to name it?*—the small, immodest flower
of helpfulness bloom in my chest.

How could I have known I, too, would pack away
my brother's life in cardboard squares,
gather the impossible burden of his shirts, his shoes,
the black leather jacket that still smelled of his cologne.

I can almost recall one or two (the babysitter? her friend?)
hovering around, as I once did—safe in their periphery.
Going about the motions without having to enter the story.
And worse, feeling better, having done their part

to erase him. Though, in truth, what would
we have done without them, passing from room
to room, busying themselves with purpose,
the fragrance of their innocence buffering the air.

THIS WAS ALSO TRUE

SALLY ASHTON

People began to die. We were forbidden to see. *Wash frequently,* authorities said. House arrest followed. I was separated from my children. We were warned not to drive except to find food. Grocery shelves emptied. *There will be no shortages*, they insisted, though I couldn't find soap, beans, rice. We were required to wear masks and cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" if anyone approached. *Touch no one*, they said. If touched, I removed my clothing, washed repeatedly, left my shoes outside. We were forbidden to cut our hair, take food among strangers. Our husbands no longer shaved. Women went gray before our eyes. Screens monitored everyone. People died anyway. The president said, "It's almost over." The doctors said, "It has only begun."

After many weeks, we were forced to watch the execution of an innocent man in slow motion, over and over. The images ran night and day. The executioner took a knee, looked me in the eye, hand tucked in his left pocket. The dying man whispered "Please." I watched his urine trail across the sidewalk. "Don't speak," his executioner instructed. As I've said, I saw this many times. Enough is never enough. But now it was too much. People escaped from their houses. Millions filled the streets. The president washed his hands. "This must stop," he said. "But it has only begun," the people replied.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE EXAM

KATHLEEN McNAMARA

Use a No. 2 pencil. Fill the entire circle. If you change your response, erase as completely as possible. Incomplete erasures will affect your score.

1. You are eight, and at your friend's house. Her brother rips the head off your doll. Your friend calls him "little shit." Then her mother yanks her arm, drags her to the sink, and begins to wash her mouth out with soap. Do you:

(A) Mention to your friend's mother that she, a fourth-grade teacher, often calls her son "little shit," then slams the screen door, escaping to chain-smoke by the pool. Can't she see the rich irony here?

(B) Ask her what she thinks she's teaching her children.

(C) Sprint from the house in terror. Return home. Both your parents are at work. It's just your nanny, ironing clothes and watching televangelists explain the impending rapture, while your brothers take turns knocking each other in the head with an inflatable bat. Grow bored on the couch.

(D) Do nothing; see yourself in the corner of the bathroom mirror doing nothing; wonder at the taste of soap as suds gather on your friend's tongue. Try to think of something to say when she wrenches free of her mother and hurls herself from the room, sobbing. Fail to think of something to say.

(Answer: D.)

2. At thirteen, you hang with your cousin and his friend Matt. For hours, Matt badgers you to show him "your tits." Should you:

(A) Get your cousin to beat the shit out of Matt.

(B) Explain to Matt that you are a human being and not a sex doll who can be bullied into stripping.

(C) Harass Matt to show you his dick.

(D) Say no a dozen times. Hope Matt will move on to something more interesting. Eventually, take Matt into the bathroom and remove your shirt. Talk yourself into acquiescence. Tell yourself it's easier than twenty unheard "nos."

(Answer: D. When Matt sees "your tits," he says, "good," then goes back to playing video games with your cousin. Feel as though you've handed him part of yourself.)

3. You and your friend are sixteen, and two boys you know invite you to drink with them at All-America Route-66 Inn & Suites. One suite has two rooms, therefore two beds. You become stuck under one boy. He kisses as though he's trying to chew your face. Feel him grow hard against your hip. Say no. Try to push him off. He's got eighty pounds on you. Taste panic and tequila in the back of your throat. Should you:

(A) Offer him your virginity. If you willingly capitulate then you cannot be raped. Remember Matt? Now feel him lose interest. He removes his mallet-mouth from your chin. Consent does not excite him.

(B) Keep very still as you wait for him to pass out from drunkenness. Keep very still as you wait to hear your friend sneak out of the adjacent room and into yours, her raccoon eyes peering out from the darkness. She stuffs her bloody underwear into the pocket of her sweatshirt. Whisper to her as you search for your missing shoe. Leave without it.

(C) Wait in your car, parked in your driveway, as the sun rises. Watch the clock move closer to the hour when your parents will wake. Look at yourself in the rearview mirror. Notice bruises forming around your mouth. Throw your remaining shoe into the dumpster at the end of the block. Sneak quietly into your room, barefoot. Slip into pajamas. Hear your father grinding coffee in the kitchen. Pull the covers over your face. Mourn the loss of the person you will never be again.

(D) All of the above.

(Answer: I think you know.)

4. Avoid his eyes at school. In history class, sit quietly at your desk as Mr. Webb explains the Wars of the Roses. Feel the start of a tidal wave behind you. See the

tentacles of the same two boys from the All-America Route 66 Inn & Suites reach from the back row and around your chest, groping as they cackle with laughter. The room turns to look at you, their eyes like drills. You can:

(A) Sit paralyzed with fear and humiliation. Wonder why Mr. Webb does nothing.

(B) Turn around. Karate-chop their balls.

(C) Approach Mr. Webb after class; ask him why he chose to do nothing while a student was groped against her will in his classroom.

"You're right," he says. "You don't deserve it in class. But, well, in my hometown, we have a saying: 'You bark, and then get mad they call you a dog.'"

Tremble. Try to not cry until you are alone in the handicapped bathroom. Ask him if what he means is that you deserve to be assaulted. Watch him shrug.

(D) Find a female teacher, the resident feminist. Report the incident to her. Tell her that shit Mr. Webb said about how you're a dog, and you barked too loud, or you barked fine but it was a little shrill, or you didn't smile enough while you barked, or whatever the fuck it was. Implore her to help you find something resembling justice. Wonder why she nods and listens, then does nothing. Find out later she's fucking two members of the senior class. People in glass houses.

(Answer: It's not B. God, you wish it was.)

5. Go to college. Stop eating. Become a cokehead to help you stop eating. Try to erase your body. Try to obliterate your mind. Accompany your friend to a frat house for a "kick-back." Four boys offer you beers, but you fear the calories in beer. Your eating disorder is your safest companion.

"Just take one sip," he says—once, twice, thrice. Refuse. Your friend drinks half a beer. You go to the bathroom to blow lines, alone. When you return, your friend's face is the color of an unripe banana. Her eyelids flutter like a half-dead insect. She tries to speak, but it's as if her tongue has caramelized to the roof of her mouth. Do you:

(A) Accuse the frat boys of slipping roofies in the beer. Watch them exchange glances. Hear their limp denials. Pull your friend's arm over your shoulder. Try not to drop her as you struggle downstairs. Laugh like a horror-movie clown when one of them offers to walk you home. It's 2 a.m. in Upper Manhattan. She mumbles your name as you carry her. Her feet drag on the pavement. She is your corpse twin.

(B) Drop her on the thin bed in your freshmen dorm. Dab a wet washcloth on her forehead. Repeat her name. Wonder if you should call the police, or an ambulance. Remember the eight-ball in your dorm desk. Blow another line.

(C) Thank the god you don't believe in when her eyes shock open. She gasps like a person pulled drowning from the sea. "It was like I was dreaming," she says, "dreaming I was falling. Suddenly, I woke up."

(D) All of these are right. None of these are right.

(Answer: All your life, notice how you recoil when someone reaches for a touch. Your skin is aflame; orange butterflies of memory rise from your arms to lash at invaders. "What's wrong?" your husband asks. "I don't know," you say, as you turn away from him in bed.)

STOP

If you finish before time is called, you may check your work on this section only. Do not turn to any other section in this test.

Mandala of Alternative Facts
Shelle Barron
Mixed-media on YUPO paper
42 × 36 in.
2019

WAITING FOR THE BEEVER

LINDA WILGUS

Lockers the color of regurgitated spinach lined the hallway. The speckled beige floor and the walls drew together at the end of the corridor to frame the bulky figure of The Beever, silhouetted pointedly against the light coming in through the glass double doors behind him. I began to walk. With every step the hallway grew denser; my JanSport backpack heavier. The Beever had his feet planted far apart and his arms crossed in front of his chest. As I got closer, I could see the muscles bulge underneath the layer of fat poking out of his AC/DC wifebeater. His eyes loitered in the shade of his ball cap. He kept his arms crossed all throughout my approach, but he may as well have been pounding one fisted hand into the other. This was it. I braced myself for the first blow.

Just then Mr. Kavanagh trotted out of the teachers' bathroom, like a banderillero before the bull. The Beever snorted at me as I passed. "See you later, dipshit."

That was the morning of my third day in high school, but it could have been any morning on any day. Minus the appearance of Mr. Kavanagh, the ingredients were largely the same. Every school day for four straight years, Mark Beever threatened to beat me up, but—and this is the clincher—*he never did.* He could've done it. The stories about kids he had thrashed were legendary. He liked to tell me in great detail what he had done to some of them, and then he'd tell me about the stuff he'd do to me, and it was always worse. One boy he had punched so hard the kid had lost a tooth, but with me he'd make sure I'd get a whole row of golden choppers. Did I think a nosebleed that lasted an hour was bad? Wait till he'd bleed me so badly I'd need a blood transfusion. The Beever vowed to piss in my water bottle and force me to guzzle it down in front of him; he was going to turn me into a walking grape. Maybe he'd kill me, if he was in the mood; string me up by the strap of my backpack in the boys' toilet or just pummel me in the bushes behind the track until I gave up the ghost.

The worst part? His intelligence. If The Beever had been the personification of the aggressive knucklehead I could've at least clung to a sense of superiority. But his mother's tenured professorship and his father's PhD in engineering had rubbed off. The Beever read stuff most kids had never even heard of. He used to quote Dante at me as I entered the school gate. In Italian. *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.* "Look it up, moron," he added, and I did, trembling by the light of the Wikipedia page.

The few friends I had were not going to be of any help when the moment came. They were shrimps just like me. Keep-your-head-down kind of kids. I considered informing my parents or taking a teacher into my confidence but I might as well jump off a bridge, I'd be that dead when The Beever found out. So I did nothing. And neither did Mark Beever. Every day I went to school unsure I'd make it back home in one piece. My grades flatlined because I spent the majority of my classes trying to devise ways to avoid him.

As the years passed the standoff became intolerable. Sometimes I almost wished he would go ahead and put his fist into my face so we could get it over with. Anything to put an end to the waiting. The Beever was always alone when he threatened me. Three times the size of an ordinary kid and in possession of five times the strength, he didn't need any cronies to back him up. I imagined how it would feel to have your teeth smashed out of your mouth. What it would be like to choke. I tried holding my breath as long as I could and doodled pictures of bruised bodies in the margins of my tests. The school counselor wanted to talk to me. I watched Mark Beever stalk past the office and said nothing.

On graduation day, he cornered me on the way into the cafeteria. We stood in a sea of navy polyester. Parents swarmed the hallway. The Beever towered over me, lips parted in an unctuous grin. The graduation gown clutched his neck. "I'll be seeing you, dipshit," he said, grinning.

—

I had hoped leaving school would put an end to my difficulties, but I kept running into him. I took up a job inspecting water purification plants which took me all across the country, and wherever I went I saw Mark Beever. I saw him on street corners and in 24-hour corner shops. I encountered him in grease-stained diners off of 64, 264, 864; I caught a glimpse of him in the frozen-foods aisle of a San

Antonio Whole Foods and bumped into him in a dive bar in Oklahoma. In San Diego I watched him board a bus: muscles, wifebeater, hairy clever grin and all. Stepping off a BART train at San Francisco's 24th Street and Mission, he sidled up to a woman some six feet ahead of me and asked her for money.

I had turned from a skinny little prawn into a hard-assed lobster, working out in the gym every other day since college. I had learned to box. My pincers were ready for him. If ever The Beever came after me for real, I could turn around and knock his oversized brain flying so it'd come pouring out of his ears in slimy grey bits. But while I kept seeing him around, I never managed to get close. I would go after him and he'd disappear in the crowd; around a corner; through some back door; the familiar grin would morph into somebody else's; the muscles those of a different thug wearing the same wifebeater or a different one or no shirt at all, it was only the block-shouldered outline that was the same. The Beever remained purely a threat; the promise of violence eternally unfulfilled. Every day I'd drive down another stretch of back country highway or traffic light–infested, big box store–lined street and think about that. Some people might have called it a lonely life. I kept a small apartment near my parents, but I slept there no more than two or three months out of the year. Sometimes I felt as though I was running away from something; other times I was sure my destiny lay ahead. But I was never alone. The Beever was always just a block away.

—

In a bar in downtown Athens, Georgia, I finally caught up with him. It was Saturday night and the place crawled with mangy college students. The Beever and I were ten years their senior. He showed up with two friends and he looked a little different because he had grown a beard and his eyes were darker than I remembered. Maybe he'd grown a little shorter, too. But his voice was the same when he elbowed me out of my hard-won spot at the bar, telling me, "Out of my way, dumbass." The accent was not the same but the voice was. Maybe he'd acquired the twang on his many travels.

I waited for him in the parking lot. Rain dripped from the streetlights, that kind of thick warm rain you get in the South in the summer which makes the pavement smell of rising dust. He left the bar with his two buddies, hollering at somebody standing in the doorway. I walked up to him feeling a little jittery, but also like this

was the right thing. He started off saying things like, “Back off, asshole, what the hell is your problem?” and then when he saw I meant business he changed it to, “Look I ain’t looking for no trouble—”

My fist cracked his nose; a soul-crunching pop I’d not heard before. It made me twitch. My hand rolled into itself like a trapped animal, swinging at him again and again right through the pain. His friends were useless; they just stood there. After a while one ran back into the bar and the other got out his cell, real slow-like, as though he couldn’t be bothered or maybe he was afraid I’d pull out a gun and start shooting or something. But that was never my intention. I only wanted to teach The Beever a lesson, just like he’d promised he would teach me.

By now The Beever lay on the ground, on his back, his arms spread out wide and his legs together as though he’d just been crucified. His head lay in a puddle into which the rain splashed, the drops jumping back up around his ears. I had knocked him out cold. Time to leave.

By the time I hit I-85 I started to feel kind of bad. Maybe I had gone too far. All those years I had been afraid of Mark Beever, but despite the never-ending threats he’d never laid a finger on me. The fear had left me, but maybe it had not been necessary to beat his face medium-rare.

The rain kept up all night. The pines along the road lurched in the wind. The car dragged, straining to pay homage to the narrow concrete median. About halfway to Charlotte, I passed a burning truck. It lay in the grass by the side of the road like an upturned turtle, smoke wafting out of the back. The rest of it had turned black and soaked in the rain. By morning it would all be covered in white ashes. There was nobody around, not the driver nor anybody else. Maybe the police had already been. Maybe the firetruck was still coming.

Driving by a Shell station, I saw The Beever standing in the glare. His face was too dark to make out but I recognized his stance, with his feet planted far apart and his arms crossed. My hands ached. I had wiped them on my jeans, but they were still bloody. Would I ever stop running into him? I didn’t think so. There were too many Mark Beevers; the world was smothered in them.

I passed another broken-down car. This one did not burn. There was a man standing next to it, but I didn’t stop. When I glanced back at him in the rearview mirror, the road looked like a tunnel, all pine-green wall and narrowing toward some indefinable end that lay in my past.

—

After Athens I saw The Beever less frequently, but he still popped up from time to time. In an Olive Garden booth, munching eggplant parmigiana. Behind a red Target shopping cart. Jogging his fat-muscle frame down the path of some local park in some town in some state, narrowly avoiding collision with a young mother pushing a stroller. In this bar or that airport or swinging a golf club not to bash my head in but to score a birdie. I never beat him up again, though a few times, it was a close call.

The last time I saw him was in a Wendy's parking lot, a town over from my hometown. I'd stopped to grab something for breakfast and was about to get in my car when I spotted The Beever's hulking figure across the road. He was standing on the sidewalk talking to some rainy-day woman dressed all in black. Sweat stains ran down the length of his shirt; his crossed arms covered the upper half. The fear no longer gripped me, but as always, when I first caught sight of those bulging muscles and gravedigger hands, my lungs would splutter out my breath in wet clumps. As I debated whether to go have a closer look, somebody behind me said, "Matt? Matt Seager?"

I turned around. The voice belonged to a man carrying too many shopping bags. He bent down to place them on the concrete beside my pride and joy and unfolded his bulk. Upright, he blocked the sun. The tuft of bleached hair on his head quivered; his face split down the middle in a bright, shit-eating grin the size of a small pick-up truck. Above it perched, in happy dissonance, a pair of horn-rimmed hipster glasses.

The man stepped over the sea of shopping bags and slapped me on the shoulder. The whack made me reel. "I knew it! How have you been, man?"

Looking up at him I searched his face. The clues multiplied in sickening thuds.

"Nice ride," the grin said. His muscles gyrated; the glasses blinked.

Very slowly, I turned away from him and faced the car. Grabbing the door handle I found instead a writhing metal eel; the car key amorphous in my hand.

"Dude, don't you recognize me? We were in high school together, man! We used to mess with each other like, all the time."

The car squeaked. The handle found traction. In the reflection of the window, The Beever stared back at me, one hand on the car door, the other raised as though to greet somebody or strike him. Behind him, caught in the window frame, stood the man with the glasses, bleached blond and polo-shirted; roped upper arms roaring out of the sleeves; his face a raw mass of affable bewilderment. Our eyes met briefly in the glass. I waited for him to quote Dante.

REED

No. 154

GABRIELE RICO CHALLENGE FOR NONFICTION

Joseph Sigurdson

Give me a story that takes me to a place I've never been—and make me actually feel like I've experienced it—and you'll have me every time. From the flying minivan to the frozen beaver to a man sharing a grouse with his dog, the two of them a new unit, the story built itself, piece by piece, in my imagination. It also brought me along emotionally. The lessons learned from an Alaskan village mutt—and the prickling understanding, from the moment that we hear of the young, goateed man with a rifle slung across his lap, that this story will be one of loss. But "Wishbone" is also about so much more. I found myself feeling acceptance for a culture so different from my own. There was an understanding of the dog catcher's point of view, even as I cried over the narrative's tragic resolution. Finally, I found this story to be about resilience, a much-needed reminder in these uncertain, troubled times. All you need do is look to the beautifully simple, yet powerful ending of "Wishbone": "They asked me if I was leaving after that, and I said no."

—Suzanne Rico

WISHBONE

JOSEPH SIGURDSON

You start in Anchorage: you get your gun, a new cell phone plan, winter gear to withstand -40° temperatures, your final dose of civilization for quite some time. The planes that take you to these Alaskan villages feel like minivans that are somehow flying. The pilot's gym clothes were in the seat beside me. He was eating a sandwich as he flew. We were low enough and moose are big enough where you could see them from up there, meditating in the tundra pools formed from yesterwinter's melted snow. The pilot leaned over to point to one and brought the whole plane with him. "YOU SEE THAT MOOSE DOWN THERE?"

"YES," I said.

"HUH?"

"YES."

We were still descending. "BEAUTIFUL CREATURES AREN'T THEY?" he asked.

—

The village where I teach is called Kalskag. A Yup'ik fishing village on the Kuskokwim River. For thousands of years these people have harvested the masses of salmon who come upriver to lay eggs and die. A Paleolithic lifestyle is still alive here, although the kids love basketball and Machine Gun Kelly just as much as any other. It's a mix of two worlds. People harvest moose then go to bingo.

The stuff I shipped was at the school, so I went there first and explored my new workplace. My classroom was modern. Rows of desks, big whiteboard, big TV, thin carpet. The gym was large and clean. Its walls were decorated with the tapestries of past victories in basketball and volleyball and wrestling. I explored the teachers' lounge to find the sink piled with blood-soaked cutting boards. Knives caked in moose hair and blood and tendons lay in the mix. I opened the fridge and there was nothing but a forsaken jar of mayonnaise. I opened the freezer and there was a beaver. I flinched so hard I nearly burst my appendix. The huge frozen rodent was still fully intact. Its face was in a screaming posture, its paws were upright, ready to scratch.

—

My house was red and small and ice-worn and tattered but cozy nonetheless. On the first day children were knocking on my door, asking to come in. Some wanted to use the shower or the toilet, because there was no running water at their house. They would say, "You live in there all by yourself? Are you rich?" They were infatuated by my cigars. The fifth-grade boys stole the butts from my porch ashtray.

Permanently chained dogs were everywhere. Loose dogs were everywhere. I played with them on my morning smokes. These bedraggled mutts were just as loving as a suburban golden retriever. Some of them limped though, from injuries uncertain to me. Some were rib-skinny. One was covered in spray paint.

My neighbor said, "I won't look at them, because then I'll get sad."

"Uh-huh," I said, puffing some Honduran cigar.

"They won't last. The dog-catcher will get them eventually."

Here, there are no spay and neuter clinics. No veterinarians. The town hires a man with a .22 to shoot the strays. $20 a tail.

—

The sun wouldn't go down until midnight. I'd come home from fishing and sit in my sunlit living room well into the night. Internet was scarce. I read until I needed eyedrops.

One day, I opened the door for another smoke, and a little black dog ran right in. Though he was collarless, his fur was smooth and his belly was chunky. A well-kempt, well-fed little boy. Full of energy. Full of love. He became my favorite.

He loved trash. He'd explore the village for rotten trinkets such as pop cans and halves of scissors and fish guts. He followed me to the post office one time and found some ribcage that he quickly fell in love with. He gnawed at it real good. Dragged it this way. That way.

"Is that your dog?" said a man. He was sitting on a railing, a rifle yoked across his lap. He was young and had a thin goatee. Slender, but strong. A calm yet somehow violent glower.

"Sort of," I said.

"What?"

"Sort of. Yeah. I don't know whose he is."

"Well, I'm hunting dogs."

Now I could see that the ribcage was bait and the dog catcher was waiting. He was good at what he did. Even I didn't notice this hunter until he spoke. I picked up the little black dog. He loved his new ribcage so he began to scream and bite at my arms. He tried to squirm free but I held on.

"I'm saving your life," I said.

—

Another neighbor approached me and asked, "You been letting that dog in your house?"

"Sometimes."

"You want it?"

I smiled. He smiled.

"I'm being completely serious," he said.

"Well," I said.

"You look like you could use the companionship."

Behind me lay my house of no furniture save a couch and a lampless end stand. No bed. No TV. No pictures. No LIVE LAUGH LOVE.

"Well," I said. "All right."

He went back to his house and returned with treats. "We've just been feeding him scraps and these. He likes fish."

"Is he fixed?"

"Oh, no. None of them are." The little dog came to him and jumped up on his leg. "This is your new master now."

When the treats were transferred to me the dog's love was transferred too. He scarfed down the moist and meaty treat and stood anxiously, wanting another. The man took this time to leave.

Just before he entered his home I said, "Wait."

"What?"

"What's his name?"

"The kids named him Wishbone."

—

I was told the dog catcher wasn't supposed to kill them if they had a collar. I got him a camouflage collar, because I wanted to take him hunting. I'd never been hunting

before, but I figured I'd start if I lived out in the Alaskan bush. And all the hunting dogs I'd see online had camouflage collars. Wishbone had the face of a lab, but was smaller. I figured it'd be enough to make him a bird dog. He was all black, save a diamond of white on his heart.

We walked the dirt roads of the village. My shotgun was over my shoulders. Wielding a firearm was not strange here, though I felt strange doing so. Children came to me asking if I was going hunting, asking if they could come with me. Cabins older than the elders lay every which way, with lawns of decaying vehicles and howling dogs on chains. Wishbone wanted to approach them, but was nervous.

"Come on little boy," I said.

A big woman was up a ways and Wishbone sneaked behind her and stuck his nose into her butt crack. She yelped then turned around and kicked him. I couldn't blame her.

"Sorry. Sorry. Come on. Come on you damn dog. Git over here."

He was confused as to why she was so angered by his curiosity. He meant nothing by it.

Behind Kalskag there are trails. Long stone trails where the grouse come from their secret places to feed on the gravel for their gizzards. I got cold feet the first time and delayed pulling the trigger until the bird flapped to the spruce trees and was gone.

Further down we found the foreleg of a moose. People hunted them then dumped the scraps wherever. Bald eagles and foxes and dogs would pick them up and take them. Soon you had hides and heads and legs and antlers scattered in random places, like some forgotten God of the hunt went whacky and poofed strange things into existence. Wishbone gnawed on the leg.

"Stop."

He gnawed.

"Stop, you'll get sick."

My demands were useless. He only listened when he wanted to.

"Fine." I carried on until I saw three grouse ahead, sauntering in and out of the path. I got close enough where they froze, but not close enough where they fled. The safety was clicked off and the aim was true. When the shell expelled, the bang made my ears ring and the wounded grouse flapped awkwardly in its cloud of feathers. Wishbone came darting from behind me and soon had the grouse by the neck, dead, out of suffering.

He was a natural.

One of my students taught me how to gut and clean a grouse. You place both your feet on its wings, then grab hold of its talons, and pull until it's disemboweled. It works well. No plucking.

Wishbone and I shared the grouse. It tasted like the dark meat of turkey, but a bit greasier.

—

School began, but because of the virus, we had various blocks. The high school's block was last, going from 1:15 to 7:30. I'd let Wishbone out to play with the elementary school kids on their recess. He was loved by them all. They weren't allowed to touch any balls with their hands, so they resorted to soccer, running and kicking on the dirt roads, running and kicking with Wishbone and the other loose dogs, laughing, screaming.

He came to learn that 12:50 meant he was getting locked in the house. The first few days he destroyed everything he could. Whole stacks of books were in shreds. The dish towels too. The handles of my knives had bite marks. He clawed so hard at the door there was a pile of wood shavings beneath it, and his paws were bloody.

They made us sanitize all the desks before we left. Wishbone was often locked in the house for ten hours. He'd get so upset with joy when I returned, he'd pee everywhere, cry in screams.

"You thought I'd leave you little boy?"

Yes. Yes he did. So now when 12:50 came, he would hide in the brush.

Though he now had a bed, a food dish, two different collars, he was still very much a village dog and it seemed there was no way of changing that. He played with the other village dogs. He fought with the other village dogs. He scavenged the beach, the trails, for carcasses and trash. He was happy outside.

—

Autumn came and killed off all the swarms of mosquitoes and gnats. Wishbone and I ventured off the trail in search of geese and tundra swans. We came to a meadow that must have once been a quagmire, for the grass had the feel of a dried sponge. Goose droppings everywhere. They were once here, or maybe further down.

We walked so far that the way home was uncertain. Wishbone had his snout in the grass, a ways ahead of me. The sun shone through the tree line, blinding

me, but not enough to mask the movement of some large animal. I moved a few paces to block the sun with a tree, revealing that this animal was a bear on two legs, staring at me.

This was right before their long sleep when they're desperate for their final pounds of protein. I had my gun, but it was only a 20-gauge loaded with birdshot. That would tickle a bear at best. I knew not to panic though. I knew not to run.

I stepped back into the blinding sun and could no longer see the bear watching me. Wishbone couldn't either, but now he sensed it. That air of no longer being the hunter, but the hunted.

We made our way slowly to the tree line. I paused and found the bear's silhouette. It was still standing. I grew bold and said loudly, "I see you bear! Get out of here!"

It responded with a deep and guttural bark that echoed across the meadow. My knees lost their lock. Wishbone whimpered.

"Come on little boy. Follow me."

Trembling, we ventured deep into the brush, scraping our limbs and faces on thorns and protruding branches. Their sharp edges, like the tickling fingers of witches. I prayed we wouldn't hear the rustle of foliage, the stomp of a running bear, from behind.

We never did.

It was dark by the time we found the trail again. We went home and I took a shower. As the hot water pulled the dirt and blood from my skin, I could hear Wishbone crying from behind the bathroom door.

"I'm right here Wishbone."

When I got out, I found him on the couch with pants and socks from my dirty laundry. He wanted my scent.

"You thought I'd leave you little boy?"

—

I couldn't afford a four-wheeler so I had to take the bus home with the kids. When I'd get off, I'd tear off my mask and Wishbone would run to me. He'd jump up on me, bite at my arms playfully. He'd want me to come play with him and his dog friends, but I was always too tired to do anything but sit on the couch and smoke cigarettes.

I'd peek out the window often to check on him. One time I spotted him mounted atop a female, thrusting.

"God dammit Wishbone!"

I ran out there and tried to put an end to their natural instincts. Now the strange thing about a dog's anatomy, is that when the two of them connect, they truly connect until the job is done. It can't just slip out. Some mechanism stiffens in a certain way to lock in place. That's why you may have encountered two dogs stuck butt to butt.

Now the female dog was truly stray. She was afraid of humans. So when I approached them her natural reaction was to run—didn't matter if they were in the middle of this intimate experience. She booked it, and because of the strange sexual anatomy of dogs, dragged Wishbone with her. He was dragged by his little red rocket for a good twenty-five yards. I'd never heard such agonizing screams. What a way to lose your virginity.

But he was resilient. When the job was done he came back in, licked himself down there, and was back to normal. I actually sensed a hint of pride in how he carried himself. He was no longer a puppy.

—

He spent the day outside with the other dogs while I worked. Still, each morning, I was nervous. There are no fences in Kalskag. I'd try to coerce him into the house but he was too smart. He knew what that meant.

One morning I was off to make my walk to school. My student and his mother were on a four-wheeler and they offered me a ride. I hopped on, held my bag tight.

When we took off, I caught a glimpse of black running through the foliage. It was Wishbone. He kept up with us for a while, but the four-wheeler was too fast.

The last time I ever saw him alive he was running for me, not wanting me to leave him.

—

I knew what happened but I refused to believe it. When I got off the bus that evening, all his friends greeted me, but he was nowhere to be seen. I walked the dirt roads through the frigid dark, calling his name. I walked our hunting trails, fearless of moose or bear, praying I'd find him.

That night I slept on the couch. I got up each hour to go outside and call his name, but there was nothing.

—

I posted his picture on Kalskag's Facebook page. Somebody responded that the dog catcher threatened her dogs. He said he'd kill any dog he sees. Collar or no collar.

—

I called the town office and the lady said she didn't know where the dog catcher was.

"Did he kill any dogs yesterday?"

"I don't know."

"Is there a way I can find out?"

"I don't know."

I hung up, then called again. "If he were to shoot a dog, where would he dispose of the body?"

"I don't know. The dump I guess."

—

It had been two days. I knew to bring a garbage bag, but I did not articulate why. The dump is at the far end of Kalskag. I woke before anyone else and walked the roads, past the houses now leaking smoke from the chimneys, expelling the smell of scorched wilderness throughout the village.

At the dump there were over fifty ravens. Big as eagles. Black as nothingness. They picked through the trash and made their toadish croaks. I walked the whole dump but could not find him, or any dead dog.

I went around one more time just to be sure.

In the tall grass there was an area that was flattened that I had not noticed the first time. I peeked around it and saw the snarling skull of a dog. Only half of its face had decayed. I stepped closer and the smell hit me. I stepped closer to find a whole pile of dead dogs, many of which were puppies.

I saw his white diamond chest.

"Oh Wishbone."

I plugged my nose and stepped closer. He lay there dead—a bullet wound in his head, dried blood in his ears. His tongue was crushed between his teeth. "I'm here. It's okay."

I grabbed hold of him and lifted him from that pile of horror. I placed him down on the path. I could hardly breathe through my cries.

"You thought I'd leave you little boy?"

—

His body froze over the cold nights, making him awkward to carry. I put him in the garbage bag, reminding him that it was okay, I was here, and carried him on my shoulder. I carried him nearly two miles across the village and far down the beach where no one would see us. This was one of his favorite spots to explore.

My back was raw when I placed him down. The earth was too frozen to dig a grave, so I laid a bed of logs on the hardened mud. I took his tongue from his teeth and put it pack in his mouth. I smiled over the cries. "You don't want to look vicious when you get to heaven." I closed his eyes, stroked his silky fur. "I'm so sorry."

It took a while to gather all the wood to make a fire strong enough. Log after log—eventually I could no longer see him. "I'm still here. It's okay."

I waited until there was nothing but ash. I sat there staring at the Kuskokwim. His remains would blow into this ancient river and get carried away into the nooks of the world no man or dog had ever set foot in.

They asked me if I was leaving after that, and I said no.

Kin
Shen Chen Hsieh
Pen and ink
29 × 30 in.
2016

THE SKY IS A LIAR BEING BLUE

ASHLEE BEALS

We didn't have electricity anymore; the big yellow generator was gone. I asked Mom where it was, and she said *cops* and nothing else. I waited a couple days before I asked her again. Then she said we needed to go to town soon to get her a court dress. The room with the plants and their blinding white lights was empty now, so I decided I was going to ask her if we could put my bed back.

I'd been sleeping on it in the living room every night, but the dogs were always clicking their nails across the linoleum in the kitchen and waking me up. I'd tell her that I'd sweep the potting soil out myself and make it nice, she wouldn't have to do anything. We could scrub the mold that had been vining its way across the walls with some bleach from under the kitchen sink. I would just need her to help me carry the frame in when it was time. We'd lived off the grid so long that I could barely remember how it was before, but in truth it had only been two years since we had bounced around the small towns on the California coast, just an hour west. To me it had been so long, that when I went to bed at night, I pictured our house floating in total darkness.

Everyone on the mountain must have heard the sirens when the cops came, because my little brother and I received a new kind of attention when we started school a few weeks later. He was starting second grade, and I was starting third. The bus picked us up from the side of the highway on the first day, and I saw Tyler sitting up near the front. He lived on the property up the hill from us with his uncle Robbie, but he was never allowed to come over and play. I didn't understand that then, but I can see now that my brother and I were marked from the beginning. Our parents made no effort to assimilate in a place where it was dangerous not to, with her patchwork skirts and his long hair. I sat in the window seat across the aisle from Tyler and placed my purple backpack on the seat beside me. He leaned over and gestured that I should lean in too. I stared at his new shoes, still white in a place

where you could never escape dirt. He whispered *trash* and *whore*, low enough that the bus driver couldn't hear.

I knew what trash was. Disposable. I pictured my baby sister wrapped in a garbage bag and thrown away. It wasn't the first time I had heard it used to describe a person. But I wasn't sure about *whore*. I could tell by the beet color of his face that it was something disgusting. He said he was going to tell everybody at school what happened, and I turned away and looked out the window at the seam of the horizon, where the forest met the grey hanging clouds in the distance. If I turned around and met his eyes, I might give us away.

When the cops came, they tried to pull my sister, still a baby with a red rumpled face, from my mother's arms. Mom was barefoot, wearing only a T-shirt and underwear when she ran with the keys and my sister and got into the truck and drove away. It was a weekday, so only Mom was home; my brother and I were at school and Dad was working in town. She was alone in her fear. The cops let her run, and they just kept on packing up the plants and the lights and the baseball bat Dad found in the woods with the nails sticking out of it. I guess they probably thought there was no need to chase an animal when the trap for it was already set. They knew her name and her PO Box. We didn't have a street address that far out in the woods, but they found us anyway. It didn't matter that my parents had taught me how to hold secrets so well that my mouth went numb with the sharpness of them. I didn't say much to adults who weren't them. They taught me how to not be a weak link.

Tyler wouldn't leave me alone at school. He kept pinching the skin on my back and calling me *fatty*, hissing like a snake. We played red rover in PE, and he'd tag me hard enough I'd almost lose my balance. I'm twenty-seven now; it's been nineteen years since an eight-year-old has called me names. I've seen pictures of the child I was then. My eyes look hunted, even though I'm smiling from the frame and holding a Pepsi can at a birthday party. You can see the bones in my arms, so I know that the lifelong unease I inherited over the size and weight of my body wasn't really rooted in reality.

He kept saying *whore* at me, and I finally looked up the word in the dictionary at home. That led to *prostitute*, which led to *sexual activity*. I knew enough at that age to close the book, shamed. I didn't understand that he must have copied it from his uncle Robbie. A child doesn't use that word unless they hear an adult say it first.

And an adult doesn't use it unless they've been taught something in particular about women in turn.

A few days after the cops took everything away, Robbie walked down the dirt road from his place up the mountain and came to our door. It was just Mom and the baby and me at home that day. Dad was absent and working, and I can't place my brother at all in this scene. It's been too long to be sure where he was, but I know he wasn't with me. At that age I was already his protector, and I would have forgotten my own fear in my desperation to mute his, even though we fought each other like wolves sometimes, like siblings close in age tend to do.

I had just eaten a piece of toast and was brushing the crumbs off the kitchen table when I heard footsteps crunching over gravel. I ran to the kitchen window and stood on my toes to look out and see who it was. It was Robbie and he had a gun, glinting black in the sunlight. That was the only word in my head: *gun*.

Most of what I remember from that moment is the electric shock of terror in my body, the kind that is compressed to a point within you until it becomes the center of a black hole, all things falling in. I can't quite see what he looked like anymore, standing there, angry and armed; I just remember that feeling. I know he was blond, red faced. I think that he was a large man, but I'm not sure now, because every man is large to a child.

The dogs went crazy and my mom started screaming words I'd never heard before. I haven't forgotten them; I just never use them. I stood frozen and waited for her to give me a signal about how to act. I don't know if it was a minute before he left or an hour. When he did leave, stalking back up the road with his rifle slung across his back, my mom opened the front door, and the dogs came pouring in like their own little river of brown and red and blond, all five of them, sheepish, looking for reassurance, wagging their tails. Mom apologized to me for screaming, looking for the same reassurance. I gave it to her. My body had become unfrozen in the sense that I could move and respond, but I could feel something underneath my ribs that was still pulling in all the light from the room. I didn't think it was new, exactly, but I could sense edges where there had been only shadow before.

I went into the empty grow room in the back and closed the door and got out my colored pencils and coloring books. I had been keeping them stacked in the corner, ready for when I could get Mom to help me bring the bed back in. The books had

fairies in them. They were delicate and long and graceful, pirouetting in air across the pages, but I couldn't keep the color inside the lines. They weren't pretty like they were supposed to be, and I couldn't figure out how to fix them. I tore the pages out and folded them into eighths and put them in my pocket. I would hide them there until I could sneak to the bin outside. Mom didn't like me wasting paper.

When I was sure that she had her hands full and the place was quiet again, I went around through the sliding door out back and threw my ruined drawings away in the big recycling bin behind our house. Then I started walking up the path towards the clearing on the hill behind us. The dogs followed me. I was less afraid when I was with them, even though the woods were full of dangerous things—rattlesnakes and bears and men with weapons.

The clearing still held some of the August heat, the last of it burnishing the tops of the grasses gold. Dark waxy leaves brushed against my legs as we walked. The hawk circling above us turned his golden eye toward the sun. Pine branches laden with needles drifted in the air, and copper-winged butterflies fluttered and landed on the last of the calendula flowers. They take their time because they know they're beautiful. My teacher that year said you're never supposed to touch their wings, it kills them slowly. My mother said that if you have to kill something, kill it quickly. She taught me herself with all the pets we had to bury. That's just how it is in the country, you have to be ready to break the bones of something small.

When I stopped walking and took a breath, the dogs ambled up and lay down around me, panting and scratching their necks with their hind legs. There was a new sharpness in the air; I could feel its brusque touch. Fall was coming, was maybe already perched on the ridge behind us, ready to tip over and flood the whole valley with rain and fog and pale lichens. I stretched out my arms like I was holding the sky up, bare feet in the dirt and the broken stalks of dead grasses. Here I was free to move my body without the voice of another child telling me I was already a *whore* and *trash,* before I was old enough to be anything at all.

There wasn't much time before I had to go in again. The night would settle soon and bring ghostly shadows cast by the moon and trees. Dad's truck would pull up and Mom would say something to him, even if he couldn't hear it, couldn't hear any of us at that time, he was so haunted by the uncertainty of the upcoming trial and the thin stretch of minimum wage. I would look at her across the kitchen table where we all ate together and hope that she would give me a clue about how to act. Another secret like a mouthful of sewing needles. The piece of me that was now

frozen felt like an entire blue room that I could enter and exit at will. I was scared of it; I didn't know yet that it was the one thing that would allow me to survive this place, and to survive many of the places I would move through as I grew. The top of the sunset turned muddy and I still stood there, caught in between two seconds, one moment and another. I understood that a thing can hide behind another thing and it's possible to not know it.

I've pictured my child body in this moment many times before, with all the language that I have now as an adult, the access I have to a universe of words that were obscured from my view at this age. I write lines of poetry now that don't go anywhere, trying to explain. *A child stacks river stones on top of her chest until her breath is imperceptible. A woman folds up a piece of lightning and swallows it because she is not supposed to use it. The sky is a liar being blue, it's only covering darkness. Terror is a universal language.* They drift and resist narrative, and I write them down anyway because I am afraid that I might lose something.

I picture my child's body in that moment, a girl on a hillside at sunset. How I brought my hands back down and stuffed them into the armholes of my T-shirt, knowing that it would only be a minute before Mom would start the old generator and the sound would tear through the forest like an ugly saw. The lights would come on and glow orange squares in the dark; I'd seen it all before from that vantage point. I pulled my arms free from my shirt and called the dogs. Their ears flipped up and they grinned like maniacs, dancing towards the path home like stars.

—

Mom helped me move the bed into the old grow room eventually. I started wetting myself in my sleep at night. The taunts tapered off; I imagine Tyler picked another girl, one who would cry. The trial came and went. Dad started felony probation while Mom dodged the charges, got off without a record. My baby sister grew, my brother and I fought and pushed each other down ragged ravines.

I don't know if my mom ever told my dad what happened that day. I don't know if Robbie meant to kill us and just didn't. We understood his message though, and she translated it to my father in the way that a woman must in order to prevent a man from creating more violence. I never told the story to anyone. It just sat like a razor behind my teeth.

We were gone from that place by winter, nothing but crumbs of potting soil in the back room to tell that we had ever lived there at all.

CHILD ABUSE

DAVID GROFF

The father had business with his son.
They went mountain climbing,
taking firewood with them—
curious, but maybe trees didn't grow
at the height they were going.
The father had his boss on his mind,
hearing his boss's words in his head,
and a boss is a boss.
He told the son to carry the wood.
The son asked what they would grill.
The dad said God would provide.

The father built the fire,
then he jumped his son,
wrestled him down expertly
and tied him up.

Imagine the son
freaked and screaming,
twisting, un-understanding
as you might not understand.
His sound went up the mountain, up to
the sunny sky.

The father took out
his Swiss Army knife,
the longest blade, and raised it.
He felt bad but a job is a job.
Pleading and screams. Just screams.

Then the boss called—
Mission aborted.
You got with the program.
Said the dad's head.

Dad said the son didn't struggle, gave in,
that the convenient sheep,
horns stuck, surrendered.

Imagine that son.
Chronicle that cannibal feast.

GOD'S BODY

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

The ocean won't shut its mouth
tonight. Tonight, the coughed-up
bones & phlegm from forgotten
shipwrecks catch the moonlight
just right. So much useless
beauty. So much moonlight
knifed by birdflight catching
& holding your face like a mirror.
In your mirror, cancer cleans
flesh from a beached whale.
I know tomorrow children
will hang from its ribs, dig moats
for their castles in the skeletal
shadow of your past. Still
I am weeping, singing. The past
hasn't left you wounded like
the rest of us. Without a future
wounds don't strain to heal. Your
limbs twine together like kelp.
Sand strains to support the sudden
weightlessness of your body.
Your body is not god's. Your bones
not a ship's. Everyone you have
ever loved silently circles this ocean
tonight. Tonight, this insignificant little
ocean is not god's or yours anymore.
In its mouth, still a thousand teeth.
A thousand gaps between teeth
for a body to slip through.
For the song of a body to enter.

Vessel II
Jung Min
Charcoal on paper with masking tape
80 × 62 in.
2020

CRIMSON

ELLEN BASS

The wishbone is, of course, a *wish*bone,
a thing to crack, sunder
with hope. But these bones
my mother painted, unearthed now
among old passports and foreign coins, mottled
with nail polish, faded to a dull rose
and chipped, pale skeletons exposed,
carried none of that burden.
These crimson clavicles were not
boats to sail on. They weren't prayers.
Maraschino red relics, candy apple arches,
these wings were for beauty only. I watched
her dip the brush, thick
with polish. She grazed the bristles against the lip.
This was the wish that words can't hold.
The never to be answered wish. Gate
never opened and thus never shut. Seed
stored in a cool dry jar, never watered, never sprouted.
Breath never taken. Child never conceived.
Absence. Unspent coin. Something
she left for me.

A FAIR AMOUNT OF GHOSTS

ZACH MURPHY

He plays the trumpet brilliantly on the corner of Grand and Victoria. He doesn't look like he's from this era. He's impeccably dressed, from his crisply fitting suit to his smooth fedora. There aren't many folks that can pull that off. He's cooler than the freezer aisle on a sweltering summer day. He performs the type of yearning melodies that give you the goosebumps. I've never seen anyone put any money into his basket.

There's a formidable stone house that sits atop Fairmount Hill. It's been for sale for as long as I can remember. The crooked post sinks deeper into the soil with each passing year. It isn't a place to live in. It's a place to dwell in. There's a dusty rocking chair on the front porch. It's always rocking. Always rocking. I'm not sure if the chair is occupied by an old soul or if it's just the wind. Maybe it's both. I guess the wind is an old soul.

This town is full of posters of missing cats. There's one for a sweet, fluffy Maine coon named Bear. He's been gone for a while now. I've searched through every alleyway, under every porch, and inside of every bush for him. Sometimes I think I see him out of the corner of my eye. But then he's not there. The rain has pretty much washed away the tattered posters. If he ever turns up, I worry that the posters will be missing.

I met the love of my life in Irvine Park, near the gloriously spouting water fountain, beneath the serene umbrella of oak trees. We spent a small piece of eternity there together. We talked about whether or not the world was coming to an end soon, and if all of our memories would diminish along with it. After we said our goodbyes and she walked off into the distance, I never saw her again. So I left my heart in Irvine Park.

HOMESICK

AMELIA JOY

I used to say to him that I feel homesick for a place that doesn't exist. I tell a psychologist, the first one I see after the breakup, about the feeling. It's this panic, I say, this floating feeling. I feel lost, but everywhere. She asks if the feeling faded when I flew back to Adelaide for Christmas to stay with my Mum. It didn't, I tell her. It might have even been worse. I think back and I remember it always being there. I remember lying awake in my crib and hating the dark. I remember feeling it at sleepovers with friends when I was a kid. And when I first went overseas, it hit the worst.

The first night I'm docked in Amsterdam, I can't actually feel the boat bobbing on the water, but it feels like I can. I feel far away from everything, like I'm an astronaut in space tethered only to my spaceship. He messages me the entire month I'm away. He keeps me tethered. Without him, I know I'll float away entirely.

We keep rushing down the Rhine, and I keep drinking. I try to ask about what's happening between us, but he can't give us shape. He drinks a lot, too. He has nightmares that make him sweat through his shorts until they're soaked. He talks about his ex-girlfriend: about the plans he had to build a run for their cats, how she cheated when he went away, the nights he spent in the emergency department. His memories become my memories. I pour out my empathy, hoping I'll be something beautiful for him.

We count down the days till I'm back. When my flight from Frankfurt to Singapore is delayed, he Googles for news articles about airplane crashes. Messages flood in when I reconnect to Wi-Fi. His panic rushes through me like relief.

The homesick feeling only fades when I sleep next to him. I inhale his smell, woody and soft. I sleep with the same teddy bear he's had since he was born, four weeks too early. He cooks homemade pies and packs them wrapped with little brown paper bags for me to take home. "For the full bakery experience," he says. He cooks rich Bolognese with Worcestershire for the umami on cold nights, hand-rolled sushi with yakitori sauce for the mushrooms. He tends to the chilies he's growing in the square of concrete that serves as his backyard. He holds the tiny growths between his fingers, talks to them like they're alive, with the wonder and excitement of a child.

Home is his beard tickling my face. The smell of fresh sheets. Red wine warm in my belly and cinnamon whisky on my breath. The soft skin of his pale arms and the mole on his left shoulder. The sex is erratic, intense, impatient. I am always hungry for him.

At night, he groans and whimpers in his sleep, and I shift close to him, stroking his back until he settles. I imagine my hands are healing, that they cover him in a bright, white protective glow, and he sighs softly, his breathing returning to a slow rhythm.

One night, I'm drunk, too drunk. He finds me leant over the toilet bowl.

"I'm going to pick you up, is that okay?" he asks. I nod. He counts to four and carries me back to bed. The last thing I remember is him stroking my hair, his fingertip running over the tattoo behind my ear.

"What's this?" he asks. Soft. Silky. I am six, I am sixteen, I am twenty-six. I am pulled under by sleep.

When I wake up, he's taken my shoes off and set them by the bed, but I don't remember that part. I feel his flannelette pyjamas, the ones dotted with monkeys and bananas, and he's asleep, propped up against the headboard, his arm around me. He wakes up because I wake up, and we fuck in the dark in the middle of the night. Even then, I know that I love him, but I never tell him. His touch is a needle to the skin; Valium straight into the veins.

—

For months, he says there's no point. I'm moving to Melbourne anyway, to study, to write, to become who I'm meant to be. He says my future is more important than anything. It feels like a hole in my chest is blown open—I'm panicked at the thought of the loss. But I stay with him every night leading up to my flight. He kisses me goodbye at the airport. A week later, he's in Melbourne for work and we're wandering the city, drunk and giddy. That night, lying in the hotel-room bed, he traces my nose with his finger, holds my face in his hands, and puts his forehead to mine.

"I love you so fucking much," he says, and I cry, "Do you know how long I've waited to hear that?" And we're a naked, drunk mess with my tears in our mouths and we fuck in our white-pillowed haven, high on the seventeenth floor. "I feel so ready to pour my life into you," he says. "You're my home."

He says we'll figure it out. That I'll finish my master's and he'll move. We buy matching stuffed penguins. I sleep in his shirts. I spend most of my pay from my call-centre job to afford flights back to Adelaide as often as I can. I keep Polaroids of

us on my wall. I am buoyed by our idea of a future together. We imagine it—walking our dog through the park, a huge golden retriever that fills the bed. He says that when he's with someone, his intention is to build a life. A house, kids one day. He says all he's ever wanted is a marriage like his parents. When he visits, we imagine renting the apartment we book. He could renovate and I'd decorate. We'd drink coffee on the balcony overlooking the river every day. When a pregnancy test comes up negative, I venture, "Is it bad that a part of me is disappointed?" He says a part of him is disappointed, too. He was gearing himself up to move to Melbourne. He says he knows he'll be a good father. He says he would've supported me through it all.

—

I hold onto him like a child. Like a child in the backseat, lulled to sleep by the humming of the car, the freeway streetlamps whizzing past, tangerine patterns of light passing over my small body in succession. Even if I wake up, I pretend to be asleep, waiting to be scooped up and carried inside to bed. Waiting to finally go home. But the joke's on me. I'm a small, desperate, dumb child lulled into this false safety, and I'm about to be pushed out of the car at high speed on the freeway.

He's withdrawing from me and I know it. I ask if he still loves me, and he says, of course. I comfort myself. I say we'll talk about it. We'll always figure it out. Because we're strong, and we can get through anything. A week later, he calls and says we should stop kicking the can down the road. He says I deserve better than to deal with his bullshit. He says it's like a honeymoon whenever we're together and then he goes home and the reality of the distance floods in. I think of how two weeks earlier, we walked through George Street together. We ate pastries and drank coffee and the sun was shining through the changing leaves. He said he could move into my place with me, into my terrace house. He could become a chef like he'd always wanted. He could start stand-up like he'd always dreamt.

"Are you breaking up with me?" I ask him. I'm stoned and I can't cry. I feel numb.

"I think so."

I hurl my disbelief at him after the phone call is done. I receive two texts from him in response: *It's okay. I understand.* And, a few days later, *I hope you're alright.* And then he disappears. He stops replying. He's in Melbourne a week later, and he doesn't reach out. A month later, there's someone new.

—

I feel like I'm living in a strange dream. I can't reconcile the person who loved me and the person who left me. The homesick feeling comes back with such force that every time I'm conscious, I feel nauseous, lost, dismantled. I quit my job. I drink myself to sleep most nights. He appears in all of my dreams: I put my face to his cheek. I can feel its warmth like it's real. *Please don't reject me,* I whisper. I wake from this dream, ejected into reality, my chest sliced open. Tears hot on my face, like the warmth of his cheek.

He's pushed me—small, tiny me—out of the car. I hold onto the car door handle until I turn blue, until my bones snap. *Please,* I beg. I tumble out onto the gravel on the side of the road. I can taste the dirt, the metallic tang of blood in my mouth.

Everything is Technicolor. Panic splits me open like a knife in an amniotic sac. I get up off the side of the road and my body is numb and in shock but my feet carry me and I start chasing down the car and I can reach the dusty windows and I start banging and screaming for him.

Please let me back in please tell me it's just a nightmare, please tell me it's not because of me, please don't hate me. Please, I just want to go home, please please please.

I can chase down the car but I can't break down the windows. It doesn't matter how hard I smash my tiny fists against the glass, it doesn't matter if I pound till I'm bruised and bleeding. He says nothing. He puts his foot heavy on the accelerator and pushes it to the floor; he leaves me in dust, he doesn't look back.

I look up at the sky covered in tears and mucus and dirt and blood. I was safe within his protection like a second skin, but I collapsed, stripped raw, and now I just want to go home. But I've been ripped away, and I wait for the coyotes to come.

—

I am an unreliable narrator. The truth is he always kept me at an arm's length. Even after he told me he loved me. I was always chasing him, always, desperate to close the gap, running after his car, trying everything I could for him to turn around. The loss very nearly swallowed me whole.

It's been seven months and I'm still grieving. In the middle of lockdown, he reaches out to see how I am, and I write a triumphant reply about how I don't ever want to hear from him again unless it contains an apology, but I don't send it. I ask him a month later if we can talk, and he blocks me instead. I think of the ex before me that caused his pain. *Hurt people hurt people,* he used to repeat to me.

Like ink, he's spread through the depths of my unconscious. Sometimes, I walk past houses or people that somehow smell like him, and I slow down even though it hurts. Sharp pain and warm relief, together, at once. I think of his face and want to cry, vomit, bleed. But the homesick feeling is mostly gone, now. I pick up tiny, small me off the side of the road. I tell her she is loved. I tell her I'm here to take her home.

THRENODY

MICHELLE BITTING

Humming from my grave, I kick the stone box
open, shake free terminal feathers. I'm tired
of being dead, regret my final acts, the swan
serenade, yellow pills and a long neck
cut short on breath. Wisteria unbutton
when I pass, lavender ashes tumbling
into my eyes and hair. I want to watch
that great ball of light marry itself to water,
the sea bleeding red through my soul's three-point
perspective. Thank you for archiving my work
at the Yale Contemporary Collective
and not some dank basement where lonely clouds
can't hear me sing. I linger late and no
one tries to find me, bring me avocado sandwiches
or a rope to swing myself through dimming
shade. It's warm and stark as a broken halo
here. Nothing to fear. I bend my paintings
into sails, shellac until one stiffens,
and stapled like that, surf the ghosting dark.
I could hang a happy man except I've
already fled—mute thread frayed and thinned to
framed black. I float the lit-up sky, striking
sections with glimmering tips, my fine mani-
cured nails. Or flip it without warning and brush
the whole thing off, just like I did my life.

LOOKING UP

RALPH ROBERT MOORE

The day we found out a monkey was living in our chimney was the same day our dentist committed suicide.

He hung himself.

People couldn't afford to get their teeth fixed anymore.

He jumped off a chair in the far rear room of his practice, where in more prosperous times he would relax with jigsaw puzzles between appointments.

We sat in our backyard at the end of that day, having a beer, when Rachel said, "What's that?"

Looking up, I saw something dark and jointy climbing around the red brick of our chimney. "Should I get a broom?"

It stood up on the apex of the roof, and we both realized it was a monkey.

We lured him down with a peeled banana.

Once he was standing on the grass, the same grass where I stood not ten feet away, I realized I was afraid of the monkey. Because it is a wild animal. Like cornered raccoons and strangers in public bathrooms are wild animals. So rather than approaching him, squatting in front of his eyes to feed him, I tossed the banana at him. The monkey snatched it up. Wide nostrils bouncing around the peeled tip. Broke off one yellow chunk after another, pushing each chunk between his huge teeth.

Then vomited up all the banana he had eaten.

It's disgusting when anyone vomits, but it turns out it's particularly disgusting when a monkey vomits. All that dark fur just below the lower lip.

Is it just a myth that monkeys like bananas?

We went to the supermarket.

The guy who works in the produce department saw us hefting cantaloupes. "Those aren't ripe."

"It's actually not for—"

"Is it for a monkey?"

Rachel's face pulled tight on her skull. "Why would you ask that?"

"More and more people are finding abandoned monkeys in their backyard. The economy. You guys should try chocolate ice cream."

We bought some chocolate ice cream.

The monkey loved it.

Cradled in Rachel's lap while she fed him ice cream, the monkey looked up at Rachel with love in his oil-sheen eyes, long hairy hands draped over her shoulders.

"I was thinking—I don't know—we have all those baby clothes we never used—do you think the monkey would like to wear them? There's so many cold spots in this house."

The monkey spent more time with Rachel than he did with me. She talked to him a lot. I didn't care. I had bigger issues to deal with. At least he made her happy.

But then I was getting dressed for a job interview one morning, the monkey watching me as I sat on the edge of the bed in my suit and bare feet, pulling on my socks.

He snatched the two socks from me, threw them on the bedroom carpet.

"Bad monkey! Don't do that!"

Bending over in my bare feet, I gathered up the pair of socks from the carpet. He yanked them out of my hand, hurting my left thumb, throwing the socks back down. Grinning up at me with those big yellow teeth, those egg-shaped eyes that had, if not intelligence, at least personality.

Which is when I realized he wanted us to play.

I scratched his coconut-shell scalp while he rested his flat-nosed face against my knees.

Coming into the kitchen, knotting my tie, I said, "You know, we should really give him a name. And we have to find something more nutritious to feed him than just chocolate ice cream."

Rachel twisted her hands in her lap. Looked up shyly. "I already named him. Minky."

Minky slept on Rachel's side of the bed, furry profile snoring below her breasts, but we felt like he should have his own room as well, because every living thing wants to be by itself sometimes. So we led him by his long hand to the unused back bedroom and tried to convey to him as best we could this was his private space.

The room was unpainted. We had been waiting to find out if we should paint the walls blue or pink, but then Rachel's doctor came into the examination room, sat in his white coat on the swivel chair, took off his spectacles. Rachel and I reached across the space between our chairs, holding hands. Actually, it was more clutching

hands than holding hands. You hold hands when everything is perfect and you're in love. You clutch hands when you know in another minute you're going to bend over, crying. "You said you felt like you were no longer pregnant, that you didn't have to go to the bathroom as often, you stopped feeling as tired as you usually did, it seemed to you your belly was no longer growing bigger. It felt to you like your fetus had dropped to the bottom of your womb, and was no longer moving." Rachel nodded obediently. The tears were already rolling down her cheeks. "Addressing—" He sat up in his swivel chair, his own eyes moist, avoiding ours. "Addressing your concerns, we listened with a stethoscope to your stomach, and could no longer detect a heartbeat. I ordered an ultrasound, and that ultrasound has now confirmed your baby, I'm very sorry to say, is no longer alive."

Her look of horror. "Why?"

"One of the prescription drugs you were taking is a Category D drug. That may have been a contributing factor."

But of course, that didn't really answer the 'Why?' question. I suppose nothing answers that question.

After my job interview, I stopped by the supermarket and picked up a container of Rocky Road. Still chocolate ice cream, but at least it has nuts.

Minky loved it. Rachel grinned up at me, the happiest I'd seen her in a long time, cradling the back of the monkey's head while she spooned the ice cream between his smacking lips.

That Sunday, we took Minky to Simian Park, Minky's long hairy hand holding onto Rachel's hand, strutting upright on his bare furry feet in front of all the monkeys staring out from behind bars, envying his uncaged freedom. Afterwards, at a green table on the concrete patio of one of the park's food vendors, Minky playfully dipped his white plastic spoon into my cup of ice cream, after which, in happy retaliation, I wielded my white plastic spoon to steal some of his ice cream.

Two days later, Minky stopped eating. His boneless arms wrapped around Rachel's waist. I petted his humped back, noticing, for the first time, I could feel the hard knobs of his spine.

Before, he used to love swinging around the ceiling, lintel to lintel, in his private, unpainted room, showing off for us, in gratitude for our love of him, but now he stayed on the carpet, a timidity climbing into his eyes.

We took him to a vet.

Rachel, crying in the passenger seat, held his limp paws all the way.

The vet gave him a thorough examination. Shined a flashlight into his mouth.

"This monkey's been grinding his teeth." His black-framed eyeglasses looked up at me, accusingly. "What have you been feeding him?"

"Chocolate ice cream."

"Anything else?"

I shrugged. "No. I mean, we also gave him Rocky Road. Which is essentially chocolate ice cream."

"This is a Connie monkey. You fed him nuts?"

"Yeah! He seemed to like them."

"I can't believe you fed a Connie monkey nuts."

What could I say? I didn't know he was a Connie monkey, or what a Connie monkey is, or what he can or can't eat.

"He's had a severe allergic reaction to the nuts."

To diagnose and treat the damage we had done would cost over two thousand dollars. Maybe more.

"Can we just donate the monkey to you?"

The tip of Rachel's nose got bright red. "He's a member of our family!"

"We can't afford him. In our present circumstances."

"So what do we do? Just give him away?"

I had to be the husband. "Yeah."

Rachel kept kissing his hairy knuckles when it came time to say goodbye, tears streaming out of those blue eyes.

She sobbed all the way home. "Will they take good care of him? Love him?"

"Of course."

The vet didn't spend any money trying to save Minky. The economy. Just gave him a cage, fed him chocolate ice cream. Three days after our visit his receptionist called. "The monkey you abandoned with us? He died during the night. Yeah. All alone. Just wanted to let you know."

I told Rachel. She was sitting on the toilet. "He died in the arms of one of the vet assistants. She said he had a peaceful look on his face."

She lowered her head, long black hair falling forward.

I didn't reach down a consoling hand, because wives can turn on you, without warning. Like a cornered raccoon, like strangers in public bathrooms. "Also, more bad news, I didn't get that job."

Her voice, under all that long black hair, was muffled. "I don't care about that."

"There is good news though." She didn't say anything. "I found us a new dentist. So. Things are looking up."

Overwhelming Feeling
Janelle Aina S. Baylosis
Pencil and digital
10 × 8 in.
2020

FANTASY ROAD TRIP FOR DEPRESSED MOTHERFUCKERS

WILLOW GELPHMAN

We made it to the first rest stop along Bright Angel Trail before turning around. There was a long line for the porta-potty, a long line for the water spigot, and big groups of people trying to get spherical squirrels to take their apple cores. The splashing water and some scrappy ponderosa pines made the air cool again but we never got a turn at the spigot, only got to watch loud children running through the stream and spraying water until there wasn't a drop left for the entire canyon.

There's something deeply unmagical about crowded places that were once sacred, neon fanny packs, nuclear family photos, wild animals that have forgotten how to feed themselves. There's a campground along the Colorado that's only accessible by foot or emergency helicopter. You have to book a site months in advance.

I wanted to keep going, but Ezra dissuaded me from taking on the 10-mile, 118-degree hike to the Colorado River by pulling up information such as this: more people die from charging unprepared into the belly of the canyon than by pitching over the edge, a fate I'd worried would befall the many tourists who were taking one-legged selfies with their heels edging thousand-foot drops. Ezra told me if I was so bothered by it, I should take some caution with my own life, too.

She always made decisions based off of statistics rather than emotions. Granted, she had personal reasons to distrust them. As for me, there are deaths that are scary to think about and there are others that are too slow to set off primal alarm bells.

On the way back up, we clung to the starfish-red rock as the rest stop fell way down below, re-absorbed into the rocky labyrinth. It was like a coral reef or the folds of a brain. Our breaths ran out fast. We'd been sitting in a car for days. To encourage ourselves, we chanted, "We are young . . . and beautiful! Young . . . and beautiful!" with every gasp of dry air as old men with name-brand walking sticks filed past us. We had to sit down at every switchback.

At dusk the canyon glowed red. I would have cried if I wasn't so scared of heights. I would have kissed her if we hadn't been walled in by other canyongazers. She squeezed my hand under the folds of my jacket.

—

When every facet of the canyon had been exploited as far as our suburban-soft muscles would allow, we piled back in the car among the suitcases and realized now that we had conquered our original destination, there was nowhere to go. If we wanted to stay there another day it would cost us $30.

It had not occurred to us that having a final destination in mind didn't mean the trip would end there. We couldn't go back—me, having dropped out of college, and her, expelled for cheating on her THEA 80L: Muppet Magic midterm—and all that lay ahead of us was the dry, empty, red road.

So we drove. During the days, we breathed red rock and exhausted every album we had pirated before we'd left. During the nights, our car was surrounded by ghosts. We'd be okay if we kept the windows closed, but sometimes the security guards who circled the Walmart Supercenter parking lots would get bored and we'd have to roll down a window so they could tell us to get lost. That's how the ghosts got in. There were ghosts in the water cooler, in our laundry, in my hair, and when we turned on the car every morning ghosts came out of the exhaust pipe.

Every lived-in place has its ghosts, but only we could see them. They can be body-shaped or they can be clouds of smoke. They drift down busy and deserted roads alike. They talk, sometimes, but most of them don't talk in a human language anymore.

No place is more haunted than the Strip in Las Vegas. We went there completely by accident and lost all memory of ever deciding to do so. The casinos must throw out invisible signals that attract thrill-seeking suckers to their blinding yellow lights like moths.

When we arrived it was dark out, so every light was blaring. Ezra was overwhelmed, and she clutched her head and tucked it under the window. At the wheel, I barely acknowledged the road ahead, too enchanted by the money-soaked scenery, the casinos like pastiches of culture stuffed in pockets, a roller coaster blasting through the Statue of Liberty, advertisements floating high overhead: promises of riches, nearly nude women, "Wife won't shut up? Call DIVORCE LAWYER Tim Hendrick at 702. . . . "

No free parking to speak of. Ezra sorted through our money stash, separated it into two piles: one to cover twenty-four hours of parking, and what was left over. Of the second pile she said, "If we can double this then we can park for one more day." We wandered into the nearest casino and immediately blew it all at the slot machines. It was a glitzy place that sparkled like a palace and smelled like an ashtray. Once the money was gone we just kept walking deeper into the neon, the far wall never appearing, the distance receding no matter how far we went. We downed every abandoned drink we saw, even sampling those that belonged to people whose backs were turned, until it was hard to walk. Drunk was the only way to be in that place, really.

After a while we waded out of the sea of poker tables and pushed through a thickening crowd. We soon found out why everyone was gathered: the casino opened up into a ballroom, only it wasn't a ballroom anymore, it had been transformed into a kind of drugged wonderland. Stained glass rained light patterns down onto a bed of bloodred carnations. In the center of the flowers lounged two gigantic tigers. Even sitting down they were twenty feet tall.

"I think those tigers are alive," Ezra whispered.

It had not occurred to me that the tigers might not be alive, but at second glance they were animatronics, their heads swiveling back and forth on a repeating track, their eyes slow-blinking exactly every ten seconds. At third glance they were real again; they couldn't not be—their walleyed stares saw everything.

One of the tigers stood up, towering above the crowd. "Get on my back," it said. "I'll bust you guys out of here."

"No, thanks," Ezra said. "We're doing pretty good, actually."

"No, yeah, we'll go with you," I said, taking her by the wrist. She giggled with surprise and people turned to glare at the overgrown puppy lovers who were shoving them into strangers. We ran to the tiger, crunching carnations underfoot, and it bent down to let us climb on its back. For a beautiful, brief moment we were both sitting astride the tiger, thinking that such a magnificent creature must know of greener and untouched pastures.

Then someone shouted, a camera flashed, and security was rushing us much faster than we'd anticipated. They wrestled us off the tiger, trampling far more flowers than necessary as they pinned our arms behind our backs. They didn't talk, didn't even look angry, just led us away from the exhibit. When I looked over my shoulder, both tigers were sitting with their flanks touching, blinking rhythmically.

We expected to be arrested or at least for a sum of money to be demanded, but they just threw us out onto the steps and told us not to come back. We were on the Strip. Ezra asked a passerby for a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked cigarettes," I said.

"I don't, but I felt like I needed one anyway." She didn't have her lighter on her, so she just sat there spinning the cigarette between her fingers. She looked so serene, neon lights blinking on the curve of her cheek, like she wasn't sitting on a grimy stairwell surrounded by gum and hair. Each chunk of her twiglike hair that stuck out under her beanie looked like it had been put there on purpose. The slight furrow in her brow convinced me that she was thinking two steps ahead, and, well, we only really needed one of us to know what was going on.

"There must have been something bonkers in those drinks," I said. "Have you ever hallucinated like that from just alcohol?"

"I'm not drunk."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not. Smell my breath."

I leaned over. "I can't. This whole place reeks—I can't *not* smell alcohol."

"Well, I didn't drink anything. Are you feeling sick? I told you not to touch those drinks, dumbass."

"No, no. I feel fine. Did the tigers talk to us, or not?"

"It was just the one tiger that talked." She crushed the unlit cigarette with her heel. "See, it's messing with your memory now."

We sampled oranges at a farmer's market crunched between casinos. Though we never littered otherwise, we left orange peels on the ground because it felt like the right thing to do.

We turned a corner and found ourselves still on the Strip: the cement had been mixed with glitter, making it sparkle like Disneyland, and the ceiling was a 3D screen that went on for miles. At first it was playing one of those ads where a skinny woman is orgasming all over her hamburger but as we walked further it escalated into *bona fide* pornography. The actors' Instagram and Twitter handles were displayed next to their faces, bobbing a little with each gyration. You could hear the audio playing just barely under the noise of all the people. There were so many people. There were street performers and businessmen, crackheads and corporations, all treating each other with respectful disregard. And, yes, there were ghosts: reaching for money from people who couldn't see them, trailing after lovers who'd long forgotten them,

clawing at heels even though no one could feel them. There was a smear of ghost coating the entire floor of the Strip at least two feet thick.

Las Vegas is what theme parks are preparing children for. It's an escape, or more accurately, a parody of what everyone is trying to escape. The sadness is exposed like a dying beetle stuck on its back and we're all in mad love with it. It's the frankest lie ever told.

We were approached by a street performer on stilts who was wearing a tasseled tuxedo bikini. She gathered my shoulders in the hook of a gentleman's cane and asked us, "You ladies wanna see something unlike anything you've ever seen before?"

I began, "I want—" and the world opened up before me. I saw the luscious jewels and ball gowns, men and women falling to their knees at the flash of a wallet, bottomless banquet seafood dinners—cracking buttery lobster shells over beds of oyster, sucking out the meat—what did I want? There was something more valuable. "I want to see the bottom of the Grand Canyon," I said.

"You can just say you're broke," the street performer said, momentarily flashing white as a ghost passed through her.

—

At night we sank into each other until the world went away. We could ward off the spirits for a bit. When we finished the thoughts came rushing back, and so did the bitter chill, a hint of the approaching autumn. We always got a little sad afterwards, not because the sex was bad or anything, but for reasons that felt purely chemical and out of our control. Then as the night progressed, we spiraled off into our respective nightmares. Ezra curled into a ball as gravity forced a heavy palm up into her spine. Meanwhile I was so far away I couldn't hear her speak. We held hands: it steadied her, and though my fingers were numb, the action reminded me that they were there. We were two balloons tied to a string, pulling toward opposite skies. Our respective storms tried to tear us apart. When hers passed, she picked up the line and reeled me back in.

I came to in her arms. We emerged from the scratchy quilt kicking, panting, and sweating, and we settled across from each other with our legs tangled. Floodlights sloshed in and pinned her shadow against the car door. It was not her; there were too many heads. Maybe it was a weird angle.

Eventually the sun stopped coming up. We wrote "ESCAPE SOCIETY OR BUST" on the back of the car, newlywed-style, and kept going on, thrust into total darkness

save the few hundred feet carved out by our high beams. Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, home fell far behind us. Our parents were footprints in drying mud. Our high-school transcripts never existed. The road ahead was bleak, but there was nothing to be found behind us, either. Once we had had many questions. It gradually became apparent that no one was going to give us the answers. So, as the landscape rolled by, we came up with new questions.

"What do you call an Italian gay person?" I said to Ezra.

"You've told me this one a million times," she said.

"A spaghét. Now bear with me. What do you call a French gay person?"

She paused, pondered, then turned toward the window. "You're going to hell."

"It's called reclamation. Everyone does it."

"Are you Italian? Or French?"

"Probably. All white people are Italian or French."

"Well, besides, I'm pretty sure that word is almost exclusively used on guys."

"Gender isn't real," I countered. "Got ya."

At first when she didn't reply, I assumed it was because I hadn't said anything that merited a response. As it turned out, she was brooding.

"Yeah, no," she said. "You can't ever get rid of social construct. There's no such thing as a blank slate."

"Okay, Socrates," I said, probably getting the philosopher wrong.

"Hey, listen to me. You can tell yourself, like, 'gender is fake!' as much as you want but when it comes to reality, gender is a thing that shapes who people are and affects how history plays out, and yeah, it hurts us! Society has already manhandled our fragile little bodies and warped us into things we wouldn't be otherwise. We'll never, ever get away from that."

Outside the window, pale, wispy fields unfolded for our car. I reached across the center console and patted her arm. "Nah."

"Nah, what?"

"To everything you said."

"So, what, you're just gonna fantasize away the entirety of human civilization?"

"Hell yeah. The world starts and ends at our headlights, baby."

Then, without even a warning flicker, the headlights went out. Ezra yelled incoherently as we plummeted in pure darkness for a few moments. I stopped the car and pulled it to the side of the road.

"Try the brights," said Ezra.

I pulled the lever back. No response.

"Jesus," she said. "Fuck. I thought we'd at least run out of gas first. Do you even know what state we're in?"

"A panicked one," I said. Thankfully, she laughed this time.

We decided to leave the car where it was and keep moving. We combed through the car, finding an emergency flashlight but no batteries, an expired can of peas, thirty-two cents, and a good luck charm that doubled as a marijuana-leaf air freshener. We stuffed everything in a backpack that we took turns carrying. We left, brandishing our lighters in front of us, not looking back once at the car gathering dust and cold and dark. The grass field alongside the road was dreamy and blue, rising up to our waists. The tops of the grass stuck to our clothes and pricked our skin like they were covered in tiny barbs.

We walked for several days' worth of hours. Our malnourished insides withered away. The fatigue started to mess with our heads, too. The field turned into sand, then rock. There was no moon and there were no cars. You might expect that even the most abandoned road in America gets at least more than no traffic, at least one lost car every few nights but it doesn't, not when there is only one night.

By that point, though, we didn't worry much about metrics like time. Once you fall off the grid, all your time is yours. As we walked, my mind wandered, and I imagined my life panning out a different way, and was just as satisfied as I would have been if I'd lived it through.

I was really a gold-star specimen in that brief life I lived. Ezra was there, too. The college thing worked out and we collected for ourselves a couple of careers and kids and a house in a suburb with lots of trees and no bugs. The house smelled like Clorox and pine. It had two stories and an attic. Our favorite family activity was filling out tax forms around the dinner table. Ezra got a job doing social work like she'd wanted, and we were able to stretch her salary to cover our living and the kids' college funds. It was an honor, she said, and she'd say to anyone who would listen, to turn around and dedicate your life to helping the feeble stand on two legs while the system that got you to where you are is constantly forcing them back down on their knees. It was an honor to hold a minor role in keeping the deadly corporate wheel turning and even sweeter to feel special for it. As for me, I discovered a hidden talent for producing music using an on-the-rise computer application. I learned how to move people to tears using instruments that didn't even exist. In my later years they gave me a Grammy, or a Tony, or whichever is the one that they give to musicians

thirty years in the future. We displayed the award on a shelf in our living room. The kids came by every once in a while to dust it off for us. It shone like a burning sun. In the end, we were able to die smiling because we'd got off better than others.

For what? It was all nothing, nothing to me.

—

The road ended.

At some point the pavement had begun to crumble, fracture and drift apart. Parts of it were lying a hundred feet away. When we reached the end, a wall of sandstone cut off the tattered road. My heart quickened. I got the sense that spirits were moving just beyond the wall.

"Check it out. We can go up this way," Ezra said to my right, indicating to where years of use had worn crude footholds into the rock. We scrambled up, but too fast—my head spun and I had such a hard time gripping the steps I felt like I was being pushed off course. Ezra nearly fell before she reached the top but I grabbed her hand just in time. Standing on the rock shelf that was at the top of the stairs, we both swayed with fatigue.

The darkness curved and deepened down the gaping cave in front of us. Our frail bodies couldn't resist its pull. We stumbled in, dragging our lighters along the walls. The yellow flames distorted the marbled white-and-orange rock. The cave reeked of marijuana. The smell was like a stain. There were moths dying in the corners and rustling sounds in the sand. The walls told the stories of everyone who had come before us: *Dakota was here, 2019. SS + BL forever, 2016. Alex and Jackie fucked here, 1998. Robin Zelous 1982. J 1961. CB 1904. 1850. 1800.* The years peeled back the further we walked. The edges of our visibility fluttered with scattering ghosts. As we walked further, the ghosts got older and bolder, or oblivious, or apathetic, because they didn't run away. They knelt in front of their inscriptions from long ago, muttering.

Of course we had to add our mark. With our collective effort we were able to scrape away a shallow line in the sandstone. Then Ezra got frustrated it was taking so long and plunged the keys into the rock. The keys went in like a knife in butter and they wouldn't come out after that.

The effort of it all wore us out. We had to lean on each other to stay upright. We needed something to keep our strength up.

"I still have the peas," I said, bringing forth the can.

"Great," said Ezra. "We're saved." She slumped against the wall, breathing heavily.

"If we drink it we might be strong enough to finish our initials."

"I'm. Not. Drinking. That. Shit."

"You'll die if you don't."

"Then it will be a noble death."

"Suit yourself," I said, and drank the whole can on my own. It tasted rancid, like liquified bad breath, but it made me realize how thirsty I was, and the briny fluid the peas were suspended in made me even thirstier. I was able to hold it down for a few minutes before I threw it up all over the floor.

"That's a shame," said Ezra. She wiped some vomit off her pant leg.

My stomach wasn't satisfied yet. It made some sounds, harsh at first, then softer. An ugly lullaby. I couldn't resist being soothed to sleep. The nap could have been a blink. When I woke up I was sitting between Ezra and a ghost, an old woman or young child or middle-aged man. Ezra was mumbling something about returning to our hometown and getting jobs. She was probably joking, but her voice had lost all its inflection, so it was hard to tell.

"And husbands and houses and two-point-five kids," I agreed.

Something peculiar was happening to my vision. Where I had only seen the thin outline of the cave's contours, bright colors swirled and popped like fireworks. The names and dates peeled off the walls, the words breaking up into letters, the letters falling apart into lines. The skin on the extremities of my body was turning Velcro. I was falling through many dreams, one after another. Fortunately, the ache that had wracked my insides had gone numb.

There was something in me like fear, but it wasn't the usual fear that you sit inside. Instead, the fear sat next to me like it belonged naturally against the wall with our little crew. I think it was anticipating something horrible, and if I looked at it then I would know what that was. I couldn't get myself to look.

"Whoa," said Ezra. "This is really it, isn't it?"

I reached over. Her hand was thin and so cold. It was like holding hands with a salamander.

"So, what now?" said the ghost. Its eyes stared with either a youthful spark or weathered wisdom. Wrinkles flickered across its cheeks, then smoothed over into a childlike plumpness, as if it couldn't decide what face to put on for us.

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I said. I tried to bring Ezra closer to me, a final desperate act to protect her. Her arm barely even moved when I pulled on it.

"It's too bad," said the ghost. "You two are oozing with potential. You ought to have some goals, or you won't ever do anything worthwhile at all." It got up and left us there on the cave floor.

There was a trickle of light coming into the cave. Maybe we were still close enough to the entrance for the stars to poke through. Or there were cracks in the cave walls somewhere. Or the names, the dates, the sand, Ezra, or the ghosts were glowing. Whatever it was, it was enough for my eyes to adjust to. I imagined the trickle growing steadily. There was a rumbling sound and then light flooded the cave and the cave opened up, the ceiling rising and breaking open. The Colorado River came in, gurgling and bubbling like springtime, and it left dry spots where our feet were. The way the light hit the water was really something biblical.

Unfocused Aunt
Safia Ismail
Photography
8 × 10 in.
2019

HUSSERLIAN MEDITATION: EXPIRATION DATES

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

It's a guess, a date to stave off litigants
and trick consumers into discarding

what may still be fresh and potent. Pills
throwing in the towel, sauces refusing

overtime, even water decidedly showing its age
in its tight bottles. Our finales, to the minute

the Good Book says, are stamped on our souls,
yet we loiter and amble on shelves daily

and long-game alike, convinced the shadow
we don't see cannot find us. Not so much

as a heads-up, a week to prepare.
The crash grind grip stroke bullet,

the virus Protean and the tumor searching for a myth.
The means may vary, but life, the spiritual tell us,

has a pull order on file. And likewise, products hide
their range. Profiteers should want a bolder

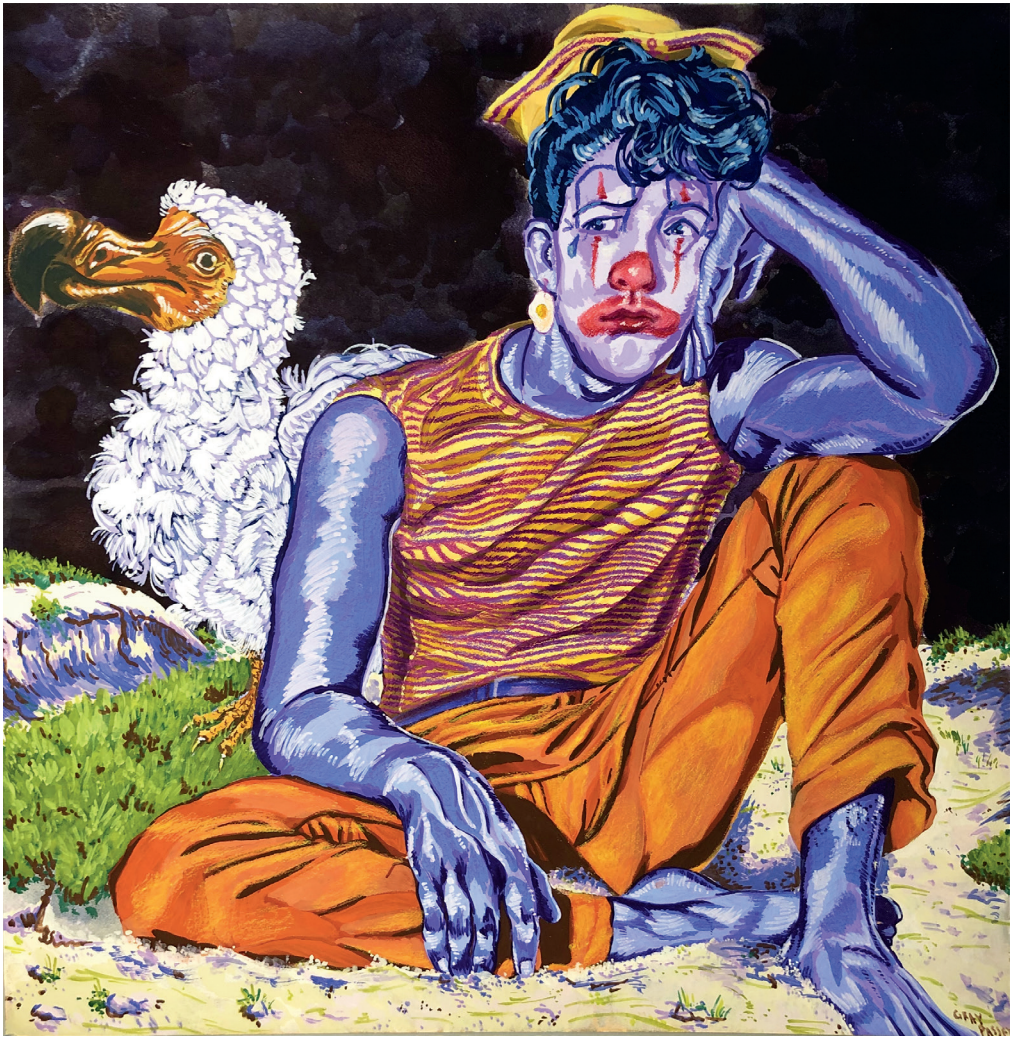
display, a stamp heroic, an edict glow.
These peaches will die on the morning of June 6th,

and this ointment will rot the following 11th of August.
But one must turn the product, or squint into embossed

grooves, angle the edge a perfect angle, hope
a bump hasn't smudged the tiny red perditions.

Difficulty betokens validity. Nothing untroubled found
cherishes the finder, so when you exhume the date

from the busy label, you sigh it is not yours. What
odds that you and your canned peaches will die in unison?



Dodo's Plight, Sailor's Delight
Gray Passey
Watercolor, gouache, and colored pencil on watercolor paper
14 × 14 in.
2020

DODD THE EXTRAORDINAIRE

JUSTIN NOGA

Dodd had grown up with the dream of stationing his head up a horse's ass. It was an industry. It came to Dodd when he was a boy perusing a coloring book behind the counter of a Safeway whilst his mother sold cigarettes. There, page four with the wispy clouds, an Extraordinaire named Horner Thuches sat under a horse's ass. "I work there," he said in a speech bubble. "Some men make a mint doing a job in a coal mine—yet others have a calling." Page five, his head was lost inside the colt, and behind him a color-by-number audience held up laudatory signs. By the end of his mother's shift, the page had been colored edge to edge, and the boy knew the path that lay before him.

Dodd the boy became Dodd the teen runaway became Dodd the young buck on the prowl in the disco. He shook and jounced beneath the neon, the dream always alive in his head. A lady named Nance strutted over to Dodd and asked, "So what do you do?"

He said, "Working my way up to a horse's ass," and winked.

But the music was too loud or the concept too arcane for her to believe she heard right. He pulled out a photo of a horse and a man for moments like this: here was the late Horner Thuches's son, Benzene Thuches, himself an Extraordinaire of both filly and colt, head up the ass of Tonto Freeclap the Alpine Spit.

"That'll be me one day," he told Nance.

"The horse?"

"No, the man." Dodd made a gesture like he was putting on a helmet.

She gave him a look, perhaps calculating how he with his dreams would fit in with hers. Though she did not voice it, it was clear to Dodd that she believed the whole endeavor a waste. Another one who saw Dodd open up and reeled away at the sight. And when he offered to test out the locks on the bathroom with her, she declined this too.

"It's an industry," he explained to her outside as her cab pulled up.

"I know what it is."

"But you know the Thuches, right?"

"It's just—" and she searched for the phrase and gave up. "Who am I to judge?"

"Somebody's got to do it, know what I mean? Why not me?"

Through the cab window she tipped a hat not worn and rode off.

On his walk home he thought on life as an Extraordinaire. This was not a traditional career, he knew. It required moods to perform and connections to get the performance slotted on stage in the first place, a fakery, a narcissism, a lack of conscience for jockeying ahead of the herd of fellow Extraordinaires. He had no direct training either, and this had always proved problematic in his years trying to get a foothold in the industry. No practice space, no hand to help slip a straw into the tunnel when the horse's body heat parched him. His mother couldn't afford anything for him growing up. The job he found after running away only afforded him medium-sized stuffed animals, bundled bedsheets, time alone in holes in the ground that he dug out with a spade and buried his head in. But none of these felt like tangible experiences. Benzene Thuches, he had come from money, a long familial line of Extraordinaires, the network laid out for him at birth. Dodd looked at the photo of the man in his pocket, Mr. Benzene en route to last year's stadium show, towed along on a trailer bed. Tonto Freeclap stood at attention. Fans flocked alongside the trailer, their mouths agape in shrieks of affection—but Mr. Benzene was simply lost in thought. Combing the horse's croup, its hocks and shanks wiped to a sheen.

What gall, Dodd realized, this presumption he could even approach that level of artistry.

He was blocks from the disco. A traffic jam in front of a string of bars. A cop mounted on a horse was busy swinging his billy club through the drunks clogging the crosswalk. He saw Nance in one of the stuck cars, honking. Her forehead greased against the window as she watched the billy work at the drunks who wouldn't crawl away fast enough. But like Dodd, she was also staring at the horse. The horse, a dappled Appaloosa, came to rest in front of her cab.

The horse's tail swished.

Swished.

Rose up.

Nance saw Dodd approach, and she too saw the flies parting from its end like a main-stage curtain.

It was the briefest moment, and soon Dodd found it over. Over the next hour the horse's anus had to be cored out to save Dodd, and in the jail cell it hung from his neck like a laurel of flowers. The horse could not be saved. Its corpse lay on the cold concrete in front of the cell with a blindfold around its eyes. The cop with the billy sat next to it. He ran his fingers through its mane.

"His name was Bick," the cop said of the horse. "Was Bick. Is. It don't matter anymore. His whole bloodline was cops, stretching back to the Mayflower. He was the last one. Had a new wife. Has. Had. It don't matter. They were trying for their first foal. Now look at the poor bastard." He removed the blindfold from the horse. "I said look at him, you son of a bitch."

Dodd would not.

Dodd needed no dressing down like this, no shame or shoulder to cry on. It hurt to breathe. His right eye had swelled shut, his collarbone likely broken. Mr. Benzene had no need to call him up, point to the gore covering his body, and tell him this was an ill omen for his first time. In his head, Dodd replayed the dream made flesh: Nance's eyes ballooning through the car window nary two hours ago, Dodd's skull pressing against sheer muscle, the darkness of Bick's tract, the faint red pinprick light, the soft walls snugging against his ears, hugging his cheeks, caressing his jaw, and that whisper, that whisper, *This is where you belong*.

TAKING THE CENSUS IN RURAL ARIZONA

GERALDINE BIRCH

On one of my most trying days as a census worker, I'm forty miles from home, assigned to work in a summer resort area of northern Arizona. This is a rush job. It needs to be done over the Fourth of July holiday when there's a possibility we can contact residents who might be spending time at their summer homes.

The urgency is due to bureaucratic red tape: the US Postal Service had refused the official federal government 2010 census forms sent to the post office in Munds Park, Arizona. This is because the US Census Bureau had placed physical addresses on their forms. Since there is no home delivery in Munds Park—only delivery to post-office boxes—the US Census Bureau literally has had no response from the entire district.

For me, the hour drive from my home is exhilarating—the scenery changes from mesquites and cactus to lush meadows and pines. Although I have been retired for several years, I don't often visit this lush high country. My hope in this new clime is that there will be people who understand the importance of the census. Since mid-April, I've been working as a census enumerator in a rural area about twenty miles southwest of the tourist community of Sedona, and it's a hotbed of antagonism toward me and the government.

When I was in grade school many years ago, I vividly remember a teacher showing the census form in class, emphasizing its relevance: the federal government must know the population of its people in order to develop public policy to plan and run social services. However, my long-held, naïve assumption about the importance of the census in the eyes of the public has turned into an abysmal uncertainty today. I have sadly discerned that most people don't care or even understand that the constitutionally mandated decennial census determines, among other things, how the seats in the House of Representatives are redistributed among the fifty states.

—

On the surface, there appear to be plenty of people in Munds Park enjoying the holiday, riding their ATVs and having breakfast at the local restaurant; still, despite the holiday crowd, I find many homes unoccupied. When I do find residents, they're either bored or angry that I've tracked them down.

After a long day—it's now 3 p.m.—I still have eight houses left, all on the same cul-de-sac. I'm hopeful. There's the possibility that most people who had been out for the day might have returned home for an evening barbeque. I park at the end of the street and begin working each house, knocking on doors and leaving notices of my visit. No one answers and all of them look unoccupied.

One address is left. It's a mobile home at the center of the cul-de-sac. There's a truck parked under a detached aluminum carport with a sign on it. Carved into the sign is a difficult Russian name. I barely glance at it, but I have a feeling someone might be around. A Welcome sign sits in the front yard with an arrow pointing toward the back of the mobile home. I follow the path and just as I'm about to enter the backyard, I'm startled by an old lady who charges out of the side gate carrying a large piece of flagstone.

"Get out of my way!" she bellows.

I step back as quickly as I can, but that doesn't stop her from cursing me. "What the hell are you doing here?" Then without stopping, she yells, "If you want to talk to me then you're going to have to follow me. I can't stop what I'm doing! I have to get this done!"

"I . . . I'm with the census and I . . ." I stammer.

"I already talked to the census lady. At my new place. What do you want?"

"I need to know if you lived at this address on April 1st," I say. "If so, then this is where you need to be counted for the 2010 census."

"I can't hear you," she screeches. "What are you saying to me? I'm busy. Can't you see I'm busy? I'm moving tomorrow!"

I take a deep breath. *God, how am I going to get through this*? "Yes, I can see you're busy, but I really need to get this information from you," I yell back. "It will only take about ten minutes."

She glowers at me, placing the flagstone in a pile and brushing past me to return to where she can get another piece. She's file-thin, wears old, baggy sweatpants and a dirty sweatshirt, and her gray hair hangs in stringy wisps about her face. I stare at her.

"I don't have ten minutes. Are you deaf?" she continues to holler. "I told you—I'm busy."

I assume this odious chore is her last-minute cleanup before moving. "Please," I say. "I really need to get this information from you."

"Oh, all right! But I can't stop, so you'll have to follow me!"

I stumble behind her as she moves into the backyard and picks up another flagstone. I have never met anyone so disagreeable. I can't imagine how this woman—she appears to be in her eighties—can even lift the heavy rock. But I doggedly persist because if she is moving the next day, I will never get the information I need. I ask her to confirm the address. She does, roaring at the top of her voice as if I am deaf. I ask her name. She shouts it to me and I can't decipher it. Then she cackles, "I'm not spelling it for you—figure it out!"

Remembering the Russian name on the sign, I figure it's hers, so I leave that question and forge ahead. How many people live in the mobile home, I ask.

"Me! Me! Me! Are you stupid?" she barks. "I have lived alone here for more than twenty years."

Finally, after following her back and forth and listening to her tell me how stupid I am, I get her phone number and ask her about her neighbors.

"No one was here on April 1st. No one! I was here all alone."

I breathe a sigh of relief. She knows about the other seven houses and I can use her as a proxy! I ask if she will consent. She shrugs. "I don't give a damn what you do, just keep out of my way. I need to get this done."

And so, I'm able to get information on the seven other residences. Still, I'm a bit concerned about using her as a proxy for that many houses, so I phone her the following morning to reconfirm what she told me.

"It's you!" she yells, even on the phone. "Yes, I said that. I told you, no one else was here. Are you stupid?"

Yes, probably, for doing this degrading job. Still, I'm not as stupid as she thinks—I got the correct spelling of her Russian name from the carved board above her dilapidated truck.

—

Getting a job in 2010 was dicey. While searching fruitlessly through local newspapers, I saw a small advertisement from the US Census Bureau about scheduled exams for potential census workers. Exasperated at my inability to find any kind of meaningful

employment, I called the number in the ad and was assigned a date to take the exam at a place not far from home. The pay was twelve dollars an hour plus mileage if I passed the exam and a background check.

When I mentioned about applying for a census-taker position to friends or family, I usually caught a shocked glance.

One of my dearest friends sat silent for a moment too long when I told her the news. A worried frown rippled her smooth forehead. All she said was, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

I shrugged. Of course, I assured her. Why not? She replied that she just couldn't envision me schlepping from house to house to get information from complete strangers. I smiled, saying I wasn't afraid to meet new and different people. She glanced down, not replying.

My ninety-year-old mother gave me a narrow look, and then she wanted to know why I wanted to do it, implying, of course, that I was unhappy with retired life—or worse yet, living beyond my means.

My husband was equally incredulous. He viewed my looking for a job as some psychological measuring stick regarding his performance as a provider. Even worse, he looked at my prospective job in another light—there were safety issues.

As I progressed through application, testing, and hiring, I wondered why he would be worried. I could understand his concern if I were gathering census information in Los Angeles or Chicago where there is high crime or racial tension. But a census taker works fairly close to home, and the area I would cover was relatively free of crime, a rural area inhabited by people I saw every day in Walmart, Safeway, or the gas station. My mistaken belief was that I would be talking to people who understood the importance of the census as the bedrock of our American republic.

As I moved through the vetting process, I became enamored of the thought of doing what I felt to be an important job. Taking the census meant more to me than a paycheck. It made me hearken back to being fourteen years old, standing alone in a courtroom before a scary judge, saying my Pledge of Allegiance as I became a citizen of the United States. This naturalization ceremony was an exciting and profound moment for me, even though to others, it could have been seen simply as a correction of an earlier oversight on the part of my parents. When I was born in Panama City, Panama, my American parents had failed to register my birth with the US Consulate, believing their citizenship was automatically passed on to me. When

we moved back to the states, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service said otherwise. This rite of passage instilled in me a consciousness of my good fortune to be a citizen, and thus I *wanted* to do my civic duty for my adopted country.

—

Working the census seemed easy enough after four days of tedious training. However, the mountain of paperwork required by the US Census Bureau wasn't as difficult as actually finding residences. In my rural area, I soon realized my GPS was a godsend as I traveled down dusty, rutted dirt roads just a few miles from my home: hard-to-find roads I never knew existed.

The area first assigned to me was in a valley carved out by Oak Creek, the river that courses from the top of Oak Creek Canyon, where the rise of the Mogollon Rim begins, and meanders through the northern Arizona communities of Sedona, Page Springs, and Cornville, finally hooking up with the Verde River, a major Arizona waterway. Grape vineyards and small wineries dot this valley scene, and many large estates sit amid beautiful pastures. In fact, this is where the late Senator John McCain wooed Sarah Palin to be his vice-presidential running mate in 2008.

There are also places in this glorious setting that could rightfully be called hovels—worn mobile homes surrounded by piles of junk and vicious, bone-thin dogs attacking at fence lines.

On this particular day, I drove to an expensive-looking ranch house on a private road that abutted Oak Creek. The house sat adjacent to a large corral where several men rode horses, working their lassoes on a skittery calf. Hoping I might get information from them, I parked next to the corral. Once inside the property, I found an older man sitting under a shade tree. He grudgingly acknowledged he was the owner, all the while keeping an eye on the men practicing their roping skills.

I couldn't really discern the man's face, for he kept his cowboy hat pulled low on his forehead. When I introduced myself and showed my census identification, he scowled. "Why do you want to know if I lived in my house on April 1st?"

"That's the date of the census count," I said. "On that particular date, we need to know if the house was occupied."

"It's none of the government's goddamned business where I was," he countered, his small eyes bearing down on me. "Maybe I was here and maybe I wasn't." He emphasized the point by spitting his chewing tobacco out in the dirt.

The man's son was nearby, twirling his rope. "Dad," he said, "what's the big deal? Just tell her the information she needs and let's get on with the roping!"

Next was another residence farther down the private road. It was a lavish Tuscan-style home with beautiful landscaping and a large fountain in a front courtyard. As I approached the gate to the courtyard, a man came from around the back of the house.

I introduced myself and went through my routine explanation. He smiled and said, "I know you from somewhere."

Previously I had worked for a large nonprofit in Sedona and replied that perhaps I had met him through that organization.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "My wife and I always attended its fundraisers."

I pulled out the census form and began asking him questions, when his wife drove down the road and parked her Cadillac SUV in the driveway. I recognized her as she got out and came over to where we were standing.

"What are you doing?" she asked her husband in an angry voice.

He ignored her question and introduced us. "You remember Gerry from the fundraisers we attended at Enchantment Resort. We didn't send in our census—I don't know why—so she's here to get the information."

She glared at me, deliberately avoiding our acquaintance. "I threw it away," she said, her voice angrier.

A scrunched look came over her husband's face. "Why would you do that?"

"The government wants information that's none of its business!"

He shook his head as if to ward off her peculiar statement and continued telling me four people lived in the home and yes, they were there on April 1st. She stood tapping her foot, and then when I said I needed the name of each person, the relationship of one to another, date of birth, and race, to my surprise, she viciously yanked the census form out of my hand and began shrieking at her husband, waving it in the air. Thoroughly shocked by her action, I stood completely still while she yelled, "I don't want you to tell them my son's name. It's none of their business that he lives here!"

"Calm down," he said, taking the form from her. His voice had a junkyard-dog growl to it. "You need to back off. I'm handling this."

I tried to shrink into invisibility, but she gave me a murderous look. At her husband's warning, she turned with an arrogant flounce and went back to her car, got in, jammed the gas pedal to the floor while she backed out of the driveway, leaving a trail of dust behind her.

After I got the census information needed, I returned to my car and drove the long private road to the main highway, wondering about the reaction I had seen

from a woman I knew, if only casually. Had her day started badly; was her anger at my presence simply the side effect of that? Or, worse yet, was she really that upset about the census?

—

The first round of census work took me 32 days and 982 miles, ending on June 3rd. One month later, I was on the job again. Aside from the Fourth of July weekend work in Munds Park, this assignment involved verifying the results of an earlier round of census takers.

This second round took place in the shimmering heat of summer as I searched out people closer to my home base who were definitely unhappy to see another census worker. I could understand their point of view—they had given the information needed, so what did the government want now? In actuality, we were checking on the first census takers, making sure what they had marked as "vacant" housing units were really empty on April 1, 2010. Had those census takers done their job correctly by checking every source possible to determine if a house was really vacant, or had they taken the easy way out and simply marked the housing unit unoccupied in order to finish the job quickly? This second go-around was also to check on residents who refused to answer the census questions during the first attempt.

In one area, the Village of Oak Creek, considered a part of Sedona but not within its city limits, I encountered an angry man who lived in an area of spare-looking condominiums built close together and rather unkempt. This was my fifth visit to this address, having previously left notices on the door, but when I finally caught him at home, he refused to answer any questions. Instead he ranted about illegal immigrants and why the government was providing services to those who paid no taxes. It was one of those instances where I could have marked his property vacant and been done with it—improperly—but I handed the paperwork back to my supervisor who, in turn, passed it back to the local census office in Flagstaff. There, someone higher up the pay scale would be given the task of dealing with his cranky disposition.

—

My last round with the census lasted twelve days, from July 2nd to July 14th, and I put another 282 miles on my car. Information was harder to get, with fewer people

opening their doors and more of them showing their disregard for the federal government.

On the twelfth day, I still had thirty vacant properties to locate before my job as an enumerator ended. I was about to leave the morning census meeting when I turned on my cell phone. A beep told me I had a message. It was from a man whose mobile home I had visited the day before. I had left a notice of my visit on his door while two vicious dogs jumped at the window that separated us. The man sounded livid, his voice a low snarl.

"I already spoke to one of the census guys doing my area. I've already filled out all my census information. I work for the federal government, I'm only here temporarily . . . this house is listed as vacant, I believe. That's my personal information and I'm getting annoyed with this stuff. Bottom line, the illegal immigrants in this country are getting money that should not be provided. Please do not come again . . . Bye!"

The day only got worse. At an old mobile home sitting amid a pile of junk, my frustration was on overflow. The home owner explained he wouldn't give me census information because it was "spiritually wrong"—whatever the hell that meant, I wasn't sure, but I left shaking my head. When I tried to back out of his rock-strewn driveway, I ran over a small boulder and damaged my car's fender.

At the next stop, I found a decent mobile home surrounded by vacant RVs rusting amid tumbleweeds nearly waist-high. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. Because there were several cars sitting on the property, I felt sure someone was there, so I called out my hellos, positioning my census bag in front of my body to show who I was.

A door opened in one of the ratty RVs. I walked up and an older man in ragged clothes stood resolute in the doorway, a shotgun leaning on the doorjamb. He looked at me and said, "Get the hell off my property!"

I did.

—

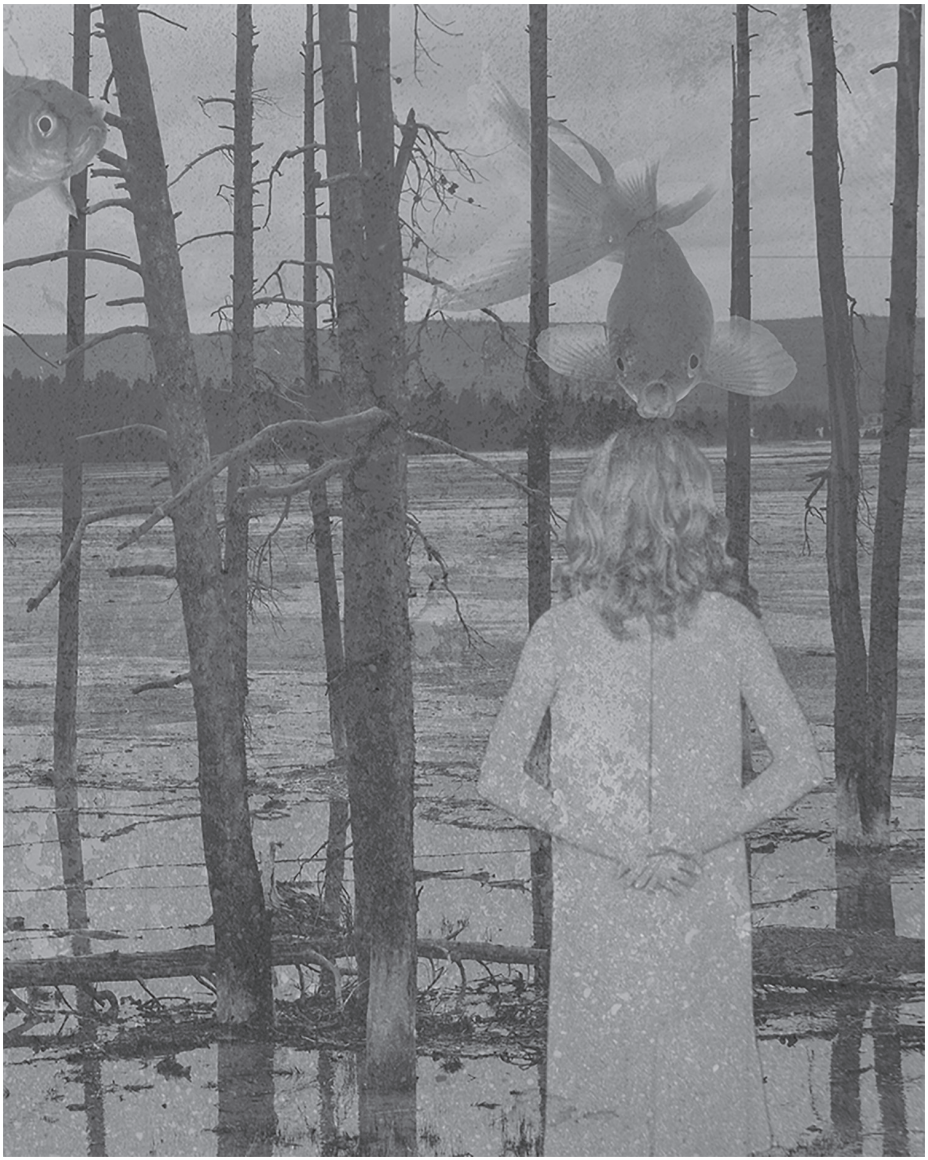
It would be wrong to say everyone acted appallingly when I worked the 2010 census. Many people were cooperative. Many, but not most. I even had one woman who begged me to count her family at their summer home in Munds Park because she wanted that area to receive federal monies based on population count. It was a great disappointment to her that I couldn't do that.

At the other end of the spectrum, a young mother blocked her doorway like a linebacker while her two school-age sons watched her accuse me of lying about the census. According to her, information on the internet confirmed the government was asking more personal information than previously; in fact, a full two pages more. I replied that the decennial census historically consisted of two forms—a long form sent to a small percentage of households and a short form, but the current census was only a short form of ten questions, consisting of six pages. Her response was to slam the door in my face. (The 1990 census short form had fifteen pages; the 2000 short form had six pages.)

And finally, there was the woman who pointedly asked why we used pencils to fill in census paperwork. Was it, she wondered, because the federal government was going to change people's answers? Considering the number of federal employees it would take to do that effectively, her question was beyond my exasperated imagination.

After the gun incident, I went home. My husband's response was to shake his head in disbelief. I quit the next morning, handing in my unfinished work to my crew leader. He didn't seem surprised.

As I walked to my car, empty now of all my census materials, I felt no relief for having quit the job I had wanted to complete. Instead, a profound sorrow settled over me, deep into the marrow of my bones—not unlike when I have seen the American flag flutter at half-mast, wondering what new tragedy has befallen this republic.



Like a Fish out of Water
Tracy Whiteside
Manipulated/composite photography
12 × 10 in.
2020

EXCERPTS FROM
WAR POEMS

PAUL DRESMAN

Out at the end of the runway,
they dump the scrapped choppers
shipped home from the war.

The west wind comes up every afternoon.
Crash-twisted rotors creak and scrape.
On some wrecks, the hinges are bad.
They squeak and cry.

The junk's hold on reality: tenuous, at best.
Large black spiders run across the metal.
"Able One, this is Delta Triangle."

—

On Iron Mountain, passing clouds,
loud falls and deep drum rolls;
rocks, tumbling in the strong current,
run over rocks trying to hang on.

On Iron Mountain,
they sneak a peek in the middle of the prayer
and fall in love again with their wingtips.

The wingtips glisten under the glittering lights
because the polish is so high.
They shine like rivers far below.
They shine like John Wayne's eyes
when he relented just a little.

—

When you came before the Khmer Rouge,
they asked to see your hands.
If you wore eyeglasses, you were a fascist,
and they shot you. If you didn't wear glasses,
but you lacked calluses on your hands,
you were a fascist, and they shot you.

In the l870s in France,
the government troops in Paris
asked to see your hands.
If your hands had calluses,
you were surely a Communard, and they shot you.

—

Los Angeles, 1945—the fire escapes
were hot, the victory parades loud
on Pacific Boulevard. Planes flew in formation
through our brains. When my red-haired uncle
came back from the veteran's hospital,
his hair was white.

San Francisco, l969—people in the streets
raging against the war;
cops charging us, rushing
with raised clubs. In the confusion
I nearly went down: a provocateur at my back
kicked me in the heel
with his steel-toed boot.

That July, I was going to a meeting
of conscientious objectors. “What a knucklehead,”
my father said. The streets were deserted:
no one else arrived. They had all stayed home
to see the landing on the moon.

A woman I met years later told me it was the first
night she made love. Everyone inside,
in front of their sets, waiting to take
the first, weightless step.

THE NETHERWORLD

ASHLEY BURNETT

Aimee is ten the first time she ends up in the Netherworld. She ate a witch's apple, naturally. In the Netherworld, trees have pink leaves and trunks so soft your fingers leave marks when you run your hand across their bark. Cats talk, but dogs don't. When you tell lies in the Netherworld, your hair grows. When you tell the truth, your nails do.

The Netherworld is ruled by a reincarnating king when Aimee first arrives, each of his forms more monstrous and vindictive than the last. The citizens say he learns his cruelty in the womb, that the king finds the most evil woman he can to become his wife, who will eventually become his mother.

Yeah, Aimee couldn't wrap her head around it either.

In the Netherworld, Aimee sees a man die for the first time when the talking cats dispose of the king. They cut off his head and it rolls and rolls and rolls right to Aimee's white Nike sneakers. When she gets home, she knows it wasn't all just a dream because she can't get that last bloodstain off her Air Force 1s.

—

Aimee is fifteen when she visits the Netherworld next. She did not want to go back. She still remembers all the years of bullying for insisting it existed in the first place. This time, she walked too far into her closet, tripped over a hanger, and ended up in the pink woods.

It is twenty years later in the Netherworld. The king is now a queen, and her cat name is Queen Minx. She is kind, or perhaps only seems that way after hundreds of years of cruelty. She remembers Aimee, even though she was only a kitten when the king was killed.

They have a feast in Aimee's honor, but Aimee is fifteen and thinks she's fat and doesn't like to eat in front of other people. They bring out chicken stuffed with gizzards and soft potatoes drowned in butter and bread so light and airy, it literally floats. You have to grab it out of the air, like a fly.

Aimee tries some of the chicken and half a piece of bread and throws it up when she gets back to the real world.

—

The next time she ends up in the Netherworld, Aimee is twenty. Her college boyfriend, Derek, is with her. He insults an Uber driver who ends up being a witch. The witch curses him into becoming a banana slug. Instead of taking Aimee to her off-campus apartment, the witch drives her to the Netherworld.

The cats are no longer in power. Instead, a group of nomadic warriors have taken over. They bring talking horses and dragons and weapons that look a lot like guns. To cure Derek, Aimee has to barter a piece of her soul. When the witch plucks it out of Aimee's chest—a little silvery ball, no bigger than a quarter—and crushes it beneath her palms, Aimee feels no change at all. Derek is turned back into a human and they take an Uber home.

Two weeks later, they break up anyways.

—

Aimee is thirty-four when she visits the Netherworld next. She was supposed to be lured back in at twenty-five, but resisted eating a pomegranate a stranger offered her. This time, she took the bait: ten pieces of gas-station sashimi at the cashier's insistence.

She wakes up on the coast, sand in her hair. There are no rulers anymore, no kings or cats or warriors. Instead, there is the president of the Netherworld. He ran on a platform of universal healthcare and universal basic income and won handily.

It's been so long that no one remembers Aimee. She barely remembers the Netherworld herself. She wanders around the charming seaside town where the water is Fanta orange and the residents ride around on flying carpets. She tries to use her phone to call her ex-husband, but the signal in the Netherworld is weak (their 5G towers still aren't up). So she lets herself get lost. She has ice cream that tastes like garlic and pizza that tastes like cake. She plays arcade games that involve whacking actual moles with your palm. She dances the night away in a seedy nightclub where the walls literally show the night sky: the Milky Way and Andromeda, the planets and stars twinkling away.

When she wakes up, she is back in her bed. She has ten unread messages from her ex-husband. This time, the sign that it wasn't just a dream is all the body glitter.

—

When Aimee is forty-four, her daughter is taken to the Netherworld alongside her. A rabbit hole whisks them there and deposits them onto an empty piazza. The talking cats are back, and the warriors, too. They have ousted the president and formed their

own parliament. The people of the Netherworld seem happy, especially when they meet Aimee's daughter, Elisa. Netherworlds are for children, and the Netherworld embraces her. It shows Elisa its magic: flying bread and pink trees and magic carpets and talking animals and the sorts of things you can buy with a piece of your soul.

The Netherworld, Aimee realizes, is a young woman's game. Without anyone noticing her departure, she exits through an unmarked door back to the real world and waits patiently for Elisa to return.

Elisa never does.

—

Aimee is sixty-five when she decides to retire to the Netherworld. She says goodbye to her three sons and tells the oldest and youngest to seek their fortunes. Like in any good fairytale, the middle son must attend to the family business.

This time, she buys a ticket to the Netherworld. There is a travel agency still functioning at the edge of town, and they help her pick the best cruise package. It takes a week by cruise ship to get to the Netherworld. She spends the time playing bingo and taking water aerobics classes and dancing with men who look like variations on her dead ex-husband.

When she gets to the Netherworld, it looks exactly the way it did when she was ten. People walk around with long hair and nails and the cats all chatter and the trees have handprints all along the trunks.

The reincarnated king has returned. His new wife is Queen Elise. Aimee thinks the name is too similar, that it must be her disappeared daughter, but she's forgotten what Elisa once looked like. And, anyways, why should she take credit for the queen's cruelty?

If Aimee were ten or fifteen or twenty, she'd become a freedom fighter. She'd help the cats oust the king once again. This time, she wouldn't even flinch at his rolling head. But Aimee is older now, as invisible in the Netherworld as she was back in the real world. She retires to the coast, where at least the sea is still orange.

—

Aimee no longer remembers how old she is. She no longer recognizes who she once was. Her face is cracked and split like a walnut, her fingernails always dirty. Living in the Netherworld is no cakewalk, no picnic. It is much harder than it looks.

Money doesn't go very far in the Netherworld. Not since they abolished universal basic income. Aimee has had to scrape by—making potions, fixing old flying carpets, tending to the wounds of nomadic warriors.

One day, she is given an odd job. There is a girl meant to visit the Netherworld, but she hasn't taken any of the lures. Aimee dons a black hood and stands on the edge of the forest, holding a juicy apple, its liquid dripping down the back of her gnarled hand.

The girl is smart. She is wearing white sneakers just like Aimee did. When the girl refuses a bite, Aimee says, "I know a girl who was once like you. She took a bite and became queen."

The girl thinks for a minute, and then she takes a bite. She will return to the Netherworld again and again and again, by rabbit hole and monsoon and wardrobe. But of course, Aimee doesn't know that. She watches the girl walk away, imagines it is her daughter, and pulls the hood tighter around her face. When she arrives back at her cottage later, she bends down and finds her old Nike sneakers. On the toe box, the blood is as red as ever.

—

Aimee has lived in the Netherworld for centuries. Was there ever a time she lived anywhere else?

For every girl, Aimee devises a new trap. Fruits, chain emails, spam texts, rabbit holes, wardrobes, curses, witches, river spirits, broomsticks, magicians' hats, words said three times in front of naked mirrors. The girls arrive and the Netherworld eats them up. Sometimes they are clever. Sometimes they are thick. One day, a girl shows up and Aimee places a curse on her—her body slowly turns to wood, starting at her toes. The girl begins to cry and Aimee feels something she hasn't felt in the longest time. It's been so long, she has forgotten the word for it: pity. It feels like film on the front of her teeth.

"How will I get back?" the girl asks, her feet already sprouting branches. She cries and blubbers. She asks again, "How will I get back?"

And Aimee thinks of that first apple she bit and she swallows her reply: "I only wish I knew."

Tremor
Mason Brown
Oil painting on canvas
30 × 40 in.
2020

RUNT OF THE LITTER
DISABILITY IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

MAGDA ROMANSKA

There was a saying in the Eastern Bloc back in the days of the Soviet regime: "You might not want to follow the news, but the news will follow you." It meant that if you're not aware of what's happening in the larger world, you might not be able to escape the next impending catastrophe, be it human- or nature-made. Thus, those of us who grew up in the Eastern Bloc (Poland, in my case) are compulsive readers of news: understanding the world being considered essential to survival. I am explaining this to provide context for why I ordered my first face masks on January 22, 2020. On January 27, four days after China closed the city of Wuhan, I purchased four months' worth of food and supplies, including hand sanitizer. Knowing how centralized governments work, I knew in an instant that China would not close Wuhan in response to the measly 300 cases reported at the time if they didn't have some other internal knowledge of the severity of the epidemic (the combination of its mortality rate and the infection rate). For the next six weeks, I compulsively followed every piece of news and data, from peer-reviewed articles and preprints to local news reports and citizen-journalist social media posts coming out of China. I analyzed both the news and the numbers, calculating the likelihood of being personally caught in the upcoming storm. On February 5, I emailed a close friend from my alma mater Stanford, a computer scientist working in Silicon Valley, to give me his reading on the numbers, not trusting my own humanities-trained mind. His casual response, "Wash your hands," indicated a gulf between us that I didn't immediately understand. For him, it was a potential sniffle. For me, it was the question of life and death.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose legs were paralyzed from an illness, reportedly had a recurring nightmare about not being able to get out of the White House in case of a fire.[1] Every disabled person, particularly those whose disability is connected to mobility, has a set of such nightmare scenarios: fires, floods, tornadoes,

[1] Perry, Warren. "Fears of the Fearless FDR: A President's Superstitions for Friday the 13th." *National Portrait Gallery*, n.d.

earthquakes. Being in a wheelchair, I choose to live in a state where the usual natural disasters—snowstorms—can be predicted ahead of time, because anything that requires urgent packing and escape would mean my most certain eventual demise.[2] Regardless of whether my choice of residence is warranted or paranoid, it is a part of the broader multifactor analysis that every disabled person must perform daily to survive: a calculation of risk defined by the complex intersection of environmental, political, social, and cultural factors interweaving with the peculiar demands of one's disability. Among the set of my nightmare scenarios, a potential pandemic has always ranked quite high: the chances of someone like me surviving one are slim, and the reasons have as much to do with my own high-risk susceptibility to infections as they do with the historical treatment of the disabled. Understanding this history, I knew that once the healthcare system got overwhelmed, I would be the last one to get the care I need, be it a ventilator, an ECMO machine, or medications. If I were to catch the virus, I would most certainly die. That's what the data, my knowledge of human psychology, and awareness of the historical treatment of the disabled were telling me.

In early February, I emailed my two doctors, sharing with them my concerns. One of them dismissed me, assuring me that the hospital would have enough ventilators for everyone who would need one. "We're ready," he said. The other promised to advocate on my behalf if the worst came to worst. I couldn't tell whether she actually understood what I was saying or whether she was trying to calm me down. Did she know that in case of state or federal guidelines, her advocacy would have no impact? In early February, I also made an ADA request for access to the back elevator at my college to limit my exposure to potential infection. Working in the college environment, one sooner or later develops some form of germophobia, but I knew that my usual precautions (don't touch elevator buttons and door handles, stay away from sick students, wash and sanitize your hands multiple times throughout the day) would not be enough. I sent my HR department a set of data and scientific articles coming out of Asia, together with my doctor's note attesting to my (already clearly visible) condition. Although the back elevator was in constant use by other faculty, my request for assistance with accessing the elevator was refused. In mid-February, when it became clear that we would have a global pandemic, I made another ADA request to teach my courses from home. I supplied our HR with additional articles and more data. By then, the top virologists and epidemiologists on social media (if not on television) were pretty much in agreement that we would have a

[2] Romney, Lee. "Disabled woman killed in California wildfire could not get out of remote house." *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 14, 2015.

serious pandemic within the next two to three weeks on US soil. My HR, once again, refused my ADA request, arguing that it posed an "undue burden" on the college to allow me to teach from home. The students paid for in-person classes, and they expected in-person classes, I was told. A few days later, all of our in-person classes were canceled. We were given one week off to prepare for online teaching, all of us.

What I experienced at work, a refusal of ADA-based life-saving accommodations—considered an "undue burden" when applied to me but necessary when applied to others—was not unique. Many disabled Twitter users have been vocal on the topic, pointing out the bittersweet irony of the current pandemic: the requests for remote work or other ADA accommodations[3] that would make it possible to increase the employment of disabled people to more than the current 19.3%,[4] and which are customarily refused when requested by the disabled, are now considered essential to the survival of the greater population. We all suddenly have become disabled, requiring ADA accommodations.

[3] Leary, Alaina. "Work with Benefits: COVID-19 Illustrates the Pros of Remote Work." *Bitchmedia*, March 20, 2020.

[4] US Department of Labor. "Disability Labor Force Characteristics 2020." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Feb. 24, 2021.

The dissonance I feel right now is difficult to put into words. The raw contradictions that this pandemic has unraveled are playing out in the public eye,[5] on the global stage, and on our bodies: from top-level conversations about the allocation of ventilators[6] to numerous articles pointing out the low value[7] that societies across the globe[8] place on the lives of the disabled, and pleading for some universal sense of mercy,[9] with a mixture of incredulity, pity, and moral outrage. The pandemic made visible what many of us have always known.

Historically, to be a disabled academic has meant to be constantly faced, intellectually, with some potential form of eugenics, whatever your field might be, from sciences[10] to humanities.[11] This history often informs the present moment. The academic world is fundamentally secular: in extreme interpretations, the utilitarian value of human life can be calculated[12] and thus subsumed under some other misconstrued "greater good," either social, political, economic, or cultural. A conscious choice to have a disabled child appears to some people as irrational on multiple levels.[13] For those of us caught at the crossroads of this contradiction—having to assign a value to our own lives in multiple discursive contexts—philosophy and ethics don't always provide easy, comforting, or unequivocal answers. And yet, live we must, despite what Hollywood continues to tell us so many times, in no uncertain terms, with the images of various euthanized cripples populating the yearly Oscar sweeps.[14] I don't know a single nondisabled person who has ever felt the urge to justify their existence with the same urgency that the disabled are asked to justify theirs on a daily basis: in brutal, utilitarian, economic terms.

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5 Mello, Michelle M, Govind Persad, and Douglas B. White. "Respecting Disability Rights." *New England Journal of Medicine*, July 30, 2020.

6 Truog, Robert, Mildred Solomon, and David Jones. "Allocating Ventilators in a Pandemic." *Conference Proceedings—Center for Bioethics at Harvard Medical School*, April 30, 2020.

7 Shapiro, Joseph. "COVID-19 Death Raises Worst Fears Of People With Disabilities." *National Public Radio*, July 31, 2020.

8 Tapper, James. "Fury at 'do not resuscitate' notices given to Covid patients with learning disabilities." *The Guardian*, Feb. 13, 2021.

9 Barker, Ariella Z. "Those with disabilities have a right to survive the coronavirus pandemic." *The Boston Globe*, March 30, 2020.

10 Norrgard, Karen. "Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs." *Nature Education*, 2008.

11 Michalczyk, John J. "Films, Eugenics." *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, n.d.

12 Rogers, Adam. "How Much is a Human Life Actually Worth?" *Wired*, May 11, 2020.

13 Sherwood, Harriet. "Down's syndrome test could see syndrome disappear, C of E warns." *The Guardian*, Jan. 19, 2018.

14 Romanska, Magda. "On screen and on stage, disability continues to be depicted in outdated, cliched ways." *The Conversation*, Nov. 2, 2020.

One billion people in the world have some form of disability. This pandemic is cleaning the global gene pool of the 'glitches' we repeatedly hear we are.[15] Our collective chances of survival, low in most parts of the world even before the pandemic, are now increasingly precarious.

Under pressure from disability advocacy groups, Massachusetts eventually revised its guidelines on ICU access and ventilator allocation.[16] Being disabled no longer automatically disqualifies you from access to care. However, I don't trust these revisions: not with my life. The disabled body stands at the very foundations of human self-perception, like a palimpsest on which centuries of culture have etched their aesthetic, religious, ethical, philosophical, scientific, and technological forces and tensions. How we treat a disabled body is a sign of our times. I won't subject my body to this test.

While I was in grad school, Martha Nussbaum delivered a guest lecture on disability. She was writing her milestone book, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, and struggling with her own body approaching old age. The project was an attempt to create some sort of ethics of care founded on something other than mercy towards the weak. But there are no good alternatives there, Nussbaum seems to suggest, except the transactional ethics of late capitalism: the disabled should be cared for because they deliver intangible social goods, the nobility and wisdom of suffering, the grace and joy of survival and perseverance, the inspiration of a life lived despite the many costs of living. Kant's categorical imperative of absolute ethics, "you must because it's right," always seems to fail in moments of crisis. The reports that *only* the elderly and people with underlying health conditions are in danger of dying from Covid-19—repeated over and over on network and cable channels throughout February and March of 2020—are drilled into our collective brains: our lives are *only*; they're a sacrifice society is willing to make.

My doctor—the one who initially dismissed me—eventually emailed me to say that they are doing okay with ventilators, they have enough. If I need one, there will be one for me. In a later video conversation, he emphatically reiterated that if I need any other care, it will be available, looking into my eyes and trying to read me. The fact that he felt the need to email me this, and to stress it again in person, touched me deeply. Yet as much as I trust his intentions, I don't trust his assertions. I don't want to be anyone's ethical choice. It feels like both an indignity and an imposition. To avoid

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[15] Shanks, Pete. "Disability Rights, Triage and Countering Eugenics in a Time of Pandemic." *Center for Genetics and Society*, April 18, 2020.

[16] Bebinger, Martha. "After Uproar, Mass. Revises Guidelines on Who Gets an ICU Bed or Ventilator Amid COVID-19 Surge." *wbur.org*, April 22, 2020.

them both, I would have to be the one to make this choice for a strange doctor in the ER stuck with my dying body, and I don't want to. I don't want to make a choice about the worthiness of my life, but I also don't want to be anyone's post-traumatic nightmare. And I don't want to make the choice between these two options.

In academia, your career depends on making others comfortable around you, convincing them you're a safe bet, even with your peculiar social quirks and habits, that you will deliver whatever needs to be delivered: research, grants, publications, or loyalty. This requires a constant maintenance of social life with other academics, admins, and sponsors. I stopped counting the times I was left behind after an academic event as my colleagues cheerfully went for a casual, spur-of-the-moment dinner with the Dean of this or that to a house, building, or restaurant without wheelchair access. The lure of the schmooze is too great for anyone to righteously stay behind—I am tacitly asked to understand that. There will be no solidarity for me, not the kind that requires the sacrifice of a social evening of academic schmoozing. The *professional* response is to accept this state of things with *grace*, absolving my companions of any mental burden of guilt and discomfort. The *grace* always comes at the price of my dignity and professional value; it involves a public acknowledgment that *my* absence is *not that big a deal*—but what other *professional* choices do I have? Irony, if I am feeling particularly tired of performing the mental labor. Humor, if I am feeling particularly generous. It's nobody's fault. It's the system that I am part of. I have to believe it to sell it. The awkwardness of these situations is unmatched, but the ethical choice of response is always mine.

My various affiliations with Harvard give me access to the library stacks. Since my upper-body strength is virtually nonexistent, making the use of said stacks a physical impossibility, I am technically eligible for ADA access to electronic resources as well. I was reluctant to ask for it, and was making do with my husband's driving and carrying capacities, but the pandemic made me rethink this, so I made an official ADA request for electronic access. My request was denied on account of the vendors' contracts, which limits such access (and which are also subject to ADA law), but I was given an option to become a faux research assistant to one of my Harvard colleagues, which would grant me the desired access, thus subverting the vendors' contracts.

I refused. It would have been so much easier to just accept the faux arrangement. After all, I have always relied on the kindness of friends and strangers. At all the top institutions I have ever taught and studied at, including Stanford, Yale, Harvard, and Cornell, my sheer physical survival was often tied to my network and my social

skills: friends who saved my life on more than one occasion. With their notoriously inaccessible buildings,[17] universities, even top ones, frequently fail to comply with ADA. But I could not do it this time. ADA access should not be a function of collegial favors. It should not be a function of our ability to form and leverage our personal and professional networks. It should be a function of equitable access, including for those—especially for those—who don't have friends and family to take care of them. How else will I survive if I ever lose my support network?

Three days after Harvard Library refused me ADA access to its electronic resources, *The Boston Globe* reported that Jeffrey Epstein had his own office and phone line[18] at the university. Harvard had resources to spare for a wealthy man indicted for sex trafficking,[19] but not for a disabled researcher.

At some point in one's academic career, travel becomes a status symbol: the more places you can physically go to in order to deliver the knowledge you produce to a small circle of those with access, be it guest lectures or conferences, the more prestige points you rack up. When I was young, I often traveled alone. Traveling with my husband now is physically easier: he is there to save me when the airlines lose or break my wheelchair, when the hotel room is not wheelchair-accessible as it was supposed to be, when the airport shuttle doesn't show up, when the lift on the bus is broken, when my talk is rescheduled at the last minute in a building without wheelchair access. But my husband's presence is much harder on me psychologically. Watching him witness my usual dose of small and big humiliations, with heroic tenderness and shame in his eyes, is more than I can manage most of the time. I can do without witnesses. And so I stopped playing the in-person public-speaking game. More often than not, my requests to deliver my lectures via VR were denied, and once again, I was forced to rely on my network of colleagues to deliver my words for me. Being there via VR has always been considered a form of cheating the system: without the obligatory burden of travel and post-lecture schmoozing, the lecture itself is not worth that much, our community seemed to collectively believe, regardless of how damaging conference travel is for the environment or our increasingly shrinking budgets.

Now, with all lectures, conferences, and events being held on Zoom, I move from place to place with an ease that was previously unimaginable. Events formerly

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[17] Lewis, Elisa. "504 vs. 508 vs. Title III: Accessibility Laws for Private Colleges." *3PlayMedia.com*, Oct. 13, 2017.

[18] Fernandes, Deirdre. "Jeffrey Epstein's Harvard ties were extensive." *The Boston Globe*, May 1, 2020.

[19] *United States of America v. Jeffrey Epstein*, 19 Crim. 490 (S.D.N.Y. 2019).

inaccessible due to extensive travel, a commute, or building inaccessibility are now open and available to me. What's more: when on Zoom, nobody knows I am in the wheelchair, so the entire dynamics of my interactions have changed. The pressure to perform the emotional labor of making other people comfortable around me is gone. This unexpectedly leaves a lot of mental space that I am not used to having. It is a deeply discombobulating and bitter experience because it makes me suddenly aware of the previous difference in access and acceptability between me and my colleagues. The social distancing, which appears to be such a mental burden for most, is not a particular problem for me either. I am used to loneliness.

Although my chances of surviving this pandemic are statistically so much lower than the average person's, the flattening of access accomplished by Zoom creates a new public space in which we're all on the same playing field. It is strange to relish this newly discovered professional freedom in a virtual world while also facing more acutely one's own mortality in the new public sphere of the real world of the pandemic. Will the changes in how we communicate create a permanent society-wide mental capacity for reimagining access to work, knowledge, and resources for everyone, regardless of their ability to travel[20] commute, or communicate?[21] Or will we quickly forget that for over a year, we were all temporarily disabled? For those few disabled lucky ones who will survive Covid-19, and for those who will be left disabled by it,[22] will the world be a more welcoming place? Will the sacrifice of so many of our lives be worth it?

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[20] Ndopu, Eddie. "It's Time to Rethink the Language of Accessibility." *Time*, May 21, 2020.

[21] Bienvenu, Beth and Lauren Tuzzolino. "Are You Including People with Disabilities in your Virtual Arts Events?" *arts.gov*, May 4, 2020.

[22] Parshley, Lois. "The emerging long-term complications of Covid-19, explained." *Vox*, Jun. 12, 2020.

DINNER POKER

MACKENZIE MOORE

Hmm.

He can see the folds settling into my chin before he even finishes his thought. No, I don't think we should all go out to dinner when she's in town. I certainly don't share my boyfriend's amusement that we might all happily dig into a meal, rubbing elbows and getting on like friendly thieves. My mother won't go anywhere without a wine list, let alone our dumpling spot with crumbs wedged between the cracks in all the tables. Her world starts to crack without polish—which is why I keep her at arm's length from my home, with all its corrosion and paint chips, here in LA.

These are nuances that are far too intricate to explain at 11:37 p.m. on Wednesday night, especially with one IPA sitting heavy in my stomach, so I don't. I hope my weighted grumble conveys my doubt, more or less. My boyfriend insists, again, he'd love to have dinner.

I fall asleep considering what a fantastical nightmare that would be. We'd split some sort of salty appetizer and talk about things my mother would deem *not political.* They would be, in fact, *very* political, and I'd grind down hard on the molar that's already been filled twice. In fact, she'd laugh and smile—as if there was no place she'd rather be than eating lukewarm edamame beans in the city of angels. I would know better, watching her through my Coke-bottle glasses, straining to parse out the subtext under the dim lights.

After years spent studying my mother as she studies herself, I know she plays a tough round of poker—eyes flicking back and forth like reading a menu, with no indication of the kind of math she's running. She might just crush you under her thumb, like a gnat nearing the rim of her wine glass, or she might save the leverage for later, a nail to throw under your life tire at some point down the line. She's the kind of person you wouldn't peg as one to count cards, but she certainly does. From the pinot she loves from St. Helena to the fact that she wants my boyfriend to at least *try* to reach for the check, it all filters in: thousands of calculations. How to balance information; how to classify it; how to weaponize it.

Everyone has a tell though, right? Eh. I've carefully logged the subtle changes beneath her eyes and the corners of her mouth as she reapplies her lipstick, and they tell me nothing. With information sparse, my only markers to measure the drift, these days, are vague rumbles of heartburn, or the richness of dessert settling in my stomach. Most indicate that we won't speak for a while.

I wake from my almost-sleep with a jolt. The jarring sensation could be mistaken for falling, or maybe just folding a hand you can't play anymore. The pit still wedged in my stomach tells me some games have too high a buy-in. I'll sweep the talks of dinner off the table, tomorrow.

EXPRESS TRAIN

TURNER WILSON

When I wake up at night, I taste
the meringue of someone else's mouth
and wonder how long it takes to walk
to the center of the world. The whole house
will shiver in the tar-thick night when a 700-ton
procession of industrial angels rolls through town
sounding their horns. All of them saying *come*
and see and I'll look and there's nothing
out there because all the streetlights have called
it a night. It all stays sealed up. I'll stand
on the wet grass and dig my toes into the lawn
until I can feel the fibrous roots stretching
till they break. I'll close my eyes and think
about everything in the dirt below me, all
the way down to the heat and then to the toes
of someone else reaching back. I think of that person
entering my blood through the dirt, up
through my capillaries, through the soles
of my feet and running into my head on a train
that misses all of its stops, looping until
it runs out of steam one day and goes quiet.

WINTER

MEGAN MERCHANT

I was told to never write about the moon,
so I'm calling it winter, a gunshot of hours,
a boarded house in the woods, cicada bodies
sleepless in their transparency, their shed.
I sweep them under floorboards. Burial
is a crosshatch of dirt over dreams.
I pretend I am sleeping under animal skin
even though I'm squeamish at the sound of twigs
snapping. A marching band. I tried, for a whole
year, to avoid every living thing along the path.
Then love. A heavy shoe. A flannel shirt over
a chair. I watched him shave, the blade a moon.
A dense metal. Glint. Dying grass. A soda can
crushed in an empty room. Sweet rust, the brocade of it,
tempting everything I taste to wisp, webs strung
high in the corners. This bow. This violin light.

SKIN CRAFT

MARCIA MEIER

MEIER CHILD, 5, HURT CRITICALLY:
STRUCK WHILE ON BIKE

The daughter of a Muskegon businessman and a well-known North Muskegon man were seriously injured in separate accidents today as the county moved off to a grim start on the last weekend before summer officially begins.

Critically hurt when her small two-wheel bicycle was struck by a car at Fourth Street and Mason Avenue about 10:30 a.m. today, Marcia K. Meier, 5, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Meier, 1291 Fourth Street, is in 'poor' condition at Mercy Hospital. Mr. Meier is an officer of Meier Cleaners, Inc.

Attendants said the left side of her face was severely lacerated in the accident. She faces surgery, hospital aides said. The girl suffered no fractures.

Muskegon Patrolmen Eugene Beckman and George Wilder said Marcia was struck by a southbound car operated by Roscoe C. Benn, 67, of 1638 Division St., as she attempted to cross the street in the path of the vehicle.

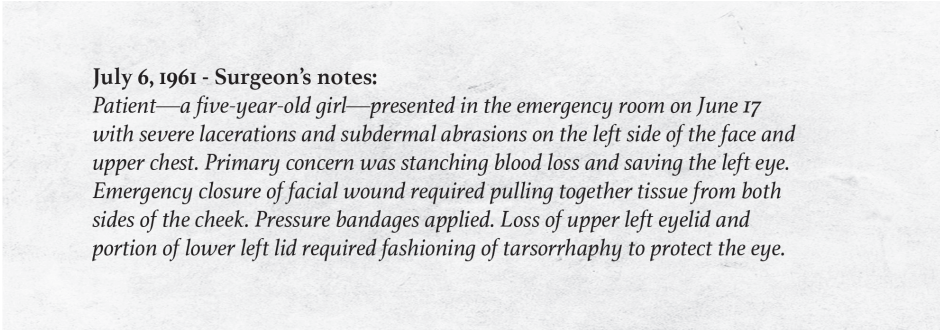
—**The Muskegon Chronicle**, June 17, 1961

I wake and I can't see. My face itches. My ears itch. I am desperate to scratch my ears. I can't move my arms! Why can't I move my arms?

My mom's voice comes to me. Soothingly, I hear her say: "It's okay, Marcia. It's for your own good."

—

It was the beginning of fifteen years of surgeries, scars, teasing, and struggle. I was five years old, and had been dragged by the car for more than 200 feet down the block. I lost my left cheek and eyelid, and it was only because of a quirk of fate that the surgeon who would recreate my face was in the hospital when I was brought in by ambulance. There were four surgeries in the five weeks I was in the hospital the first time. My father kept all the surgeon's notes for me, and presented them to me just before I married at age twenty-six.



July 6, 1961 - Surgeon's notes:
Patient—a five-year-old girl—presented in the emergency room on June 17 with severe lacerations and subdermal abrasions on the left side of the face and upper chest. Primary concern was stanching blood loss and saving the left eye. Emergency closure of facial wound required pulling together tissue from both sides of the cheek. Pressure bandages applied. Loss of upper left eyelid and portion of lower left lid required fashioning of tarsorrhaphy to protect the eye.

I am lying in my hospital crib. Dr. Richard Kislov and several nurses surround me, and the doctor is peeling away the dressing on my cheek and eyelid. Gauze sticks to my cheek. He pries it, loosening it with water, slowly pulling it away, moment by moment. My skin holds tight. I want to cry, but the nurses hold my arms close to my chest and one says: "Stay still, stay very still." I do not want to stay still. I want to push them away from my face. But the nurses hold me tight. I cannot move. So I cry. But I cry with my mouth closed, my lips pursed and my breath held, because that is the way Dr. Kislov wants it.

Nov. 29, 1961 - Surgeon's notes:
Reconstruction of left upper eyelid by Hughes procedure, release of ectropion of the lower eyelid, repair of the resulting defect by covering with full-thickness skin graft from upper chest.

Mom carries my small pink suitcase into my room. Surgery is scheduled for the next morning, and she cannot stay with me. A nurse helps me into a hospital gown and boosts me into a tall steel-sided crib. And I cry when Mom walks down the hallway to the elevator.

In the morning, they come with shots to relax and calm me. No food, no water. I become woozy, my body covered with a thin, scratchy blanket.

Mom arrives. Then they come for me, the masked ones from the OR, with green scrubs and caps on their heads. I scoot from the crib, moving my bottom and then my upper body over to the cold, flat gurney.

Mom holds my hand as we roll down the hallways and into the elevators, then down more fluorescent white hallways to the operating room. When we reach the big double doors beyond which she cannot come, I hear her say, "I'll be here when you get back. Love you." And she lets me go.

One of the surgical nurses, Anne, seems to glow in her mask and green cap, bathed in light from behind. She holds my hand and pats me soothingly, saying, "It's okay. Don't cry; it's going to be all right."

Dr. Kislov comes in and I see he is smiling behind his mask. I am good at reading his face behind the cloth. I know when he is scowling, or perplexed, or exasperated if something isn't working the way he wants it to. I can sense his pursed lips when his eyebrows knit together, and know he is concentrating on a particular problem. When he smiles, it stretches the mask and I feel as if I have done something extraordinary, something worthwhile. It makes me happy, even in my terror. His hair is caught up in a boxy green cap tied at the back, and his horn-rimmed glasses reflect my small, frightened face back to me.

It is only a few minutes before he nods to the anesthesiologist and gives me a pat on the arm. “Okay, Marcia,” he says in his thick German accent, “we’ll see you shortly, eh?”

When I awaken, I throw up. I smell the sickly-sweet aroma of the ether. My eyes are bandaged—I don’t know where I am. My hands are tethered to the bedside bars. A nurse is nearby. She murmurs some reassuring words, words meant to calm me, but they only make me more anxious.

Where am I? Why can’t I see?

Where is my mom?

—

Every day for five weeks she came to the hospital and sat by my bedside, waiting for me to wake, enduring my fearful tears when I did, watching the nurses give me shots and adjust my bandages, listening to my screams when the doctors changed the dressings. Did she retreat? Crawl into a cavernous place of grief—perhaps denial—to deal with the shock, the pain?

Neighborhood girls took turns babysitting my siblings while she was at the hospital. At the end of the day, she’d go home to her three other children. Friends and family members helped out. Still, how could it have been for her to watch me cry, seeing me bloodied and bandaged, knowing I was terrified, knowing I suffered, knowing there was nothing she could do but try to soothe me? Then going home to three young children, ages ten, three, and nine months. They also needed her attention.

She must have been overwhelmed, emotionally and physically. And still she came and sat. Sat with her knitting, absently crossing needle over needle, moving the yarn from left to right, right to left. I see her deft hands, her pointer fingers crisscrossing each other with each stitch, her mouth a set line, her brow furrowed. The ball of yarn unfurling.

—

Ten days after surgery, Mom and I go downtown to Dr. Kislov’s office to have my stitches out. The office is in a two-story modern-looking building, and there is a soda fountain on the first floor. Mom promises to buy me a malted milkshake after

the stitches are out. Dr. Kislov's office is paneled in dark wood, with boxy green-fabric couches.

"Hello, Marcia," Dr. Kislov says. "How are you today, eh?"

He brings his face close to mine, staring at the wounds, gently probing with his fingers, assessing the dozens of stitches he has sewed into it. I can smell his aftershave and the antiseptic on his fingers.

"Okay, up on the table."

I lie on the examining table and he leans over and peers closely at my face, his thick dark brows furrowed. A nurse holds my arms across my chest then, and he begins to tug at each suture with a long tweezer, stretching the thread so he can snip it with a scissors. He gently tugs the suture from my tender skin. I start to cry, and Dr. Kislov says, "If you cry, I will send your mother out of the room, ja?" *NO!* I think. *No*. So I suck in my breath and blink back my tears.

—

Surgical transplantation of skin—skin grafting—has been around for centuries. Roman and Egyptian physicians repaired damaged ears with plastic surgery as early as the first century BCE. But an Indian surgeon named Sushruta is widely considered to be the first to successfully perform skin grafting. He started fashioning new noses from strips of flesh from the forehead. It was the first flap, which is a graft of skin that remains connected and pivoted from the donor site. Sushruta also was the first to perform rhinoplasty.

It wasn't until the 1820s, though, that doctors executed a successful modern skin graft. There are two kinds of skin grafts: flaps, which remain attached and are rotated from an adjacent area, and wholly separate grafts taken from another part of the body. With a flap, a piece of skin (called a pedicle) is left attached so blood can feed the donated skin until it grafts onto the new site. Grafts taken from another part of the body are placed onto a donor site and the surgeon connects tiny blood vessels, allowing the graft to be fed from the underlying dermis. A skin graft can be varying thicknesses, depending on the injury. A tool much like a large vegetable peeler, called a dermatome, is used to harvest the skin from one part of the body, for example the thigh, for placement elsewhere.

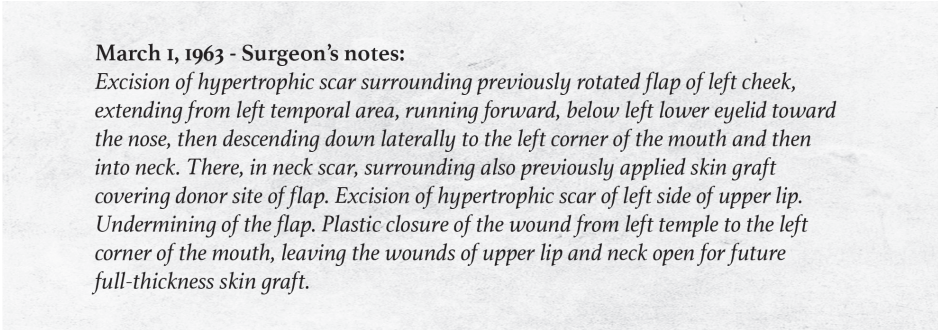
Dr. Kislov initially used a flap from my neck to replace my damaged cheek, then covered the hole left in my neck with a full-thickness graft (the top two layers of skin) from my left thigh. He took a split-thickness graft (the top layer and part of the second) from my right thigh to cover the left thigh donor site. Most of the grafts on my chest and stomach were split-thickness, and the scars are not as prominent as the thicker grafts.

I have three scars from grafts on my chest, three on my stomach and hips, and two on my thighs. And, of course, the scars on my face and eyelid.

—

Dr. Richard Kislov was born in Germany in 1921 and studied medicine at the Faculty of Medicine of the Eberhard Karls Universität in Tübingen. A year after graduation, in 1951, he immigrated to the United States where he completed his general and surgical residencies. In 1958, he settled in Muskegon and started a private practice. He quickly became known for his precise work, his fine suturing, his ability to sculpt faces—particularly cleft palates—and to reconnect severed fingers and limbs.

He was gifted in the art of sculpting skin, but also, later, in sculpting clay into life-size bronze figures. He loved to design gardens, and he studied architecture. Though he dismissed it once when an interviewer asked about the connections between his chosen fields—surgeon, builder, designer, sculptor—it would be hard to argue that he was not an artist. The only difference was the medium in which he chose to work.



March 1, 1963 - Surgeon's notes:
Excision of hypertrophic scar surrounding previously rotated flap of left cheek, extending from left temporal area, running forward, below left lower eyelid toward the nose, then descending down laterally to the left corner of the mouth and then into neck. There, in neck scar, surrounding also previously applied skin graft covering donor site of flap. Excision of hypertrophic scar of left side of upper lip. Undermining of the flap. Plastic closure of the wound from left temple to the left corner of the mouth, leaving the wounds of upper lip and neck open for future full-thickness skin graft.

Dr. Kislov takes out his ballpoint pen and draws lines all around my left cheek, neck, and mouth, noting where he will add a graft here, where he might excise tissue there. When he is done, he sits back and stares at my face with his wide, gap-toothed smile.

"There! Now do not wash your face, Marcia. Eh?"

He looks at my mom and she nods.

"Okay! Give me a hug." He pulls me into a great bear hug, then holds me away from him for a minute, looking at my face. I see his impish gap-toothed grin, his thick glasses, his broad cheeks. I see my tiny face reflected in his glasses. I smile.

"Okay," he repeats. "See you tomorrow."

Then he stands and leaves the room.

—

My therapist, Michael, sits across from me, asks about my memories of waking up and having my hands tied to the hospital bed rails. My stomach clenches as I remember being unable to scratch my maddeningly itchy ears. Not being able to see. Not knowing where I was or who was nearby. Fear rises up and envelops me. There is a disembodied voice. My mother's? A nurse's? Someone who wanted to stick me and draw blood? They were all the same: distant, dreamlike, unreal. Terrifying.

"It's almost like I was abused or something," I say.

"Let's be clear, Marcia," Michael says forcefully, "you were abused. There is no difference between what was done to you and the trauma experienced by an abused child."

"But it was done for my own good."

"Doesn't matter. It was still abuse."

—

In later years, Dr. Kislov turned his talent more and more to sculpture, gaining recognition regionally and nationally. After we moved to California when I was eighteen, my aunt sent me a newspaper clipping announcing a gallery showing of his works.

In it, Dr. Kislov says he tried to keep his work as a sculptor separate from his work as a surgeon, insisting the two had little to do with one another. Yet his large

bronzes are figures fashioned after real people, friends and acquaintances he knew in Muskegon. His pieces are exceptionally expressive, the faces exquisitely formed, the hands precise and lifelike.

The term "plastic" in plastic surgery comes from the Greek plastike, to sculpt or model. How much difference, really, can there be between crafting a face from flesh or clay?

—

It is morning. Mom and I are sitting at the dining room table, and bright sun flows through the open window behind her. The smell of jasmine sweetens the air. She has eaten her oatmeal, which I made for her. She has her numerous pills in her little green dish next to her glass of water, and she is taking them one by one. Her playing cards sit off to the side, ready for her morning hand of solitaire.

"What do you remember about that day," I ask her, "that day I was hit by the car?"

It has been forty-three years since that morning. Now, she is seventy-nine and struggles with arthritis and other pains. She has pain in her upper right groin that no one can quite figure out. The doctor almost dismisses it, but she complains about it constantly. Her hands hurt, her feet hurt, her side hurts. I do not know what to do. Just like when I was little, I am once again trying to please her, to make her happy. We sit at the table in silence. She frowns.

I plead again, "Mom, can you tell me what you remember about that morning?"

I am trying to write about the accident and those early years of surgeries and hurt. But I have no recollection of that morning. My older sister remembers some of it, and we have talked at length. But Mom, she's reluctant to talk.

She looks down at her cards.

"I was on the phone with Mimi," she says, "sitting in the front hall. I heard yelling outside, and Cherie ran in screaming."

She hesitates.

"I went in the ambulance with you to the hospital. I don't remember much else. I think I was in shock."

She won't help. I am left frustrated and dissatisfied. Again.

Over time, she shut down. Sat and patted my hand as they pulled stitches from my face, or placed another needle into my arm, or held me down for another change

of dressings. But she was gone. Pushed her feelings to a deep place so she could manage daily life.

October 5, 1973 - Surgeon's notes:
Diagnosis: Somewhat irregular scar in left nasolabial fold extending into left side of chin with excessive fullness of cheek. Surgery: excision of 3" scar in left nasolabial fold, excision of excess of full-thickness skin graft of left side of upper lip, undermining of skin flap of reconstructed left cheek and excision of excess of fat *and scar in this area. Closure of wound with subcuticular interrupted sutures of 5-0 clear nylon and continuous superficial sutures of 6-0 nylon. Several space sutures were placed, leaving long ends around the wound and bolus of cotton saturated in saline was placed over the wound and immobilized by tying long ends of sutures over it. This was done to decrease dead space underneath the operative area.*

I am seventeen. Until this surgery my left cheek bulged with extra fat, tugging on the skin so the lower lid gaped open and the eye was slightly exposed. It's apparent in all the photos taken of me those years, especially the school photos, for which I refused to smile. Why would I? My parents sent all of us kids to St. Joe's; a Catholic education was important to them. And so I spent six years at St. Joe's, and arrived there for first grade just three months after the accident.

I was teased, chided and made fun of, punished when I tried to strike out at those who persecuted me, wanted to scream obscenities and hit them with my fists. But I couldn't. Instead, I acted out, and Sister would sentence me to what seemed like hours in a darkened cloakroom, breathing in the smell of wet woolen mittens and cloaks and galoshes. A darkroom of refuge and shame.

But then, when I was in high school, Dr. Kislov carved out the excess tissue and fat from my left cheek, and it began to look more like my right. The sag in my eyelid wasn't as pronounced, and while I wasn't all that excited about having another surgery (at that point it was my eighteenth), I was happy with the result.

—

After my grandpa died, at the beginning of my senior year in high school, my dad sold his share of the family business to my two uncles, and we planned a move to California. Shortly before Christmas, Mom and I went to see Dr. Kislov for the last time.

As usual, I sat on the examination table while Dr. Kislov peered at my face. The last surgery I had undergone was a year before, and, as he often did, he pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up on his forehead and brought his face close to mine. He leaned back and lightly smacked my left knee with his hand.

"There, Marcia! Is good, ja? When you are thirty-five I will give you a facelift and you will be beautiful. Now give me a hug, eh?"

It was the last time I ever saw him. But many years later, in the 1990s when I was in my thirties, I took one of those weekend self-improvement seminars and they encouraged us to reach out to someone from the past with whom we felt there was unfinished business. I called Dr. Kislov.

Honestly, I hadn't thought about him in years. But the seminar had brought up some very painful memories, particularly of my mother leaving me at night when I was in my hospital crib. I felt an urgent need to talk with him. Did he remember me? What had he thought that morning when they brought me into the hospital? Did he have a grand plan, or did he make it up as the years—and surgeries—went by?

It was a Saturday, and when I called his office I got his exchange. I don't remember what I said, but somehow I convinced them I had to talk with him, and they gave me his home number.

When he answered, I barely got out, "Dr. Kislov, it's Marcia . . . " before I broke down in tears. I think I sobbed through the whole conversation, which perhaps lasted five or ten minutes. He seemed surprised and happy to hear from me, and asked me about my life. I remember I told him how much he had meant to me when I was little, and I think I thanked him. But mostly I cried, and he just listened and said: "Ja, ja. It's good to hear from you, Marcia."

Remembering this exchange makes me teary. He represented hope and pain, sadness and conflicting, inexplicable feelings of love. He was my savior and my torturer, my surgeon and father figure.

When we left Michigan, I never considered what it might mean to never see him again. That not seeing him would leave such a huge emotional hole in my being. Part of me never wanted to see him again. But another part, a tender place that resided in my five-year-old self, wanted him to hold my face in his big hands again, to beam at me with his gap-toothed grin, to pat my knee and laugh in the big way he did. I realize he represented, in a strange way, a sense of comfort and safety, a time in my life when things were predictable—terrifying, yes—but predictable.

October 29, 2007

Dear Dr. Kislov,

I hope this finds you well! I'm sure you remember me: You were my surgeon from the time I was hit by a car at age five, in 1961, until we moved to California in 1974. I am writing a memoir, and would love to have a chance to talk with you.

If I come to Michigan sometime in the next few months, would you be willing to meet with me? Do you still have any records from all those years ago? My dad kept invoices from most of my surgeries. If I brought them, would you be able to tell me in more detail exactly what was done? I'd also love to talk with you about anything you remember about the day I was injured. My family has told me stories about Bill Bonds, our family doctor, asking you to see me after I was brought in, but I don't know if it's true. I also was told you happened to be at the hospital when I arrived, but I don't know if that's true. I know you were living in Grand Rapids at the time.

I don't know for certain right now when I will be coming, but I'm hoping sometime in February, if not before.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

Marcia Meier

I never heard from him. I wanted to ask him so many questions. What did he think when he first saw me in the emergency room? How did he plan the surgeries over all those years? Did he have a grand scheme in mind all along, or did he make it up as time went by, adjusting for this result or that?

Did he care for me at all?

—

Dr. Kislov died in November 2012 at the age of ninety-one. My cousin sent me the obituary from *The Muskegon Chronicle*, which said he was known as "a skilled surgeon, a sculptor, a lay architect, a landscaper and pond designer, and as a great lover of nature."

I was struck by the comments left on the funeral home's website; there were others—other children—who knew him in the same way I had. And that knowledge was both comforting and discomforting. I had believed I was the only one.

A couple from Twin Lake, Michigan, wrote: "Our son was home from Chicago the other day, and I looked at him and thought of you, Dr. Kislov! Thirty-six years ago we met at Hackley Hospital. You were called in to see our son, who was born with a cleft lip and palate. You took one look at him and said, 'I will make him beautiful!' and you did!"

Many others wrote similar tributes.

And he told several of them, as he did me, that he would make us beautiful. Such an interesting thing to say to a child. I remember thinking at the time that being beautiful wasn't something I ever thought about. I just wanted to look normal. To him, though, it was the greatest gift he could offer.

—

Not long ago, I went to see an ophthalmologist. After several minutes of peering into my eyes, he asked about the scars around my eye. I explained what had happened.

"Who was the surgeon?" he asked. I told him, adding that Dr. Kislov had died recently.

The ophthalmologist pushed his chair back and gazed intently at the left side of my face. After a few moments I started to feel a little self-conscious, so I said, "He did a pretty good job, didn't he?"

Almost with a sense of wonder, the eye doctor replied: "Yes. Better than good."

—

When I look in the mirror, the face I see is not mine. It's something I made up, something I created to hold my childhood fears, a vessel for sadness and hurt, a place for momentary and long-lasting loss. Skin and bones and gristle and scar tissue that rises and flows, pink ridges of grief laid bare. Raw. Then I look again. And it is simply a mouth, a nose, deep brown eyes, cheeks, chin. One of Dr. Kislov's living sculptures, crafted with scalpel and sutures and surgical steel.

This piece is adapted from Marcia Meier's memoir *Face* (Saddle Road Press, 2021). "Skin Craft" was shortlisted for the 2021 Fish Publishing Short Memoir Prize.

SMOKE RINGS

ANNIE ZHU

My deck shoes squeak on the linoleum floor after I dash in from the rain. I'm late for the matinee, partly on purpose. The usher hurries me inside. I leave a streaky water trail behind me as I maneuver my lanky frame over a row of theatre-goers, careful not to touch their knees with my calves. Today, I'm stuck in the back, shadowed by the balcony overhead, the best seat I could get on short notice. I tell myself it's okay: the space between us only expands my desire.

The lights dim. My heart punches my ribcage, but I'm patient, even through the dull chitchat between the dreary characters in the first act of *The Seagull*. Finally, Vivien steps onto the stage. She stands languid in a velvet green dress. A fluff of reddish-brown hair frames her porcelain face. Vivien's playing Nina, an actress playing an actress. She's a bad actress—Nina, not Vivien.

Last night, I managed to snag a seat in the third row, where I was close enough to see the colour of her eyes: green, maybe hazel. I saw every micro-expression and each curl of a sad smile. This time, I'm getting the wide shot. From where I sit, she fits on my palm. The spotlight above washes out her complexion, and her eyes are two large shadows. Her face looks like a glowing skull. This image, strangely enough, endears her to me even more.

My life is poetry again.

Can you believe I didn't know Vivien existed before yesterday? If I count all the times I've thought about her since, I would run out of fingers or grow a thousand hands. Who knows how long we've been living in the same city, under the same stars, without ever meeting? I may never understand how the symphony of the universe is orchestrated. But I'll thank my stars because I'm only twenty-two and I've already found my soulmate.

I love her. Can I still say that? I've been in love a dozen times before. You can say I'm one of those fools, in love with love. Hopefully, *forever* will finally stick. Now I just have to meet her.

—

I watch my fellow theatregoers exit out onto the little cobblestone alley. The gray clouds above are ever-threatening. With no cafés or restaurants across from the theatre, I have no place to sit and wait.

I venture out to buy a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. I don't smoke so this is not my best plan, but it's better than no plan. When I return, the rest of the audience has gone. I lean against a streetlamp across and away from the theatre so I can watch without being observed. I wish I had a fedora to go with my trench coat and big old cigarette, Bogie-style.

After unsealing the pack, I shake it and nearly spill all the cigarettes onto the ground. I light up and take a tiny inhale, fighting the urge to cough. Not my most seductive moment, I know, but Vivien's not going to see me. When she comes out, she'll walk away in the other direction. And I am going to follow.

I know that sounds stalkerish, but sometimes you have to make your own magic. Once I know where she lives, I'll do a stakeout and orchestrate my meet-cutes. It usually takes more than one. However many it takes.

Of course, this isn't my first rodeo. Three girlfriends ago, I "bumped into" Anya at a flower shop. I was buying flowers for my mother and naturally needed a stranger's advice. Anya asked me if it was her birthday, and I told her, no, I always bring Mum flowers when I visit. Bonus points for that. But after our little exchange, I had the feeling it wasn't the right time to ask for her number just yet. So I waited. That planted a seed for her own desire to grow. The next time I saw Anya was at the dry cleaner's. I quickly took off my blazer and went in after her. I needed that jacket dry-cleaned anyway. Anya recognized me and looked happy to see me. And that's when I knew I had her.

It'll be the same with Vivien. Except different, because our love will last.

—

When Vivien isn't on stage, I do my best to ignore my irritation for the other characters.

To sum it up: they're all pathetic. Every twat falls in love with the wrong person. They suffer, etc. Even when the love is reciprocated, it doesn't last, and it ruins the lives of not only the couple but those around them. Only Masha does something about it. She marries someone she doesn't love. Hardly the cause for a standing ovation.

If I keep watching this play, it'll do something to me. I have to get Vivien, and fast. But not on social media—I'm much better in real life. Even if I'm not the most

handsome guy, or even the smartest or richest, charm and confidence have always gotten me far.

They always come around.

—

Between loves, I don't know what to do with myself. Yesterday, Julia rang me up and called me "a fucking butt tart." She always had a way with words. It's one of the qualities that attracted me to her in the first place. Julia hates my guts these days. If murder were legal, I'd be dead.

What Julia's feeling is the other side of love's coin. What I'm feeling for her is the complete lack of love. Rather, I feel jealousy. *I* want to ache that much from the bottom of my soul.

What I'd do is sit in a corner of my darkened bedroom with headphones on and whisper along to The Cure. Maybe I'd cry a little. If the torment gets too much to bear, I'd go down to the pub and drink away the pain until I'm spilling my guts everywhere, Brando-style.

But this is never necessary. Something in me automatically switches off when the love wanes to a certain point in a relationship. Maybe I don't have the stomach for anything less. Julia did nothing wrong. I simply run hot or cold, like one of those traditional sink faucets. One day—Monday, actually—I woke up and my love for her simply vanished. Then I rang her up to tell her.

Julia used to be perfect. She still has the single-dimpled smile, the charming red curls, the freckled skin, plump like white peaches. Her melodious laugh still rang the same keys. I can't put my finger on it. Was it her coffee breath in the mornings? Her extra-long second toe? The slightly snooty way she pronounced "not"? Maybe it's like wave erosion. Anything solid can be chipped away, little by little, with time.

After Julia's call, I walked by St. Paul's toward the Thames. The setting sun cast streaks of orange against a sky the colour of sludge. The wind grazed my ears, and I shivered, popped up the collar of my trench coat, then shoved my hands deep into my pockets. I came before the milky black-tea waters of the river, an environment ripe for deep introspection. I willed the slow waves to conjure up the wretchedness of heartbreak, anything to fill the vacuum Julia had left.

Nothing.

I kept walking. On Millennium Bridge, I passed by all kinds of girls: tall girls, fat girls, petite girls, giggly girls. I wondered with a tug of desperation whom I would love next. Longing, I suppose, can be categorized as a form of torture.

I kept walking until I realized how far I was from home, so I jumped on the Tube. Once inside the tin can of a train on the Jubilee line, I looked up at an advert.

And then I saw her.

—

As I wait in the alley, a slow-burning cigarette in hand, I go through my usual litany of questions: How did she grow up? What are her favourite films? Who are her friends? Has she ever been in love? Will she laugh more than she makes me laugh? Is she a cat person or a dog person? I even want to know her favourite colour. Vivien is a storybook I'm eager to begin.

After a few more minutes of burning through cigarettes and pretending to smoke them, I see the side door open. The actor who played Konstantin comes out in a corduroy jacket and a black cap. His earbuds are in, his head bopping to the music. I'm relieved that twit is not walking with Vivien. But even if she does have a boyfriend, I'm a patient man.

I hide behind the lamppost. Anytime now. The door swings open again. Two older women exit. I recognize one of them as a minor character from the play. As I reluctantly take another drag of my cigarette, I want to pass out from nausea. I think I'm allergic to these things.

I worry that Vivien might have gone out another way. A back door? I'm not sure how much longer I can keep sucking on these death sticks.

Finally, I see her exit. She's wrapped in an oversized cream-coloured faux-fur coat, black skinny jeans, and studded black boots. Her long hair is messily wrapped into a high bun.

I'm surprised by how contemporary she looks; I'm used to the frail and forlorn image of her in the green velvet period dress, on stage and in the Tube ad.

Predictably, Vivien walks away from me in the alley, and I get ready to follow, but she suddenly stops and turns around.

I freeze.

She is walking straight towards me.

I don't know what to make of this. Does she know what I'm up to? What if she recognizes me from last night's show?

Her eyes hold contact with mine as she comes closer. They're a beautiful hazel-green framed by thick, doll lashes.

"Hey." She smiles sweetly. I melt.

"Hey." I force my confidence to reawaken, flashing my easygoing smile. I hope I don't smell too vile from all the smoke.

"Can I bum a fag?"

Another surprise of the night. While I'm relieved she doesn't know who I am, I'm disappointed she smokes. Her accent, which sounds a bit Brummy, also takes me aback. I suppose the posh one she only put on for the play.

"Of course." Without missing a beat, I dig into my pocket for the pack, and say cheerfully, "I'm quitting tomorrow, you know."

She smiles, with teeth this time. Another thing that throws me off: her teeth are too big for her face. They remind me of a row of Chiclets.

"That's what it says on my ashtray," she says.

I laugh. I didn't expect her to be funny.

"No, really," she insists. "That's what it says. My brother got it for me for Christmas. Cheap bastard."

"Oh." I'm not sure if she's joking or serious. Her smile has dropped.

"I get him socks every year." She takes a cigarette from the pack I'm holding up for her. When she puts it to her lips, I rush to find my lighter.

"Here." I shield the flame with a hand.

She steps in: kissable distance. My heart is a rock tumbling in a dryer. Luckily, my hands don't shake. I don't blush. I don't sweat. Maybe I should be an actor.

She dips her pale face into the glowing flame, her full lashes dipping and fluttering. When she leans back and exhales, the smoke seems to swirl and wrap around her head. Her features slowly reemerge as the smoke fades. I'm hypnotized.

"Thanks," she says. "I really need this."

"It's what I'm here for."

She looks at me closely. I detect a glimmer of interest.

"Do I look familiar to you?" she asks as she takes another inhale.

"Familiar?" I pretend to think.

Her face falls, and I regret playing dumb.

I scramble for something suave. "I don't think we know each other. I would remember you if we did. But you do look familiar. Are you a model?"

She smiles again and nods back at the poster in front of the theatre. "I'm in this thing. You probably don't go to plays. Nobody does under the age of sixty-five."

I laugh again. She really is funny.

"You're in *The Seagull*?" I pretend to sound impressed. I am impressed.

I want to tell her I saw it, twice, just to see her. And that I hated it, and that she was the only bright spot. But I can't because I'm not about to start off our relationship on unequal footing. Maybe after a decade together, I'll tell her for fun, but right now, I have a script to stick with.

"Yeah. I'm in it till February."

She doesn't sound too happy about it, and I was about to ask why when the side door opens again. The brunette actress who played Masha steps out. Dressed head to toe in black and carrying a plain black canvas bag, she still looks in character.

"See you on Monday." She smiles and waves to Vivien before heading to the main street.

"Bye," Vivien says cheerfully. When the other actress turns the corner, Vivien rolls her eyes. "If she lands a film before I do, I'm going to kill myself."

I need a second to process her words. "You're—joking, right?"

"Did you see her? Hideous. But she's booking TV parts. Nothing major, but still. I just don't get it."

She shakes her head as she finishes her cigarette. Mine's long done, so I'm standing around, not completely sure what to do with my hands. I put one arm on the lamppost in a pose I hope projects confidence. But I have little to add to that conversation. I change the subject.

"How long have you been acting?"

"I graduated from drama school last spring, so this is my first real job. My agent says it's a big deal."

"It is." I nod. "A West End play is huge."

"But I don't want to do plays. Since I'm too short to model, I want to be in the movies. Once I pin down the American accent with my acting coach, I'm off to LA."

"Oh wow," I say. "You'll make it. You've got the stuff."

"You think so?" She's looking up at me with warmth again, smiling. The Chiclet teeth. Veneers? It's weird to see her smile, but I realize it's because she never did during the play.

"You've got a certain magic." I genuinely mean it.

As she looks at me, I know she's sizing me up, gauging my potential. I stand tall.

"Wanna go to mine?" she asks.

"Your—?"

"My place," she says as if it's obvious. "My Internet's down. I need entertainment."

This night has been one surprise after another. Of course I say yes.

The sky starts spitting. Vivien swears under her breath as she stomps on her cigarette stub.

I offer to get her a cab. After she gets in and tells the driver her address, she starts texting furiously on her phone. This lasts throughout the fifteen-minute ride. I sit in silence. I suppose she has a lot to catch up on, on her phone. I'm disappointed, but she invited me over for a reason. We'll get to know each other soon enough.

The Black Cab stops in front of a nondescript brown building in East London. It's ugly. We're certainly not in the trendy parts of Shoreditch. Vivien gets out, and I quickly pay the driver and follow her in.

When I enter the foyer, I detect the faint smell of urine. Vivien seems immune as she walks ahead. In the elevator, the piss smell is stronger. I assume it's due to someone's dog.

As if she's reading my thoughts, Vivien says, "It's human piss." She rolls her eyes. "Some crack addict on the third floor. I've never seen him do it, but it's what I hear. I can't wait to get out of here."

I've been holding my breath inside, and when the elevator door opens, I spring out. Poor girl. I'm not about to judge her for her living conditions. London is an expensive city. Without my inheritance, I would probably end up in a similar situation myself. Besides, I haven't seen her flat.

As she unlocks her door, I imagine gilded mirrors, Victorian wallpaper, rococo furniture.

"Are you living with any roommates?" I ask.

"God, no." She rolls her eyes again. "I had a roommate in school who cut up all my clothes."

"What? *Why*?"

"It was an absolute nightmare."

"Was she crazy?"

"Well, she went a bit mental after her boyfriend fell in love with me." She turns to me, eyes wide. "I can't control the emotions of other people, you know."

"No," I agree. "So you moved out?"

"Yeah. Luckily it was the end of the term, so we both did. I've been here since. At least I got her dad to write me a cheque for the damages."

She pushes the door open. I step in and swallow a gasp.

The ivory walls are streaked with dirt marks and smudges. Some of the paint is peeling. The furniture is spare, mismatched and tattered; it all looks as if it's been dragged in from the sidewalk. I can't see most of the floor because clothes are everywhere. Vivien walks right over them as if they aren't even there.

"The grand tour." She gestures and spins 360 degrees like a game-show hostess. "The kitchen and the bathroom are there, and we're already in the living room and bedroom."

The bed is essentially a mattress on the floor behind the couch and beside the window. Outside, the spitting has turned into a torrential downpour.

"Nice place," I say.

She shrugs. "It's a place to sleep. Sit. Throw your coat anywhere."

I do my best to make myself comfortable on the brown corduroy couch. It reeks of cigarettes. I take off my trench coat and put it on my lap. On the wooden coffee table in front of me is the biggest ashtray of cigarette butts I've ever seen. If this is the ashtray from her brother, I can't read the quote at all.

I look elsewhere, not sure where to look. I spot hairballs below the coffee table.

"Do you have a dog?" I ask.

"No, why?"

"Just wondering."

She makes a face and opens the fridge. "Pets have parasites."

While she's not wrong, I'm not convinced she worries about things like that. I don't mean to be harsh, but even the poorest people have soap and water.

But I will myself to look past it. Sometimes I can be a bit judgmental. She's probably too busy for domestic duties. I'm a modern man. I like a woman with ambition. So she doesn't know how to sweep. It's not the end of the world.

"Want a beer?" Vivien asks.

"Sure. Thanks."

I look back at her in the kitchen. The fluffy coat off now, she's wearing a powder-blue sweater which complements her complexion. Her beauty against the garbage dump of a flat is jarring.

I notice the row of empty green Heineken bottles lined up on the kitchen counter. "Nice collection you've got there. Did you have a party recently?"

"No. I just like the way they look, all lined up like that." She hands me a freshly opened bottle. "I'll have to take them to recycling soon."

At least she recycles.

"Cheers." She clinks her bottle to mine.

I notice how silent it is in the room. My gulps are as loud as grenades. I wish she'd put on some music.

"You know," she says, her eyes on me again. The bottle brings out the green in the hazel. "You've got this old-man thing about you."

"I do?"

"Yeah. And very posh."

"I—"

Suddenly, my coat is brushed to the side. Vivien climbs over my lap. She takes another swig of her beer, giggles and straddles me.

I'm not sure how many surprises I can take tonight. Any words I planned on using are lodged in my throat. I'm used to making small talk to work up to big talk. Asking questions. Selling myself. Earning trust and reaching intimacy, little by little. None of that is required with Vivien. She's heavier than she looks, but another part of me defies gravity.

She contorts back and puts her beer bottle on the coffee table. I do the same. She kisses me. The only sounds I can make are moans.

I'm a simple man. Within seconds, I'm tangled in lips and skin. She peels off her sweater. No bra. My mouth goes straight to a pink nipple. She unleashes her bun, letting her hair tumble down. Untamed, she looks absolutely animalistic. For the first time in my life, I am prey.

—

The rain has stopped. We're on her bed. She sits up and reaches for the pack of cigarettes on the windowsill. I wish she wouldn't smoke. I decline when she offers me one, and she lights up.

I sit up against the peeling wall too and try to convince myself that there's still romance in this—in smoking after sex—like being in a film from the Hollywood Golden Age.

"Look." Her mouth forms an O and puffs out a smoke ring. "I learned to do that last week."

"Wow," I say flatly.

"YouTube. It took *hours* of practice. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah."

She keeps puffing out the rings, and I watch her do it.

I suddenly hate her. Hate the way her mouth looks when she does that. How is she supposed to be the love of my life when her lips are puckering that way?

"The trick is pushing out the tongue," she explains.

I'm silent. I can't leave. I'm too polite. She turns and kisses me on the cheek. The foul smell of cigarettes makes me ill. Was it only a few hours ago that she was my long-lost soulmate?

But I'm an optimist.

Maybe I can still get her back.

I lie down, hoping the nausea will subside. After she's done smoking, she nuzzles into my armpit and closes her eyes. I look down at her curled up against me. Bare torso, hair everywhere, still a fairy goddess. I feel the weight of her, her breath on my skin. She's real.

I raise my head and look at her closer. Her long lashes graze her cheeks. Her skin is luminous, her lips full and narrow, like rose buds. She has tiny elf ears.

Nothing should be missing. Yet some magical quality is lost. Maybe I'm too close, my nose pressed up to an image and seeing ink dots instead of the picture.

The rain slowly starts up again. I wish the night would make up its mind. I listen and let each pelt on the windowpane reverberate the hollowness within me. Vivien doesn't know anything about me. She didn't ask. Not even my name. I wonder if she does this with every guy she finds remotely attractive. I wonder if she's ever been in love.

To my surprise, I realize I don't care.

The soft moonlight shines down on her delicate profile. I still can't let her go.

I shake her.

She doesn't move.

"Hey." I shake her harder.

Her eyelashes flutter, a sign of life.

"Hey."

"What?" she whines, eyes still closed.

"Have you seen *La Dolce Vita*?"

"What are you talking about?"

"At the end of *La Dolce Vita*, what do you think the girl was saying to Marcello?"

"Who?"

I swallow a sigh of exasperation and speak calmly. "Marcello. In the end of *La Dolce Vita*. The Fellini film."

"Fellini?"

"Yeah. You know, the Italian filmmaker."

"The movie's in Italian?"

"Yes." Finally. She was understanding my words.

"Oh, I don't watch foreign films."

"Why not?"

"Don't like them. I can't watch movies with subtitles."

"Why *not*?"

"I can't stand watching a movie and trying to read at the same time. It's annoying."

After a minute of silence, I say, "You're kidding me."

Her breathing's heavy again.

I can't let her sleep.

I crawl over her, cup her face, and kiss her, hard, as if to resuscitate her. It feels like two skulls smashing together.

"Ow." She swats my chest. "My teeth."

I lie back down. She turns her back to me. I want to sleep but I'm wide awake. I sit up and look out the curtain-less window. The view is of another dreary brown building across the street. From here, I can't look up at the night sky. Even when I do, I feel cheated of the stars. But it doesn't matter; stars are basically giant exploding balls of gas.

I lean back against the peeling wall again, my knobbly knees pulled up to my chest. My head is in my hands. I feel myself sinking, while my body does not move.

I sit here for minutes, maybe hours. Daylight comes. I count the seconds until she wakes up and it's appropriate to leave.

Ultramarine
Jennifer Carrier
Acrylic on canvas
36 × 36 in.
2020

BLUE HOLE BLACK

EMMA DEPANISE

Seawater seeps through limestone, its pores,
comes out fresh into the last lick
of rain the alligators get, into the old quarry
for the Key's first highway. This is where

my parents met, although they must not have actually
because part of the story is my mom got lost
driving them there. His thin biker's frame, her bleached
curly hair. The *blackhole*, they told me

is where. So I imagined their hands
meeting and them disappearing, my mother's yellow
sundress undulating pitch-wet in a vacuum of fish
glares and turtle carapaces. And later,

on a road trip, the signs told me there was no
blackhole, just a blue one, and I brought you back
a rock as if you forgot the you who ran south, the you who ran
your starry fingers through his thick black hair, as if it weren't

under the paint's new color, in the blue
stars you stamped my borders, as if it weren't in the new
oven, his achy back and worn camera strap,
my face. Brought you back a map as if you forgot

the here-to-there, the time or distance
blue became the absence of, the mud
kneeling in your sandal, the thundersong
playing as your life became this one.

COME WHAT MAY

V. JOSHUA ADAMS

When you meet the Angel of Death
it is a Tuesday, the air warm and wet
with the smell of turmeric and chive. Churches are closed
but cafés are open, people are sitting in sun
drinking frappés and beers.
The Angel of Death comes up beside you
as you are walking to meet your sister and her children
or as you are walking to meet your friend and her lover.
You know it is the Angel of Death
by the lightness of the hand as it touches your shoulder,
the distance of the voice that begs pardon,
the whiteness of the teeth and the orderly silver hair.
The Angel of Death asks you for directions
to the place you are already going,
and falls into step quietly beside you for a time,
remarking on how the street has changed,
the unpleasantness of the heat.

Frustrating, not to let on that you know,
but it is necessary for hope that you do so.
So instead you ask a few polite questions
such as "How long have you been visiting our fair city?"
"Where are you staying? Will you remain long?"
to which the voice gives decorous, vague replies.
Now you are sweating a bit in the heat and the scents,
and also chilled with death-thoughts,
hop-scotching through things you did and did not do.

Learning the trombone. Traveling to Africa to take photographs
of people taking photographs. Falling for someone wrong the right way.
You arrive at your destination. There is your sister and her children.
She looks tired as ivy on a fountain. There is your friend and her lover.
What is it like, waking to each other now?
A hand on your shoulder again, light as a dried leaf.
The Angel of Death says, "Thank you for guiding me," and walks away.

CRÈCHE SCENE AT THE WHITE HALL COMMUNITY CENTER

MARY ANNA DUNN

The Ruritans have dressed department store mannequins
as Joseph and Mary (one shepherd, too, but he
has toppled over backwards).

Jesus is not a mannequin.
Jesus is a baby doll.

The faces of Mary and Joseph have been molded
into impeccable self-absorption.
They don't seem to have noticed the baby in the manger.
Though the Madonna's eyes are fixed in his direction,
the gaunt gaze of her chic face is impassive.
Joseph stares off as if watching a golf ball arc with the sky.
I think he wishes he had been given sports clothes
instead of the floral bedspread and Polartec® bathrobe
the Ruritans have draped him in.

Neither Joseph nor Mary glances at the hapless shepherd
lying on his back, feet splayed toward the highway.
I can see up his robe,
see two boards crossed and nailed
like a tree stand to his feet.

The shepherd's right hand extends upwards.
When he was standing, he might have held it
out to the Holy Child in a gesture of supplication.
I'm sure it was a gesture of supplication,
but now that he has fallen on his back
his hand waves beseechingly
as if he is trying to get Joseph's and Mary's attention,
as if he has something to tell them.

MUM
(ITERATION 5)

JOHN A. NIEVES

Keep your rags. I will not wear
them. I will not waste the thread
to bind them. I will not wake red-
eyed so you can tell me I slept
wrong, I dreamt wrong. I will not
let the little bird in your throat chirp
the life from my lines. Keep
your breath. I have all the air I need
and store-bought intimacy never
worked for me. Count your likes. Count
your counting. The symbol for a heart
has nothing to do with a heart. You
have nothing to do but tell me
I typed it wrong. I said it wrong. Even
though the wind does not complain. Even though
the snow falls as it always has as rent
commas against the glass. Keep the glass. Stare
deep. In the frame is just a face for the followers,
a glass others need to fill. Keep your rags.
They are all you will have against the cold.

The Weary Blues
London Ladd
Mixed-media
16 × 20 in.
2020

REED

No. 154

EMERGING VOICES CONTEST

Tvisha Gupta

"Jerk" submerges the audience into the depths of neurodivergent alienation with a brutal, yet delicate, honesty. What begins as an innocent choir class slowly malforms into a painful ordeal filled with repetitive epithets and panic. But it isn't until the narrator reveals her struggle with Tourette's syndrome that the audience truly is invited into the life of the main character, Laila. With this invitation comes the prevailing knowledge of both pain and perseverance. The duality of the world Laila lives in creates a mirror for the audience to experience the struggle of a neurodivergent teenager. It is through this struggle that Laila is able to realize her true, superhuman potential and accepts her own "normal" in a riveting and heartfelt ending.

—Sarah Nolte

Honorable Mention: Casey Larin, "Life Itself" (Fiction)

Read on **www.reedmag.org**

JERK

TVISHA GUPTA

Laila sings. Sweet notes come out of her mouth. The choir director moves her hand up, down, left, right, and Laila follows, a dutiful student on the first day of class. She sings harmonies, tunes.

Before—*Jerk*. She pulls her head to the left. *Jerk*. She does it again.

'Weirdo.'

She hears the word echo in her mind, bouncing off every wall in her head. *Jerk*.

'Retard.'

This one echoes louder. *Jerk. Jerk.* It's getting worse. She can't stop the jerking, her head hurts, *jerk Jerk JERK JERK*

The music stops. Everybody turns to look at the alien. Laila jerks her head twice more. Her mind is silent for a moment.

Before

'Weirdo Retard Bizarre Odd Freak Wacko Psycho—'

Opinions flood Laila's mind. 'I can hear you,' she thinks. 'I know what you all think about me. Your thoughts only make it worse.' *Jerk jerk*.

'INSANE FREAKY WEIRD CRAZY WACK QUEER ABSURD—'

Laila excuses herself. Walks to the bathroom. *Jerk. jErk.* She enters, peers around to see if anyone is inside, and walks up to the mirror. She lets go of her self-control.

Jerk. Jerk—jerk JerK JeRK JErk jERK

Laila watches herself move her head uncontrollably. She can't stop the movements—they're part of her Tourette's Syndrome. 'But I can,' she thinks.

Her mother's thoughts float into her mind. 'You just want attention. Seema Aunty and Priyanka Aunty have normal children. Why aren't you normal? Special medical case. You don't have any Tourette's problems. So stop this. Don't tell me you can't.' Her mother is supportive on the outside. So sweet and kind. But Laila knows the truth. She's a disappointment, a disgrace.

Jerk.

Laila rolls up her sleeve and finds the familiar spread of skin. Pinch marks litter the area. *Jerk*. She adds one, two, three more. The pain distracts her, reducing the movements. *Jerk. Jerk.* Nothing's stopped? Alright. She lifts her hand and slaps herself. Once, twice, thrice. Harder, harder. Four times, five, six—until the wave finally finally

Stops.

Laila spends the rest of the period in a bathroom stall. *Jerk. Jerk.*

The sound of the bell echoes through the empty bathroom, and Laila begins her walk to her therapy session. She gets a call from her mother. "Hi *beta*, just checking in. Have fun at your therapy session!" But unspoken, 'Let the lady do what she has to in order to fix you. Don't know what I did to deserve you and your problem.'

The phone goes silent before Laila can respond. 'I'm sorry I'm not the perfect Indian child,' she says wordlessly. She looks up. She can see the therapy office across the street. *Jerk. Jerk.* She begins to hear the thoughts of the people around her. 'Weirdo. Freak. Retard.' Nothing she hasn't heard before. *Jerk*. 'Ew, weird.'

Laila walks. In the opposite direction. Away from familiarity and down a new road. Worn-down buildings hold worn-down shops, stranger than anything she's seen before: "Auditorium for Insects." "Mary Ann's Home to Wigs and Woozles." "Uncle Jim's Curing Center." Laila stops in front of the last one. It's a hovel, covered with graffiti. *Jerk. Jerk.* 'Wacko.' She walks into the Center, determined. 'He'll fix me,' she thinks. Laila enters the room, and within a second—

"Hello, child."

She turns towards the voice. She sees an old man with a long beard and a wrinkly face.

"Come sit," he says.

The man gestures to a pile of red pillows, and Laila sits. *Jerk.* She waits for the opinion, but nothing pops up. She is surprised. She attempts to read the man's thoughts, but—

"Doesn't work on me. I learned how to block people a long time ago," says the man.

"So you know I'm different?" Laila asks.

The man laughs. "If you weren't, then you wouldn't be here. Now, what can I do for you?"

Jerk. Jerk.

Laila points to her head. "Fix this. It's supposedly caused by a syndrome, but it should be fixable."

The man studies Laila for a few seconds, and in an amused voice, he says, "I think you want me to fix your problem with caring."

"My what?"

"Your problem with caring about what other people think. You hear people's thoughts and care about them."

Laila looks at the man silently for a few moments. He's right. She only cares about the fact that others think she's weird. A freak. *Jerk.*

"Can you fix it?" she asks.

The man laughs again. "I could rid you of your ability. You'd be a normal girl with Tourette's. How's that?"

Laila thinks for a moment, before replying, "No, wait. Don't get rid of my ability. I want to keep it. Any other way?"

The man hands Laila a scrap of paper. "Here," he says. "Open this the next time you feel a fit coming on."

Laila tucks the paper into her back pocket. "Thank you." *Jerk.*

The man smiles. "No problem. Now, hurry back to the therapist. The office is about five minutes away from calling your mother to ask where you are."

Laila sprints over to the therapist's office, the scrap of paper safely tucked away.

The next day,

Laila sings. Sweet notes come out of her mouth. The choir director moves her hand up, down, left, right, and Laila follows. She sings harmonies, tunes.

Before—*Jerk.* She pulls her head to the left. *Jerk.* She does it again.

'Weirdo.'

She hears the word echo in her mind, bouncing off every wall in her head. *Jerk.* Her head moves again.

'Retard.'

She reaches into her back pocket and pulls out the scrap of paper. She opens it, and sees

It's your normal.

The words drown out the opinions.
'It's your normal.'
Jerk. 'Freak.' *Jerk.* 'Weirdo.'
Laila waits for more.
Jerk.
And hears nothing.
Jerk.
'It's my normal.'
At home with her mother—'It's my normal.'
At therapy—'It's my normal.'
Everywhere she goes—'It's my normal.'
Jerk. Jerk.
It's my normal. THE normal.
Simply, it's normal.

A MAMLAMBO ENCOUNTER IN A DROWN'D HUT

ANDREW McCLURE

Not polished earth, but shimmering crystal is the floor. Through the door I enter; behind me it strikes shut. I'm the kernel in the nut, the furthest tendril of a plunging root. Time has stopped.

The floor reveals itself to be water, of a sort. It's a gleaming bit of liquid gauze that seems both shallow and deep, like a mirror. Tentatively I dip a toe and the water ripples. I shudder along with the humming skin of the water that sings like a struck drum.

From out of the deep comes a thing coiled. It wears the slick viscous crystalline substance all around. It unfolds, like a flower with its weeks of blossoming condensed to a minute. Wet petals fall around her. Her.

She is a vision in serpentine braids. A beckoning hand bedizened with bangles is held out; deep wickedness is in her smile.

So many come to the realm of the oceanic maiden who dwells in the very depths of generation, she says, *past the gates of space and time and closest to the cosmic womb from which we all branch. And many come and ask me for fortune and wealth, for success in their travails. But there is a price.*

Her predatory smile is like ivory in a crocodile's mouth. *The price is to be forever wed to the Mamlambo. To me. Whatever you ask for shall be given, as a lobola. Yes, in our matrimony the bride-price is paid to the man and not the wife. Marriage to a Mamlambo is monogamous,* she says. *For you. I may have many husbands, but you are allotted only one wife. For what do you ask?*

I shift uncomfortably, sending waves of crystal rippling, before making my reply. *I was going to ask you for a wife.*

PANDEMIC HAIRCUTS

CASSANDRA CAVERHILL

I'm certainly no salon apprentice, yet
when I wield Norelco's Multigroom 5000,

I'm adept as my mother was, standing
at her station trimming, her belly

big with me. That you'll submit
to being my model still surprises.

But you're antsy when strands fan
along your neck like ghost fingers tickling.

From 16 mm to 12 mm to 9,
gradually, I let the guard down

while you sit tall in boxer briefs, eyes closed
as I circle. Your tinsel patch is bigger

than it was before your mom got cancer.
I wipe clumps from your shoulder blades

and you say the sensation's like sandpaper
rubbing skin; ask me to leave it.

Somehow, I always catch the mole
at your nape, hidden in your hairline,

even though you tell me *careful*
with a raw-edged razor—

how easy it is to elicit pain
with a button's press, to shape

the bend where your head bows low.
Love's greatest fallacy will always be

that our safeguards won't give way.
The dustpan brims with what's been

shorn and swept while you shower—
two month's growth, two months since

we drove cross-country
for our last chance

to be with your mother in this lifetime.
And I want to preserve it all:

keep your locks the way
my mother keeps my childhood

ponytail secure in a Ziploc baggie,
nestled in a chest with our family treasures.

REED

No. 154

MARY BLAIR AWARD FOR ART

Q'shaundra James

This artist demonstrates an extraordinary command of color, utilizing analogous colors in such a lovely and subtle touch. Complementary colors give this piece an effortless mood. The choice to use such a yellow-heavy palette is both bold and warm. Too often women and girls are directed to "Smile!" and this piece flies in the face of that demand. A young Black girl, relaxed in mismatched jammies, epitomizes Black joy, peace—a girl's right to exist in her truest and most candid childhood form.

—Erin Salazar

Wait for a Smile
Q'shaundra James
Oil on canvas
34 × 30 in.
2019

Wait for Her Gaze
Q'shaundra James
Oil on canvas
37 × 32 in.
2018

Shhhh . . . Quiet
Q'shaundra James
Oil on canvas
44 × 36 in.
2019

Wait Till She Looks Up
Q'shaundra James
Oil on canvas
40 × 30 in.
2017

No Offense, But: Quincy
Q'shaundra James
Oil on canvas
10 × 8 in.
2018

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

JIHOON PARK

A Picnic
She is a young girl. Her parents watch her stare up at the sky for hours. She does not go on the swing sets or play with ants like the other children. Her parents wonder what she is looking at. The birds? The passing airplane? Maybe she'll grow up to be an ornithologist or a pilot, the parents think. They smile when they realize their daughter can become anything she desires to be.

Geometry Class
She finds the classwork easy. She always sits next to the window staring at the clouds. In her notebook she copies them exactly. Not drawing, like how the other kids draw stick figures and hearts, but copying, as if taking dictation of a cloud, following the lines off in the distance with her eyes. She moves her hand mechanically, holding her pencil vertically. Other students think this is strange and throw paper balls at her. She does not know how to react as they bounce off her head, so she continues to stare out the window. The teacher thinks she is strange too but doesn't make much of it because of the girl's excellent academic performance.

At Six Flags Amusement Park
She sits at the back of the roller coaster. She told her parents she did not want to go, but they insisted. "Some of my favorite memories were class trips," her mother said. The roller coaster goes up and up and she finds this part enjoyable. But then it swoops down away from the sky and her classmates start screaming. She does not like this part, especially the screaming. She wishes the roller coaster would keep going up and up forever.

Described by a School Counselor
"Yes, she has always been a bit strange, but not what we call a 'Problem Student.' She's not interested in substances like some of the other teens. The bullies don't

even pick on her anymore. Other students who get pushed around at least react in some way. They cry, they complain, they sigh and then take a long walk in the schoolyard, but she never reacts. I think that's why no one bothers to push her around anymore. She is incredibly shy but shows a great level of critical thinking for a young woman her age. I've met her parents many times and they're a fantastic couple. I know she is especially fond of her art classes. Miss Wexler is always talking about her cloud paintings. We have a few of them hanging in the teachers' lounge."

At Dinner
She prods her food with a fork. She separates the mashed potatoes from the roast beef. She separates the carrots from the string beans. Only once the foods are separated does she start eating. Her mother and father continue their meal in silence. They have grown accustomed to this behavior.

Overhearing an Argument
She sits in her closet in complete darkness, clutching a flashlight in her hands. She hears her mother and father arguing. Something about a new therapist, a specialist two hours out-of-town. She flicks the flashlight on and off. She sees her clothes disappear and reappear. She finds this reassuring. After a few hours she falls asleep peacefully in the closet under an old sweater.

A Conversation
The young woman tells her parents she will go to art school after she graduates. "To paint more clouds?" they ask. She nods yes. Her father wants to ask, "Don't you have enough paintings of clouds in your room? Don't you think you should do something else with your life?" but he stops himself. He recalls a passage from *Troubled Teens Made Simple: A Definitive Guide* (Allan Hartford, PhD, 1998): "Revealing ambitions can be an insurmountable obstacle for teenagers. Without parental support, ambition can turn into unhealthy obsessions." The father would rather have an ambitious daughter than an obsessive daughter.

A Friday Night
She discovers she enjoys drinking screwdrivers. The alcohol unwinds her brain and makes it easier to hold a steady conversation. The students at the art school are dressed strangely and seem very different from her peers growing up. They talk

about postmodernism and tax reform and starting a coalition for stray cats. People keep telling her about social injustice in Belarus. She does not care for Belarus. She doesn't know anyone in Belarus or wish to go there anytime soon. She leaves the party and stumbles into the campus studio to paint the giant cumulonimbus she saw earlier that day. The screwdrivers tell her to use a thicker brush than usual and paint with intense contrasts. The cloud stands strong like a forceful tower against the sky. The young woman imagines falling through the cloud. She closes her eyes and smiles, feeling the cold wind rush through her body, running her hands through the moisture of the cloud. In the studio by herself, she feels free. A few other late-night students notice the lights in the studio and see the young woman giggling and waving her arms like a lunatic.

Hangover Cure

- Instant noodles with a hint of vinegar (something her father makes).
- Three-hour nap on the dorm lobby couch (she never naps in the same place she sleeps).
- Walk in the park, looking at the sky.

[No energy for painting today.]

At Her Easel

She always sits by the window in the studio with the sunlight shining on her canvas. Her professors often suggest moving to a more neutral area of the studio to better understand the values and hues in her paintings. She always ignores this advice. Clouds should have sunlight beaming on them, she thinks. She holds her brush vertically to the canvas and moves her arm mechanically. She spends hours mixing different shades of white and gray. The perfect shade will reflect sunlight back to the viewer.

Described by Her Roommate

"She's talented but always runs up trouble with the professors here. She only draws or paints clouds. In our figure-drawing class, she'll draw the models as clouds. If we're working with architectural models, she'll paint clouds in the shape of buildings. Or she'll just paint a landscape with a tiny building at the bottom of the canvas and fill the rest of it with clouds. One time Professor Hicky got so sick of her, he snapped her canvas in two against the blackboard. She's a good roommate.

Quiet. Clean. Doesn't bring people over. She's out most of the time, either at the studio or just walking around. Sometimes she'll sit in the courtyard for hours. One time someone called the cops on her for looking suspicious. She was just sitting on a bench looking at the sky for like, five hours. They searched her for drugs and then they left. I'm pretty sure she doesn't do drugs."

Critiquing Her Own Work
She paints a big X over the canvas in black. She does this to paintings that do not properly move her. The dumpster behind her dormitory is filled with unsatisfactory paintings of clouds with big Xs on them. A sculpture student in her dorm has been collecting the thrown-out canvases as part of an installation art project. She hates sculptors, especially this one.

Her Outfit
Her clothes do not make a statement, and many of her peers think this in itself is a statement. She only wears white and blue. White shirts with blue jeans. She orders them in bulk online. She does not wear earrings or hair ties. She often gets paint on her clothes, as all artists do, but she does so in such a way that the whites of the clouds splatter only on her shirt and the blues of the sky splatter only on her jeans. Sometimes, if a student at the easel next to her is painting aggressively, shades of greens and red and yellow will splatter onto her clothes. She keeps a change of clothes in her studio locker for this reason.

Weeping While Listening to Music
Passing by the performance hall, she hears a section of Bach's Mass in B Minor and begins to weep. It is the music she has been searching for, the music she hears when she sees the clouds in the sky. She runs to her room and searches the song on her laptop. The sound fills the room. The sound fills her with an immense sadness, a longing to return to a home she never knew.

A Dream
She is in a cathedral, lying flat in front of the altar. She is in a white gown. A priest blesses her while swinging a smoking thurible. She begins to float, higher and higher in the air. The ceiling of the cathedral opens up to reveal the bright sky. The angels

and saints painted on the ceiling point out the direction, up into the Heavens. The sun bathes her with light.

At Her First Gallery Exhibition Downtown
"These clouds are beautiful, what inspired you to paint this series?"
"Clouds."
"This piece reminds me of Magritte's surrealism. Like in his piece *Clear Ideas*, one of my favorites. Wonderful use of form and texture. Is your painting symbolic of anything?"
"No."
"Your compositions are so powerful! What will you paint for your next exhibition?"
"Clouds."

At Brunch with a Date
He approaches her first. He has a wide smile with beautiful glistening teeth. They eat eggs Benedict together and have a few mimosas. She tries her best to separate the egg from the bacon and the biscuit. He tells her about how he came to New York from Florida, how he admires Norman Rockwell, how he always had trouble with history in grade school, and so on. She has a hard time paying attention. She thinks about how to incorporate those teeth into her next painting. He gets a piece of spinach between his front teeth, but she does not tell him.

A Painting
Her next painting features long wisps of cirrus clouds. There is a small, green propeller plane flying to and fro between them, shaping them in squiggles. The piece is titled *Spinach*. She does not see her date again.

Ordering a Meal at Burger King
"Chicken Burger Combo please."
"No mayo on the burger please."
"No dressing for the salad please, plain is fine."
"No ketchup for the fries, I'm okay. Easy on the salt please. Thank you."
"To go please. Extra napkins please."

"Thank you very much."
"Keep the change."

Puzzled by Her Classmates at Graduation
After the ceremonies her classmates cheer and cry and embrace one another and take pictures. They hoist each other up on their shoulders. A few of them even hug her, and she tries her best to return a hug that feels natural. Overall, she finds the whole ceremony too loud. She does not know what to do with her hands or where to look. She occupies her attention by reading the graduation pamphlet, working through the names alphabetically. *Corey Adams, Hector Angeles, Peter Blueth, Athena Buckley, Kevin Chowder, Sally Ann Christoph, Cynthia Czecksy . . .*

Described by a Professor
"She is, I believe, an artist for whom the subject always comes before the medium. I think back to someone like Degas, who produced around 1,500 works featuring ballerinas. Pastels, oils, sculpture, sketches, prints, and so on. I did urge her, throughout her time here at the Art Institute, to branch out in both subject matter and medium. Our faculty encourage our students to at least experiment with digital art and design, as those skills are more employable in today's world, but she mostly thought this was superfluous. She may have thought higher education in general was superfluous. Her thesis project was extraordinary. I believe it's still being featured at the Sophie Bilinski Gallery. It's a series of canvases, connected on the inside of a spherical cage. When you're inside you can see the sunlight beaming through the canvases, and it really does make you feel like you're up there among the clouds. I remember a conversation I had with her. I suggested illuminating the canvases from inside the cage with a lightbulb and exhibiting the project indoors, as sunlight will eventually damage the canvases. She didn't like the idea. She was always very dismissive of others. However, a certain dismissiveness is required to be a successful artist, I believe. She's doing quite well in the New York scene now from what I hear."

Comments by the CFO of a Major Communications Company
"My wife is a fan of her work, so when the facility manager asked for painting recommendations for our headquarters lobby, I suggested her paintings. We

purchased three of her largest works. They're called *Composition #59, Glaucoma*, and *Heavy Weather*. I never understood why paintings are titled the way they are. *Composition #59* is a vertical canvas with some fluffy clouds, like the ones from *Toy Story.* You know the wallpaper in the first scene? And there's a single rotten banana in the middle of it. *Glaucoma* features a giant cloud in the shape of a man's face. On top of the cloud is an anvil. *Heavy Weather* is the largest of the paintings and covers the entire western wall of the lobby. It's a cloudscape at sunrise, except all the clouds are in the shape of tubas. Or trombones? I don't know my instruments. Floating in the air between the clouds is a woman with an umbrella. It's a great icebreaker and conversation-starter for our salespeople."

An Emotional Connection

While driving south for a gallery opening, she passes through a long stretch of open farmland. Cars make her claustrophobic, but she has learned to deal with it. She pulls over at a cow pasture to get air. The smell is humid and heavy but acceptable. A calf trots up to her, just behind the barbed-wire fence. As it chews grass, the calf looks into her eyes with a silent intensity she has never felt before. She sticks her hand through the fence, careful not to prick herself, and rests her hand gently on the calf's head, feeling the movement of its chewing. After a few minutes the calf trots away from her to rejoin the herd off in the distance.

Her Mother on Her Loneliness

"Her father and I always fought when she was growing up. We felt we were doing something wrong. We read self-help books and visited therapists. She never had any friends. She rarely visits. Last time was two years ago for Christmas, and that was only because her work was being shown at a gallery near here. I see her mentioned in articles sometimes. We try to keep up with the art world, but we don't understand it. She mails us her work now and then, but we've run out of places to hang them up. Sometimes it feels like we're living up in the clouds, so much blue and white on our walls. I wonder if that's what she feels like all the time, up in the sky, completely isolated. I don't know if she ever connected to another human being. Even us. I don't think she ever wanted to. I don't think she ever really knew what to do with herself, with being a person, if that makes sense. I remember once when she was young, she disappeared for almost two days. We called out to her all over the house but never

got an answer. We thought she had run away so we called the police, and they even opened an investigation. Turns out she was just lying under the bed, not making a sound. For two whole days."

Preparations

She is out in an open field, many miles away from the city and artists. It is a cloudy night. She stares up at the few stars that shine through gaps between the clouds. She unloads the materials from the back of the rented pickup truck. She begins inflating the industrial balloons with the helium tanks. One by one, she ties them to the lawn chair, which is held down by cinderblocks to keep it from floating away before she is ready. By the time the 100th balloon is inflated, the sun begins to rise. It paints the dawn clouds with a hazy orange. She is nervous, but not in the usual way that she is around people or loud cars or narrow alleyways. An intense but freeing kind of nervousness. She kisses the earth beneath her feet and sits in the lawn chair.

Head in the Clouds

She is past 15,000 feet. She has just come out of a cumulonimbus cloud. Her clothes are soaked and she cannot stop smiling. It is freezing but she does not mind. Her hair and eyelashes are already frozen stiff. She crunches her hair in her hands. The sun bathes her in light. She can no longer see the earth. Great masses of clouds are blanketing the sky beneath her. Clouds tower near her, stretching up into space. The clouds expect nothing from her and couldn't care less about her. And yet, they expose themselves truly and completely to her, and she loves them for that. Intense gales roll the clouds through the sky, taking her with them. She thinks back to the roller coaster from her childhood, carrying her up and up. As her chair is thrown around in the winds, she grips the arms of the lawn chair tight, but playfully, as if it is just a ride. She screams with joy. She takes off her shoes, using one foot to remove the shoe from the other. She watches them fall but does not think about them possibly hitting anyone. She does not have to think about anyone else ever again. She feels relaxed for the first time. As the oxygen thins out, she falls into a peaceful sleep. She is finally truly free.

CUNNILINGUS

WORTLEY CLUTTERBUCK

I'm going to speak to all the gents
who might lack some experience;
but this advice is also good
for most dames, in all likelihood.

Cunnilingus is the best
so give that phallic push a rest;
in faith, no lady wants a poke
since licking's better to invoke.

First up, ye buss her underwear—
do not advance without moisture;
and if she bids ye fair exhorts,
continue, and untruss her shorts.

Behold that lovely pubis hair
which has a scent beyond compare;
the view from here is true divine—
so worship well her holy shrine.

Now, bring thy face into her *quim*
and say you love her synonym;
she wants to know ye venerate
her womanliness incarnate.

If she assents, acquaint the lips
of your mouth with those in her hips;
then, give a slight vibrato from
your tongue to the place where she'll come.

Breathe through your nose as you give head
and cosset that posh oyster bed;
go slow and subtle, note her speed—
she wants a good time, not thy seed.

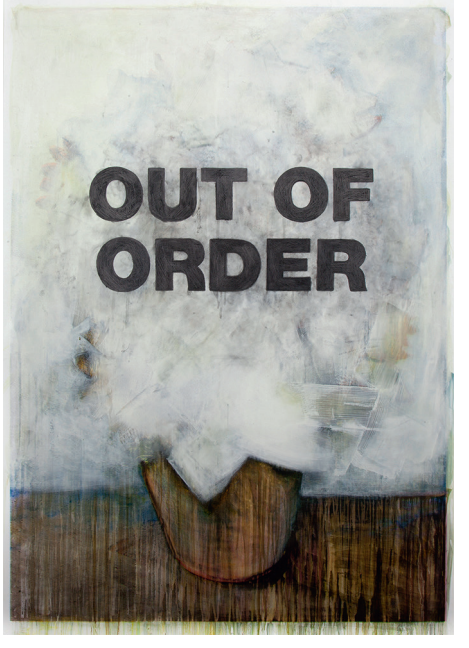
Her breathing rises to and fro
with undulations down below;
be always patient and discreet
and lick in time to her heartbeat.

And when ye hear a lusty yell
ye know that ye have rung her bell;
it gives ye pride to coax those moans
from deep inside her carnal zones.

Now, when her orgasm doth crest,
desist all pressure, I'd suggest;
release slowly your loving mouth
and tremble from that 'dining south.'

That 'eating pussy,' vulgar called,
will guarantee that she's enthralled;
aye, cunnilingus is the best—
forget thy penis, 'tis a pest!

Now, swiving, as a gen'ral thing,
proliferates couples' offspring;
to tip the velvet's just for joy
so pucker up, and don't be coy.


OUT OF
ORDER

Clockwise from top-left

Thanks For Nothing
Erik Beehn
Acrylic, solvents, graphite, and pigmented ink on photo paper
60 × 44 in.
2020

#Getbettersoon_I
Erik Beehn
Acrylic, solvents, and pigmented ink on photo paper
60 × 44 in.
2019

#Getbettersoon_II
Erik Beehn
Acrylic, solvents, graphite, and pigmented ink on photo paper
60 × 44 in.
2019

#Getbettersoon_III
Erik Beehn
Acrylic, solvents, graphite, and pigmented ink on photo paper
60 × 44 in.
2019

Featured PROFILES

AN ELECTRIC FEELING OF ULTIMATE HUMANNESS

TIMOTHY CECH

Photo © Jenna Garrett

Rita Bullwinkel stands astride two worlds. In the first phase of her life, she was immersed in the world of competitive sports, specifically basketball and water polo, and her character was formed by the experience—the endurance, the strain, the violence, the victory. Not until college did another passion take hold, one more solitary and fanciful: fiction writing. In Bullwinkel's view, inhabiting the consciousness of a fabricated character demands a drive similar to that of an athlete, where the mind and body are pressed ever toward the sublime. "You have to be a pretty crazy delusional person," she says. "There's nothing in my life that can justify how much time I've spent writing . . . [nor] how much time I spent training my body to physically compete against other people." Bullwinkel draws another connection between the two pursuits: she considers writing to be "essentially the best technology we have for inhabiting another's consciousness and leaving the body. Using your body or pushing it to a point where it might not endure has a similar feeling."

Bullwinkel's energy and drive, honed by years of intense athletic competition, have stood her in good stead in her writing career. Within a short decade, she has published stories in *Tin House*, *Conjunctions*, and *BOMB*, many of which were collected in her debut book: the 2018 short-story collection, *Belly Up*, which subsequently won The Believer Book Award. She's been interviewed by *The Paris Review* and has conducted her own interviews with notable contemporaries, such

as Ottessa Moshfegh, for *Vice*. She has worked as an editor for *McSweeney's* and *Noon* and teaches creative writing at California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

Given her history, it isn't surprising that the human body and its ability to inhabit invented realities animates her fiction. In many ways, the body mirrors the creative alchemy of fiction: they share a remarkable potential to transcend their own limits, whether by willpower alone or in choreography with eldritch forces. In Bullwinkel's work, a character's experience of pushing through a rigorous ordeal often functions as a generative action, culminating in unsentimental epiphanies and moments of psychic clarity.

Therein lies one of the many striking features of Bullwinkel's work, which has been described as grotesque, strange, comic, mysterious, precise, and poetic. But a central theme that emerges from her imaginative fiction is best expressed as *creation*. In "Arms Overhead," a story included in *Belly Up*, two high-school friends separated by an after-school soccer league reunite over library books about cannibalism and shared fantasies of transforming into vegetation. This story takes place at the poetic nexus of athleticism and acts of creation. As one of her characters opines during the glorious violence of practice drills: "This is what it feels like to use your body hard enough that you leave it."

The more fantastical conceits featured in Bullwinkel's short stories often serve as landing strips to the comical monotony of daily life. "So much of life is just composed of busywork," the author notes. "And the only way that the busywork doesn't feel awful, like my brain isn't melting out my nose, is if I'm writing." Her characters seek to transform routines built of menial labor, commuter traffic, and waylaid ambitions by transcending the strangeness of their bodies, often through psychic transformation and identity cleaving. The stories depict a realistic environment through an absurd, oftentimes spectral, tweak: an administrative assistant adopts a second self when hearing harps tune in her university's music department, a snake in a big city aspires to turn into a pear, an interior decorator imagines a convicted felon as home furnishing. Through these varied narrative branches, a central thematic trunk is revealed: the body's capacity for destruction, its potential for disintegration, and its fundamental, all-consuming strangeness.

But what makes Bullwinkel's ascent all the more remarkable is that she's attained such stylistic and conceptual precision in under a decade of concentrated practice following her shift from competitive water polo. Her follow-up to *Belly Up*

is also her first full-length novel, and its premise indicates a more direct synthesis of the two worlds she carries within her.

The author, who plays in a co-ed league with other writers, observes, "There've been many writers who have been athletes, and I don't know if there's a reason for that. There is this sense of an out-of-body experience that the two activities share, that you have to build a world so completely and so fully in order to inhabit it successfully." She reflects on Yukio Mishima, the controversial writer and athlete whose failed usurpation of the Japanese government culminated in seppuku. Although Mishima wrote more than 140 books, "he really considered his life's greatest artistic work to be his body," she says. "He had lots of projects and was always making films and writing, but he identified as a bodybuilder. I'm interested in that."

Bullwinkel's in-progress novel, a project four years in the making, examines the world of a young woman participating in a boxing-league tournament; it shows teenaged combatants engaging in remarkable feats of physical prowess even as their trauma and resentments undercut this force. "The hardest thing is just finding mental space to go back into the narrative. I think if a story is short enough you can hold it all in your mind very easily, but the novel takes many days to enter and then exit." The Fall 2019 edition of *Zyzzyva* published an excerpt of the book as "Andi Taylor vs. Artemis Victor," and even in its abridged state the direct prose and precise tone are characteristic of Bullwinkel's preternatural short fiction. The passages depict the young boxing prodigy and her underdog opponent during a regional championship match, while also interweaving inane magazine profiles, the politics of gym sponsorship, flashbacks to an accidental drowning, and the insular environment in which these forces collide for a paltry audience. In many ways, Andi and Artemis resemble two faces of a sentient superorganism, twin selves fighting with the past and competing with the present.

"I have been wondering a lot about why I wanted to write this book," Bullwinkel muses. "I think it's because there's this very intense electric feeling that I don't experience anymore because I no longer play competitive sports. This electric feeling of ultimate humanness, of using your body to physically compete against someone else, or to be engaged with someone else, or to be a display of power."

The novel serves as a deliberate subversion of the sports narrative genre, which Bullwinkel intends to transform into a wholly different organism. "There's just not a lot of great language or writing out there about the ecstasy of using one's body for

sport . . . I am interested in the impulse of what would drive someone, what drove me as a young child to become obsessed with seeing what my body could do."

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Bullwinkel didn't aspire to be a professional writer. She had been fixed into the arena of competitive sports, particularly basketball and water polo, an arena far afield from offbeat fiction. Her literary compulsion wouldn't flourish until her sophomore year at Brown University, as she pursued a degree in religious studies and anthropology and competed among future Olympic contenders on the Ivy League's water-polo outfit. "I played Division I water polo all four years. I was co-captain of the team my senior year. And we were an NCAA Division I team, top-20 ranked, so we were playing at a very high level."

Her collision with literary fiction happened in an introductory creative writing course taught by author Joanna Howard, whom she would one day include in the acknowledgments page of her first published book. "When I took the course, my thought was not, 'Oh, maybe I can become a writer.' It was that the work we were reading was shaking me and changing me and I was obsessed with it." Through a course-required anthology, *The Anchor Book of New American Stories*, Bullwinkel was introduced to the imaginative feats of George Saunders, Lydia Davis, Aimee Bender, and Diane Williams: all writers concerned with mapping the uncanny dimensions of human experience through incisive humor and strange tableaus. Bullwinkel spent the following summer reading through these modern heavy-hitters' back catalogs, and built her own material in private. "I wrote in and around that course, but I never shared it with anyone outside of the workshop," she admits. "I graduated from college obsessively reading and writing privately . . . writing things that I really was not sure if anyone would ever see." Still, the literary arts had by then overpowered Bullwinkel's athletic obsession. After completing her undergraduate degree, she was accepted to Vanderbilt University's highly selective graduate program in creative writing.

Bullwinkel's writing process and professional development can be traced to yet another highly regarded prose stylist. Diane Williams, whose short story, "All American," was included in the anthology from Joanna Howard's class, gripped Bullwinkel's imagination. She was so drawn to Williams's writing, she reached out to her via email. The unsolicited correspondence led to a position as a reader for the vaunted literary journal *NOON*, where Williams is the editor. "Diane Williams's influence over me and her editorial and literary genius cannot be overstated. She's

a very powerful mind, and reading work aloud with her, having her critique me reading work aloud . . . changed the way I write."

When Bullwinkel writes, she conjures and orchestrates hidden realities into existence. Forged from those afternoon performances of stressed syllables and modulated oratory, Bullwinkel's own style was further honed by vocalization and physical presence. As a result, the performative is a foundational element of her prose style: "I do write aloud. I try not to write things that don't sound good aloud, although it's hard, sometimes, with a lot of dialogue. I think the long interior pieces probably naturally sound the best out in the air."

Bullwinkel's growing body of work represents a kind of connective tissue between the physical and the sublime. Her fiction constructs anomalous paths for readers through the banality of the real world—often revealing it to be merely a perceptual distortion—and underlines the strangeness of common courtesies, the insatiable hunger powering the human condition, and the unknowable mystery of the flesh.

Reflecting on her writing practice, Bullwinkel says, "I think it's a coping or a protective mechanism. The things that I make and what I write, I would be happy if people read them. But I think I would definitely still write if no one read them . . . it's more compulsive than that. . . . It's like the only thing I have found that makes me feel I'm spending my earth hours well."

LANCE FUNG AND THE ART OF LONG-DISTANCE INTIMACY

MATTY HEIMGARTNER

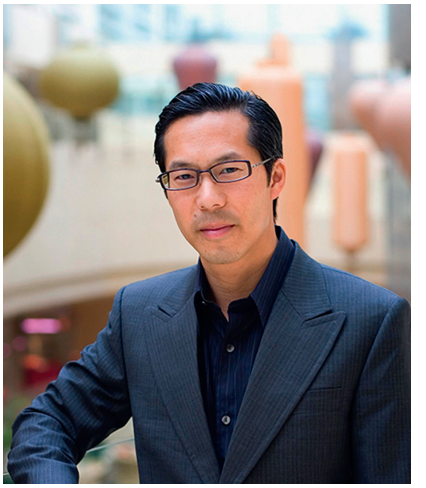


Photo © Bay Area Photography

On a warm Tuesday afternoon, below fluffy autumn clouds mixed with wildfire haze, I walk through downtown Redwood City with a welcoming cool breeze as my only companion. The roads are quiet, but the sidewalks are lively with pedestrians, cyclists, and skateboarders. I make my way to the square in front of the vast neoclassical San Mateo County History Museum. The square is lined with fountains shaped like goblets and paved in the pattern of a pale mandala.

As I walk, I try to keep six feet from everyone: a mother and child eating yogurt in front of a fountain and a group of three Spanish-speaking twenty-something-year-olds. Two of the youths have masks pulled under their chins. The other holds his mask in his hand. They are comfortable with each other. Not wanting to stare too long, I shift my focus to the reason I made the northbound drive—the *Art Kiosk*.

This fourteen-by-fourteen-foot cube is a hybrid of public art and gallery installation. Curated by Lance Fung, a Bay Area native, the *Art Kiosk* is the brainchild of Fung Collaboratives, an arts organization that is committed to "curating intellectually rigorous and visually stimulating exhibitions that are also accessible to a mainstream audience." *Art Kiosk* launched in January 2019, when the featured artists were allowed to have celebratory opening events—a time that now feels like a different world. In those first months, artists interacted with viewers in the intimate confines of the kiosk. Fung told me that during the initial proposal for *Art*

Kiosk, he worried the space would be "too tiny." Social distancing orders have since forced it—and all of us—to adapt. Today, *Art Kiosk* can be viewed at any time, even with its doors shut.

This diminutive installation came from the mastermind behind *The Snow Show*, a multi-acre art and design project in Lapland, Finland. *The Snow Show* was Lance Fung's first large-scale curatorial gig, featuring work from thirty-four creatives who designed and built collaborative pieces expressly for the show. Fung paired seventeen artists and seventeen architects into duos of one artist and one architect. The creators reflected local and international talent of all levels—emerging, mid-career, and established. Though everything was to be made of ice, Fung intentionally chose creators who weren't accustomed to the medium. Convention wasn't the goal: vision was.

The Snow Show featured seventeen vastly different installations, including an entire amphitheater made of ice by Eva Rothschild and Anamorphosis. There was also a cube house designed by Yoko Ono and Arata Isozaki. Millions of dollars in time, effort, and materials went into the creation of these pieces. Yet every installation was intended to melt. For Fung, the legacy of this ephemeral show was the process of creation and collaboration.

This show was just the beginning of Fung working on a large scale. In 2006, *The Snow Show* came to life once more, reimagined in Torino, Italy, in conjunction with the 20th Winter Olympic Games. And in 2008, for SITE Santa Fe's seventh biennial, Fung was invited to curate—the youngest person ever selected. For Fung, this was when the title of "curator" finally felt comfortable. Instead of using his clout to reel in big-name contemporary artists and secure large crowds, Fung set his own parameters, inviting twenty-five artists from sixteen different countries. All were emerging artists who had never exhibited in the United States. Many had never even visited. The Santa Fe

biennial, which Fung titled *Lucky Number Seven*, was an immersive and critical success.

In 2009, Fung returned to his roots in the Bay Area to curate a public art show in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. Where some only saw street violence, public drug use, and homelessness, Fung saw *Wonderland*, an opportunity to shine light on the *other* side of the Tenderloin: the familial side that has an eclectic variety of its own artists.

When selecting artists for *Wonderland*, Fung first drew from his graduate students from the San Francisco Art Institute. Later he invited "other artists where [he] saw some voids happening." He told me that curating this show was "less about which artist, and more about which artwork could properly address the social needs in the Tenderloin."

Over the next ten years, Fung was equally prolific, with temporary pieces in Atlantic City, a temporary sculpture park in Washington, DC, and the mobile project *Fireflies* in Philadelphia. During that time, Fung also had a constant flow of smaller projects in the Bay Area. His latest exhibit, *Illuminate Coral Gables*, is a massive project that combines video projections, sculptures, and art installations.

Lance Fung's resume—which includes a double bachelor's from UC Davis, an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, a gig as the youngest director of the Holly Solomon Gallery, and ownership of a Manhattan gallery—doesn't threaten his humility. Not long into our first conversation on Zoom, I recognized how wonderfully kind this man is. I admitted up front that, while I have extensive background in visual art and memoir, this was my first experience interviewing someone. He stepped into teacher mode—which really put me at ease—and gave me tips on how to get the most from the interview. I could also see how incredibly passionate he is about his work and collaborations. Our discussions about his collaborations always spilled into discussions about the other works of his collaborators.

Fung is careful when choosing who and what goes into his shows. He knows he's curating personality as much as art. The power of a curator is to begin a conversation that viewers continue long after they leave. Fung says it is important for viewers of his shows to feel joy, experience playfulness, and be challenged by their own responses.

I bring the conversation back to the Redwood City *Art Kiosk*. Fung reflects that although it first felt too tiny, the kiosk is actually "the perfect pandemic space to

show art." With its doors closed, the kiosk combines the "drive-by element" of public art with the monthly turnover of an art gallery. Most importantly, however, Fung saw a need for art that no virus could destroy.

In the same way that Fung has always been deliberate with the artists that he chooses for his projects, he was proud to tell me that the lineup for *Art Kiosk* is "inclusive of artists of color and lifestyle, and gender-balanced and gender-fluid." Of the thirteen shows in the 2020–2021 season, four feature San José State University students.

The slower pace of the pandemic-era *Art Kiosk* also benefits Fung, who is ready for calmer chapters in his life. He's delighted the project has been renewed for 2021, because it means he'll be able to nurture his curatorial passion from home in the company of his husband and their dog, Wexford Talley Fung.

As I sit on one of the fountain walls only a few feet away from the small and inconspicuous *Art Kiosk*, I reflect on the long months of lockdown that have passed—and on the months before, when I'd lose myself on solo art dates in San José or San Francisco. Although a huge part of the art world involves networking and in-person exchanges, I'm an introvert at heart. My favorite moment of any show is when I find the piece that helps me feel connected, even as I maintain my physical solitude. For that, *Art Kiosk* is big enough for me.

Page 183
Oblong Voidspace, Snow Show, Lapland 2003–2004
Artists: Jene Highstein & Steven Holl
Photo: Manne Stenos
Courtesy of Fung Collaboratives

Page 185
Number Crunchers, Art Kiosk, Redwood City 2020
Artist & Photo: Shannon Wright

ON EMPATHY AND BEING PRESENT

RACHEL A. CRAWFORD

Photo © Irene Young

In spring 2020, as the world went into lockdown due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, the award-winning poet Ellen Bass published a new collection of poems entitled *Indigo*. Because of the pandemic, *Indigo* was released with a different sort of fanfare. Instead of hopping on a plane and traveling around the country on her book tour, Bass followed a shelter-in-place order and sat at home like the rest of the world. Yet in true Ellen Bass fashion, she did not focus on the struggles and disappointments created by the global health emergency. Instead, she found reasons to "praise the things that are not usually praised." Bass tends to go with the flow, always keeping a calm, gentle, and welcoming demeanor and a smile that emanates joy. So with a stunning wall of books behind her, Bass continues to attend events from her home in Santa Cruz, California.

Because of the lockdown, Bass has attended even more events than originally planned, connecting with a wider audience through her virtual readings and interviews. "I think that right now, more than ever, we need to talk to each other," Bass says. "We're very separate. Even those of us who live with someone, or a few someones, are separated from at least some people that we really would like to be able to see and touch." Connecting with others has been a priority for Bass, and during interviews, she gives her attention so precisely that you immediately feel

a connection. At least, that's what I experienced in April 2020 when we sat down together over Zoom to talk about *Indigo*.

During our interview, Bass described her wife and children as "generous" because they accept how often they show up in her poetry. Bass does not hold back when recounting details of her family life, from the birth of her daughter to intimate moments with her wife. Nor does Bass shy away from writing about uncomfortable topics, like wondering at what point she will have had "enough" of life.

I asked Bass how she navigates writing such private details into her work. "Events of my life are the material I'm given to work with," she replied. Bass then expanded on her metaphor. She said that drawing from her life as inspiration for her poetry is like living on a prairie, and a peddler comes to sell bolts of cloth. There is no store where she can go shopping and get whatever she wants. Instead, she is limited to choosing from what the peddler offers. The bolts of cloth are Bass's life experiences, which she cuts and sews and crafts into beautiful poems for others to read. Extending the metaphor further, it's as if readers can try on the poems Bass creates from her life's cloth. In so doing, we can learn more about ourselves and the human condition. Or, as Bass says, in reading about the experiences of others in poetry, we can "enlarge our compassion."

Bass's poems that share personal moments from her life enable readers to cross the boundaries that separate our individual experiences. She explains, "For the most part we can't easily write about the big phenomena. But even in such a big experience, everyone has their own personal experience. Mostly that's the way in." As an audience, when we read poems where the "I" voice is present, we feel like the writer is speaking directly to us. Bass agrees with that sentiment: "There's a kind of solace in that, a kind of connection in that, which is what poetry really is about—trying to not be isolated, trying to connect in some way, hopefully in a way that gives us all more connection to the actual lives that we are living. We're trying to live them and also examine them at the same time, but the only way that I can get into a poem is to be specific, and to some extent, personal."

In September of 2020, after months of Zooming, when fatigue could easily have set in, Bass took the time to connect even more with the San José State University community. As a prelude to taking up her position as Lurie Distinguished Visiting Author, Bass participated in an online salon led by Professor Alan Soldofsky. She talked to a small group of students and professors about the need for poetry during

this tumultuous time, addressing how living in isolation has magnified the importance of community. Bass also discussed writing about experiences from the personal perspective and how that can create a connection between the writer and reader.

During the salon, Bass read a poem from *Indigo* entitled "Experiment in Empathy." The inspiration for this poem came from a time when Bass was in an "hour of need" and wanted her friend to show empathy. Bass remembered, "She couldn't look me in the eye and just say, 'God, I'm so sorry.'" To illustrate the kind of empathy we need to show others, Bass draws imagery from an unusual source: animal research. In her poem, she describes lab rats trapped in "glass boxes" who receive electrical shocks near the end of a thirty-second clip from the song, "It's a Wonderful World." Other rats watch what happens, and their response is an empathetic one: "A rat who isn't shocked, / who only watches/ panics too." Bass points out that in poetry we can read about another's experience, and, like the rats watching, we can find a sense of connection through our identification with another's pain, even if our experience is not the same. Bass says that in situations where empathy is needed, "We often think that what's required of us is really great. And in some way, it is, because you have to be present. But the truth is you only have to be present for about fifteen seconds."

In "Experiment in Empathy," Bass also suggests that as writers, we can bear witness to the experience of others by writing from our own perspective. She walks this tightrope gracefully because she does not try to "appropriate their experience." Instead, she focuses on what she observes and how she interacts with others in the moment: "If I position myself in the poem as this person, Ellen, in relationship to [someone else's experience], then what might I be able to say? That use of 'I' becomes very important. Without it, we step into the territory of telling people about things we haven't personally experienced. But when the 'I' is in there, then we can talk about what our point of view is, where we're coming from, where we see from."

Bass beautifully shares her point of view and where she "sees from" in her poem "Bringing Flowers to Salinas Valley State Prison." Bass regularly runs poetry workshops at the prison and in the Santa Cruz jails. In this poem, Bass describes a moment from one of these workshops, telling the story of an inmate she calls "Mr. S." The narrator brings paper cups of flowers to the workshop the day they talk about "Beauty and Loss." At the end of the session, the guard tells the inmates they cannot take the flowers out of the room but must leave them on the table. The speaker then

watches as Mr. S drinks the water from his cup of flowers and even consumes the blossoms themselves before going back to his cell.

Bass told me that, from her point of view, Mr. S "triumphed" because he found a way to take the flowers with him. She said that when she shared her poem with Mr. S, she realized that he "hadn't quite seen himself that way," as triumphant. But Bass honors his victory through her poem so that others may see the occasion as she did and empathize with Mr. S's desire to hold on to something beautiful. The poet's connection to Mr. S and to that moment transcends the page, and as readers, we triumph too, because Bass's words give us a way to take the beauty of those flowers with us wherever we go.

Bass revealed to me that "Bringing Flowers" was originally longer because of a metaphor she included where Mr. S "grazes in that meadow of flowers almost like a horse, maybe one of the horses his ancestors rode." Bass admitted that the metaphor was "too much" and that Mr. S didn't "have to be a horse in that poem, he can just be himself." During the salon, Bass provided another example of how she extensively reworked a poem. Discussing an early draft of "Experiment in Empathy," Bass said, "I had so much description about the scientists and a whole ending about how I would have appreciated even a rat. The poem went on too long. I had to find the bones of the poem. . . . It took me years to get this one hammered out." Bass allows herself to be vulnerable to other writers by exposing these elements that didn't work in earlier drafts of the poems.

Perhaps Ellen Bass's vulnerability is what resonates most with readers—her willingness to open up and share so much of herself, her life, and her passion for poetry as a way to connect and help generate a deep sense of empathy. Through her gracious spirit, Bass effortlessly connects with readers, students, and the literary community, a community to which she gives an incredible amount of her time. What might such a generous poet want in return for sharing her life with readers? Bass sums up her philosophy like this: "If I write a poem that you can apply to your present situation, that's all I could ask for."

REMEMBERING ANTHONY VEASNA SO
1992–2020

NICK TAYLOR

Photo © Anthony Veasna So

The San Francisco Bay Area literary community suffered an unexpected loss on December 8, 2020, when fiction writer Anthony Veasna So died suddenly at twenty-eight years old. Just days earlier, So had delivered a reading of his work and answered questions from San José State University students on Zoom. As news of his death spread on social media, friends and mentors remembered a writer whose warmth and generosity matched his extraordinary talent. He lived in San Francisco with his partner, Alex Torres, and joined the SJSU community when he was named one of six Steinbeck Fellows for the 2020–2021 academic year.

A rising star in American fiction, Anthony So was exceptional even among honorees of the SJSU Steinbeck Fellows Program, which was established in 2001 to support writers and scholars at the early stages of promising careers. Thrust into the spotlight thanks to several high-profile publications in early 2020, So embraced his sudden status as a voice of the Cambodian-American community and a role model for young queer writers of color. His parents were political refugees from the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. After a brief stop in Thailand, they settled with their families in Stockton, California, home to one of the largest Khmer populations outside of Southeast Asia. So was born in Stockton in 1992. His father owned an auto-repair shop, and his mother worked for the Social Security

Administration. Against the odds, they succeeded brilliantly, and their son grew up an ordinary California kid.

The parallels between Steinbeck and So are interesting to explore. Both grew up in Central California cities with strong ties to agriculture: Steinbeck in Salinas, So in Stockton. Both attended Stanford University, where they followed their own intellectual interests rather than prevailing trends. Steinbeck famously took only courses that he felt would improve his fiction. So switched his major from computer science to art and English literature. Unlike Steinbeck, So earned his degree. He went on to study creative writing at Syracuse University, where he completed his MFA in fiction in 2020.

While Steinbeck's work was not recognized by readers or critics until his early thirties, So began to establish his reputation while he was still in school. He first attracted national attention in April 2018 when his short story "Superking Son Scores Again" appeared in *n+1*, an influential literary journal based in New York City. In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Mark Krotov, the publisher and coeditor of *n+1*, recounts how So walked into the magazine's office and made a quick impression: "He had this chill, expansive vibe attached to a real intellectual intensity. It was very Californian." The scene calls to mind another Steinbeck parallel. After leaving Stanford, Steinbeck also moved to New York. He believed that was where serious writers lived. Young Steinbeck made a habit of sending manuscripts to agents and editors, then showing up in person, unsolicited, to receive their feedback. The strategy worked much better for So than for Steinbeck, who retreated to California with his tail between his legs.

After *n+1*, So's literary fame grew quickly. In the winter of 2020 he placed stories in two of the most prestigious venues in English, *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. With over a million subscribers, *The New Yorker* is capable of launching a fiction writer's career with a single publication. So's story "Three Women of Chuck's Donuts" appeared in the February 10, 2020 issue. The piece tells the story of a woman named Sothy, a Cambodian refugee who owns a donut shop in a depressed American city that resembles Stockton. The other two women of Chuck's Donuts are her teenage daughters. The shop is both a symbol of Sothy's new life in America and a continuation of her past:

> She contemplates her hands, the skin discolored and rough, at once wrinkled and sinewy. They are the hands of her mother, who fried homemade *cha quai* in the markets of Battambang until she

> grew old and tired and the markets disappeared and her hands went from twisting dough to picking rice in order to serve the Communist ideals of a genocidal regime. How funny, Sothy thinks, that decades after the camps she lives here in California, as a business owner, with her American-born Cambodian daughters who have grown healthy and stubborn, and still, in this new life she has created, her hands have aged into her mother's.

By the end of the story, Chuck's Donuts has come to encompass even more roles: the site of a school interview, the scene of a fight, and the venue for the women's solidarity and perseverance. Within a month, So's agent had secured a two-book deal with Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins.

The first of So's two books, a collection of stories titled *Afterparties*, is slated for publication in August 2021. *Afterparties* includes the stories previously published in *n+1*, *Granta*, and *The New Yorker*, as well as a story selected for 2021 publication in the San Francisco journal *Zyzzyva*. *Afterparties* is one of the most anticipated titles of the year. Fiction writer George Saunders, one of So's mentors at Syracuse, describes the stories in the collection as "beams of wry, affectionate light, falling from different directions on a complicated, struggling, beloved American community." Bestselling novelist Brit Bennett admires how So's work "explores the lives of these unforgettable characters with bracing humor and startling tenderness." Jonathan Dee writes: "Karen Russell, Carmen Maria Machado, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah—you can count on one hand the authors of this century whose debut short-story collections are as prodigious and career-making as *Afterparties*."

As director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at SJSU and coordinator of the fellowship program, I am proud to see a Steinbeck Fellow placed in the company of

Karen Russell and Carmen Maria Machado. But it breaks my heart to know that his first collection will also be his last. Part of the thrill of reading a writer like So, blessed by such extraordinary gifts of voice and imagination, is to watch his talent evolve as he finds new subjects, new modes, new forms. At twenty-eight years old, John Steinbeck was the author of a single published work, *Cup of Gold*, a forgettable novel about the Caribbean pirate Sir Henry Morgan. Steinbeck would not write the works for which we remember him, for which he won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature, including *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *East of Eden*, until he was in his thirties and forties. Tragically, we will never know what Anthony Veasna So might have written at that age.

On December 3, I had the privilege of moderating a panel of Steinbeck Fellows in a Zoom discussion that would turn out to be So's last public reading. Toward the end of the Q&A session, a member of the audience asked the authors if they had any particular emotion or feeling that they wanted their readers to experience from their work. So thought for a moment, twitched his mustache to the side, and gave his reply: "I got really drunk one time and started screaming, it was during my MFA, I started screaming that all I wanted was for my work to communicate an exuberant grief." He paused, looked into the camera. He smiled. "So yeah, I guess that's the emotion."

Exuberance and grief. Exhilaration and heartbreak. A Steinbeck-worthy appeal to empathy. These and a hundred others.

We feel you, Anthony.

CONTRIBUTORS

V. JOSHUA ADAMS is the author of a chapbook, *Cold Affections* (Plan B Press, 2018). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Posit*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Cloudbank,* and elsewhere. He teaches at the University of Louisville.

SALLY ASHTON is editor-in-chief of *DMQ Review*. Her fourth book, *The Behaviour of Clocks*, was published in 2019 by WordFarm Press. Recent work appears in a variety of journals and in *A Cast-Iron Aeroplane that Actually Flies: Commentaries from 80 American Poets on their Prose Poems* (MadHat Press, 2019).

SCOTT BADE earned his PhD at Western Michigan University (WMU). He teaches at Kalamazoo College and the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts and is the coordinator of the WMU Center for the Humanities. His chapbook *My Favorite Thing About Desire* was a co-winner of the 2018 Celery City Chapbook Contest.

SHELLE BARRON is a professor of art and design at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania. She maintains both a graphic design and a studio practice, the latter of which combines traditional and digital approaches. The recipient of national and international awards for her work, Barron has received grants from the NEA and other arts organizations.

ELLEN BASS is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and her latest book is *Indigo* (Copper Canyon, 2020). She coedited the first major anthology of women's poetry, *No More Masks!* and cowrote *The Courage to Heal*. She teaches in Pacific University's MFA program and is the 2021 Lurie Visiting Writer at SJSU.

JANELLE AINA S. BAYLOSIS is a twenty-one-year-old multimedia artist based in the Philippines. She mainly does photography and illustration. One of her visual niches is making photos look atmospheric and dreamy. Her recent works are more personal, and she is branching out and experimenting more with her art's look.

ASHLEE BEALS is in her first year of the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans. A recent winner of the AWP Intro Journals Award, her nonfiction has appeared in *Coffin Bell* and *The Rumpus*. When not writing, she makes comics and plays Americana music.

ERIK BEEHN is an artist and educator working out of Las Vegas, Nevada. Receiving his MFA from SAIC, his practice spans across installation, painting, and object making. Beehn is an adjunct professor at UNLV and the founder of Test Site Projects, a fine-art publishing house located in Las Vegas.

GERALDINE BIRCH has worked as a newspaper reporter for community newspapers in Southern California and Arizona. Her work included a ten-year stint as a freelance writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. Her writing has appeared in *The Arizona Republic*, *Six Hens, The Santa Fe Writers Project*, and *Fiction Attic Press.*

MICHELLE BITTING was short-listed for the 2020 Montreal International Poetry Prize. She won the 2018 Fischer Poetry Prize and *Quarter After Eight's* 2018 Short Prose Contest. Her fourth collection of poetry, *Broken Kingdom,* won the 2018 *Catamaran* Prize and was named to *Kirkus Reviews*' Best of 2018. She is a lecturer at Loyola Marymount University and the University of Arizona.

MASON BROWN is a surrealist oil painter from the United States. His works are typically based on either moments from dreams or scenes formed in his mind, and are heavily influenced by his interests in nature, science, and consciousness. More information can be found on MasonBrownArt.com.

ASHLEY BURNETT is a writer and editor living in California. Her work has previously appeared in *Split Lip Magazine*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Necessary Fiction*, and other publications. Her preferred way of visiting the Netherworld would be via spam texts.

JENNIFER CARRIER is a visual artist from San José. She has been involved with art from a young age and is mostly self-taught. She finds the process of creating to be therapeutic and a practice in patience. As an art teacher for ten years, Jennifer thrives by helping others find their voice through their own creations.

CASSANDRA CAVERHILL is the author of the chapbook *Mayflies* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have most recently appeared in *The Windsor Review*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, and *Cæsura*. Cassandra is an MFA Poetry candidate at Bowling Green State University and lives and writes in Ann Arbor, Michigan. More information can be found at cassandracaverhill.com.

TIMOTHY CECH has served as lead fiction editor for issues 153 and 154 of *Reed Magazine*. In 2019 he was recognized as an Ernie Pyle Reporter of the Year by the Associated Collegiate Press. He is currently pursuing an MFA at San José State University.

DAQUANE CHERRY relied on his art as an escape from reality throughout an unstable childhood. As a result, the image of the teddy bear appears in much of his work, representing the imagination. As kids we give our teddy bears names and storylines, but as we grow older we forget them. DaQuane rewrites and paints their journeys.

WORTLEY CLUTTERBUCK is the author of *Poèmes Déplorables de Wortley Clutterbuck,* available gratis at soundcloud.com/wortleyclutterbuck. Excerpts of his work have been published by *Blue Unicorn*, *Chronogram*, and *Quadrant*.

RACHEL A. CRAWFORD is a writer, editor, and teacher living in Northern California. Her work has been published in *New South* and on the Academy of American Poets website. She is a graduate student in the MFA program at San José State University, where she studies poetry and creative nonfiction.

EMMA DEPANISE'S poems are forthcoming or have appeared in journals such as *River Styx*, *The Minnesota Review*, *The National Poetry Review*, *Passages North*, and *Quarterly West*. Currently an MFA candidate at Purdue University, she is a poetry editor for *Sycamore Review* and a co-editor of *The Shore*.

PAUL DRESMAN was born in Los Angeles, educated in San Francisco at SFSU and in La Jolla at UCSD. He is a poet, a translator of Spanish poetry, and an essayist. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

MARY ANNA DUNN is the director of an educational nonprofit in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her poetry has most recently appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Portside*, and *Beltway Poetry Quarterly.* Her chapbook, *Letters to Littles' Mills*, was published by Finishing Line in 2018. More about her writing can be found at www.maryannadunnpoetand.com.

JONATHAN ENDURANCE holds a BA in English and Literature. He was a semifinalist for the Jack Grapes Poetry Prize (2020). His unpublished manuscript ("House of Cain") clinched the finalist spot in the *Ramblr* Quarantine Chapbook Contest (2020). You can read his work in *Rattle*, *Into the Void*, *One Magazine*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

WILLOW GELPHMAN is a fourth-year at UC Santa Cruz studying art and literature. She grew up in the Bay Area, where she's temporarily returned due to the pandemic. In her art she explores anxiety, surrealism, queer identity, and how weirdly these subjects intersect in the face of existential threat.

DAVID GROFF is the author of two books of poems: *Clay*, which won the Louise Bogan Award, and *Theory of Devolution*, a National Poetry Series selection. An independent book editor, he teaches poetry, nonfiction, and publishing in the MFA Creative Writing Program at the City College of New York.

ALEX GULIS is an emerging writer based in Kansas City. He studied creative writing, sculpture, and gender studies at Rhodes College, where he discovered his passion for using the arts as a means of queer self-examination. His work draws from our persistent human need for mutual warmth, home, and touch.

TVISHA GUPTA is a sophomore at Monta Vista High School. Some of her hobbies include reading, writing, playing piano, exercising, and coding. One of Tvisha's biggest goals is to publish a book, and she also wishes to move to New York City to pursue her dream of being a writer.

MATTY HEIMGARTNER is a queer artist and writer in California. He holds a BA in art and is currently studying for an MFA in creative writing. He is a resident artist of KALEID gallery in San José. His work has been published in *CreativPaper*, *Content*, *Beyond Words*, and *Artist Portfolio*.

SHEN CHEN HSIEH'S work expresses her inner world. Her identity is influenced by her multi-cultural background, relationships, and introverted personality. Experimenting with visual styles and diverse mediums—such as drawing, silk screen, and sculpture—provides her with opportunities to explore the conscious and subconscious mind and ultimately communicate this understanding with others through her creations.

ALDEN HUGHES is a senior at Prospect High School. He received a camera for Christmas two years ago. Since he started taking photos, he's come to look at the world more closely. Hughes enjoys capturing the dynamics of light and shadow and highlighting the uncommon in our common environment.

SAFIA ISMAIL is a nineteen-year-old artist with experience in painting, photography, drawing, and ceramics. She often works with themes of growth, self-reflection, and nature. Her pieces are extensions of herself and experiences as a human. Her artwork allows her to document unknown territories of her identity, which encourages her to keep creating.

SKYE JACKSON was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Green Mountains Review*, *Rattle*, and *Xavier Review*. Her chapbook, *A Faster Grave*, won the 2019 Antenna Prize. She was a finalist for the 2020 *Rattle* Poetry Prize. In 2021, she won the AWP Intro Journals Award.

Q'SHAUNDRA JAMES is a local Las Vegas artist. She earned bachelor's degrees in English and fine art at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her work has been exhibited at the Untitled Space Gallery and Main Street Arts. Q'shaundra participated in the Las Vegas Rouge Project. She also studied in Italy.

AMELIA JOY is a writer based in Melbourne, Australia. Her work was featured in *On Dit* and *Dubnium*. In 2018, she became a selected participant of Express Media's Toolkits Nonfiction program. She holds a BA and is currently working toward a Master of Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.

LONDON LADD, an illustrator whose work ranges from picture books to murals, uses a unique mixed-media approach combining cut paper textured with acrylic paint, tissue paper, and touches of the digital to bring his diverse subjects to life. Each image is steeped in intensity and emotion, a reflection of the artist himself.

DANUSHA LAMÉRIS' first book, *The Moons of August* (Autumn House, 2014), was the winner of the Autumn House Press Poetry Prize. Her second book is *Bonfire Opera* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020). She teaches poetry independently, and was the 2018–2020 Poet Laureate of Santa Cruz County, California.

HECTOR LEDESMA studied painting and fine arts in Santo Domingo and Madrid. He has curated more than 100 exhibitions worldwide, and his works are exhibited in the "Voluntariado de las Casas Reales de Santo Domingo" and the Madrid City Hall, as well as corporate collections throughout Europe and the Americas.

ANDREW MCCLURE is pursuing an MFA in creative writing at SJSU. He has spent the last decade living in and writing about Swaziland, South Africa, and Kenya. His ongoing projects include a family memoir, "Crocodile River," and a novel entitled "The Lost Erotica of Alexandria."

KATHLEEN MCNAMARA'S fiction and essays have appeared in *Witness*, *The Columbia Journal*, *Redivider*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Nimrod,* and other journals. She's a 2020 recipient of a research and development grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. Originally from southern California, she now teaches writing at Arizona State University.

MARCIA MEIER is an author, writing coach, and book editor who loves words, books, humans, and almost anything with four legs, not necessarily in that order. Find her at marciameier.com and weepingwillowbooks.com. Her memoir, *Face*, on which "Skin Craft" is based, was published by Saddle Road Press in January 2021.

MEGAN MERCHANT is an editor at *The Comstock Review* and *Pirene's Fountain*. Her latest book, *Before the Fevered Snow,* came into the world with Stillhouse Press in April 2020. You can find her work at http://meganmerchant.wix.com/poet.

JUNG MIN, aka MJ, is from South Korea. She teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and earned her MFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art. Her work navigates between individual desires and social expectations, elaborating on her uncomfortable feelings about navigating these societies and how they have impacted her identity.

JOSUÉ MONTIEL was born in the lightning capital of the world: Maracaibo. At 17, he moved to Florida with his family. As a teenager in Venezuela, Josué taught himself English by playing video games. With the help of his girlfriend, Caitlin, he's honed his writing skills while attending Hillsborough Community College.

MACKENZIE MOORE is a writer and illustrator based in Los Angeles who currently writes for television and podcast. Her chapbooks *Alms Basket for Your Heart* (Variant Lit) and *Bento Box* (Kelsay Books) are out now. She believes bagels heal most wounds.

RALPH ROBERT MOORE'S books include the novels *Father Figure*, *As Dead As Me*, *Ghosters*, and *The Angry Red Planet*; and the story collections *Remove the Eyes*, *I Smell Blood*, *You Can Never Spit It All Out*, *Behind You*, *Breathing Through My Nose*, and *Our Elaborate Plans*.

ZACH MURPHY is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Mystery Tribune*, *The Coachella Review*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

JOHN A. NIEVES' poems appear in journals such as *Crazyhorse, Southern Review, Harvard Review, North American Review,* and *Massachusetts Review*. His first book, *Curio*, won the Elixir Press Annual Judge's Prize. He's an Associate Professor at Salisbury University and an editor of *The Shore*.

JUSTIN NOGA is a fiction writer from Akron, Ohio. He holds an MFA from Arizona State University, where he taught Composition and Creative Writing. In 2019 he received a fellowship at Vermont Studio Center. His work is published in *Conjunctions* and *Witness*. He lives in Tempe, Arizona. His Instagram handle is @jus.tin.no.ga.

JIHOON PARK'S fiction is forthcoming or published in *Little Patuxent Review*, *New World Writing*, *Atticus Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently an MFA student at George Mason University where he also teaches. He is from San José, California.

GRAY PASSEY studies art and biology at Northern Arizona University. In his art process, Gray seeks to combine the aesthetics of satire with more serious subjects regarding extinction, pollution, and other biological injustices. Gray's art is also influenced by queer culture, and as a queer artist himself, he hopes to shed light on gender and sexuality.

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA'S eighth book of poetry, *The Turning* (2018), was released by his longtime publisher, Carnegie Mellon University Press. He is also an art critic and curator.

MAGDA ROMANSKA is a writer and theatre and media scholar. A graduate of Stanford and Cornell's doctoral program, she was a founding editor of *Palimpsest: Yale Graduate Literary & Arts Magazine.* Her op-eds and articles appeared in *The LA Review of Books*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Conversation*, *Salon*, PBS, and *The Cosmopolitan Review.*

JOSEPH SIGURDSON is a writer and poet who lives in rural Alaska. His first novel, *Buffalo Dope*, will be released in fall 2021.

NICK TAYLOR is the author of the novels *The Disagreement* and *Father Junípero's Confessor*. Under the pseudonym T. T. Monday, he also writes a series of thrillers set in San José. Taylor is a professor of English at San José State, where he directs the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies.

TRACY WHITESIDE is a Chicago-area photographer specializing in conceptual art. Her works center on women and their emotions. A photographer for over sixteen years, she is self-taught and is always developing new techniques. Tracy wants to awaken your imagination with images of beautiful women in their times of turmoil.

LINDA WILGUS is a Dutch writer and a graduate of the University of Amsterdam. She makes her home in the UK with her husband and three kids. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *J Journal*, *The Fourth River*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Stonecoast Review*, and other journals.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize). A twenty-six-time Pushcart nominee and winner of various awards, John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review*, as founder of Caesura Poetry Workshop, and as a literary agent.

TURNER WILSON is a writer, poet, and MFA candidate at Bowling Green State University. He currently serves as managing editor and assistant poetry editor for *Mid-American Review*. His work has appeared online in *Dreams Walking*, *The Tiger Moth Review*, and *Quatrain.Fish*.

KENNETH ZENZ is a Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist whose work describes interactions between the human being and the material world from the perspective of an ill trans masculine body. Using body horror, sacred imagery, and symbolic technologies, he explores how body modification, disability, technology, mental health, and identity embody themselves.

ANNIE ZHU holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Her fiction was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, longlisted for The DISQUIET Prize, and published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Firewords*, *The Puritan*, and elsewhere. Annie is currently completing a short-story collection and a novel set in the '90s.

CONTEST JUDGES

Rita Bullwinkel is the author of the story collection *Belly Up*, which won the 2018 Believer Book Award. Bullwinkel's writing has been published in *Tin House*, *The White Review*, *Conjunctions*, *BOMB*, *Vice*, *NOON*, and *Guernica*. She is a recipient of grants and fellowships from The MacDowell Colony, Brown University, Vanderbilt University, Hawthornden Castle, and The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation. Both her fiction and translations have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She is an editor-at-large for *McSweeney's* and a contributing editor for *NOON*. She lives in San Francisco and teaches at the California College of the Arts.

Sarah Nolte (she/her) is an undergraduate majoring in English and minoring in philosophy. She studied with Oscar-nominated writer Kim Krizan. Currently she is taking a break from creative writing to gain a deeper appreciation for literature and philosophy. She is the marketing manager as well as the social media and web director for *Reed Magazine*, and her work can be found in *Myriad Journal* and *Zeniada*.

Matthea Harvey is an award-winning American poet whose work is notable for its conceptual daring and relentless innovation—qualities that serve to expand the boundaries of the genre. Poet Dean Young has called Harvey's poems "marvelous contraptions . . . always ravishingly complex." Her collections include *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?* (2014), *Of Lamb* (2011), *Modern Life* (2007), *Sad Little Breathing Machine* (2004), and *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form* (2000). She has also published two children's books. Her collection *Modern Life* was the winner of the Kingsley Tufts Award, a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2008, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2017, Harvey was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

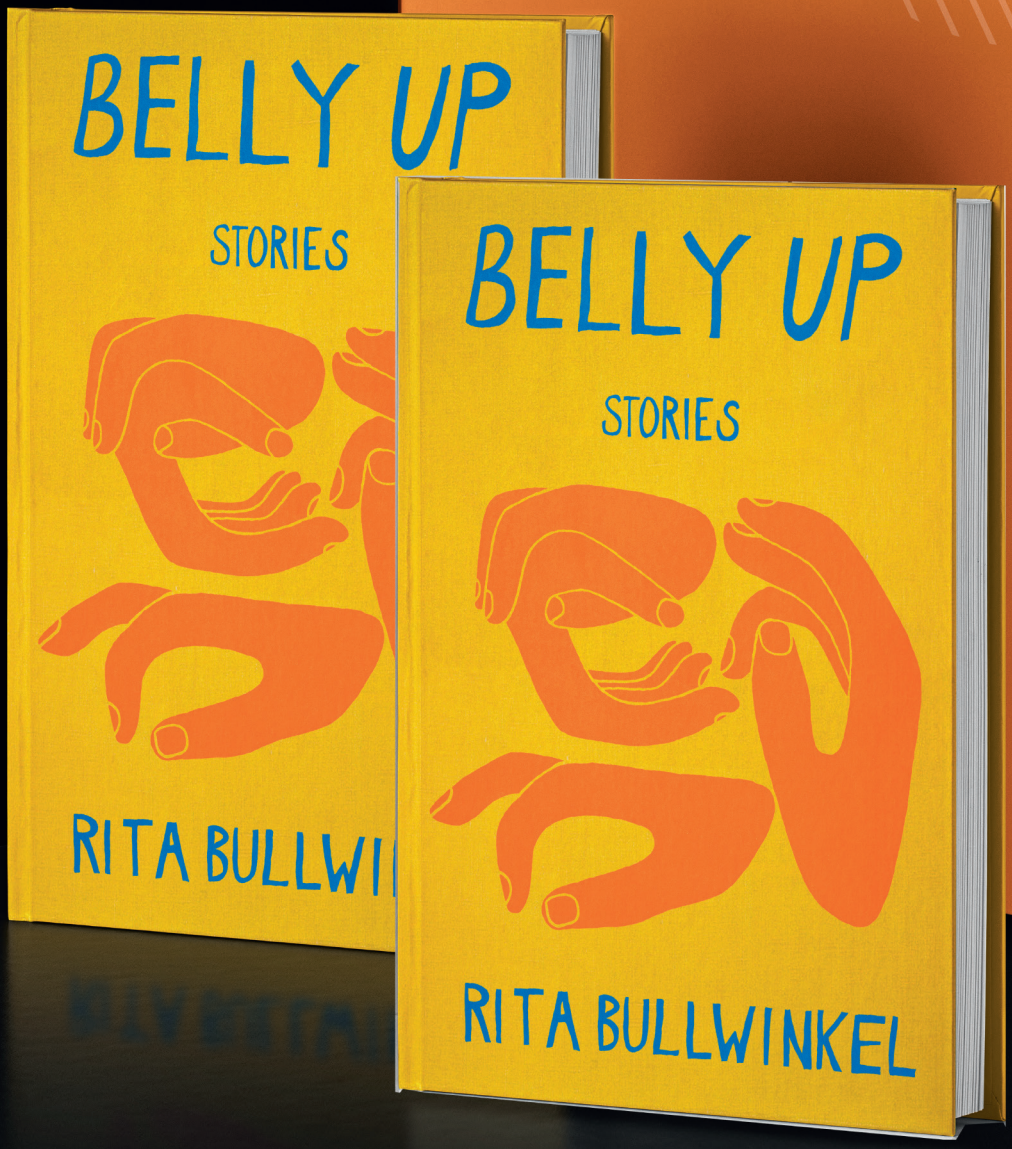
Suzanne Rico is an established television and print journalist who was part of the Emmy-winning team at KCBS-TV in Los Angeles. She has interviewed influential figures such as Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Her work has been featured in *O*, *The Atlantic*, *Los Angeles Magazine*, *LA Weekly*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and elsewhere. She can be found at suzannerico.com.

Erin Salazar is an artist, muralist, seamstress, curator, community organizer, entrepreneur, and dreamer originally from the Mojave Desert. She is the founding executive director of the arts nonprofit Local Color, which provides opportunities at the intersection of art and community development. Salazar and her team have painted over 40,000 ft^2 of murals throughout San José. Salazar was an Emerging City Champion at 8 80 Cities in 2015 and a National Arts Strategies Creative Community Fellow in 2016. Salazar has been part of the Leadership Development Program at the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute of the School of Arts and Culture and has been selected for the Knight Foundation's Public Spaces Fellowship. Salazar and her team have received a Mayor's Commendation from San José Mayor Sam Liccardo. In 2018, Salazar was named "Woman of the Year: Rising Star Honoree" by Senator Jim Beall and one of KQED's "Women to Watch: Bay Brilliant."

"This collection, which absolutely heralds an exciting new talent, takes place at a four-way crossroads between the mind and the body, the reality we can know and the reality adjacent to our own, which we can only glimpse through fiction."

—The Paris Review

RITA BULLWINKEL



"[This] book is full of squirmy pleasures."

—The New York Times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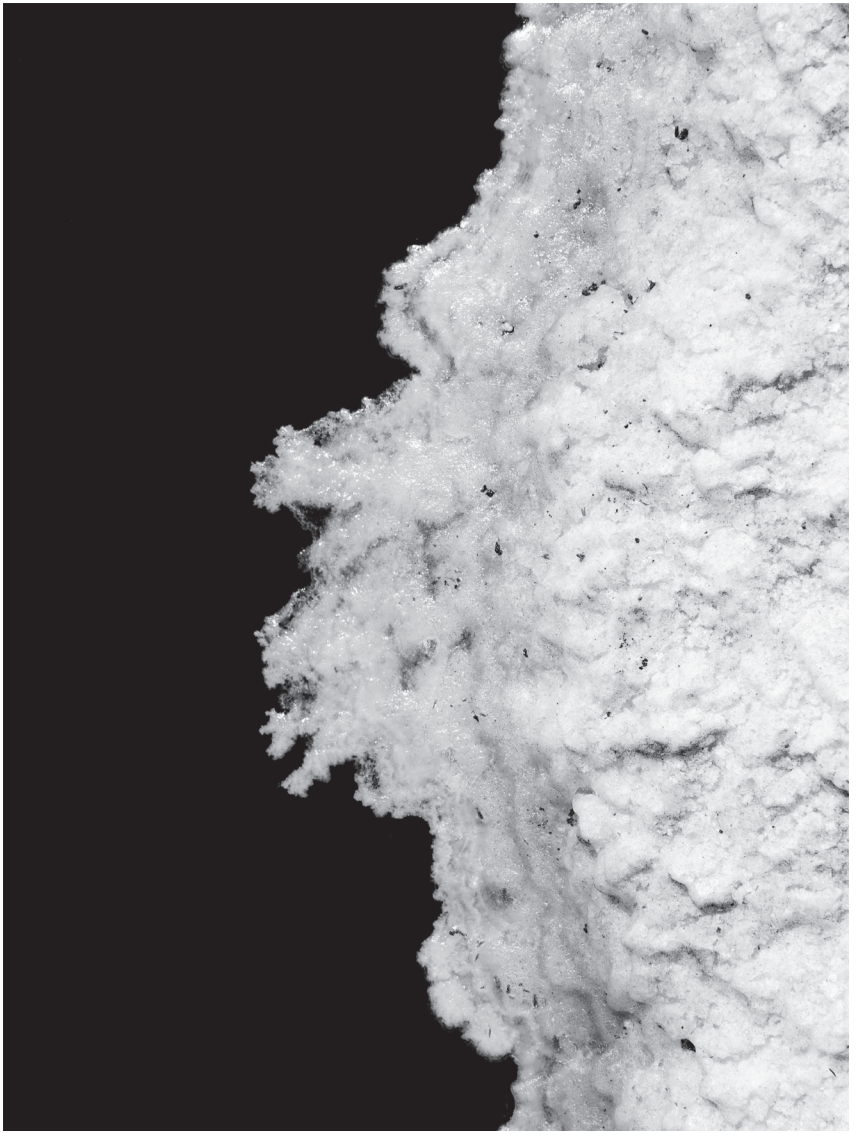

Rift
Alden Hughes
Digital photograph
6,000 × 4,000 px
2020

Dark to Light

Our experiences condition the way we think and process emotions.
I know that I am not alone when I say that my own experiences during the last year
were heavily influenced by the art and literature I consumed.
There were moments in the real world—the pandemic,
the California wildfires, politics, working and
schooling from home—which felt so bleak
that I relied on art and stories to escape.
Sometimes I craved somewhere dark to run away to,
while other times I needed somewhere light to hold me afloat.
Issue 154 of *Reed Magazine* is designed to be read
from the very first page to the very last.
In doing so, the reader dives
directly into the darkest of worlds,
both real and imagined—you may have noticed
that this issue of *Reed Magazine* has a strong surreal presence.
As the reader continues the journey, they will begin
to swim toward the surface, toward the light,
ending with poetry, stories, and art of a lighter nature.
As the world begins to open up to a new kind of normalcy
following an intense year of repetition, solitude, and questions,
Reed Magazine Issue 154 acts as a time capsule
for a year that we never could have imagined
and a year that we will never forget.
A year full of the darkest of darks
and the brightest of lights.

Matty

Matty Heimgartner
Design Director

Roger stood me up at the Diner
DaQuane Cherry
Acrylic on canvas
30 × 24 in.
2020

Fiction

Ashley Burnett • Willow Gelphman • Alex Gulis • Tvisha Gupta • Andrew McClure • Ralph Robert Moore • Zach Murphy • Justin Noga • Jihoon Park • Linda Wilgus • Annie Zhu

Nonfiction

Ashlee Beals • Geraldine Birch • Amelia Joy • Kathleen McNamara • Marcia Meier • Josué Montiel • Mackenzie Moore • Magda Romanska • Joseph Sigurdson

Poetry

V. Joshua Adams • Sally Ashton • Scott Bade • Ellen Bass • Michelle Bitting • Cassandra Caverhill • Wortley Clutterbuck • Emma DePanise • Paul Dresman • Mary Anna Dunn • Jonathan Endurance • David Groff • Skye Jackson • Danusha Laméris • Megan Merchant • John A. Nieves • Ricardo Pau-Llosa • John Sibley Williams • Turner Wilson

Art

Shelle Barron • Janelle Aina S. Baylosis • Erik Beehn • Mason Brown • Jennifer Carrier • DaQuane Cherry • Alex Gulis • Shen Chen Hsieh • Alden Hughes • Safia Ismail • Q'shaundra James • London Ladd • Hector Ledesma • Jung Min • Gray Passey • Tracy Whiteside • Kenneth Zenz

Profiles

ELLEN BASS
by Rachel A. Crawford

LANCE FUNG
by Matty Heimgartner

ANTHONY VEASNA SO
by Nick Taylor

RITA BULLWINKEL
by Timothy Cech

Featuring

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