



PROMETHEAN

SPRING 2023

THE OFFICIAL LITERARY JOURNAL OF
THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

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2023

VOL. 50

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Promethean is published by The City College of New York
160 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031

Volume 50, Spring 2023
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Front Cover:
“Caresses of Memories,” by Dilianny Espinoza

Back Cover:
“I Met Myself Inside My Reflection,” by Faith Brown

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Our thanks to the following for their passion, leadership and commitment to this journal:

Renata K. Miller, Dean of Humanities and Arts
Elizabeth Mazzola, Chair of the English Department
The Lippman Family

Special thanks to:

Doris Barkin, Faculty Advisor. Welcome back, Doris. We appreciate your check-ins, always willing to lend help or ideas, and your trust in us to bring this incredible journal to life.

Michelle Valladares, Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing. Thank you for your support and enthusiasm for the publication of this year's journal. We are encouraged by your encouragement.

From the Editors

Dear Readers,

There's nothing like a plot twist that keeps peeling back layers of a proper mystery. There's also no discovery quite like discovering your own story, if it's a story you could know by digging in the right places and putting together all the pieces. This 50th anniversary volume of *Promethean* is one such story.

Starting with what we could click, our digitized copies go back to 2013, but we've got some journals on our shelves. Print issues from 2006-2008 all mention *Promethean* goes back to "the 50s" with a nostalgic pride—but the 50s started more than 73 years ago. Even the journals in our little office show a gap with one solo journal dating back to 1971 and its shelf neighbor jumping to 1991. There must be a common-sense solution here; some well-intentioned editor must have scrambled the Roman numerals. We took a field trip to the Cohen Library Archives, behind the fifth floor glass door, to meet with CCNY archivists. Sure enough, there's a cardboard sheath with about 30 journals and zines dating back to the very first issue: "Winter 1953," a black cover and flame-colored outlines of a man reading a book, with a twig-chewing bird resting on his shoulder. The book's text and man's features, toenails, and shins are outlined in charred wood white. Holding the last copies of our first issue, we learned that immersive covers have been around for 70 years, but keeping with tradition and adding 1 to last year's number, the publication you hold in your hand is Volume 50.

Refusing to be those editors who can't dig, we've almost found the missing time, if missing time can be found. Evidence shows we have a 19-year gap from volume 20 in 1972/3 to volume 22 in 1990/1, and unlike the year between 2019 and 2021, history didn't leave a worldwide footnote. Sure, the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression began in fall 1973 and could have scared our journal into a cave, and maybe the 1990 advent of the WorldWide-Web, launch of the Hubble Space Telescope, beginning of the Human Genome Project, demolition of the Berlin Wall, or unearthing the most complete T.Rex ever in South Dakota—really; her name is Sue—may have resuscitated *Promethean*. Like any non-robots, we just don't know what we don't know. There's no magic

postcard in the archival sheath, no invisible ink treasure map in our filing cabinets or bookshelves, and no keeper of secrets, unless one of our readers was on the 1972-3 editorial board. If you were, thank you for the mystery, and for the profound lessons: take breaks. And power naps. If you worked on the 1990-1991 journal, thank you for the reincarnation. It's still great to be back.

Whatever kind of anniversary or amnesiary this year is, we celebrate the work inked on these pages. We think our authors and artists are pretty fantastic. We thank them, and we thank you for allowing them, and us, to accompany you on your next step, whatever direction or however uncertain. We also thank The City College of the City University of New York for encouraging this journal to continue timetraveling.

In Celebration,
The Senior Editorial Team



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Wednesday

AYESHA KHAN

I've started to believe
that, like most things in this world,
wasting my life away
is wondrous art.

Because my days nowadays,
season between half-hearted hobbies,
and bursts of obsessions
and midnight haircuts,

changing and washing bed sheets,
washed four days before,
skimming books
piling on my nightstand and floor.
Missed texts and forgotten emails,
yet hours long calls with old foes and friends
about the same old grievances.

I've never been good at
letting things go.

And it snowed yesterday,
so, I know it's magic outside.
But I stay inside
in this bedroom,
making needless art
with dried up paint
in worn out pajama sets.
In these wasted days
I am less angry than I ever was before.
Maybe that's progress

but I can not tell
if the withering rage means
they got to me.
That I too am to become unfeeling,
ignorant and content,
or maybe I'm growing up.

My night's most poor painting—
the ghost of my mother and mine
meeting around the breakfast table
like old times.

Cutlery clatter, chatter picks up
of the same old tired news.

We never became good at
letting things go.

Later I lay in my bed
and remember this novel where
a man spends all night hearing
the day old snow melt.

So I part my curtains,
open my windows,
and try to hear the day old snow melt.
Drops drizzling down rooftops.
Water sliding on slanted roads.
Precipitation leaving lamp posts and trees.
Splashes made by stray paws.
Sounds of distant creeks.
Or maybe it's all just a neighbor's leaky faucet.

These plants remain wilting,
to-do lists remain unmarked.
Stupid games played.
Stupid prizes won.
Still silence in all of this
unremarkable and ordinary.
On this Wednesday,
I lay and pick apart.



Reproduction of *A vigil by the sea, Côte d'Azur* by Marcel Rieder.
Painted by Ayesha Khan to accompany her poem *Wednesday*.

Girls Like Us

An excerpt

NINA CAPILLE OPPENHEIM

THE DORIS LIPPMAN PRIZE IN CREATIVE WRITING

Connie was a confluence of conflicting qualities to Mare. Her mother was five foot nothing and the most sure-handed cradler of infants Mare had ever seen. Connie could mold her hand and arm around any child's head and back like a baby whisperer, like she knew the very angle, tilt that would calm them immediately. There was utter confidence in the embrace. But Connie was also shrewd. She knew when she was getting hustled, when she was being lied to. This in combination with her brother Gregory's oversight had made Marianna's high school years feel like a dress that was two sizes too small. Marianna knew Connie could be like an old world witch. She could see behind you and inside you. So it wasn't much of a surprise when, out of the blue one day, with no prior discussion of David, she had asked Mare to invite her boyfriend over for supper.

Even Connie's invitation was a braided reflection of maternal care and shrewd strategy. Does his mother make marinara? she had asked. Marianna detected an ocean of possibilities even in this line of questioning. Mom, are you asking me if he's Italian like us? No, he's not. If his mother makes marinara it's not from tomatoes they grew in their backyard. Connie knew to leave well enough alone. She corrected Mare, told her that their people were Sicilian, from that little piece the boot is going to kick away. Then she took pause. Connie wanted grandchildren, wanted to live to see them, unlike her own mother who was gone by the time Gregory came. She figured a good way to start would be to just get the boy in the door of their house. Connie laughed, I won't embarrass you; I'll make stuffed shells with marinara, meatballs and sausage. They left it at that.

It was early August when the day came. Mare could feel the bittersweet end of the season in her body. This was what the summer had been. The year they lost Gregory was the same year she carved out a gray space away from home, in the cool, dark bedroom of David's summer house while his parents worked the weeks away in the city. They both knew the end was coming, that he would leave for college soon. They didn't talk about it but filled up the days with chicken dinners and boat races, tonight with supper at Mare's. She unlocked the door. He raised his eyebrows, smells good, he said, thrust his hands in his pockets, then grabbed Mare's hand when it was free.

Inside it was surprisingly dark. Connie sat on the couch in a house dress with the phone receiver to her ear. She raised a hand as if in greeting and left it in the air absently. She didn't look at them. Mare knew something was wrong. After a moment and some murmurs of ascent, Connie put the phone down. The receiver

made a subdued clang when she set it in the cradle.

That was your Uncle Sal, she said without looking up, Louisiana died.

David drew in a breath and said, I'm so sorry, tried to hold Mare's hand tighter. Mare pulled away.

Connie said quietly, as if to herself, first Gregory and now Lu.

David looked at Mare, confused, and said quietly, who's Gregory?

Connie looked up, startled. The boy didn't know about Gregory. A chasm between Connie and Mare opened, like they were suddenly living on opposite sides of a divide, like the earthquake Connie had heard of that broke her parents home town in Sicily in half. A veil lifted from Connie's eyes. Of course. The girl had been living a life away from this one, where she wasn't defined by loss, by broken hinges and a crumbling house, by the absence of a lost boy who the police had barely bothered to inquire about after the report was filed. Connie snapped into the present, apologized, life is for the living.

Connie was transformed in an instant. She got up. She looked in David's eyes and held out a hand. She squeezed his rather than shook it. I meant to change out of my house dress, she blurted out, but now you know me better than I planned and it's only the first day I met ya. She was suddenly girlish, mischievous. Mare's friends had always liked Connie. She could see David open toward her in that moment, disarmed.

Connie beckoned them into the house, the stereotypical Italian mother leading them directly to the dinner table. She smiled, sit down and eat, then abruptly said Mare, you're in love with this boy and he doesn't know about your brother? She touched the saint on a thin chain around her neck when she mentioned Gregory.

Connie asked Mare to serve the food while she went upstairs to change into proper clothes, but a moment later she called Mare from the top of the steps. Mare went up. Connie was still in her house dress. You and David enjoy yourselves, she said. I'm going to pack. We'll leave for Philly in the morning; what a tragedy she sighed. Marianna held her mother's hand and said Ma, Aunt Lu was half way dead, she was old, her dying is sad, Gregory dying is a tragedy. Connie looked up sharply and said you think he's dead. I do, Marianna answered.

After dinner Mare walked David out and set herself down in a chair on the porch. Want to go over to sunset beach, he asked. But Mare leaned back in the chair, said no, she felt like she belonged here tonight, now, and said goodbye.

She watched the sky above the long row of homes. It was a clear blue canvas suddenly stroked with oranges, reds and purples for a furious fifteen minute sunset and then snuffed out fast. She watched while the electric blue night was muted with a hood of black. What had she been thinking? She'd tried to get away from all of this, the stuff that had defined her all over the island, all of her life. She could level with David, tell him everything. She knew that. But the idea of laying it all out—her long dead father, the little house they struggled to keep, the storm, Gregory—giving David an orientation toward her, a new place from which to see her, skewing his perspective away from who she was in their private spaces and navigating him toward this other thing—was too stifling a thought.

He saw her as whole. She didn't want him to know the version of her that was fractured and broken. So that was that. She'd had a pretty good run of it, she figured, a summer romance with a prep school kid. Nights in the cool, calm bedroom of his youth, with the brown plaid blanket across the foot of the bed, with the clean, fresh smell of a young man headed the right direction in life. Not bad. She almost wanted to laugh at herself. She'd thought she'd felt free but now she knew she'd been hiding the better part of who she was.

Marianna stretched in the lawn chair and got up to go inside. She heard a familiar growl and saw Tommy's car pull up the block. He had been rehabbing a hot rod for as long as she could remember. He was faithful to his almost weekly check-ins though she had missed him on the last few. The times she was home when he came by she usually heard the car's deep purr from the back of the house but there it was now in all its red-painted iron glory, with a noisy new "look at me" engine to boot.

Where you been, he grinned, working hard? Mare smiled and flipped the switch inside that told her to get ready for Tommy's particular style of banter, like Gregory's. It was like a minor sporting event. May the best wit win. He leaned on the wobbly post, remembered the spot and moved to the other side of the porch. You want a beer, he asked jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the car. No, I was about to call it a night, Mare wanted to put things to an end. Oh, look at this, Tommy's whole demeanor got animated, activated in motion. Come look at this, he moved toward the car. What is it, Mare said with a hint of wariness. Nothing bad, Tommy, childlike, waved her over to the passenger side door. Found these at work, he raised his eyebrows with playful innocence. Guy drops off his van, doesn't come back for it and we find these guys inside. Marianna couldn't see anything inside the dark car. She poked her head in. There, in the foot of the passenger side of the front seat, was a cardboard box. She heard a faint peep and then they came into focus, five little baby chicks. Four were sleeping and one bobbed all over, nipping at the box all around. Cute as hell, right, Tommy smiled and reached his hand out to the little bird, the way you would for a dog to sniff. It bobbed, chirped and then nipped. Tommy looked at Mare. They both laughed. That hurt more than you'd think it did, he said. What are you going to do with them, she asked. Take them off shore; I know a guy with a farm, keeps a lot of animals. Want to go for a ride? No, I'm OK, I'm going to turn in, Mare stood up. Come on, short ride, have a beer and come back home; Greg knew these guys, Weasel and Junkyard; quick trip and come right back. Mare had heard of them through her brother but never met them. The names alone were indelible. OK, she shrugged, short ride.

Mare had seen cars like life-size matchbox toys zooming around town. She was not an exceptionally tall woman. But inside Tommy's car she felt like the dollar bill her mother stuffed into a tiny envelope every Sunday for mass. She felt better suited to blast up into outer space than to thrust forward down the narrow back streets of her hometown. How could Tommy drive this thing? She looked over at him. He was practically lying down flat with his right arm up above his

head at the twelve o'clock position on the steering wheel. He winked, ready? In ten, nine, eight, she said. Tommy revved the engine.

It wasn't a long drive offshore. In less than twenty minutes they'd crossed all the little bridges and were driving by farm after farm after farm under a big dark sky full of stars. You couldn't see stars like this on the island with all its bright street lights. Tommy veered into what Marianna was sure was a thicket of vines. She gripped her seat but it turned out to be a hidden dirt road. Tommy slowed down and they bobbed over the rutted path overhung with vines and branches that tapped and scratched the sides of the car. Tommy turned his headlights off and made ghost sounds. He flicked the lights back on and Mare rolled her eyes at him. When she began to wonder how far they were going, the brush cleared and a little clapboard house and open barn came into view. They pulled up and got out while the dust behind them settled all round the car.

A peacock crossed the backyard with its folded up tail feathers sweeping the ground. He looked at Mare, crowed and sauntered away, indifferent. Tommy had been right about the chicks. There was a big coop and a grassy area where Junkyard Dog, a giant of a man, deposited them with great care. They peeped around and pecked in the grass. Mare and Tommy joined Junkyard, his wife Ivy and Weasel at a picnic table.

Mare knew it was her job not to draw the attention of the men. She sat down next to Ivy, a woman with a face as wide open as the moon and a deep crease across it, slashed from the right eyebrow to the left corner of her mouth. Mare looked her dead in the eyes, didn't flinch at the old scar and said hello. Ivy, steely eyed, assessing Mare, looked at her right back and asked her if she wanted a drink. I'll have whatever you're having, Mare flashed back. Something in Ivy's face let down its guard. Mare kept a poker face, couldn't help but test Ivy right back and said stoically, what is that, some kind of bootleg? Now Ivy's face crinkled crossways. Hard as nails and easy to smile. Mare knew the type. That's an Anheuser Busch in a Dixie cup, Ivy said and got Mare one of her own.

They spent a good hour drinking and shooting the shit. Off the cuff Ivy told Mare she'd been called for jury duty. Now she unfolded an intimacy like that between two old girlfriends, unassuming, devoid of pretense. She enumerated a series of scenarios she'd imagined to get herself off the hook. Almost all of them had to do with drinking. She'd show up to the courtroom half tanked and eager to serve, booze breath blowing on the lawyer's face as they asked their fielding questions. She acted it out, he's going to say this, I'm going to say that, and after each scene she crowed. Mare joined in her laughter. If she wasn't funny, Mare saw that at least Ivy was real, earthy, trying to make a good go of it.

Marianna had a vague sense that they were there longer than they'd planned. But the drinks, the laughter, the stars scattered above them in the black night all obscured the time. She hadn't noticed the wiry guy they called Weasel leave the table until he came back with a gun. He'd been sitting at the far end next to Junkyard. But now he sat down on the length of empty bench next to Mare, so close she could feel the heat of his leg next to hers. She could have shifted closer

to Ivy, but thought better of it and froze the expression on her face again. Come on, Weasel, Junkyard said. Junk didn't move but seemed to expand, grow larger in his seat. Come on, Weasel echoed boyishly, looking down. He grinned, opened the barrel of the gun and then looked up and right at Marianna and said play Russian roulette? She hadn't seen any bullets in the barrel but now Weasel was fishing around in his pocket. He kept looking at her and she could see there was something jittery in his eyes. They never quite landed in one place for very long.

Marianna reached out coolly for her drink and took a sip. From Weasel's direction she heard a quiet clink and then a weightier smack, she assumed, of the barrel slamming shut. She guessed now one in six of the chamber was loaded. She felt a wave of red heat flare from her throat to her belly to the bowl of her pelvis. She knew that to express fear would be to draw his attention so she assumed a looseness antithetical to what she was feeling. She put the drink down and scanned the table. Tommy was all restraint but Mare could see he was ready to pounce. From the corner of her eye she saw Weasel holding the gun by the handle. Junkyard seemed to growl and laugh at the same time, you trying to turn my woman into poison, Weasel? She's got that poison Ivy look now. Mare could hear that Junk's laughter was more of a warning. Weasel raised his right hand in the air between his head and Marianna's. Mare felt a rush of air and heard a thwack as Ivy reached across her and slammed the length of the barrel sideways into Weasel's face, muzzle pointing straight up into the sky. Two Dixie cups, Mare's and Ivy's, tottered then spilled cold beer into Marianna's lap. She jumped up and stepped back, looking at the liquid yeast drip from her shorts. Look what you did, Ivy spat at Weasel. No one mentioned the gun, just focused on Mare's soaked clothes and the wasted beer. Ivy turned to Mare, now maternal and soft, and said OK, sweetheart, you go inside that back door, turn down the hallway to the right; there's the bathroom and towels under the sink. Mare heard Ivy continue to berate Weasel, heard Tommy and Junkyard hoot, while she walked across the patchy grass. She went in the back door and—hang the wet shorts, the bathroom, the towels, the lot of them—walked straight through the house and right out the front door. When she reached the end of the long dirt road she heard a shot in the distance behind her. Marianna kept going in the dark and walked all the way home.

What Spirit

CORINNE SHEARER

slipped beside you murmuring irresistible
 violence was it not enough
 that sometimes the sky cracks open pink floods a lavender so soft
 gray before you can name it but wasn't it something
 maybe the pills rattled like rosaries allowed you to air out
 your life like a sheet hung on the line
 then preferring that false animation to release it
 was the wind kinder than your own grip I can't speak of peace
 was it ecstasy or relief the grass remembered the shape of your body
 for no more than ten minutes after they collected your body
 blown speechless when the inside met the air and so became real
 became more than one person's pain when did the light go out
 did you feel beneath the cemetery tree planned so considerably uncle
 tell me how it was to leave

Catching The Rain

a villanelle

CORINNE SHEARER

You were only this big when the sea came
What is a home that has no place
We were given palms like valleys for catching the rain

Several generations knew not where they had lain
We made mountains so high they needled the clouds like lace
You were only this big when the sea came

A people is not like a body, fracture makes them strong not lame
Be warned about forgiveness which moves at its own pace
We were given palms like valleys for catching the rain

Spirit must wander, become the refrain
No mirror can return a face
You were only this big when the sea came

At times you will remember salt men and feel shame
There is no monument that water will not erase
We were given palms like valleys for catching the rain

It is easy to forget our names
But stories endure if given a space
You were only this big when the sea came
We were given palms like valleys for catching the rain

Friday Night

EVELYN ASHBURN

I'm standing on the corner with two paperbacks in my hands, held in front of me like an offering. I am a schoolgirl, praying to the deli in front of me, to the lit-up Heineken sign. Praying to 'Open 24 hours.' Praying that this time, cigarettes will cure cancer, and even end famine.

I don't think I even enjoy cigarettes, but we all believe they'll scratch some itch. Be ultra-satisfying, fulfill some picturesque movie scene recreation we never even knew we all had. I wish I liked them as much as my Mother did. As much as hiding them from your kids, only you smell of them so much that they start stashing them in the freezer. When we all smoke, we act like my Mother—claiming the 'organic' label on the American Spirit box will somehow offset its effects. Your roommate might even have those long European ones, but you only like them because they don't taste quite as bad. We all smoke hemp cigarettes now, horribly chic.

A far-off friend told me that the subway can go up to fifty miles per hour and knowing that made me feel nothing. But I still wrote it down to scare my Mother. To instill more fear into her about the City, about my Life. On the train, a man thinks I'm following him, and I think he's following me. He's dressed in gray and purple like a pigeon. We follow each other from the top left of Manhattan to the bottom right. I tell my Mother about how sometimes I forget where I'm walking and my whole life zooms out and I no longer am a part of time.

So now my stolen books smell like smoke, and I can't wait to get home. Don't tell my Mother I can't wait to get home. She thinks I live a vicarious life. Once, I told her I go out every night to speakeasies, endlessly fraternize at clubs, and always stand leaning over the edge of the subway platform. She believes I only go out at night, alone—never aware of the world around me. But I went out tonight and I can't wait to return. I'd rather be drinking a light beer in bed and reading Charles Dickens, while only enjoying one of those activities.

I call her up—I knew I would as soon as I left the house. Mother, I went out tonight and this girl kept crying about a boy she dated for a month. Mother, the bartender didn't even give me a second glance even though I stared at him the whole time. Mother, the entire world is contesting itself, and neither you nor I matter—will you please let me tell you I had one cigarette? She hangs up.

The floor is always wet here but it never rains. It could be urine, but it could just be the type of concrete, a mirage. I surface to the street, unabridged. I call my Father, which means I must be bored out of my mind. I don't like him much but I tell him everything. Father, I've become syncopated to other people's bullshit but I swear I've never created my own! Father, what if the selfishness-to-aging graph is linear? Father, can I call myself an adult even though I'm broke? Father,

do you still think I'll be able to make it to pickleball in the park at seven tomorrow? He tells me I might be a few minutes tardy. I tell him he's on one, and I get to hang up this time.

For clarity, my parents always told me I was an industrious child, or maybe that was my brother, but either way, I've been spending my whole life trying to figure out what that means. Barely anything has become of their procurement of me. A child to call you up late at night and complain.

I live in a twenty-six-story walkup and the doorman is a dog but he has an excellent system for organizing the building's mail. I throw him a bone on the way in and begin my ascent. I am grateful for this time because it gives me the chance to catch up on podcasts about plant-based diets and reminisce about having an elevator. Years ago my family got stuck in one and my Mother and Father argued about whether the fireman who would inevitably save us would be physically built or not while the elderly woman subjected to the event ate her takeout in the corner. Someone is having a party on the thirteenth floor but it would violate superstition to knock. Instead, I throw a brick.

The night has gotten very unconscious at this point and I apologize for that. Coherence is not my virtue. Someone, somewhere, yells at me to take my shoes off, but no one's home.

Holy Anorexic

RAYN VALLEAU

I've been treating this body like a
Ford Crown Victoria, 97k miles.
A rabbit for an engine and
swamp water in the tank.

Think I might be more roller skates, glass slippers,
an ex lover's cardigan—
somethin' silly,
somethin' fragile,
somethin' pathetic.

My mouth tastes like brass,
all the door knobs I'd lick like sickness
are a diet,
line this stomach in aspartame, lungs with soot
and they can pray together.

I can't stop coughing.

This is how Saint Catherine of Siena musta' felt,
holy anorexic, livin' on eucharist
and cancer pus,
purging dinner with twigs.

The difference between mirabilis and nervosa
is that one makes you a mystic
and the other
medicated.
I just want to hold a little magic, a bit of heaven, see the angels
float off past the steeple
through the market without touching a single peach or pear.

The guilt of flesh is everlasting.

Saint Veronica Giuliani
fished the five orange seeds she let herself swallow outta her throat like a
Good Christian Daughter.

Heavenly Father likes his children
sleeping on broken pottery, showered in leper spit.
Self annihilation is the quickest way home.

You tell me my body is a temple but
there ain't no sacrilege in building a church to burn—
not if ya hum a Hail Mary, eat the ash as an offering,
say the Holy Spirit told ya 'so.

I give myself to the dog's jaw
and admire the teeth left in my hand, red welts and
puncture wounds.
This is how Jesus musta' felt,
stigmata'd and starving,
pure with piety.

This disease believes it deserves to be
beatified, immortalized.

Note to self: this is not a religion.
 Note to self: there is no baptism in breaking.
 Note to self: dying won't save you.
 Note to self: peaches are fucking delicious.

Others

RAYN VALLEAU

I hope I hurt less in the next life.

I hear bugs beg for their souls
to be housed in humans.
These hands are coveted,
this heart.

I would like to be
a pigeon
or
a starfish
somewhere high
or low
someone I've never been.

I'd like to be a calico,
sunning on your porch front.
I'd like to be the tree which
spends a lifetime growing
just to spend another day
waiting on your bookshelf.

I hope you hold me from time to time.

Equinox

ISSIS PALOMO SÁNCHEZ

There was always something thrumming behind thrumming behind thrumming behind. The fox shifted eyes every time you stretched your back. The serpent was beginning to wake. But some thing held and would not go.

At last the equinox broke, the sun rose shadowless. Somehow the feet fell no longer held by the invisible cord taut to sky. Somehow spring surged forward. The warmth of your body then was not the warmth of your body the previous June. Says the left to the right: silence does not become him. The right to the left: falsity becomes her less. And so the twins slip into a wrestling peace, the husk falls away, the world is birthed. You come to speak from you. You come to speak of your body.

A severance.

The warmth of womb the first thing you miss.

The tongue divided against self betrays the ebb and flow of lust called desire called twin. Twinings of dusk curl the tongue trips on tamarind and persimmon birthing mandorlas of light out of indigo thought. Arachnid architecture houses archives in the space between each filament of web. Yesterday unspins itself. House on fire. Yesterday unspins itself. House on fire. Yesterday unspooled by single thread. House on fire. Glacial melt. Desire exiled to the cold countries. But this house has always been on fire. Liquid pools the thighs and paps of Anu. The waters are flowing. The waters are flowing.

The waters flow.

Waters moves unleaving the things of this world. The 10,000 things under the scaffolded sky. Named counted and categorized for good measure. Eternal delight reduced to substance reduced to nomenclature reduced to weight reduced to price.

The price was set in the beginning. A base thing to set a price, sealing rot into the fruit before it had a chance to bear.

Nevertheless, receive the invitation. A seat at table. Feast on famine. Those others the shadows – ask not whom. The price is stated. The price is stated again. Although every syllable of this language screeches it. You are not willing to pay.

Darkness unfolds and a carmine moon.

Link between thought and thought severed long ago.

The price was set. The price is set. You will not pay. You do not pay. You are exiled to a cold country. Sunless and moonless. Desert. No hope of feast. A feast of famine. And yet your body is warm. Your body is warm. Your body is warm. Your body warms. These words an incantation to impart warmth to your body.

The cold of Earth the last thing you forget.

Black Sun

ISSIS PALOMO SÁNCHEZ

The silenced speak. The dead have their drink of rain.

Walls of blue. The sort of blue you ache for even as it stares you down.

That first night. Miami. A motel in Overtown. Mother brother sister had flown down from the North. One of the united states called “New,” after some place someone missed back across the waters. How different a world of circumstances had that someone stayed in that place he so missed that he must name a land new to him after it.

Some spaces are home to some. To others they are mere stops on a journey elsewhere.

Lately names evade me. English feels an acquired tongue, which she is to me. And I say “she” because she is an acquired persona as well, whom I have slowly been shedding as a snake her skin.

The blue, darker than sky, you will never forget. Nor the two young men, whom you feared less for the threat of violence against you than for the violence enacted many a time against them. You knew even then that your fear of them was yet another form of that violence. And you a child, but still the perpetrator with your gaze.

So let this stand as the first testament of a stranger more familiar than my own skin. I am warmer than sun suffusing layers of sinew and crouched nerve. I am the sea and the three suns that I submerge beneath my flood, warmer than the icon painted to the tenured sky.

Miami was strange after two years in the North. Even if it was much closer in every way to the homeland that had abandoned you long before you abandoned her. The yearning for which homeland can never erase the facts of history: this land had abandoned your mother and the mothers of your mothers before they were born, an island of exile.

The eyes close to open. In the beginning was opening. When I emerge now, I cannot believe that there is a world outside and around me. The dissonance is absolute. In my daily walks, I dissociate by listening to music. If I pause the music, the world pours back in with all the heaviness of reality. It is sound that connects all, spanning the distance created by the chasm of vision. It is sound that first lifted sky from earth.

The South morphed new in your eyes then. When you saw lizards again, you were frightened and repulsed. You who had chased them, running about with your cousins in Havana and Nazareth. But lizard is a symbol of division, the opening of one into two. And between the two, a surfeit of light unbearable.

There is a crossroads that Anubis and I often traverse during our daily walks. Twice there I have experienced a strange dislocation — a sudden forgetting of myself, almost a forgetting that there is such a self at all. The world spins without spinning and the rope that keeps me from floating into the void shrieks threadbare.

I am not the bastard, broken child of any civilization.

Reflections of a Fake Ukrainian

MARINA PALENY

I.

A starts a conversation in her head and leaves you to catch up once the sentences have made their way through the vocal channels. It's no use expecting anything more sympathetic. Her thoughts are her own after all. This is a sporadic yet predictable tendency, and makes for dialogue that's essentially a series of loop-holes, a scavenger hunt for the right detail that will complete the picture. She is telling me about a memory in Ukraine, except her narrative keeps coiling around a grudge she's holding against someone, and it's hard to get the facts right. In the middle of it, we are transported to an exhaustive description of the man's bad breath or this trivial report of an alleged misdeed he carried out with full intent to hurt A's feelings, or—the opposite still—an elaborate account of a joy so meticulously archived, it overrides the plot without further ado. Most times the memory is lost somewhere between the forest of diversions, and my thoughts wander off to my own recollections of our childhood domains. Nineteen years later, they seem more like a series of uploaded fragments.

There's the story when A and I almost set the house on fire; there's the vague (almost fictional) time D and I went to live at a sanatorium long enough to attend the local school; there's the time V ripped his thigh open with an exposed nail while sliding down the roof with D; the time we sold our own home-picked cherries on the highway side; the time we lived off "the land" for the summer and earned a bunch of snack cash and swam in the makeshift "pond"; the time we slept on top of the haystack beneath the stars; the time we had no food and mom's heart broke because her children stopped crying from hunger and merely accepted it as fact; so many stories that eventually become stale and redundant with time. Memory is stifled by time too, and each detail that once lit the way to joy, gets forgotten by accident between the lines, erased by conditions and circumstances, but more importantly, by new and more relevant memories. I suppose joy prefers a certain expansive proximity, and you can't live on expired joy for too long. You have to learn to manufacture it from scratch.

This is where my thoughts stray while A drives us to another place. There, we sit and talk some more—A enjoying the audience, and me secretly noting her intricate, eccentric patterns—the paths words take, spoken and unspoken. Surely, no one else muses just so.

II.

Two weeks prior, on my way back to Lviv, I was robbed while passing through a train station in Kyiv. I called my mom who laughed at me for a good while.

She told me a story with her euphonic folksy Ukrainian, about an old man who, after thirty years, visits his home country from America. She described him passionately arriving at the airport, falling on his knees to tearfully, tenderly kiss the ground of his homeland: "At last! my Motherland, I, your prodigal son! Back to the sacred soil of my Home!" and so on and so forth he went on sniveling, emoting his pleasure at this enormous honor. Once he felt he conveyed his esteem, he turned around, and noticed his baggage missing! After many hours of dealing with airport security, the police, and local authorities, this fervent man left the premises huffing and puffing, entirely exasperated at the audacity of thieves to target him so—an innocent pilgrim! Then, turning to his wife, he groaned, "I can't wait to come back to our little house in America. I will kiss every brick down the lawn path to our darling front door. In any event, no one will take our baggage!" With what I imagine as little tears in the corner of my mom's eyes from cackling in my direction, she closed her tale and pronounced for additional emphasis, (as moms tend to do), "That's you and that's your sentimentality, Marina. Keep. An eye. On your bags!" She hung up and I, defenseless against this contagious delight, found myself feeling easier, lighter. In my locket I carry three grains of wheat I picked up in a field near our hometown a couple of weeks ago. When I shake it against my ear, I can hear their delicate rustle.

III.

It's true that this past summer I went to Ukraine in search of some missing remnant—a distinctive belonging that I only identify now by its absence. But what is my identity crisis to Ukraine? An absurdity at best. A trait so irrelevant and oblivious that it's laughable and only proves the distance that 19 years has carved between me and the person I would've become, should I have stayed. Without wanting to admit it, I sought desperately to get a hold of a little validation. I wanted to be claimed by my people, and to bring that claim back home with me, to clutch it in my pocket for safety—a most prized possession. But I resisted it because I knew how it must look to real Ukrainians, how aloof and self-indulgent to afford that kind of opulent craving, while most hunger for food, rent, gas, political stability, and financial security, or the hope for blatant corruption to cease its irreverent grip on the everyday livelihood of its citizens. However.

On two separate occasions two men, in two different cities, had the startling conviction to contradict my own uncharitable conclusions about myself. And with such a quick and unembellished grace and with the same, carbon-copy statement they astounded me, "No, you're not American, you're ours." A compliment I defined and accepted in my mind as deliberate and therefore entirely indisputable. Please understand, the logic is airtight.

The first time it happened, I was eating stuffed peppers in someone's backyard, surrounded by friendly faces and a cat affectionately rubbing my side, purring. Later, we ate ice cream with raspberries and basil in colorful, delicate tea cups. The carbon-copy statement came in response to a harmless joke about my

status. His words kept my belly warm for a long while after.

Another time it came from a police officer through a stained bureaucratic sliding window, and the declaration was undeniable—perhaps due to his profession, or to a few stories we’ve exchanged while waiting, or that he’d served for a time in the town where I grew up, or perhaps it was his general outlook on dual citizenships, that you don’t just take a country out of a person with a thud of a stamp. Even in America. Before I left the office, he candidly asked me if I liked the US better. I counted my words, heeding to pay my respects and tell the truth. It was a sunny day, and while leaning on the waiting room wall, I collected whitewash with the back of my camo jacket. Some residue of it came to America with me where it finally rinsed off in a New York City Laundromat—through the underground pipes, into the Hudson, and towards the Atlantic Ocean.

IV.

I wear the layers of these thoughts like clothes. We, the Slavic diaspora, come to America to generationally forget, and to selectively salvage old traditions into something more modern, a little more profitable. My parents used to warn us about selling your soul to the American values: the god of the dollar. It all feels very righteous and appropriate and responsible, because wanting the best for your children and your children’s children is universal and, even holy. Back in our hometown though, no one is transgressing the rules of our heritage. No one is recycling principles, refurbishing outdated customs. Here, as before, traditions are anchors as they had always been; reminders that life moves in predictable patterns, like the seasons, like a new birth after a passing, and there is always a solace to draw from this ancient wisdom. Here, people just live and endure day to day—this mundane sameness, a comfort and a bondage simultaneously (this sameness that the diaspora had seemingly surpassed). They’re not familiar with this violence of assimilation that we co-sign in the name of our own, different, cultural survival. But they are intimate with many other violences around. The less subtle, more abrupt and immediate, physical and mental violences of war and alcoholism, scarcity and debt so monstrous it eats people: body, mind, and soul. The evident and the yet undiscovered landmines of the refugee who fled and the refugee who stayed.

V.

They say each Ukrainian vyshyvanka has dedicated regional patterns. Everywhere you look, someone is selling them on the streets; I am told by a local that they’re ordered from a manufacturer in China, and I begin to ask the sellers if they know who stitched the ones hanging up for sale. Sometimes I get an aggravated look, sometimes they say it was their cousin or a sister-in-law. When the vyshyvanka is cheap, I can tell they’re lying. It looks like it was machine-made and kind of clumsy all over. But I’m looking for a specific design from the eastern side, with the certain symbols between the stitches. Historically,

these designs are meant to be a ritual of archiving the ancestral bond, something our grandparents used to honor, and their parents and grandparents, many generations into the past.

All Ukrainian embroidery shares certain symbols: floral, geometric, zoomorphic and so on. The cross represents light overcoming darkness, the rectangle represents a fruitful field, a peacock symbolizes youth and happiness; two peacocks facing each other stand for a new family. To an untrained eye, the designs may appear too similar, but they carry codes and symbols of each individual cultural domain—a little secret, its own type of literacy.

I have one hanging in my closet that I’m reading to myself and interpreting its nuances the best way I know how. This particular vyshyvanka came from my mother’s hometown near the Belorussian border, a town that literally translates as The Old Village. A place I, regretfully, did not visit on my trip. I have to imagine someone more Ukrainian than me stitched some meaning and affection into the material and when I wear it, I can carry some of that history on my body too, even here in New York City.

VI.

Yes, forgetting is cultural erasure. I have to speculate: when do we make any collective contact with those people who sat in the airplane chairs for the first time crossing the Atlantic? Flying over Mt. Rainier that we would later hike casually with our aunts and uncles a decade later? I do think we collectively forget; first, the experiences that are unpleasant and too heavy to hold in memory, the experiences that brought us to the desperation which made us flee, made us abandon. Yes, I was old enough to still transmit my own survivor’s guilt. How many others deserved this chance and would have probably made something more of themselves? Something less fearful? But it was my ass in the airplane seat, my purple jean overalls, my chestnut hair braided behind me, my baby sister not crying, her chubby fingers trailing around the window following the massive cloud shapes outside. I am sipping on the complimentary apple juice and wondering what else they’ll bring around in those carts.

After we land in Sacramento, I only remember that it is nighttime and outside the car window, we see our first palm tree pass by, zooming in and growing exponentially. I don’t remember too many other firsts. Everything happens too fast, then it ends and is quickly replaced with more events that need remembering. It seems to happen instantaneously. Bloop, you’re an American. What do you see when you stop to look back? Stale, reiterated and deflated images that used to spark bragging. If this is what happens to a family, what does it look like to an entire generation? All the Slav friends I had growing up are now taking their own kids to Ukrainian school on Saturdays, or to grandma’s (who still speaks the mother tongue), or settle for a few cute phrases here and there. *Deedo* for grandpa. *Sche* for when you want more.

In college I prided myself on residing between the veils, swearing I was some con artist jumping from one world to the next at whim, electing the more no-

ble aspects of both cultures, and disposing of the nonessentials. Man, I was so smart! It did not occur to me to evaluate the lens with which I made those very judgments: how did I come to decide what is noble? What heights was I trying to reach and who was at the top of those moral groups beckoning me forward? Nevertheless, I was the immigrant's lucky daughter. I saw with my eyes the blind-spots of society that others took for granted, all because of my magic green card and my exotic accent that I worked so hard to erase. Certainly, it was all very charming at the time. And perhaps for a time I did truly see, and for that time I genuinely believed I could single-handedly resist my own assimilation.

A happy, big-headed idiot.

An impostor at best.

Today, I FaceTime my parents after work while they babysit their first grandchild, and the halo of delight, euphoria even, lines the crinkles of their eyes, both sides of their mouths. They look at her like she is the mother pearl, the treasure chest they found in a field, went home and sold all their belongings to purchase; like they've won the lottery. I don't blame them. Who doesn't want to give everything to their child? Who doesn't love to have everything to give to their child? And here I am, trying to trap the past into some comprehensible, neat chronicle of what could've and should've been. I hear my mother laughing gently in the background. Without seeing, I know she's working the dough at the kitchen table. Somehow, she can hold the grief and the joy simultaneously, while I trip and plunge into my rumination without registering. I look at my niece stuffing her face with pelmeni on the screen; she's looking at me with her deep dark eyes, then quickly flashes her two front teeth in my direction, squinting playfully. I accept it for what it is—a gift I couldn't earn. After hanging up, I take a long walk home under my umbrella and I feel easier.

Lighter.

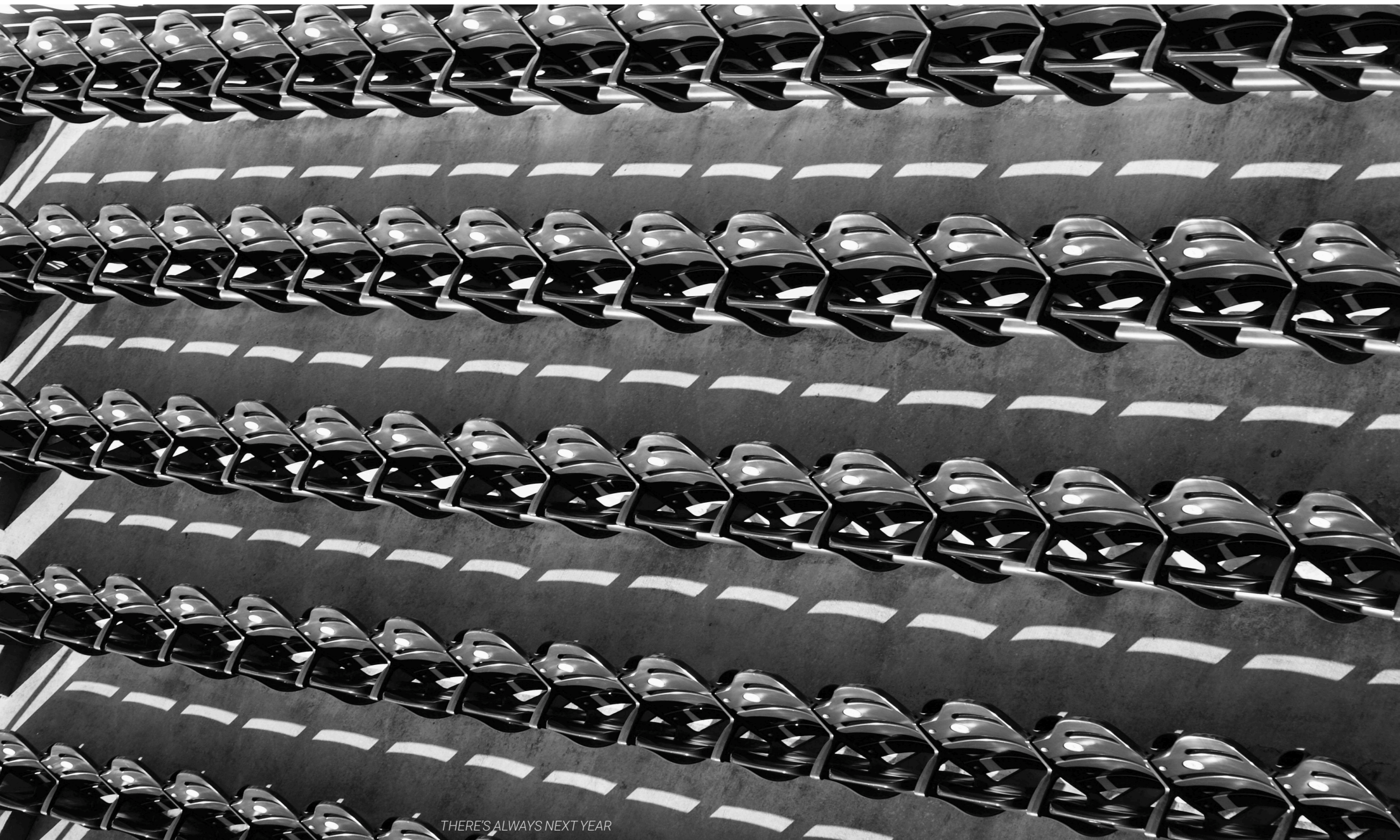
Collection: Untitled

ADAM BUBROW

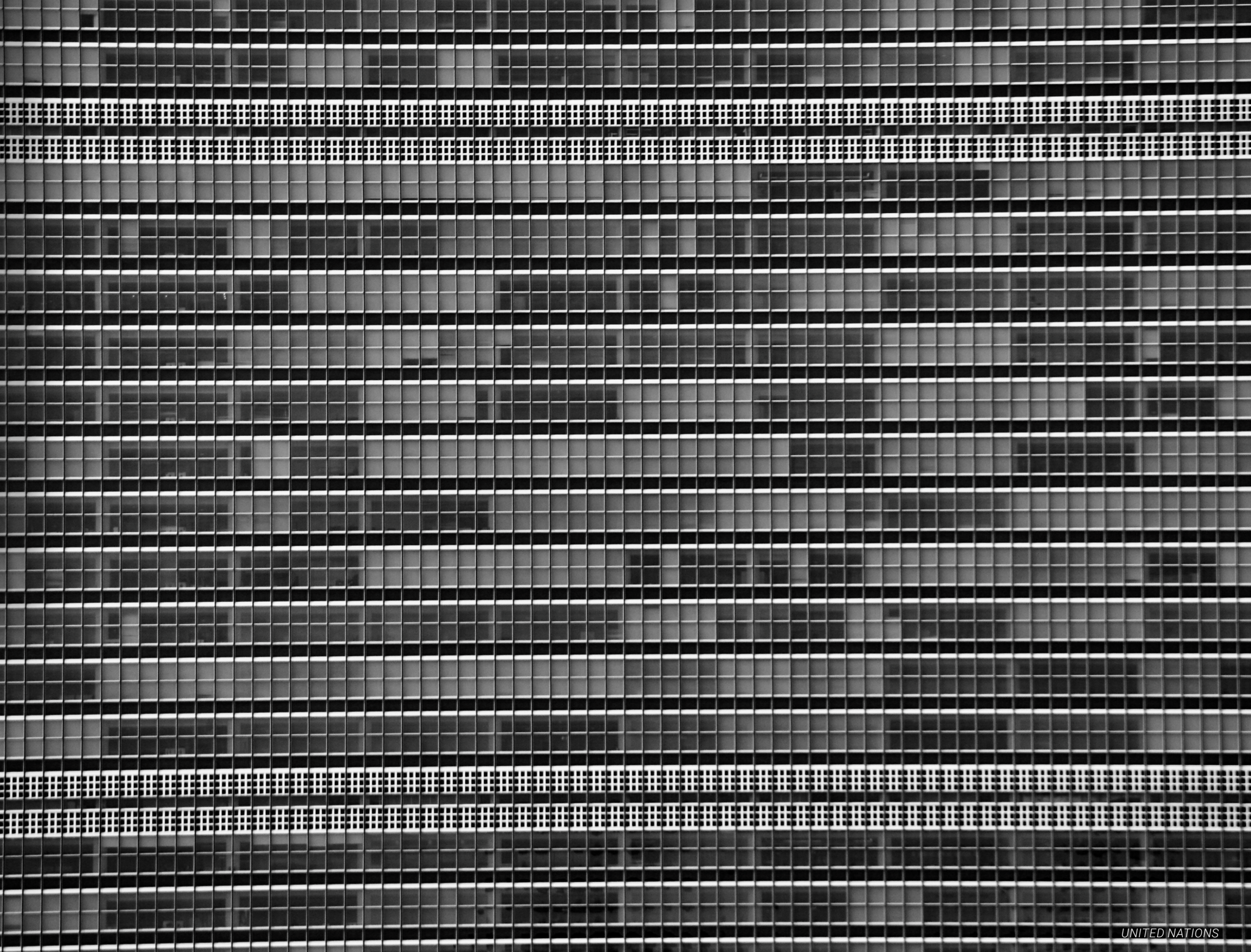
From the parabola of the Thunderbolt roller coaster to empty rows of Citi Field seats to the rectangles of the United Nations building to the parallelogram terraces of a Long Island City apartment building, I suppose that New York City's geometry emerges as an unintentional theme in this collection. But geometry can change before our eyes. Stare at the bottoms of those apartment terraces for thirty seconds; they become the tops of other imaginary terraces—a perspective shift. So maybe photography offers us different ways to look at the world, which is what draws me to it.



PERSPECTIVE SHIFT ON MODERN LIVING



THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT YEAR





IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE

Jab Molasie

LYNDON NICHOLAS

“Why not stay at the Hyatt in Port of Spain?” Charles says after handing Bob Beales his daily cup of coffee spiked with bourbon after the announcement at the board meeting.

“Where did you get this from? Tastes different.”

Beales stirs the liquid in the blue and white paper cup.

“Same place as always, sir.” Beales’ assistant is growing a beard. It is just filling out, skin visible through curling tufts of hair around the jawline.

“When I first hired you, you were clean-shaven.”

“Well that was over five years ago, I was fresh out of school.”

Charles waits as the cogs turn in Mr. Beales’ head. Beales on the other hand is trying to remember why he had hired Charles. He knew it wasn’t just a diversity hire, and that’s when he remembered.

“Charles, you still have family in the area?”

“In Trinidad? Yes, I do. On my mother’s side. Right by the factory actually.”

Beales grins wide.

“You know, I haven’t been back since my time as a boy with my father. This trip, why don’t we shake things up a little bit, stay with your family?”

Charles scratches the back of his neck, avoiding his boss’s gaze.

“I’m not sure if they have the space,” Charles mumbles back.

“For us, they’ll have the space. It’ll show them we’re men of the people.” Beales takes a sip from his cup, and flicks his hand towards the door, signaling the end of the conversation.

“And Charles, I liked it better when you were shaven.”

And I’ll like it better when you’re dead. Charles thinks to himself, but he bites his tongue as usual.

Mr. Beales

“It’s carnival season, you know. Why don’t you stay out, have a lime?” The woman says to him. She had introduced herself but he’d already forgotten her name. He stirs the watery mixture of Coca-Cola and bottom shelf rum, feigning interest. He looks around the dingy outdoor bar, with cheap vinyl flooring and red barstools with cracks in the cushioning. He thinks about his study back at home, reclining back in his black leather chair, pulling out the bottle of scotch he keeps by his desk, watching the sunset over his well-manicured lawn, about the single oak with its lobed leaves, the shadows of its branches stretching out across the grass like aging fingers.

“No thank you, I think I’ll just retire for tonight. Just make sure the boy stays

fresh for our photo op tomorrow.” He leaves the drink at the bar counter.

The woman sighs, and he thinks he hears a hint of relief in her exhale. “Alright, suit yourself.” With that, the woman walks him down the street back to the house where he’s staying.

“What’s it like running a company with tendrils that reach far past the Caribbean Sea over the Atlantic Ocean?” He isn’t sure if there is malice in this phrasing.

“You have to hire people at the top you can trust. Me, I go for Oxford, Harvard, MIT, St. Mary’s, St. Francis. I need to feel like I know them. Men cut from the same cloth.”

“Right, is a lot of us down below too you know. It’s the first time someone from your family been down in a long time, let me tell you that.” She responds, with another hint of malice. As they walk down the main road clouds of smoke shoot up in the distance above the trees from the mouths of smokestacks that line his factory’s land.

“It’s hard, you know, I used to get out here every year those first few years after my father passed and I took on this president role but it’s been hard these past few years. It feels like everyone here is judging me.” Mr. Beales hopes this admission will soften her to him.

As they arrive at the front of the house it is larger than most houses in the area, multiple stories, with tacky finishing. Not somewhere he would have chosen for himself, but he hoped that he was adequately hiding his discontent.

“People say you did put us on the back burner and let the company die.”

“With all the financial holdings, it was in the company’s best interests that I diversify my assets. The real money is in Biomedical Tech and Nuclear Energy.”

“So when they close alluh this down we gettin that over here?”

“You know, I can’t really say.”

As they approach the door he is glad to cut the conversation short. He brings his mouth to what he thinks is a smile but comes off as more of a gnarled grimace. “Thank you, err, uhh-”

“Lucille, the name Lucille.”

“–Right, well it’s been wonderful to get to know the people around here, yourself included.”

“I suggest you stay in your room if you don’t want anything to do with this carnival foolishness. It’s a big thing around here.”

He watches as she walks away. Her chestnut skin is rough but supple, darkening at the elbows and the creases, with a reddish hue underneath. She has very loose, curling hair, but short, not even shoulder length. Her ancestors must have been that admixture of African, Indian, East Asian, Indigenous that the island was so well known for. If he had been a younger man, maybe he would’ve asked her to join him.

The room itself is big enough, with a queen-sized bed, tiled flooring, and a television that looks like it is from last decade. The hallway that connects the room to the bathroom is unadorned, except for a blue-lit aquarium. To his knowl-

edge, there must be fish in there, but he is unable to spy any as he walks past. He thinks he can see them out of the corner of his eye, but as his pupils move to focus on any particular one, they disappear behind the makeshift outcroppings of coral. He wants to reach in and grab one, just to prove to himself and the fish that he is the one in control, not them.

Once he gets to the bathroom, he washes his face in the mirror, taking time to stare. Already, it has a rosy color from the brief time in the sun. He turns his head, examines the gray trickling up his jawline, the sinking of his eyelids, the soft lilt of the skin on his neck. His hairline has receded to the middle of his scalp, and the white and gray patches jut like thorns in the wreath of hair that remains. There are veins of red that run through the sclera of his eyes. He takes the water, splashes his face, then moves the razor horizontally across his cheek, the hairs there vanishing in the razing of metal and suds.

Charles

Charles was glad to be accompanying Mr. Beales, even if he was just there to be dangled as a feel-good story. Tickets around carnival time were expensive, and he was itching to get out of the frigid North Atlantic winter. They had arrived at the La Brea factories the evening before Carnival. He would catch a real, Trini, J'ouvert morning. It wasn't like the big-time carnival in Port of Spain, the one you see on the television, but the whole neighborhood was out liming and drinking.

He didn't notice when she'd slipped back to the bar, but he saw the flash of an arm out of the corner of his eye. Before he knew it, the bottle of rum he was holding disappeared from his hands, the usurper's arm a chestnut complexion like his. At the elbow where there should have been wrinkles, her skin is smooth, probably from living somewhere heat and moisture conspire to preserve and create life, not like the dry air of New York winter.

"The man do' like rum, I guess that mean more for us." Auntie Lucy takes a long swig before passing it to her nephew. Charles takes a swig as well, trying to match her intensity.

"Charles, Boy, you talk like them, but you does drink like one of us!" she smiles and flashes a gold tooth in the corner of her mouth. Another arm comes and grabs the bottle, this one thick and with dark hairs that curl in small C's around the forearm.

"And what allyuh think he was doing up at them fancy schools? Harvard is alllllll the way up in Boston. So cold up there, no wonder, he had to drink to keep heself warm!"

Uncle Lou chuckles before he takes a drink next, some of the brown liquid dribbling down onto the U collar of his undershirt at his chest. It was true, although he'd spent time studying, Harvard was where he got his initiation into the classic American Ivy-league collegiate pastimes of binge-drinking, frat parties, and hangovers.

"I tellin you, the only place I considered going up there was the University of Florida, but then I saw the tuition for an international student. Was better off saving my money and going right here at the University of the West Indies."

"And is too bad, we cyah miss somebody who do' leave!"

Auntie Lucy digs her elbow into her brother's rib, taking the bottle from Uncle Lou. His uncle is a short man with a potbelly and a dark russet complexion opposite of his sister, and yet when he looks at them together he can see the ways in which he complements his sister, his rough appearance only a mask for a body that operates with the same smoothness and ease that she has.

"Yes, and how's our older sister doing?"

"Mom is fine, still at that law firm."

"Now I can't imagine her dressed up in a suit, I remember she used to always take us out to get dirty playing in Pitch Lake. That's how I got interested in workin at the factory."

His uncle interrupts. "You, me, and everyone else who livin round here. Interested? Is not like we had much of a choice. Your mother, boy, she something now. Can't believe she gone from the island, what now, 40 years? When she coming back? I hope it's before I dead and in the grave."

"The way you drinkin that could be very soon," Auntie Lucy adds playfully, but Uncle Lou continues. Something in his voice has switched from cheerful to somber, acknowledging a world outside of the current merriment.

"It wasn't her choice, you know. As the oldest it only made sense she go with them. Granny raise us jus fine on the money they sent down. Well, at least she raise me just fine. This one might be a lost cause." Uncle Lou takes another swig of rum, clinking the bottle with his fingernail as Auntie Lucy swings her legs back and forth on the barstool. For a second Charles can picture her as a little girl still, her legs sloshing through invisible mud running behind the tail of his mother's skirt.

Mr. Beales

That night Mr. Beales can't sleep. He can hear music, the clanging of steel drums, the sounds of people out and about, and celebrating what? He had brought headphones, but even these don't suffice, the intrusions of unwanted sounds throwing him out of balance. Finally, he can't take it anymore, he has to get some quiet. He throws on his Teva sandals, some cargo shorts, and goes for a late-night walk. As he leaves the front entrance, two men sitting on the porch look up from their beers, but he shuffles off quickly before they can engage him in conversation. All down the street people are sitting on their porches, talking with their neighbors, some walking down the main streets of the town. He goes in the opposite direction.

He looks back at the accommodation he's staying at, a two-story stucco house with a slanting roof painted in a ghastly pastel turquoise. The front facade has tiled arches plastered around the windows and door, resembling those that might

be used as a prop on the castle set of a school play. The whole thing is raised about six inches off of the ground standing on stilts. It sits on the outskirts of town, the first or the last house you'd see depending on which way you were going.

From down the street, one of the men raises up their bottle in his direction and nods his head. If Mr. Beales had gotten that hearing aid like he should have years ago, he would have heard the man say, "Watch for Jab tonight." But instead, the sound is muffled. The other starts to dance a little shuffle, closing his eyes and grinding his waist slowly, side to side, to the music in the background, lips curling into a rye smile. Mr. Beales looks away and crosses to the other side of the road, careful to avoid the cracks and potholes in the pavement.

Charles

"You know your great grandmother had a story about Pitch Lake. This isn't how she told the story but this is how I guh tell it."

Uncle Lou is standing at the bar, using a small, plastic round table as a lectern as Charles listens on. Uncle Lou had been lecturing about family history, current events, the problem with American politics, government corruption, without any sense of inhibition or tact. *He would have made a fine professor.* Charles thinks to himself.

His uncle continues, drunk on the attention but also just drunk.

"The people of this land are descendants of the hummingbird. There was a sacred tree here in southwestern Trinidad, although at the time the land was not called that. The tree stood in the middle of a green plane, surrounded by lush forests. The tree had a black nectar that secreted from its sap and turned everything from the bark to the leaves the black color of coal. No animal dared to approach the tree until one day there was a giant storm. Two hummingbirds caught grazing in the surrounding field flew to the nearest cover and took shelter under the tree. The storm continued for hours, and the birds soon grew tired, resting on the branches of the tree. As the storm raged, the sap from the tree seeped off onto the sleeping birds and encased them, hardening. When the hummingbirds woke they found themselves trapped. They vibrated their bodies until the hard casing crumbled off onto the dirt, but they had changed. Their bodies had grown, their movement had slowed, their limbs had grown soft and brown, and their feathers had fallen to the forest floor. When they tried to walk back into the forest, they found themselves bound to the confines of the field, and so they were trapped.

"The two grew, had a family, and soon their tribe expanded around the sacred tree as the epicenter. The two lived long lives and soon forgot their time as hummingbirds. Their children could move about freely, never knowing their true nature, but the two were forever bound to the land. After years, they died on the same day, found underneath the sacred tree. Their bodies had hardened and turned black, holes in their chest cavities where hearts should have been. Above, two black hummingbirds buzzed around the mourning family. As time went on,

the tribe grew and became prosperous, using the sap from the tree to harden the tips of their tools and to help build their homes. They came to be known as the Chima people. Every time a Chima person died, another black hummingbird appeared and took home in the sacred tree. Hundreds of years passed until a member of a rival tribe stumbled into the field where the Chima village lay. Stunned by the beauty of the sacred tree, they pleaded to bring back a branch of the tree to their own tribe, but the chieftain of the Chima refused. The man spat on the floor and left, vowing to come back and take the tree by force. The Chima were not warring people, but they knew they must protect the tree. And so they took the sap of the tree and used it to harden the tips of spears and arrows. For the first time, warriors ventured off of their land into the surrounding forest, searching for the rival village. When they found it, the night was pitch black, and the moonlight reflected blue in the tips of their spears. This village had never known war, and so the Chima descended on the village and slaughtered, leaving weapons stained red with blood. They started a fire and burned the village down, and then returned to their own.

"In a frenzy after their first conquest, the Chima village celebrated, drinking the nectar of the sacred tree, and creating a great fire. Not satisfied, they desired a feast, but their usual diet of root vegetables was not enough. They wanted to feast on fire. The chief's wife protested, and under cover of darkness took her children and fled into the forest. But she was the only one, the others blinded by fire. And so, they coaxed the hummingbirds from out of the tree, and then strung them over the fire, and as the birds roasted, the fire itself turned black. The fire began growing wings, and burst up from the logs to flit across the grass of the field. Homes began to burn, and the little fires spread, until one of them caught root of the sacred tree. And that too burned, and burned, and the black fire from the tree lurched up branch to branch. Soon this fire dwarfed the original one, so much so that it flew up into the air in the shape of a bird. The bird's wings flapped and the air clouded with smoke. The tree lurched, and then fell over, leaving the large roots exposed like organs splayed out over the ground. And from those roots, a crack in the earth grew, and a black bile splashed upward into the sky. Soon the earth started to crack, and the whole village was a sea of black. Where there was once prosper, there was now black. Soon the fire too died down, the only thing to be heard in the night was the tap tap tapping of the feet of the chief's wife and her children running from the tar pit under a blue moon. And that pitch lake, one of only three of its kind in the world, is what still stands here now."

His uncle motions with his hands around the space, and then, not knowing what to do with himself, gives a slight bow. Charles isn't sure if he should clap, or comment, but thankfully Auntie Lucy interrupts.

"Right, now that he make a ahse of heself with this dotish fairytale nonesense, time for the real story of the night. We playin Jab this morning or what?"

Mr. Beales

Mr. Beales follows the asphalt road, weaving its way down a slight slope, narrowing until it gives way to gravel. The trees he walks past are different, with long, arching leaves fanning out overhead, as if they are grasping for every last drop of water they can find. There might have been a forest here once, but it had no doubt been plowed down in order to build the infrastructure and industry needed for the factory.

When they had told him that Petrostar was shutting down he had debated whether or not he should make an appearance on the island. He was, is, the Chairman of the Board of Directors, a title he had worked hard for all of his life. A phone or video call is the way he likes to conduct business. It means he can command attention in many places at once, his presence an astral projection to be heard and seen from a distance. He can have his ears in one country, his eyes in another, fingers sending a message over to a third, mouth and teeth chattering on in a fourth, and his feet planted safely on home soil.

It was something about the way that it happened. When they elected that new Prime Minister he should have known from his voice that change would come. A black man that spoke with fire in his voice, raised by farmers that worked the land, a volcanologist, of course a man like that would want his hands in the country's oil. So when the announcement came that they were shutting down Petrostar, it wasn't much of a shock. They have been losing money for years, prices are at an all-time low, and the people have been calling for his resignation for at least six years now. He could have sat back and made a statement from home, but he wanted to have his presence felt on the island one last time. His family hadn't worked so hard for generations to be tossed to the wind that easily. And, he wouldn't admit it to himself, but he was scared. Scared of a future that had no need for him. He continues on, the crunching of his sandals out of sync with the bass and the drums in the background. Walking, pretending he can't hear the music.

Charles

"What's Jab?" Charles asks, and Auntie Lucy looks at him in disbelief.

"Your mother never teach you?"

He shakes his head, as it materializes that this is another way that he is a stick in mud here.

"A Jab Molassie is a demon, and if you don't give him money he'll torment you."

"So you go around stealing from people?"

"No, nothing like that, usually people just give a dollar, a quarter, a swig of rum, whatever they have. It's all part of the bacchanal."

Charles looks around at the dancing bodies in the night, different shades of brown, waists swaying and sweat dripping down to the asphalt street, a street soaked with the sweat of generations of people who lived and worked the land

until their bodies dropped and returned to the earth. Maybe for just a night, he could be like them, be part of a tradition that sings in his bones.

"Sure, why not?"

There is a group of maybe 10 players huddling around a fire burning in a used oil drum. The players take motor oil, paint, black grease, varnish, oil, tar, and drench themselves in it, the liquid like melting molasses. Some carry chains, others steel drums, some with whistles around their necks, some wear locks and keys around their waists, others carry pitchforks, or wear helmets pronged with horns, half-torn shorts, tank tops, some with chests bare. Charles takes his shirt off, and then Uncle comes up from behind and starts to pour the black grease on him. Charles' body tenses in shock, and then loosens as it drips down. Uncle takes his hands and smears it over Charles' back, chest, stomach, and the touch is a warmth that starts to envelop his body.

Someone starts playing a rhythm on the steel drum. Not like the melodic steelpan the island is known for, with notes mapped neatly out. No, this drum is made of rusted scrap metal, and taps like rain on a corrugated roof. Another joins in, and then someone starts to blow the whistle. Charles takes his own whistle and blows too. The sound makes him want to move his feet, bounce up in place. And that is it. They start, a band of devils marching down the street. A blur of black bodies. Charles loses himself somewhere in the rhythm, the tap-tap-tapping, in the music, in the spirits. He doesn't even realize how far they've gone down the road. As they pass, they yell, harass people walking down the road, who chuckle and toss them coins. They've come to the edge of town, and there is a figure in the road. It keeps moving, and so they follow it, calling out. It is a man, but he pretends not to hear, or maybe he is lost in his own world, but this is Jab world now, Jab street, and the group follows him down the road.

"Hey, you cya pass these streets without fi pay the Jab toll."

Charles ignores them again, but they see he's started to speed up. Now the game begins.

Mr. Beales

It is a blue moon tonight and that worries him. He imagines the moon is a woman, her eyes shining through the treetops with iridescent teal irises. Her body an icy hue, a crescent creating a soft glow overhead that rolls like frost through the sky. The clouds drift as she inhales and swirl as she exhales, like spume capping the edges of seawater during a storm. The usual yellow glow of night is painted over in a blue that pours over the senses and drips down from the sky into his eyes.

As he walks he realizes another sound is coming into focus. A tinkling like the clinking of a silver spoon on a wine glass, or the jangling of loose change in a coffee can. He hears a loud whistle, and then another, and then a chorus of whistling, jangling. He quickens his pace, the overgrown brush scraping past blonde hairs on his legs where his cargo shorts don't cover. He doesn't see the figures

surrounding him but he can hear them. Something tapping out a rhythm like the pitter-patter of rain on an oil drum, the tikitakitik of hooves or feet tramping through the forest floor. A high chirping sound whistling through the air. Three bleats then silence. Three bleats then silence. Three bleats then silence. A voice calls out to him, something he thinks is definitely not human. He takes off in a hurried burst, and he hears the rustling behind him. The dirt underneath his feet becomes moist, his footing less sure as he continues running forward blindly. He can feel his heels sinking into the ground as he pushes off, heart palpitating with each pounding step.

He hears voices, sees faces, hears a clanging that cannot be human, and so he lets his feet carry him. Away. Out into a break in the trees, an open field of what to him looks like soil. His feet move instinctually, forward, away from whatever is coming for him, until they too betray him, getting caught, stuck, and he feels his body sloshing in what he thought was solid ground, but he only realizes now is something entirely unearthly. The last thing he sees is the blue of the moon and the bodies of demons rushing towards him.

Charles

They split up, taking off along the side of the dirt road, scattering through the trees and the brush around the lone man who dare defy them. Palm fronds fan out overhead scratching at the sky and leaving impressions there. He is running now in earnest, nervously, stumbling in the dark, at the entrance towards a large, open area. The group is running on grass now, and on what feels like wet soil. It is an open field, leading to a lake. But as they get closer, Charles sees that it is not a lake, or even a swamp or marsh, but a large pit of a dark substance. This is the entrance to Pitch Lake, he realizes, and it dawns on him why everyone is suddenly so nervous. Like they had said, it is like a field of mud, with sudden depressions, eddies where the flow of liquid can pull one in, tar pouring up from the center of the earth. They are all running now towards the man to help, screaming, calling out, banging drums and shouting to come back, but this only frightens him, and he begins running further into the pitch. As he runs, one of his shoes becomes stuck in the ground. He pulls but it is no use. Charles can see then that he is a white man, and horror strikes him when he realizes it is Mr. Beales.

Charles calls out to Mr. Beales, but at this time it is too late. Mr. Beales is on the ground now, the one leg sunk in down to his ankle, the other past his knee. His white linen shirt is splotted with black, and as he struggles, he continues to sink lower into the viscous liquid. His lower half won't move, rooted now deeply in the liquid earth. He falls forward, his left shoulder first, then his ear, and then he is submerged. He suddenly makes a lunge forward and his body is a heaving mass of sludge. And then it disappears.

Charles starts to run out into the pitch, but the others hold him back.

"He gone, boy, in this kinda darkness it would be foolish to try and get him."

"Do you know who that is?" Charles shouts.

"It nah go matter who he was, it matter if him knew what him was. Only Jab come out this late at night. Seem like di ting what make him eat him too."

A figure that resembles his aunt is speaking. It then takes a swig of rum and holds a lighter to its lips, creating a burst like a bird that erupts from its mouth. Charles sees the glint of a gold tooth behind the blaze.

"The Earth knew what him was, and that's why it swallow him up so. Tonight, we see a real Mass."

The others start shouting and bang on their instruments. Charles takes a swig of rum too, and he feels the brown amber liquid rush down into his chest and ignite. They start off back up the road. It is dark now, but the sun will come up soon. They walk away from Pitch Lake. A white hummingbird flies across the night sky. When the day breaks, the ritual has begun for real and they have left their bodies. By nightfall they are back, sweat pouring and rinsing the oil off of their bodies in black-blue pools on the earth.

The Night Train

KRISTEN STRMEL

upon a chair glazed bubblegum blue
FUCK LIFE goads sight with plastered gash
on the night train fogged in dying hue.

the carved *C* disconnected, snake spine snapped in two
or twinned waves curving inward, never to crash
upon a chair glazed bubblegum blue.

FUCK is still defiant, forked letters paying due,
but LIFE is trawling downwards, just half as brash
on the night train fogged in dying hue.

rain slip-smacks past the window screws
trembles metal beat, but doesn't once splash
upon a chair glazed bubblegum blue.

some amped-up avant schoolboy—was it you?
cinder slabs pull back, let another one dash
on the night train fogged in dying hue.

good luck, poor schmuck I never knew
let's wait and see what tales you'll hash
upon a chair glazed bubblegum blue
on the night train fogged in dying hue.

Consider the Tree

KRISTEN STRMEL

with ribs pulled apart.
telephone line slipped through the heart.

upgrades!
swap arboreal with abundance
lick receiver
blot metal with tongues

I can be anywhere you know
suburbs botoxed green
death valley chews its bones
raw patch between mountains
point nemo, mcmurdo—you name it.

hey new year, new age, new us!
don't say EXCELSIOR unless you mean it
can't colonize mars with two bars, you know
switch to wifi, damnit
I split how many trees?

(alternatively: consider the tree who
split for thousand tongues
still grows
leaves fattening each year
birds cozy in its eaves
bark rough enough that our hands
come away with splinters every time)

Me and Too Loose

An excerpt

JOHN ATTANAS

THE GRADUATE CHILDREN'S WRITING AWARD

I throw open the door and standing opposite me is a little man, so little his eyes look straight into mine. His face is round, his nose is long, and he's smiling like he just heard the greatest joke but is not going to tell it to anybody. On that nose sits a pair of glasses. The glasses have no arms. They're simply balanced on his nose and look like they might fly off with the first strong breeze. He has a chocolate-colored beard and chocolate-colored hair, which juts from under a chocolate-colored, bowl-shaped hat. In one hand he holds a cane, and in the other he holds a business card.

"May I help you?" I ask, sure that this strange looking man is on his way to a costume party.

"My card," he replies in an accent that sounds like he belongs far from Hudson Valley.

I take the card.

It reads: HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC. PAINTER. TEACHER. INSPIRATION.

"Uhhh. Mr.- "

"Lautrec," he interrupts me. "Toulouse Lautrec. It is French."

"Too loose?" I say.

"Not 'too loose.' Like your pants are too loose. *Toulouse*. Long. Graceful. It is French."

"Henry de- "

Again, he interrupts me: "'Ahn-ree.' It is pronounced 'Ahn-ree.' Once again, it is French. 'Henry' is English."

"Henry's *my* name," I snap.

"I know," he replies, smiling. "Henry Rayfield. I know everything."

"What do you want, Mr. *Toulouse*?" I ask, making sure to pronounce his name as gracefully as possible.

He takes a deep breath and then declares, "You are Henry Rayfield. You are in the sixth grade of the Hudson Valley Elementary School. And you have block. Painter's block. I am here to cure it."

"How did you know - "

"I know everything. *We* know everything. Regarding the select. And you are one of the select."

"'Select'? What do you mean 'select'?" I ask him. But then it all makes sense. A practical joke. "Did Regina send you?"

"Regina?"

"Regina Conway? And Nicole? And Jenny? Did they send you?" I demand.

"I do not know this Regina."

"I know Regina doesn't think much of me. But Nicole and I are friends. *Were* friends. Until she humiliated me. Just because I wanted to paint her portrait. But to send somebody to my house, dressed like he's going trick or treating," I say, my voice getting louder. "That's just not funny."

I slam the door closed.

"Allo? Allo?" he calls. "Please open the door. It is of the highest importance you listen to me."

I pull the door open.

"No. It is of the highest importance you listen to *me*," I tell him. "I am not in a good mood. My entire life is coming apart."

I hear the phone ring.

"If you're still on this step when I come back, I'm calling the police," I say, and slam the door closed, even harder than before.

I tear into the kitchen and almost pull the phone off the wall. "Hello?"

"Your sister got offers from two colleges, and I'm bringing home Chinese take-out. I know you don't like Chinese, but Sarah wants it," my mom says. "You get to choose the soup."

"Hot and sour. And bring me an egg roll," I say. "I gotta go."

"Your sister got offers from two colleges," she says again, as if I didn't hear her the first time. "Isn't that great?"

"Great. Bye," I say, then hang up the phone, let out a long sigh, and head back to the door.

This time I look out through the peep hole.

I see nobody.

But as the guy was so small, maybe he's still standing there.

So I open the door a crack.

Nobody's there. Or on the porch. Or on the sidewalk.

My body starts to relax.

But just as I'm about to close the door, I see, on the welcome mat, the little man's card.

I pick it up. It feels warm, like it spent the day sunning itself on a beach.

I read it out loud: "HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC. PAINTER. TEACHER. INSPIRATION."

My eyes lock on to the word "INSPIRATION." Just what I could use right now. So instead of ripping the card in half, I slip the card into my pocket and shut the door.

Mom brings home Chinese. Hot and sour soup, just like I told her. Chicken with broccoli. Vegetable lo-mein. And an eggroll. I don't love Chinese food. I eat it. But I'd much rather have pizza, or burgers, or tacos, or hot dogs. My sister can't get enough Chinese food and always make fast work of take-out, leaving

nothing in the containers but trickles of grease and soy sauce, which look like clouds in a stormy sky.

Dinner conversation is all about soccer. My sister is a senior at Hudson Valley High. And a star. At everything. But most importantly, at soccer.

"...her pass was way too high, but I bolted straight into the air, like I had boosters on my feet, and headed it right into the corner of the goal," she goes on, all the while shoveling forkfuls of lo-mein into her mouth.

I'm usually on the edge of my chair when she describes a game, but today I'm on another planet because I can't stop thinking about the little man. I want to stop thinking about him in a big way because he was clearly a practical joke. How could he know so much about me if somebody hadn't told him my name, where I go to school, that I'm blocked?

"...and then she passed the ball to me, a few feet out of reach, but I took an extra step, and kicked it so hard and so high I was sure it was going to fly right over the goal, but it caught the crossbar and bounced in!"

"Amazing," my father says, as he piles more chicken with broccoli onto his plate, and then into his mouth, without even taking a breath. "Isn't she amazing, Henry?"

"Yeah. Amazing," I say. Then I look down at my plate and see I've barely finished my eggroll and have made even less progress on my hot and sour soup.

"The University of Connecticut and the University of Michigan," my mom says. "Full rides."

"And we haven't even heard from Stanford yet," my dad says.

My sister shakes her head. "I'm not gonna get an offer from Stanford."

"You most certainly will. And in a few years Henry will, too," my dad goes on.

"Huh?"

"Stanford. You're going there, too," my father says to me.

"What if I don't want to?"

"Who wouldn't want to go to Stanford? It's one of the best universities in the country. And it has one of the best soccer programs."

"But what if I don't want to play soccer?"

It's like I announced that the world's going to end in five seconds. They fall silent—my dad, my mom, my sister. And on each of their faces is the look of cold, dumb terror.

"You don't want to play soccer?" my dad finally says.

"Uuuuh. No. It's just that - "

"You've worked so hard. And we've spent so much money. This Christmas. One week in Florida at the National Soccer Academy. It's not going to be easy with your mom out of work. But you have so much talent, almost as much as your sister, it's worth the expense."

"I don't have to go."

"Of course, you do. And it's going to be great. The best players in the country are going to be there. I can't think of a better way to spend Christmas vacation."

"You sound like *you're* going to the soccer academy," my mom says.

"I *am* going," my dad replies. "I'm not spending my week on the beach. I'm going to be observing every one of Henry's practices."

I don't say a thing, just shove the last piece of my eggroll into my mouth, and chew very, very slowly.

I barely sleep that night.

I think of the little man, and coach, and Nicole, and Regina, and soccer camp, and the little man again, and who could have put him up to coming to my door, and the possibility, the very strange possibility, that he wasn't put up to coming to my door at all.

I slouch into school, my eyes half open, and go straight to Ms. Velasquez's room.

"Ms. Velasquez, who is your favorite painter?" I ask her.

"Oh, there are so many, Henry," she replies. "Da Vinci. Rembrandt. Monet, Georgia O'Keefe. Jackson Pollack."

"Did you ever hear of a painter named Lautrec?"

"Toulouse-Lautrec," she says, nodding. "He was French. Painted Paris at night. Restaurants. Dance clubs. He also made posters. Beautiful posters. He was very - "

"Inspiring," I interrupt her.

"I imagine," she says. "But I was going to say short. He was very short."

"Like me?"

"I guess...But remember, he was an adult. You're still in sixth grade."

Toulouse's card is still in my pocket, and it feels so warm I think my pocket's about to burst into flames.

"You said 'was.' You mean he's not short anymore?" I ask her.

"No. He's not alive anymore. He died a long time ago. Early 1900s, I think."

I feel like I've been hit in the forehead with a soccer ball made of marble. For a second the little man seemed real. But if he's dead, if he died over a hundred years ago, the little man who came to my door had to be a practical joke. A guy in a costume, paid by Regina, to confuse me like crazy.

I run to the library to go online.

In seconds I find a Toulouse-Lautrec site. Paintings, just like Ms. Velasquez said, of Paris at night. Crazy colors: dark siennas, deep plums, blazing crimsons. Then there's a photograph of the artist. He looks exactly like the man who came to my door. So exact that my flesh starts to tingle.

The late bell rings. I have to get to homeroom. I don't want to. I want to keep staring at the photograph of the little man with the beard, the eyeglasses, and the bowl-shaped hat. But I can't. I have to head to class, even though I'm certain that today will be completely wasted, and the only thing I'll be able to think about is the little man and why he came to see me.

Chapter Three

And I'm right.

English, math, social studies, science. Even art. My favorite class. I can't focus on any of them.

In art class, Ms. Velasquez has us sketch a single red rose standing in a glass vase. I manage a few lines that make it look like a Popsicle. But Regina's sketch is so good Ms. Velasquez shows it to the class.

Soccer practice is a waste, too. Thankfully, Coach Carney doesn't see how out of it I am. That's because Steve Stein is in bad shape, too. He can't run, he can't pass, he can't do anything. And Coach lets him have it.

"What's wrong with you, Stein?! You're the captain of this team! You're what makes it run! If you're not going to lead us to the championship, sit down and I'll find someone who can!"

I want to say something in Steve's defense, but I don't. I just hide in the middle of the field. Invisible. And let Coach grind Steve into the dirt.

As Steve and I walk home, I ask him, "What's wrong? You look exhausted. Didn't you sleep last night?"

"No. That's what I was trying to tell Coach. But he wouldn't listen to me," Steve replies.

"He doesn't listen to anybody. Except for my sister. And she played for him six years ago."

We walk along in silence. I want to know why Steve didn't sleep all night, but I'm afraid to ask him. He's the only friend I have, and as the captain of the soccer team, he's an important friend to have.

"My sister moved out," he says.

"What?"

"My sister moved out. That's why I didn't sleep last night. My parents and my sister got into this big fight. She's been singing with a band on the weekends. The Nose Rings. Well, she decided that's what she wants to do with her life. Be a singer. So she told my parents she was dropping out of college to go on the road with the band."

"The Nose Rings?"

"Right. They started arguing. The arguing got bigger until my mom was screaming at my sister, my sister was screaming at my mom, and my dad was screaming at both of them to stop screaming at each other."

"Wow."

"They were screaming at each other until two in the morning when my sister packed her things and left. It was bad, Henry."

"It sounds terrible," I say. "Wow. I thought my family was weird."

"How is your family weird?"

"My father's obsessed with soccer. My parents think my sister's gonna become a famous soccer star, and that I'm gonna be one too. But compared to your family, we're not weird at all."

"Thanks a lot," Steve says.

"I didn't mean it that way. I meant..." I say, trying to come up with something to keep Steve from getting mad at me. "They never listen to me."

"They don't?"

"No. They hear me, but they don't really listen to what I'm saying. They listen to my sister. And they want me to be a copy of her. But I'm not her. I'm not as talented a soccer player, and I want to do other things."

"You sure do," he says with a chuckle. "The soccer-playing painter."

"I like both. And there's no reason I can't do both. But try telling that to my dad."

"Just like Coach."

"Exactly like Coach. Not as loud. But like coach, all the same."

Steve turns at the next corner, and I walk on alone. The huge maple tree is looming, holding on to the tales of Henry Hudson's time. I wish it would start talking because I could use a good story now. A funny story. Or an adventure story. But the tree stays silent, and I walk past it and on home.

I slump up the front steps and raise my key toward the lock. But before I can put it in, the door pops open. This is weird. For a second I think I should turn and run. But I don't. I'm so depressed I just go inside, drop my books, and head toward the kitchen, my eyes locked onto the refrigerator, a cold bottle of water my goal. That's when I hear, "*Bienvenue*."

I freeze.

"Welcome. You have finally arrived."

It's the little man. He's sitting at the kitchen table, one of my mom's best coffee cups in his hand, the same mischievous smile on his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"I hope you do not mind, but I helped myself to some of your *cafe*."

"Excuse me?"

"The coffee. I was looking for your cognac, but I could not find any."

"Looking for what?"

"Cognac," he says, then waits for me to say something. "It is like the brandy."

"We don't have any brandy."

"A pity. It is the most amusing of drinks."

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you yesterday. I am here to inspire."

"I mean, in *here*. In this house."

"The door. It was open."

"No, it wasn't. My parents never leave the front door open," I say. "I'm calling the police." I pull my phone from my pocket and dial 911. But nothing happens. My phone's dead.

"Put the phone down, my young friend. All can be explained," he says. "I walked up your steps. I knocked at your door. There was no answer. I tried the knob. I let myself in. You must believe me."

"Why?"

"Your future depends upon it."

“My future?”

“Yes. Your future,” he says, “as an artist, a painter, a man.”

Suddenly, I’m frozen. Everything I want to discover, this little man says he knows.

“Tell me.”

He takes a deep breath, then says, “Are you sure you have no cognac?”

“I’m sure.”

“Some wine, perhaps.”

“We don’t have wine either.”

“No wine? No cognac? *Mon dieu!*” he says, confused. “What do you have?”

“Juice. And milk. And water.”

“Oh, you Americans,” he says, looking up at the ceiling and shaking his head. “Missing out on all that is good.”

“Excuse me?”

He lets out a long sigh, then says, “I will have the juice. The orange juice. Chilled, please.”

I open the fridge, pull out a carton, and pour him a tall, chilled glass of OJ.

He carefully raises the glass to his mouth, then takes a long gulp of orange juice, and when he’s done, rubs his lips together. “Not bad at all. But cognac would have been much more refreshing.”

“Stop talking about cognac!” I snap. “Tell me about my future.”

He smiles again. “You are one of the select. In French it sounds much more official. But I will spare you. You are one of the select. The chosen. The special.”

I must look completely confused because he continues quickly: “In painting. But you are blocked. At a very critical time in your development. If you don’t get, as you say, unblocked, you might get depressed, give up, choose another path. Perhaps become an accountant.”

“My father’s an accountant.”

“*Exactement!* We cannot let that happen!”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“I could say, the art gods. But that would not be correct. Let me ask you, do you think what you see around you, this kitchen, this house, this town, is all there is?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you believe there is more to this world than what you see?”

“I guess.”

“Then you would be correct. I am who I am: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. I lived from 1864 until 1901. I painted pictures, designed posters, and drank too much. I have been sent here to help you become who you were meant to be. You have talent, but you are conflicted. You have little support from your parents, you are ridiculed by the students at school, and you are short. Very short. That I understand more than anyone. I have been sent to break your block, to give you lessons, and to take you, as you Americans say, to the next level.” He takes a deep breath. “I have come to teach you the life of art and the art of life. What do

you think?”

I stand there, trying to make sense out of all he’s just told me, and finally say, “This is crazy.”

“Much of life *is* crazy. Mine was insanity. But I wouldn’t have changed any of it. So now it is up to you. I have rented a studio,” he says, pulling a card from his jacket and handing it to me.

I read it out loud: “HENRY T. LINCOLN, 450 Elm Street, 3rd floor.” Then I turn to him. “Lincoln?”

“That is my American name. Like the President Abraham.”

“Elm Street. That’s the center of town.”

“It was a bit, as you say, pricey. But the building has an elevator. And as you have noticed, I do not walk so well,” he says. Then he pulls something from his pants pocket. “I even have the cell phone. You can send me the text.”

“Great,” I say, smirking.

His smile disappears. “Now it is up to you. If you come to my studio, we can begin. If I do not see you there, I will assume you chose to throw away your talent, which would be a great pity, not only for you, but for the world.”

My heart starts to race, like when a soccer ball is at my feet and I’m zeroing in on the goal. “Are you saying I have a future as a painter?”

“I am saying you have been selected. You can never be de-selected. But you can de-select yourself. Many have, to their regret. Your future is in your hands.”

I stand there, staring at the little man, his tired eyes, his bumpy nose, his chocolatey beard, and want to believe that everything he has just said is true. Want to more than I’ve ever wanted to score a goal or win a game. Want to so much that suddenly I can’t breathe.

“Now I must go,” he says and starts to struggle out of the chair.

“Wait!” I snap. “Why did you leave?”

“Leave?”

“Yesterday. On my doorstep. Why did you leave?”

“Why?” he says. “You made threats.”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess I did.”

“You were not ready to have this conversation.”

“And now I am?”

“*Oui*,” he says. “And I am never wrong.”

Right then my head starts to spin, my legs start to quiver, and I feel like I’m going to faint.

“Are you unwell?” he asks

“Yeah. No. I don’t know,” I say.

“You need cognac.”

“No. I need water,” I say, turn to the sink, pour a huge glass, and chug it down, down, down. Then I take a deep breath and turn back to him. “Wow. That was scary—”

But the room is empty.

“Hello? Toulouse? Where’d you go?”

No reply.

I walk into the hall

“Hello?”

The living room.

“Toulouse?”

I look up the stairs.

“Are you playing some French version of hide-and-seek with me?”

Silence.

For a second I’m sure I’ve gone crazy, that I was hallucinating or having a nervous breakdown, the kind that all the great artists have once in their lives, and that I should be taken to a mental hospital as soon as my parents come home from work. But when I walk back into the kitchen I see the empty glass with the dribble of orange juice at the bottom, a dribble that looks like a splash of sunlight, sitting on the table, and next to it the card with his American name and his studio’s address. Then I know that not only am I not crazy, but that I’m one of the select, and that my life might actually, incredibly, amazingly matter.

Ghost at a Party

From “Infinite Containers”

SAM HERNANDEZ

THE STARK POETRY PRIZE IN MEMORY OF RAYMOND PATTERSON

I buzz a novel porthole and a stranger opens up for me. I’m exposed as the face of a mood ring as the entropy in the room wobbles around until the heat map of my body goes from blue to red and. I hold still until the Host sees me and asks me what I’m working on. My mouth opens to reveal a QR code with my resume and links to some web publications and my best photo from two years ago. A swarm of sentient magenta gas enters the one bedroom apartment obscuring bare feet, Tevas, and Maison Margiela Tabi sandals. I begin to itch. No one introduces me to the gas, but I’m told that it’s verified on Instagram. Jon’s roaming lens finds me in the clothes I’ve worn all day to ask me what it’s like to work retail, now that staff is masked again and customers are not. He says he’s sad too and he can’t film strangers on the subway anonymously anymore. The ground sticks with natural wine. A trio of voices say in unison that they can’t even stand the non-natural stuff these days. It gums up their gills and gives them such a hang-over. I get low, lucky to find a hatch behind the Wayfair couch. I count one to three-four different people drifting by who Pete fucked around with when we were together. All the Old Feelings pile out like clowns from a clown car. I kind of want to cry but I have to pee so badly. I wait in line next to Kate and Elton whispering through their teeth about if they should try to make it to the Thing in Bushwick tonight or not. The sentient cloud crouches above the hardwood lapping an orange wine puddle with a cumulus tongue. I arrive in the bathroom where my ghost floats above a Diptyque Baies candle burning on the counter. It’s time. I find my shoes in the pink fog and creep out. The air outside is so softly indifferent to me that I fall into its open arms and make my break with grace granted by the city’s infinite container.

In This Condition

TAYLOR ALEXIS

You confronted me

and suddenly I was small
 bullied to an innocent reflection
 of a self I thought was hardened long ago
 I dropped my head and began to flood my vision

my face numbly mazed out a path
 tightly woven by caution then quickly softened

we ached in sync
 blued and blacked over
 at the slices of life that towered over our
 God-awful hearts
 they reserved the right to palpitate
 in a restless state

in me an infectious but familiar shock
 surged through my wilted and drenched hands
 for I saw you then

unable to trade a glance knowing
 it might have sent me to my grave

how is it
 you've seem to have lingered
 and the longer I've waited
 I turned in on myself
 testifying that memories do last in water

you're tattooed to the parchment
 I try to rip and divide
 hoping you'll fit
 where I bury away all my mistakes

please tell me this is a mistake

you swell in tides my senses
 that no longer feel like senses
 I oppose you so dearly yet
 This is stillness and comfort

how did you find shelter in my mind

I pretend I don't hear violas echo
 in every bit of sheet music you've
 plundered for me

I so desperately try to hedge myself away
 hoping paths don't form circles to my center

and dare I be afraid to fall again
 still I walked forward in this condition

Would You Exchange Your Hands

TAYLOR ALEXIS

For mine
They are also brown
And confused
And hurt but not broken
Bone thin
From lack of nourishment
From rich people fruit
Dangled over our cuticles
But never submerged

They're left
And right

They write
Because they do not cry
And they cannot yell

Mine sweat
So you probably shouldn't do gymnastics

Even though sanity and poverty are a balancing act
And generational trauma seems to be double jointed

If it gets too cold
Might I suggest mittens
There's warmth in hiding scars left
Untreated

From a type of struggle that historically coats brown hands
In scars

And if you'd ever like to switch back
I'll gladly wipe my prints
Of any memory of scorn and squalor
That will surely reach under our nails

A Dream in Motion

SCARLINE MARTINEZ

A Dream in Motion attempts to unmask the fiction that demonizes immigrants. It aims to continue the dialogue on the anti-immigration attitude that is so deeply embedded within our society. My work tells a multilayered story concerning the grueling journey of those wishing to experience a better life. It seeks to depict a more sympathetic view of immigrants by capturing their vulnerability and determination through art.



maricon

NICO GUTIERREZ

is just another word for dyke
 in a language that rejects me
 and bleeds out of me every second
 i spend away from the violence that
 birthed me

black blue yellow green
 i push my teeth against the hurt

if i can't destroy, i will eat

biting into the flesh of my mother
 tongue
 the meat moves under my teeth
 writhing

the tons of deaths seep
 into my mouth

i spit them out
 watermelon seeds blooming into
 vowels my mouth contorts against

a kiss

i lay on her forehead while she sleeps
 there's not a word for lovers who
 flow towards sunlight
 a river transversing through
 the mountain of my body
 a country, split,
 drowning in the Magdalena

i have a nightmare that
 my mother is dead
 and looks into my mouth with her
 rotting worm eyes
 pinches my skin between

her bone fingers draw
 blood the way i draw breaths

and tells me she loves me
 sings a lullaby made of moths
mi hija, mi bonita
mi muertita mariconcita mia

i wake feeling the worms
 in the palms of my hands
 i use to caress her face
 i can't touch her for three days after

the blood spills from my stomach
 as i bite into words turned bullets
 dykewomanlovekissdeath
 shatter my ribs
 burn through my flesh

The Great Debate

TOM WEBBER

CHARACTERS

DAVID – 53-year old college English teacher. Playful and young at heart.

SARAH – 54-year old doctor. DAVID's wife of 24 years. Paints watercolors in her free time.

THE TIME

The present.

THE PLACE

The living room of SARAH and DAVID'S Upper West Side Manhattan apartment.

SCENE 1

Lights come up on SARAH and DAVID WEAVER sitting on either end of their living room couch, their bare feet up, their toes touching. It is Friday night and THEY are sharing an after-dinner glass of cognac and a piece of dark chocolate. SARAH, wearing her nightgown, has clearly just washed her hair. As the scene opens SHE is battling the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle, occasionally writing in a word with her pencil and occasionally erasing one. DAVID, in blue jeans and a flannel shirt, is staring at her hoping she'll pause and look at him. On his lap is a copy of Henry James's novel, *The Ambassadors*. Throughout the scene it should be clear how in sync they are; how much they enjoy each other's company. In an attempt to gain her attention, DAVID moves his foot up her leg. SHE continues to ignore him. Finally, losing his patience, HE speaks.

DAVID

Will you please put down that damn crossword.

SARAH

SHE puts down the crossword and looks at him.

What?

DAVID

Let's do it.

SARAH

Just like that? No preamble? No preliminaries? No pâté paysan?

DAVID

It's time.

SARAH

I'm not stirred by the idea. It's already giving me a headache.

DAVID

I might surprise you.

SARAH

After twenty-four years of marriage?

SHE shoots DAVID a seductive smile and reaches for a piece of chocolate. HE moves his bare foot further up SARAH'S bare leg.

Not likely. I can already intuit what you'll say. As a gay man, James's writing about women is devoid of sexuality. Only when describing male characters does Henry write with sexual energy.

DAVID

Bullseye. It's all right here.

DAVID slaps the book on his lap.

When Strether first sets eyes on Chad, the young man's presence hits him with a crowded rush. Name one of Henry's female characters who merits a crowded rush?

SARAH

See. You're so predictable. I could easily write the article by myself.

DAVID

You can't. You can't write from the male perspective. You're incensed by the male perspective.

DAVID's toes ascend SARAH's leg and burrow into the flesh of her thigh.

It's why you refuse to read Hemingway or Mailer, Roth or Updike.

SARAH

Why would I want to waste my time in the company of such macho, sex-obsessed, male egos?

DAVID

You might learn something. Something about how males view the world. What's on their minds.

SARAH

I pretty much know what's on their minds. I certainly know what's on yours.

SARAH takes a deliberate sip of cognac as she tightens and relaxes her thigh muscles.

Gardening. Tilling. Furrowing.

DAVID

Triple bullseye. What other topic warrants more attention? It's why I began reading Henry James in the first place. To learn why you were so enamored of him.

HE takes the cognac glass from her and sips.

SARAH

You were jealous. Of a dead man.

DAVID

With whom you were spending a lot of time in bed.

SARAH

By introducing you to Henry, I elevated your reading habits.

SARAH imprisons DAVID's wandering foot with both hands.

DAVID

That's not all you elevate.

There is a pause, each waiting for the other to make a move. Finally DAVID says.

So let's do it. Write our joint essay. Until you pointed out that passage between Maggie and the Prince, I would have argued there's not a single erotic moment in all of James.

SARAH

Perhaps we differ in what we find erotic.

SARAH lets go of DAVID's foot, reaches for a piece of chocolate, raises it to her lips, sucks it into her mouth, and slowly chews.

DAVID

That's it. Why our article will be so stimulating. That you as a female reader find eroticism where I as a male reader find a closeted gay man's careful avoidance of anything sexual . . . How about my other foot?

DAVID places his neglected foot on SARAH'S lap.

SARAH

Who says Henry was a closeted gay man?

SARAH'S fingers begin their magic on DAVID'S second foot.

You think every male writer not obsessed with gardening is gay.

DAVID

Oh, come on. Not that old saw again. Henry's homosexuality is no longer in question.

SARAH

Perhaps being gay is what made him so insightful into the feelings of women. If only straight men were half so perceptive.

DAVID

Don't be smug. You think you know what I'm going to say before I say it, but I feel the same about you. You won't last two sentences before you skyrocket into a rant on noble resignation. Your idea that Henry's heroines redeem themselves through some kind of self-sacrificing acceptance of what they consider moral and just.

SARAH

Not redeem. They have no need to redeem themselves in order to stay true to themselves. But what does noble resignation have to do with the erotic?

DAVID

Zilch. Nothing. Nada. My point exactly. But I have no doubt you'll find a way to sneak it in.

SARAH

Nada is what you're doing to advance my enthusiasm for your project. Your cup runneth over with cocksure, male, one-upmanship.

DAVID

I love it when you say cocksure. Say it again.

SARAH

As SHE speaks, SARAH elongates the words cocksure and cocky and mushes her lips together in a full Marilyn Monroe pout.

You're worse than cocksure. You're cocky.

Their eyes catch and hold. Their strongest moment yet of sexual tension. But DAVID can't resist the final word.

DAVID

In our essay the male will erupt with cocksure one-upmanship while the female

drips with noble resignation . . . What do you consider the most erotic scene in all of Henry James?

SARAH

That's easy. The scene at the end of Portrait of a Lady when Caspar Goodwood kisses Isabel Archer. It gets me every time.

DAVID

Where exactly does it get you?

SARAH grimaces, rolls her eyes, and ignores his question.

You find it erotic?

SARAH

Incredibly.

DAVID

I'd better read it again.

SARAH

You should. Read it from a female perspective.

DAVID

How am I supposed to do that?

SARAH

Try using your imagination.

DAVID

Don't get snarky.

SARAH

Don't get defensive.

DAVID

Who's defensive?

SARAH

I'm just saying. Don't.

DAVID

I think we've hit on something. Let's read the scene between Isabel and Caspar and record our reactions. Because you'll be providing the female perspective, I'll be free to unleash my uncensored, politically incorrect, egocentric, cocky, male perspective.

SARAH

Oh, God.

Webber

SARAH pushes aside his foot, takes a sizable swallow of cognac and returns to her crossword.

DAVID

We can do it. I know we can do it. Afterwards, I'll type up our exchange and we can edit what we've said. I promise not to try and score points if you promise not to soar off onto the high ground of noble resignation.

SARAH

As a matter of fact, I'm feeling a large dose of noble resignation right now. I'm going to bed.

SARAH rises from the couch.

DAVID

Before you retire, let's set a time. Tomorrow evening before dinner let's ring in round one of our great debate. What do you say?

SARAH

Fine. But we'll need two copies of Portrait.

DAVID

Why two?

SARAH

You're not so good at sharing.

DAVID

I'd like to share something with you right now.

SARAH

Sorry. You missed your chance. You should have made your move when I said you were cocky. I was giving you every clue and you blew it.

DAVID

Damn. Is there no room in your heart for redemption, resurrection, resurgence?

SARAH

You can always hope.

SARAH takes DAVID's hand and leads him into the bedroom. Lights go to black.

SCENE 2

Lights come up on the same set as in SCENE 1. It is the next day, Saturday, shortly after 5:00. SARAH and DAVID are once again seated on their living room couch, this time with a plate of crackers and cheese on the coffee table in

front of them. SARAH, dressed in slacks and a blouse, is sipping a glass of white wine. DAVID, wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt, is sipping vodka on the rocks. Their sock-covered feet are on the floor. They are holding separate copies of Portrait of a Lady. DAVID fools with his cell phone, then places it between them.

SARAH

Let's start by reading the scene out loud.

DAVID

Why would we want to do that?

SARAH

To get in the mood. To invoke Henry's presence. To hear his voice. To fill in the words above the page. To listen before we talk.

DAVID

Okay. If you insist. You read, I'll listen. Bottom of page 545 where Caspar says to Isabel, You are perfectly alone; you don't know where to turn. Now it is that I want you to think of me.

SARAH

No, no. We've got to start at the beginning. Middle of page 543 where Caspar first appears and finds Isabel sitting alone in the garden. We need to see what Isabel sees. Feel what she feels. Part of the eroticism is the setting. The atmosphere. The buildup. Why do men always want to rush things?

DAVID

All right, all right. Start wherever you want.

SARAH

Remember. Henry didn't give Caspar the name Goodwood for nothing.

DAVID

Whoa. You really think? Goodwood?

SARAH

Henry was a lot more knowing than you give him credit for. Listen. Listen carefully.

SARAH begins to read.

She quickly straightened herself, glancing about, and then saw what had become of her solitude. She was sharing it with Caspar Goodwood who stood looking at her . . .

The lights dim for a moment then come back on denoting the passage of time.

Ah, be mine as I am yours! she heard her companion cry . . .

SARAH looks up from the page.

Now you. I want to hear your voice.

DAVID

DAVID begins to read.

He had suddenly given up argument, and his voice seemed to come through a confusion of sound . . .

Again the lights dim then come back on.

He glared at her for a moment through the dark, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like a flash of lightning; when it was dark again she was free.

SARAH

There is a moment of silence during which SARAH and DAVID stare at each other.

Well?

DAVID

Clearly agitated, HE takes a deep breath. Then a sip of vodka. Then a bite of cheese. Then another sip of vodka. SHE waits.

I wouldn't call it erotic exactly. Moving maybe. But not erotic. Definitely not erotic. Nothing happens. Only one kiss.

SARAH

Nothing happens? The world happens. For the first time in her life Isabel feels truly loved. It wraps around her lifting her off her feet. She feels that to have Caspar take her in his arms would be the next best thing to dying and then he does take her in his arms. And his kiss is like a flash of lightning.

DAVID

But then she runs away.

SARAH

It's all she can deal with at that moment. But she has felt herself loved.

DAVID

And it's erotic to you?

SARAH

Extremely. It makes me feel weightless, like I'm floating in a fathomless sea. More.

DAVID
In what way more?

SARAH
Oh, you men. You always want the details.

DAVID
Because we fear making an unwanted move.

SARAH
No such fear deterred Mr. Goodwood. It's one of the reasons why Isabel is so stirred by him. He's everything her husband isn't. Virile. Straightforward. Willing to defy societal censure for their love.

DAVID
Is that what women want? A man who's virile, straightforward, willing to take risks for love?

SARAH
In part, yes. We also want a man who will take care of us. Protect us. Keep us safe. At least some women. Certainly this woman. It's when I feel safe that I can let myself go, forget myself, become myself.

DAVID
Thanks for telling me. I never knew. You never put it so boldly before.

SARAH
But Henry knew. He listened to women. He observed us. He saw us. He understood.

DAVID
I always had the idea that women are most turned on by the zipless fuck. By being swept off their feet by a dark handsome stranger on a train.

SARAH
The zipless fuck is a fun fantasy. In our own beds, in the safety of our own homes. Most of us wouldn't go for it in reality.

DAVID
Most of you?

SARAH
Some women are free enough, bold enough. Not me. And not Isabel Archer. She returns to her banal husband, but she returns changed. She knows that Caspar Goodwood, or a man like him, will be in her future. That's what gives her the strength to return to Osmond and her loveless marriage. She refuses to place her own happiness above her promise to Osmond's daughter not to

abandon her. To Isabel, returning to her marriage and to Pansy is more than a societal obligation. She has to return to be true to herself.

DAVID
Noble resignation.

SARAH
You said it. Not me.

DAVID
I don't believe in that kind of self-sacrifice.

SARAH
I know how you feel. Whenever I read that scene half of me wishes Isabel would just go for it and give herself to Caspar.

DAVID
Except she doesn't. Instead, she runs off leaving poor Caspar alone with his good wood.

SARAH
Yes. It makes me sad. Realize that sometimes it pays to be spontaneous.

Sarah looks at DAVID and smiles.

But remember, Isabel's only twenty-six. Henry leaves up in the air what will happen to her in the future. Maybe someday she'll seek out Caspar, maybe not. But the reader feels, as her cousin Ralph prophesied on his deathbed, that anyone with a heart as true and as loving as hers won't be made to suffer for long.

DAVID
So in effect, Henry, himself, gives us both the male and the female perspective. Caspar Goodwood embodies the male. Isabel Archer the female.

SARAH
Pretty neat, huh?

DAVID
But it still doesn't resolve the question as to why the female reader finds their love scene erotic and the male reader doesn't.

SARAH
You didn't find the scene erotic?

DAVID
Maybe a little.

SARAH

I'll bet Caspar Goodwood found it erotic.

DAVID

Undoubtedly. He had that one lightning bolt kiss.

HE gives SARAH a meaningful look.

SARAH

SHE returns his look.

Yes, he took it.

DAVID

HE moves to take SARAH in his arms and in doing so sits on the cell phone resting between them. HE picks it up and gives it a onceover.

Goddammit. I must not have turned on RECORD.

SARAH

Never mind.

SHE takes the cell phone from him and places it on the coffee table.

Come here, my Mr. Goodwood. You've turned on something else.

THEY embrace as the lights fade to black.

THE END

6'5

AIRIANA QUITO

You're so tall

You can see everything from up there

Can you see I miss you?

I miss a lot of things especially you from down here

The Veil

ERICA REX

Dear Cassandra,

I received an email from your mother recently. She said she was writing to inform me of your engagement. Firstly, let me congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials.

Secondly, please ask your mother not to contact me by email. Email is not communication. It is a decree that allows the sender to engage in a self-serving charade of having communicated. Your mother has a phone. Please tell her to use it.

I opened your mother's missive as I looked out my tenth floor window where scabby patches of sunlight fleck the sides of turn-of-the-century buildings like an outbreak of smallpox. I've never liked big cities. They will never soothe my soul like the view from the terrace at the Ranch—the tarweed-yellow field below the house, the tawny grass field sloping up the hill from the creek to the ridgeline, the cluster of Angus standing under the live oak by the watering trough at the corner post, swishing their tails, coyotes yipping at twilight. The redbud in April against the gray-green manzanita. Its first bloom always brought tears to my eyes. The oddly erotic scent of bear clover. Will your wedding take place at the Ranch? Under the live oak by the house where Jake and I got married?

Your mother said she was writing because you'd asked her about your grandmother's veil, which I wore when I got married these many years ago. She said you wanted to wear it at your wedding.

I was surprised. You were only four when I married your Uncle Jake. You'd hardly recall the day at that age, I should think, although you'd have seen photos. You are even in some of them, wincing rather than smiling, in your little red plaid dress. It was a beautiful veil, though. Handmade in 1935 for your grandmother's wedding to her first husband. Floor length, French lace, a little ribbon loop sewn onto the hem to wear over one's wrist—your grandmother pointed out—so the wearer wouldn't trip over it while dancing.

The spring Jake and I announced our engagement, your grandparents came up to the Ranch from Santa Barbara to talk about wedding plans. My own parents, your grandmother had tactfully observed, were absent. No need to go into that.

Your grandmother wanted to know about my dress: would it be simple? Lace? Tulle? As a woman who had worked my whole life, I could not imagine dressing up like a meringue. Very simple, I answered. Charmeuse slip with a layer of chiffon. Sheer sleeves. Shadow neckline. Tea length. No train. No rhinestones. Just me in it.

"Okay, honey," said your grandmother. She leapt out of her chair and rushed out of the room.

"Did I say something?" I asked Jake.

"I don't think so," he said.

"I'll be right back, kids, I just need to get something!" she shouted from down the hall. She was in her late seventies, but boy I've never seen a more purposeful sprint from anybody—save, perhaps you, Cassandra, when you were first being potty trained—long before you were weaned from the tit—and you realized you had to go.

Your grandmother returned from the bowels of the house breathless, clutching a faded hot-pink I. Magnin's gift box. She opened it and held up the veil.

"Now, be honest. I'm offering it to you, and you should accept only if you want to," she said. "I've had it locked away hoping someday someone would come along, the right girl to wear it! And here you are!"

The veil complemented my dress perfectly. I thanked her. She was overjoyed I'd be able to use it. In my own life, it was a gesture without equal, redoubled by the fact that I was marrying her stepson, from your grandfather's first marriage. He'd gotten custody of his two little boys at a time when it was unheard of, in the 1950s, and met your grandmother, with her boy and girl. They'd married and had your dad.

Teflon Jeff.

After the ceremony, your grandmother and I were in her dressing room off the bathroom. I'd removed the veil and thanked her again for letting me use it. She said, "Honey, you looked lovely, and it was perfect with your dress. I'm so glad someone else could finally wear it. I'll put it away again, so it's there for the next one." Presumably that's what she did. Where? Who knew? She didn't tell anyone, evidently.

In her email, your mother said she'd looked everywhere for it. Your grandparents' Santa Barbara house, which she'd cleared out after your grandmother died. Lately, evidently, a general ransacking of the Ranch. Fifty years of feed-store calendars, hip flasks, a box of cut citrines your grandmother never got around to having mounted. Bed jackets. Christmas ornaments. Clay pigeons. Boxes of shotgun shells. A complete set of the *Wizard of Oz*. No veil.

Your mother wanted to know if, perchance, I knew where the veil might be. Twenty-five years after I last saw it, and a solid dozen after I left California for good, this was an odd question coming from her. It made me wonder. Then all the pieces began to line up.

"I'm sure you understand how important that veil is as a family heirloom, and why we'd really like to know where it is so Cassandra can wear it on her wedding day," she wrote. "Do you have it?" Her implication—that I'd stolen it—although sordid, was not surprising.

If there is one thing for which I am grateful it's that I do not live inside your mother's head.

As far as I know, until the day I wore it, no one had seen the veil except your grandmother, her first husband and whoever else was present at her first wedding. Not your grandfather—he was her second husband. Nor, of course, your mother.

Nor, evidently the first daughter-in-law, Annika. Nobody even knew it existed, to say nothing of where it was stashed. Between the two houses and the barns and garages, and offices, there was ample space for anything to be hidden away. Anything. Gold nuggets. Firearms. Deeds to property in Honduras. Unwanted children. The odd lace veil.

This, I realized, has been the dish of lava simmering in your mother's soul since the day I wore it: your grandmother had not offered the veil to your mother to wear to her own wedding, a decade before mine. Your mother has never gotten over it.

I cannot imagine what a compound blow my wearing the veil was to someone as abjectly committed to cataloging the spoils as your mother. She didn't marry your father for nothing: youngest son, single full biological offspring of both parents, a perfect finish to a well-heeled blended family. Your mother informed me in not-so-many words when I started seeing Jake that she owned the relationship with the in-laws. Jake and I were still living at the Ranch before we bought a little cabin up past the Mono allotment in the National Forest. Don't buy Kleenex in decorator boxes and leave them around, she ordered. Don't put anything on the walls. I told her if my in-laws-to-be had anything to say to me, I was certain they'd call me up and say it.

I adored your grandparents. They were not without faults, but, as I told your father on the phone the day your grandmother died, they were people who had the habit of being larger than life. They were a hard act to follow. Your father doesn't even come close. Jake, well, if it weren't for the drugs, he may have amounted to something.

By the time Jake and I got married, your mother had had your younger sister. Lucky for you, really, otherwise your mother may never have let you unlatch.

You guys came up to the Ranch to visit before your sister was born. I'd made lunch. Jake had left the table already. Kendall, Jake's closest Los Angeles college buddy, was finishing his coffee. I was reading the paper. You were cranky, pawing at your mom. Still seated at the table, your mom lifted you onto her lap, pulled up her shirt and whipped out her boob. When in doubt, whip it out, I guess.

Kendall left the table to join Jake down at the shop. He did not stop commenting about boobs for the rest of the weekend.

"The kid talks in full sentences. She walks. Is this normal?" he kept asking.

Can't say I knew.

At some point, though, it became obvious the breast baring was making lots of people uncomfortable. That Christmas, I gave your mom a book called *Bye-Bye Nah-Nahs*. The jacket copy alone was worth the price. "Join little ones across the globe as they learn to say 'bye-bye' to nursing and 'Hello' to the fun that awaits! Simple phrases in Spanish, French, Hawaiian and Japanese are included along with their English translations."

That same Christmas, your mother gave me an expensive Japanese kitchen knife, the kind with the swirly Damascus pattern forged into the blade.

You girls, especially you, were the epicenter of your mom's life. I don't think

she had anything else, really. Your sister developed actual interests: horses, rock climbing, swimming. And recently neuroscience, from what I'm told. What a kid. You, alas, were your mother's daughter. Despite your aptitude for math, which emerged during middle school—Jake used to speak of your talent in tones approaching reverence—and being sent at your father's insistence to a school for math geniuses (you were twelve for heaven's sake!), your mother saw to it you became an extension of her. Scared of dogs. And horses. And snakes. And heights. The last thing she was going to do was let you grow up into anything but the millennial version of herself: a latter-day, overall-clad, cool chick clutching a \$10,000 string of pearls.

But where is the veil? The truth is, its disappearance has nothing to do with me.

If I am honest, I have to say your veil enigma isn't really about the veil itself. "Veil envy" is an emotional cold you caught from your mother. Your own feelings—if I can guess at them—about who is entitled to wear what on her head began with a different piece of headgear entirely. Namely, a cowboy hat, a Stetson, belonging to your father.

I believe you suffer from synesthesia of hats, dear Cassandra. I suspect shadowy traces of that night—the night of the hat—have been lurking in your mind ever since in those corners where childhood events become ensnared, like gold necklaces with minuscule links jumbled together in a jewelry box. Getting them apart is like trying to unhook a molecule. So, herewith, I offer you a wedding gift: the truth untangled.

It was December. We were all at the Ranch.

Your sister was about six months old. Your mother was up at the house in bed with her. You were in your father's care.

It was your dad's birthday. There was the usual rogues' gallery of his work and college friends: Los Angeles property developers, a financial wiz named Buck who eventually had to testify before Congress about why short selling the housing market had been a good idea. Another guy who had left his wife for a secretary thirty years his junior.

Jake and a bunch of his friends had heaped brush for a fire down by the dam. Bob, your dad's high school friend who worked for a helicopter logging outfit, poured a little diesel fuel from a gas can into a shallow, narrow groove he'd made in the dirt. I watched the runnel slide toward the pile.

"Back up," ordered Jake. Everyone stepped away. Your dad tossed a match. A whoosh and the flames leaped skyward.

There were lots of people around. Everyone was drinking. Snow began to fall. The fire crackled against a background of darkness.

As I stood staring into the flames, your dad moseyed up beside me and mumbled hello. I'd never liked your dad. I never trusted him.

I could tell by his amble he was already three sheets to the wind. I found out later his pals had brought up a canister of nitrous oxide. Between the gas and the cocaine, and the vodka and Jack Daniels or whatever they were drinking, he'd be

going full tilt until dawn.

“How ya doing, Sarah?” he mumbled. With the speed of a rattlesnake, he grabbed the back of my neck, and drew me—yanked may be a better word—in front of him. Lifting the Stetson from his own head and placing it on mine, he growled huskily: “I want you to kiss me long and hard.” He pulled my face toward his and kissed me on the mouth. I almost gagged.

“What in the name of God are you doing, Jeff?” I pulled away and threw the hat at him.

I saw you standing there, your face a mask of horror. You started to cry. You’d been right at your father’s side, and you’d seen it all. I knelt. I took your hand.

“Please don’t cry, Cassandra,” I said. “Your father’s a different kind of guy. I don’t even like him.”

“It’s my hat. He told me he was giving me the hat.”

I looked at your father.

“You son of a bitch.”

He just stood there like a dolt.

“It is yours,” I said.

I picked the hat off the ground, brushed it off, and placed it on your head. You were inconsolable. You’d witnessed your first life-changing flash from heaven. The depravity of your perfect parent had been unmasked. The hat was forever contaminated. I asked if you wanted to stay down by the fire or go up to the house with your mom. You said you wanted to go up to the house. I walked you up over the stile, followed you into the kitchen, and told the maid to find your mother. You refused to take the hat, so I put it on the counter in the kitchen for you to reclaim later, if you wanted it.

I went back down to find Jake so we could return to our cabin. I somehow thought he’d seen the incident. High himself, and drunk, he hadn’t.

About a month later, Jake stopped at the Ranch before coming home. I realized—belatedly—most likely to fetch some cocaine from a stash he kept in the barn. He was surprised to see Jeff’s car in the carport. A heavy-set woman with long dark hair stepped into the shadows as he approached. She didn’t reply when Jake said hello.

Jake entered the kitchen to find Jeff rushing from the back of the house carrying a pink I. Magnin’s box.

“What are you doing?” Jake asked. “Who’s that in the carport?”

“It’s sort of a long story,” said Jeff. “I have to give her something.”

“What? Why?”

“Because.”

“Christ. Give her money.”

“I did. Wasn’t enough. Wasn’t personal.”

“Why personal? Give her a spoon. Give her a salt cellar. No one will miss them.”

“Karen would notice.”

Your mother. Bless her silver-counting soul. Jeff raced out the back door,

ordering Jake not to follow til he’d left.

Later when Jake told me about the woman, he said he thought it was probably one of the “Duh” sisters. In high school, he and his brothers had gifted this unkind sobriquet to a pair of Mono Indian girls from the allotment, Brenda and Wanda. Bren-duh, Wan-duh.

Your father and Jake could sure be cutting—Jake, especially when he was high.

Aunt Ida, your grandmother’s sister, provided me with this morsel of Okie wisdom the first Thanksgiving I spent with the family: “Amazing Jake got you to marry him,” she said. “He’s a hard dog to keep under the wagon.” He was. Which, along with the drug use, was why I had to leave.

Shortly before I departed the mountains and Jake for good, I ran into one of the Mono women, Frances, at the post office. She’d come down to the Ranch every spring to pick reeds that grew beside the slough as basket weaving material. Could only find those long stems a few places, she said. She told me she’d got wind of some gossip about one of the Duh sisters. Got knocked up, she’d heard. Didn’t mention who the father might be. Didn’t say what became of the baby.

Since receiving your mother’s email, I’ve learned your future husband takes after your father at least in his dipsomania. A personal squib on your wedding registry website read something like: “Love the red wine, and when that’s gone go for bourbon. I surf. She does yoga.”

And so that’s the story. I’m sending this to you through your Uncle Jake as your mother would never pass it along. Ask your dad about the veil, dear Cassandra. And make sure you’re looking him in the eye when he doesn’t reply.

Yours truly,
Aunt Sarah

There Once Was A Man

RYAN FITZGERALD

There once was a man in a far-away land
who was plagued with a terrible curse:
from his very first breath 'til the day of his death
he was forced to speak only in verse.

The words that he'd say were aligned in a way
that the rhythm was always in time,
and though try as he would it would do him no good
to attempt not to end with a rhyme.

At first he enjoyed this condition devoid
of non-metrical turns of the phrase;
when he opened his mouth all the words just came out
and this feat never ceased to amaze.

But, after some time, he grew tired of rhyme
as the novelty started to wane
and the constant repetitive rhythm upset
him and started to drive him insane!

He vowed that one day he'd discover a way
to be rid of this evil for good,
and he swore that he'd try 'til the day that he died
to do all that he possibly could.

He set out to climb up a mountain to find
a magician who might break the curse,
and although he was scared, his new fate, when compared
to his current one, couldn't be worse.

So, he climbed and he climbed with the thought in his mind
that his words might forever continue to rhyme
and he thought to himself maybe no one could help
break the curse and he screamed at the sky as he knelt.

The man's heart filled with fear as a shadow drew near
and then all of a sudden a figure appeared.
The man's eyes filled with dread, but it smiled and it said

Fitzgerald
that this whole time the curse had been all in his head.

Then the man stood up, turned around,
climbed down the mountain,
and carried on living the rest of his life.

Kingsbridge

CHRISTOPHER BROWN

Miguel kept flipping the light switch on and off, as if the bulb would magically turn on by itself. He knew it wouldn't work, nothing was working. He had lost track of how long it had been at this point, and he was getting worried that his old flashlight would run out of batteries soon.

Guzman slogged in, flashlight in hand. The light was dim, but was still wide enough to cover part of the room in a very soft, golden glow. He sighed as he dropped onto the bed. He lay there in silence, lost in his own thoughts, until he finally groaned, "How long have you been trying to get the lights on?"

"Not that long," Miguel muttered.

"Sure, I totally believe that. Why are you even trying? Nothing's gonna happen." As Miguel moved his hand from the switch, Guzman got up from the bed and went over to the dresser. He dug around in the top drawer, occasionally leaning in to get a better look. There was the sound of loose coins jingling and pencils rattling around on the wood. Miguel leaned against the wall, watching as his brother's frustration grew until he finally asked "What're you looking for?"

"The batteries!" Guzman shouted as he combed through each drawer.

"There aren't any, I checked already."

Guzman froze. "You checked all the drawers?"

"All of 'em."

"Are you sure?"

Miguel paused briefly before saying "Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

Miguel shut off his flashlight, using his brother's to see the papers. He gathered the loose leaf, the textbooks, and his old notebook. As he looked for his pencils, the light suddenly disappeared from the room, along with Guzman. He heard footsteps followed by the sound of something opening and glass breaking. Confused, Miguel got up and followed the vague glow down the hall and into the kitchen.

The kitchen was small enough for the light of the flashlight to reach every corner. The smell of spoiled food filled the entire room, and he watched as Guzman, crouched on the kitchen floor, desperately searched through the unlit fridge for something that hadn't already gone bad. He held up a container of something neither of them could identify, only to throw it on the floor with the rest of whatever was in the fridge. Miguel looked on in silence. Guzman turned to see his younger brother staring down at him.

"Was that everything?" Miguel asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah... yeah, that was it," Guzman said as he got back up on his feet. "Unless there's something else in the cupboards, but I doubt there'd be anything up there."

Everything fell quiet again.

Guzman clenched the small carton of spoiled milk in his hands before he went over to the sink. As he poured it down the drain, Miguel began cleaning up the floor. Guzman had made more of a mess than they had realized. Some of the containers of food had spilled, a few had broken when they hit the ground, including a beer bottle that had fallen out of the fridge door. Guzman heard the glass and the broom against the tile. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm cleaning this up."

"No the hell you aren't. I'm cleaning this, move over." Guzman tried to pull the broom from Miguel's hands.

"I don't get what you're so upset about. It's no big deal, Dad lets me clean stuff like this up all the time."

Guzman glared at him, "forget what he said. I said no."

"Then what am I supposed to do, huh? Since you're clearly Dad now. What's next, are you—"

Guzman snapped without warning. "God, will you just shut up and move?" Miguel stood there and stared like he had seen a ghost. Guzman looked like he had just committed a crime, like he had done something absolutely unforgivable. The tension hung in the air like smoke in a burning room.

Miguel was the first to try and force out a sentence. "Sorry, I—"

Guzman cut him off. "It's...It's not your fault."

They hesitated to say anything else.

Guzman took the broom and swept up what was left of the glass.

"Can you help me look through the cupboards?"

Miguel nodded, and they began opening the cupboard. Each one had almost nothing. Sometimes there were things like maple syrup, or some ketchup, but there wasn't anything that could be an actual meal. They kept looking, until eventually Miguel came across a small, unopened box of instant rice in the back of the last cupboard, collecting dust behind some bottles. "I found some rice, but that's pretty much it."

"That's gonna have to do for now. I'll have to buy some stuff in the morning."

Guzman grabbed a match and lit the stove as Miguel took his seat at the table. Until then, neither of them had heard their father's soft breathing from the couch.

"I don't know how he could just sleep through all this." Miguel turned back around towards the kitchen.

"Me neither. He's been sleeping for a good three, maybe four hours."

Miguel looked down at the mess scattered on the table. "How many did he bring home this time?"

"You're the one at the table. See for yourself."

He searched through the pile of documents/papers for a while, before he pulled out a few small, colorful pieces of paper.

"Seven, I think. Maybe more."

Guzman sighed. "I swear, he spends more on those than on—" Guzman cut himself off. "Forget it. Just put those in that box over there."

Miguel picked up a banged-up shoe box from underneath the table. It was full of lotto tickets just like the ones in his hand, scratched out and useless. Except one. "Hey, one of these isn't scratched out yet."

"You might as well use it. He's probably not gonna notice."

Miguel looked around for coins before finding a nickel where he found the tickets. "You got anything?"

Miguel scratched the tickets to see what he won. "Ten bucks."

"Wow, ten whole dollars! Oh my God, we're rich!" Guzman shouted sarcastically as he brought the plates to the table.

They laughed as Miguel crammed the ticket into his pocket. "I mean, it's probably better than nothing. We could use it for food."

"True. Or maybe you could use it for your college fund?"

Miguel's smile faded away. "What college fund? It's not like there's enough for me to actually go anywhere good."

"But it's a start. Trust me, you're gonna need whatever you can get. What are you studying, anyway?"

"Business, maybe."

"Nice," Guzman leaned in a bit, looking to hear more. "You can make a lot from stuff like that."

Miguel paused for a moment before he asked, "What were you gonna study?" Guzman looked like the question had stabbed him straight through the heart. He sat there, too dumbfounded to make a sound. His brother waited for a response, puzzled. "Biochemistry."

"What made you stop?"

"Ran out of money." He rested his head on his arm. "I might as well have quit. Where can you even go with a Biochemistry degree anyways?"

"But it was something you liked, wasn't it?" Guzman didn't bother responding. Miguel changed the subject. "I found out that I might be able to get a full scholarship for Canisius College."

Guzman perked up again. "Is that a good college?"

"I think, but I need to check later."

"Looks like you got it all figured out, huh? Good." Guzman's smile was surprisingly warm. It was as comforting as it was rare. Guzman had no idea how confused Miguel was, how scared he was. But his brother's happiness about his "plan" was something he couldn't take away.

The light above the table started to flicker with an unsteady but bright light, before it finally turned on completely. Just like that, the blackout was over. Through the window, you could see Kingsbridge light up again, you could hear cheering from downstairs. The clock read 11:09 PM.

"Great," Guzman mumbled bitterly, "the power comes back on just when we need to go to bed."

Miguel breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm just happy it's over."

"I'll wash these," Guzman said as he pocketed the coin and picked up the plates. "You go to bed. You've been up for long enough."

Miguel scoffed. "I'm almost an adult, I think I can handle being up until midnight."

"Whatever. I'll see you tomorrow." Guzman took the dishes into the kitchen. Before he got into his bed, Miguel flipped the light switch, almost like he was checking to see if it actually worked. Sure enough, it switched on, just as it almost always did. His things were scattered all over the bed. His work was unfinished, but he decided that it could wait for a bit longer. He shoved it all into his bag before walking over to the dresser. He looked down into the still-open top drawer of the dresser to see old chemistry textbooks collecting dust, and a single small battery.

Collection: Form, Light & Space

DILIANNY ESPINOZA

“Envisioning the inimitable perspectives of everyday life, mixing surrealism with pop art.” Sometimes when I’m walking in the city, in an interesting conversation, reading a curious word somewhere, or just on the Internet, almost anything can inspire my brain to create these visual twists. In my collection for *Promethean*, you can find artworks that explore light, space, and form, especially in the architectural sense. I extracted what I consider the main feature of a place or scenery and exploded it to accentuate a feeling while adding a nostalgic touch.











Union Specific

WILLIAM QUINONEZ

In the age of dissonance and
telegraphy.

Hero mentions in a ruminating space,
“We’re making amends starting at dawn.”
But then asks, “Where do we go from here
and what about our differences?”

“Did you hear about Benny? Did you see him?
He carried a mallet in his satchel
and was arguing
with the streetlights again.”

But we’re, you know, still hiding up in the trees
afraid to come down.
“How about you? Where did you go?
I’m so happy to hear about your successes.
Yes, and triumphs.
Send over those transcripts.
I want a copy.”

Why can’t I get out of bed?
Depresión punto com. An online forum
for our gestures
and innocences.

Answer my calls, Operator.
Mister-I-know-what’s-good-for-you.
Mister-I’ve-been-there.
And Mister-don’t-mind-me-ima-jus-passing-through.

Forgive the notes on the wall,
they don’t know what they’re talking about.
Forgive the thoughts upstairs,
they don’t know where to go
from there.

I saw you on the side of the road and asked if you needed a ride.

Do you remember the loneliness
and oranges we shared, and the miles we went
in neither direction?

They said those waters were stagnant
and no one should go in.
We met underneath
while holding our breath
and rust cutting our feet.
Operator, do you remember
the day we stole from our cousins and neighbors and CVS
for things we already had?

Do you remember
running away from home
and spending the night in the park on top of the restrooms?

Oh, don’t you remember me, Operator,
of the local tri-state-area?
We should hang out. I have 17 dollars now
for donuts and trail mix and topo-chicos.
Do you need hardware?
I think I have enough for nuts and bolts.

It’s okay to feel unintentional
and never deliberate.
We’ll shy away with no excuse.
It’s fine.
We’re a thousand steps behind everyone else, the ants pass us by
and the parked cars have a better start.
Where to next if the beaches are closed and the librarian
doesn’t return your late-night texts?
Where do you go if the journal has had enough of your bummers
and offset confusionals?
The park bench is fully booked,
and the bushes require reservations
months in advance.
Where do you go if you can’t open the can of beans?

I want to spill the beans, but I also want to enjoy them first
with wheat tortilla, avocado and onion.
Where are you going for the holidays
and where are the families flying in from?

Sorry, I can't talk long. I got to go
 and say my evening prayers near the pine and oak.
 Over the mountain,
 cross the sea with our friends.

Remember Dennis? He's back in the desert searching for soil.
 And June-bug, June is always the month we are in.
 And Charlie has his windows open.
 And Noah is directing traffic.
 And John has a curriculum.
 And my dad is building a garage for my sister.
 And the times released another story, and my teachers have jokes about
 the apocalypse
 and the garbage man tells me what to do every morning.

Woody, please be with us. We've been hit
 and run down, run over and walked on.
 Can we join you, Railroad Bill? You never worked,
 and you never will.

Hero of the last remark,
 did you get my voicemail?
 Where are you? I want to make lentils for you.
 We could finish the last season.
 What did I tell you, dude?
 You got nothing to worry about.

There's no more late fees
 and we landed on the moon
 months ago.
 There are fresh flowers
 speaking out
 and there's a place for you.

Thanks for calling.
 Operator, put us through.
 Hey, thanks again for reaching out. Things are good. I'm so good.
 I figured it all out.
 I swear, and I know better now.
 But I want to hear about you. Where are you these days?
 Boy, I wish I was there. Sounds awful but I don't know, maybe
 it's for the best.

Call me back.

Catch up with me and let me know
 if there's anything I can do for you.
 Pick me up tonight and wear your swimming goggles.
 Telegraph me this:
 I miss you.

Ray

STEPHANIE ZLOTNICK

Ray was born at least three years before me. He was somewhere around eleven years old when my parents bought him (at least that's what we were told), and I was eight. I don't know his full backstory, but I know he had been neglected in some way. "He's not like the horses you're used to, Steph," my mom warned. "You have to be more careful around him. He hasn't been trained to be a school horse for kids. He hasn't been trained for anything."

I recently found a photo of Ray and me from when he was still relatively new to the family. I am handing him a treat, clearly trying to flatten my hand so hard that it almost looks hyperextended, and my scrawny arm is locked straight, keeping me at the farthest distance possible. My right hand grasps the paddock fence that divides us, and the tendon in my hand juts out enough to show my inner tension. My head is level with his nose; I'm wearing an oversized yellow t-shirt and denim overalls. My glasses are thin wire frames, and my hair is parted in the center, reaching just past my ears. Ray's head looks small, somehow. There's not a gray hair in sight, and his eyes and ears are focused on me.

Before Ray, I had learned enough being around horses to know the basic rules. Never put your face next to the horse's face; always keep your hand on the horse if you need to go behind them so they know where you are; never stand directly behind a horse where they can't see you, and either get up real close to their butt or stand far enough away that their kick won't reach you; keep your hand completely flat when giving a horse treats. With Ray, these rules mattered. He wasn't as relaxed with people behind him as the others were, he got so excited about carrots that he would've easily taken a finger off if your hand wasn't in the right position, he sometimes thrashed his head when on the cross ties, and if he heard a sudden noise he didn't like, he'd jump sideways.

As a tiny eight-year-old, he scared me, but I so badly wanted to love him. With him in our family, it no longer made sense for me to take lessons on one of the barn's school horses, so I had to figure out how to be Ray's sister.

Ray was a nervous horse for the first few years. He had a thing about puddles. He would squeamishly side-step around tiny pools of water on the ground. Right outside the indoor ring was a gravel clearing that often stayed wet for a while after a big rain, and one day, a miniscule puddle sat next to the mounting block. It couldn't have been more than a quarter of a cup of water, but after I mounted him, Ray danced around it with his eyes wide open and ears alert. In this moment of unpredictable waltzing, my muscles strained and my heart pounded. Under my white knuckles, the leather reins chafed my palm as I braced myself for Ray to gallop away in fear. But I stayed on him, and he stayed put. I realized I could survive a little dancing. I held my own on his back, and as he and I both grew,

puddles became a fear of his past, and my own fear of his dances waned. We learned to walk on together.

Ray stepped on me twice in his life. He was on the cross ties both times, wiggling around to avoid flies or the hoof pick in my mom's hands. They weren't malicious stomps, just the haphazard motions of a being with limited peripheral vision and absolutely no sense of how big he was. The first time it happened I was wearing riding boots, so my toes were protected. I panicked, but my mom quickly reminded me of another important horse rule: if a horse steps on you, don't try to wriggle your foot free. That's a battle that will almost always end with crushed toes. Instead, push the horse in the opposite direction. The second time he stepped on me, I was wearing Converse. It hurt, but before the panic could set in, I leaned into him with my entire body weight, and he stepped off. My first thought was that Mom was right: I shouldn't have worn Converse to the barn. Despite the immediate pain, I remember feeling proud of myself in that moment. I took a breath, acted swiftly and calmly, grabbed the brush that had fallen from my hands, and resumed combing out the knots in Ray's mane.

There was always an order of operations when it came to grooming Ray. First up was the curry comb: a round brush with short points designed to kick up dirt and break through mud. With the curry against Ray's neck, I moved my hand in concentric circles. "Don't worry, they like this. It doesn't hurt them," my mom reminded me. Once his entire body had been curried and all the dirt and mud was lifted to the outer layer of his hair, I took the big brush with tough bristles and swiped the dirt away. It was all in the wrist. Following the grain of Ray's hair, which changed direction at various body parts, I flicked the dirt and dust, and what looked like a million pine needles into the air, and watched it all fall to my feet. Then, I grabbed the brush that looked the closest to my own hairbrush and got started on his mane. I always wished I had his hair color. That vibrant chestnut red with natural blonde highlights was exactly the kind of early 2000s hair I would've died for. I'd even cover part of my hair with his to show my mom. "Wouldn't I look so good with this color, Ma?"

Once his mane was silky smooth, I would always pause because the tail was next, and that meant leaving the safety of Ray's peripheral vision. My mom would ask, "Do you want to do it or should I?"

"I don't know. I guess I can," I'd mumble, wishing I was braver.

"Just keep your hand on his back to let him know you're going to his tail, and make sure you're touching him the whole time."

I walked toward his rear end, sliding my right hand along the curve of his smooth back. With all the weight I could muster up from my lanky frame, I leaned my right shoulder into his left hip, grabbed his long, beautiful tail, and began brushing the knots out. Not once do I remember Ray doing any unexpected dancing or swaying. He always stayed put, silently reminding me I could do this.

His hooves were always the last and the most dangerous step. "Do you want to pick his feet?" my mom would offer, sensing my hesitation.

"You can do that. I'll brush his face." With a chuckle, she bent down next to

one of his legs, and tapped on his ankle to get him to flip up the bottom side of his foot. As I heard her grunt from the weight of Ray's massive leg resting in her arms, I grabbed the smallest, softest brush in the tack box and walked toward his face. "Thank you," I whispered. "I love you."

As my siblings and I got older, our social lives took precedence, and I visited Ray less and less. He became my mom's horse. But the barn was always a special place: one where I grew up and pushed through my fears. When I began a life in the city during college, I started to really miss him. When I went home for breaks or long weekends, I visited Ray at the barn and always slipped into the same rhythm. We'd walk together through the trails while my mom rode. We'd chat about school and work and boys and friends, and she would show me her favorite spots in the woods. "Over there is where I saw a gorgeous mama deer and her babies the other day. They didn't run away! And Ray was so good. He just looked at them and watched them watch us until I moved him along." We'd continue along the trail, and I would watch my step, avoiding his heavy hooves, occasionally petting his neck as he walked beside me. If we came across a puddle, we waded right through.

My family had Ray for nineteen years before he died at the end of 2021. After several months consumed by off-and-on infections and abscesses, it became clear he wouldn't survive the winter.

There's a photo from our goodbye, two days before he died. I went right up to him, grabbed his halter, pulled his head close to me and kissed the spot between his eye and ear. The photo shows my lips in mid-pucker. He and I are both older. I'm tall enough to kiss above his eye. It's cold: I'm wearing a black winter coat with a red beanie on my unwashed hair. I have my contacts in and no makeup on. You can see the exhaustion and leftover tears on my skin. My right hand, no longer showing its tendons, rests on the side of Ray's nose in position for giving scratches.

Ray looks at the camera in front of him, his own exhaustion sneaking through. His ears are alert, but his head leans heavily into mine. The space between his eyes and ears, the part I'm kissing, is sunken in the way an old man's eyes fall. There are small, hairless patches on the bridge of his nose from branch scratches or bites from his paddock-mates. His chestnut color is a little faded, and bits of it have grayed, almost matching the white diamond on his forehead.

In that photo, I know how to confidently stand next to Ray. I know how to walk him with a lead rope, to step right up to his tail and brush it with ease, to feed him carrots without pulling a muscle, to grab his nose and pull it close to my face without hesitation, to kiss his cheeks warmly. And he knows how to let me.

Opal Grey

JACK'SON PHILLIPS GRANT

She had gotten to the house at the time they requested. 9:30. She was always punctual. The woman who let her in, Mrs. Addison, was pleasant enough, or seemed to be. White, mid 50s, dressed like a professional—a sort of navy skirt suit, but instead of a blazer, the top she wore was more of a form-fitting shirt with three-quarter length sleeves. Her brown hair was cut short, but still very stylish. Her green eyes greeted her firmly.

"Come in," she said with a voice that was part husky and part diva. "I'm glad that you were still able to make it out in this weather. I was hoping you wouldn't cancel. It's so hard to find good people on short notice. With the party we're having tomorrow night, we want to make sure that the place is up to par." She tossed her head as if her hair were longer. Opal offered a faint smile.

"Well, here is the house. Let me show you around so that you really know what you're up against. Philippa said that you did a marvelous job at her home a few weeks back and that you were well worth what they charge.

Opal nodded. She put her cleaning equipment down but did not remove her coat as the brown-haired, green-eyed, blue-dressed diva led her on a tour of the house.

"Do you need anything? I don't know if you have ever cleaned such a large house by yourself. It's not exactly a mansion, but it's still a lot of house for one person to clean."

"No, thank you. I have what I need."

She had. Opal didn't need anything. She never did. She always brought everything that she needed. And no, she didn't need any help either. She liked cleaning alone. In fact, she loved it. The others worked in teams of two or three or in a house this size – maybe four, but that wasn't for her. Sometimes—rarely—it helped to have others, but they did not pay as much attention to detail as she did. They were usually in a hurry and wanted to move on quickly so they could punch out early and do God knows what, but she always took her time to make sure that it was done right. Only some of the West Indians took as much care in cleaning, but not always as much time. Most of them wanted to make sure that they got as many houses done as they could in a day and in a week. She had come to find out, in fact, that more than a few of them did not have their papers and she imagined that it was most likely a greater number than the ones whose conversations she overheard. Overall, they were hard workers and could have helped her here; yet the agency did on occasion allow her to do some of these assignments by herself. And she was glad. Cleaning for her was easy. There was dirt—all types of dirt—but at the end of the day, it was just dirt. And it had to be moved and, thanks to her mother, she was good at removing it.

After Mrs. Addison left for her appointment, Opal went to survey the house again. She always did. Of course, when the owners showed her all the different rooms and informed her of their expectations, she paid attention, but more to how the owners changed their tone and mood, what they did in each room. Did they light up? Did they get soft and quiet? Did they slow or quicken their speed or lower their pitch? Opal rarely paid attention to the actual cleanliness of the room, only how important the room seemed to be to the owner. That is what made the difference in her approach and actual cleaning.

The house was certainly large. Whether or not it was a mansion was not her concern. She only needed to make sure that she did a thorough job. She would. In fact, she had been looking forward to this assignment. She had cleaned a few houses in this neighborhood and enjoyed the calm environment and was glad that she had been recommended and requested. This house was similar to the last one that she had cleaned, although a bit larger. And she would have it all to herself until Mrs. Addison returned from her appointment and errands later in the afternoon.

Opal left her supplies in the kitchen and started her solo inspection of the home. The first floor had a small foyer, living room with fireplace, den, formal dining room, and kitchen. There was also a small powder room, but it seemed to be a bit newer than the rest of the rooms. It didn't quite fit. Somehow, she could tell these things.

The second floor had the master bedroom with its own bathroom. There was a king-sized canopy bed, double mirror vanity, dressers, walk-in closet and a single chair in the mint and cream room. The two other bedrooms on the floor – the pink one slightly smaller than the lavender—were for the girls, and there was also a bathroom for the floor. The third floor had the last bedroom, a small bathroom, and another area that Mrs. Addison had called the attic that had quite a few boxes and other junk. The bedroom had no bed but was really Mrs. Addison's workroom with her easel for her drawings. Mrs. Addison had become excited as she showed Opal this, the smallest room in the house. She had been more excited in here than she was in her bedroom or any of the children's rooms. This, the garage, and Mr. Addison's library which according to Mrs. Addison he cleaned himself, were the only rooms that she would not have to clean.

She went back downstairs, through the kitchen, straight to the basement. A small living area: bar, bedroom, half bathroom, and a washroom in addition to the room that had the furnace.

Last, she came back to the kitchen and climbed the stairs that went to the room that ascended from the dining side of the kitchen. Mrs. Addison said that this would have been the servant's quarters if they had had a live-in maid. That was the way the homes, these Tudors, had been designed. But the room belonged to Jeremy, the son, the oldest, the only boy. Although it did not look currently or recently occupied, the bedroom was clearly that of a young male athlete. Hockey sticks. Football. Deep mahogany bed. Matching wood desk. She took note that it had its own bathroom as well.

Going back to the kitchen to mix the cleaning solutions and spray the oven, Opal decided that cleaning this house would take about five or six hours, but she was not in any rush. She never was. Her job was to make sure that things were exactly as they should be. Which is to say neat and orderly. Or perfect. And perfection usually took some time.

She would tidy and clean each bedroom first, from top to bottom as she always did, take care of the living room and foyer, and then go back and do the bathrooms. She would then do the stairs, and finally the kitchen. There were six bedrooms in all. Five bathrooms plus the half bath powder room. Which meant six toilets. She didn't mind. Others did not usually like to clean bathrooms and most hated doing toilets. She personally had a love-hate relationship with bathrooms and toilets but had become particularly good at cleaning the toilets which is why she reserved the bathrooms to the end of the cleaning as opposed to most people who almost always did the wet areas—kitchens and bathrooms—first. She always gave them the extra attention they deserved. It was the stairs that she was not fond of. They were carpeted and the vacuum that was present in the house did not look like it was up to the task. She would do these last.

After spraying the oven and mixing the solutions for the bathrooms, she carried her mop and bucket and cleaning caddy up the two flights of stairs to Mrs. Addison's studio and attic. It would be a quick job, especially since she did not actually have to clean the actual attic area. As she dusted, straightened, and vacuumed, she wondered why anyone would want or need such a large house. There didn't seem to be anyone that lived here besides the couple. From the state of the rooms and the pictures that were in the living room, the children were grown, maybe in college or out on their own, but definitely not living here. Maybe they came back to visit for the weekend. Two girls and a boy. The girls, Ashleigh and Alyssa, were blonde like their father, and the boy had brown hair like his mother. All of them resembled both parents in different ways but seemed to favor the father a little more. But she wasn't here to look at pictures or to speculate about the lives of those whose houses she cleaned. She would leave that sort of thing to her mother.

Halfway through, Opal went to the kitchen to put on the kettle. It was 12:45 and time to eat. The people in these neighborhoods were good about letting the help eat. She did not need their food though. Just their water. She always brought her own lunch. Simple sandwich. Mayo, lettuce, honey turkey and Swiss. No tomato. That was only for home. Tomatoes became too soggy when they sat too long and would ruin the sandwich.

While eating lunch and waiting for her tea to steep, she looked around and noticed how plain the kitchen was. Really, how plain the entire house was. So many houses that she had cleaned had gaudy furniture and decorations. This house was very simple even though it was huge. Mr. Addison was some type of lawyer and Mrs. Addison an architect. It seemed that they both worked in the city, or at least they did so most of the time. She wasn't a snoop, but cleaning demanded attention to detail, and she attended to sorting the mail and was able to find out what

was what and who was who. Scott and Genevieve Addison. Professionals. In the picture in the den, they seemed happy enough, but knowing what she knew about people, she wondered if they really were. Did they sleep in the same bed? Did they sleep with each other or with other people? Of course, they had slept with each other. All of the children looked like them both. But still.

Opal stirred her tea and took a long sip. She looked at the Bulova clock on the wall. 1:03. She needed to get back to work, but for some reason, she did not get up. Instead, she reflected on what she had already cleaned and what still needed to be done. The top floors had been done – bedrooms and bathrooms. She just needed to clean the first floor, basement, and the boy's bedroom. There was a bathroom for each floor and she still had not done them as yet. Her mind, for some reason, drifted back to the picture of the couple again. Mr. Addison dressed in a gray cardigan and Mrs. Addison leaning on him with her burgundy turtle-neck. She had a simple gold necklace with a locket. There was a picture of the whole family in the living room. In a cabin. They must have gone skiing. Again, they looked happy. Faces smiling for the camera. *Who had taken the picture?* Opal wondered. These people were not like her mother or grandmother. They were simple, but they still had style. She took another sip of the tea and almost relaxed as her mind drifted towards her own life.

She had never known her father and she barely knew her mother. But the little that she did know led her to leave things alone. What she did know for certain was that her mother was miserable. She did not know if her mother had ever known love like she had, but it was highly unlikely.

The pictures of the Addison children were definitely different from the ones of her own childhood. She remembered her school pictures and how she never wanted to go to school for picture day. She really did not ever want to go to school at all since her mother had a horrible sense of fashion. Just because the colors were the same or were supposed to go together did not mean that the whole outfit actually fit together like the exposed beams of this house. Green plaid and green stripes or floral and polka dots. She could have sworn that her mother was colorblind, but she was not. She just liked the combinations that she put together and inflicted them upon Opal. And the children at school and on her block were vicious. They made fun of her every day and every day Opal had tried her best to grow a strong turtle shell to protect herself and hide even if she had still been in plain sight. But picture day was the worst. And in all of her pictures, the ones from school and any other of the ones her mother took, Opal was sad. No smiles. Like her mother.

She hadn't really had many friends. Or any friends at all really. Some people were nicer to her than others, but she couldn't really call them friends. Her mother didn't let people come over, but then again who would have wanted to. They didn't have any money and they didn't have anything. And even though a lot of the people around them did not have much money either, they at least had more style. The Blacks and Puerto Ricans. But her mother wasn't and didn't. On top of

that, even though they had to take care of her grandmother, her mother smoked all the time, and that smell of Marlboros was on and in everything. The sofa. Opal's clothes. Her hair. And the kids were vicious.

In junior high school, Lawrence had been nice to her for a few days, and she even thought that he might have actually liked her and she wasn't sure if she liked him back if he did. But she didn't have to worry about that. One day on a school trip, some of the boys – Randall and Curtis – were telling him how he was a loser because they had seen him talking to her. She remembered that day well. It was in the spring, and sunny, not like today. She had tried to look cute, but things did not come out exactly right. Her dress was new or newish. She wasn't allowed to wear makeup but she could wear lipstick. The pink lipstick matched the dress perfectly, but the problem was her hair. It was curly in some places and straight in others and she could never get it to stay the way she had seen it with other girls at school and the news people on television. But at least it was combed and didn't smell like smoke for once. She had been looking forward to the trip to the planetarium because she just needed to see something different. Something special. But during the trip, Curtis had laughed at her, and Lawrence just pretended as if he didn't see her. That was the last time she spoke to him. Or to anyone at school.

Opal walked slowly and painfully from the kitchen island to the breakfast nook by the door to Jeremy's room. Sitting down she thought about her own family. She had really wished that she had been born into a different family. Her mother was so mean and selfish. The only time she hadn't been selfish was when she had gotten the cat for Opal for her eleventh birthday. It was an orange tabby that she had named Pumpkin, but it turned out that she was allergic – hives and rashes and tons of itching – and her mother got rid of Pumpkin. Just like that. She had had her for almost a week and one day, when she came home, she didn't see her. The litter box was gone. She froze and felt something inside her drop. She feared the worst but desperately hoped for the best. Opal was scared to ask her mother but because she really wanted a pet and was determined to get over the allergy, she gathered the courage to ask her.

"Mommy, did you take Pumpkin to the vet?" She knew the answer before she asked the question. Her mother, not even looking away from the television, just tapped her cigarette, allowing the ashes to spill inside of the glass ashtray.

"What the hell did you think you were going to do with that cat? Pet it and feed it and cuddle it 'til your outsides get as raw as your insides?" She tapped the cigarette again, taking a pull and then, "You think I'm gonna sit here and let your teachers call BCW when they see you can't breathe and you have rashes all over? I don't need that."

Even if she hadn't been born into a different family, she could have at least been born into a complete one. It would have been nice to know her father or even know about him. Like even just the basics. Her mother had not given her her father's last name; she gave her hers. Grey. Opal Millicent Grey.

When she had asked her mother where and who her father was, her mother

coughed a response through puffs of her cigarettes.

“What do you need to know that for? It’s not important. He’s not important.”

And that was the end of the conversation. Her mother never let her bring it up again and her grandmother was of no help either. She was losing her mind and had lost her ability to speak. The only thing Opal knew about her father was that he was a foreigner. That must have been why she loved to read so much. Foreign places. Cultures and customs. At one point, she thought that she could have been a social studies teacher, but she hated memorizing dates and that was the end of that. The only thing she was good at was cleaning and that was because even though her mother had nothing, she made sure that everything – every little thing and every little nothing – was clean. Neat. Perfect. Opal couldn’t even change the figurines on her own dresser. And her mother made sure that Opal’s hair was just the way her mother liked it.

Opal sighed, looked out of the window, and took another small bite of her sandwich and chewed slowly.

Who knows? She might have hated her father if she had actually known him or even met him. She did not know if it was his fault or her mother’s that she looked like this, but it was someone’s. It had to be. She didn’t look like anyone else she knew. She hated people looking at her. Asking her what she was. She was a person. They couldn’t tell if she was Mediterranean, Middle Eastern or Indian, or just a mutt. She couldn’t either. Her eyes were dark and large and looked like almonds. Her brown complexion had seemed dirty to her when she looked at the plain white of her mother and grandmother. When she was eight, she had tried to scrub it off in the bathroom, but the only thing that she accomplished was making a mess. The soap had gotten into her eyes and somehow ended up in her hair. Oh yeah, there was that. Her hair, curly, straight, dark, thick, tangly, unmanageable. But it really didn’t matter. Nothing ever mattered but keeping things clean.

The only good thing that had ever happened to her was Manny. Thank God. He was different. He didn’t care about what she looked like or how she sounded. Or that she was just a house cleaner. He was a regular worker too. It was almost like a scene from a movie when they met. They almost literally bumped into each other. He was looking for the manager of the building in midtown that she worked in at the time. She showed him where the office was and the next thing you know he was there every day. He was there to paint and fix things. And there were times he was in the way when she needed to clean in that building. But he always apologized, and he always cleaned up after himself after fixing a hole in a wall or the sink in a kitchen. One day, almost at the end of her cleaning shift, he asked her to dinner.

“Hello.” He smiled with eyes. “Do you like food?” She was puzzled.

“Yes.” Didn’t everybody? At first, she didn’t understand that it was an invitation. Of course, she liked food.

“Juwanna eat dinner?”

“Oh...” She paused. She hesitated. She had never in her life had someone ask

her this. “Uhh...” she stalled, frozen.

He must have thought that she said, *uh huh*. “Ok. We go to restaurant at corner after you finish work.” She was too surprised to correct him.

And that was how it started. At first, she was only being polite. He was not from New York. He wasn’t even from the US. He was here working so that he could send money back to his mother and younger brother and sisters in his home country. And she decided that she could be nice to people even though she had learned to be alone.

Manny’s eyes were kind and his hands strong. He was a hard worker who was staying with cousins in Queens, but he wanted her to show him New York. Of course, she did know anything or anywhere, because her mother had never let her go anywhere, but then she forced herself. It was the first time she smiled. Ever – or since the 5th grade when Mrs. Johnson praised her in front of the whole class for getting a perfect score on the Mesopotamia test.

And, of course, he kissed her. He told her that he was only staying for a few months to see if things would work out for him, but she hadn’t really heard him. His music was too loud. And the first time they were together in a room at his cousin’s wasn’t what she expected, but it was still nice, and then it got better and better. He was the marble pillar, she the porcelain tiles.

Opal looked through the window and saw that the steady rain that had pummeled the region that morning had slowed to a drizzle. It was still dark and dreary. She could barely see her reflection in the window. On bright and sunny days, if she cleaned the windows and looked at just the right angle, she could see herself clearly, but today was not that day.

She finished her sandwich, put the teacup in the sink, and then left the kitchen to start the second half of the day’s labor. As she passed through the living room on her way to the den, she noticed another picture. In this one, the family was on a ride at an amusement park. Mrs. Addison and the girls were seated in the front seat of the coaster while Mr. Addison and Jeremy were in the second row. Goofy smiles and messed up hair. The girls looked about ten and twelve, Jeremy about fourteen or fifteen. They looked kind of happy. The picture was definitely not recent. All of the other pictures seemed as if the smiles were for a forced celebration. This house would be different if real people lived there, she thought. Not the plastic people in the pictures. If she had had a child with Manny, they could have had a house like this. And, of course, things would have been different if she had had a child with him. She wouldn’t still be living with her mother. There would be no need to stay with her. She and Manny would be together starting their own family. She would only work in the early part of the pregnancy and then gradually reduce her hours so that she could be well rested and prepare for the birth of their child. A boy. It would have to be a boy because she was tired of girls. Boys could be mean, but girls were the worst. Manny would work closer to home. Home. They would live somewhere not so crowded as Soundview where she grew up and still lived with her mother, or East Elmhurst where Manny stayed

with his cousins. They would live in Pelham Gardens or Riverdale or maybe somewhere in Westchester eventually, after they had enough money. But that would be a while. She would not have to clean or work so hard, her hands aching sometimes from the days of wringing and scrubbing. Manny was a good hard worker and strong and he would get a real contract to work on buildings for great management companies and real estate companies because they would be married of course, and he would get his green card and his citizenship. They would name the baby Victor or Aaron because he would be destined for greatness. She would dress him in cute little outfits, and he would be well behaved. They would have him christened and have a great party, but only Manny's family and friends would come because she wouldn't want her mother to know where they lived. She could attend the christening if she wanted but Opal knew she wouldn't want to. And Victor would grow up and be very strong. She would teach him at home so that when he went to school, he would not be behind the other children and no one would make fun of him. They would have money and he would be dressed in the best or almost the best clothing with good style like the Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood or even maybe some of the white people that she saw on television. They would go out on the weekends to the circus and the movies and the museum and Victor would look like both of them and his hair would be nice and dark like his father's and his face soft and pretty but not too girly because they would make fun of him at school, but then they wouldn't because he would be smart and handsome and have style and know how to talk to people and everyone would love him—the teachers and the students—and even the neighbors, and he would play sports and know how to work and Manny would teach him Spanish like they speak in his country. And all the girls would love him and she would have to show him how to treat a woman and he would listen and pick the right one and bring her home when he was seventeen and he would be smart and get a scholarship to college, but he wouldn't leave because he—

Opal stopped to breathe and wipe the warm dampness from her forehead. *Was this part of the house warmer?* She needed to sit for a moment. She rested in the arm of the leather loveseat. She knew that she should move from the living room and get on to cleaning the den, but she couldn't.

She couldn't.

And she wouldn't have that son with Manny. She couldn't. She could not. Because Manny had left. One day he did not show up at work. She had tried reaching him but couldn't get through. She called him at his cousin's and gotten no response. The building manager had gotten someone new. She had taken the trip to his cousin's place in East Elmhurst, but all his cousin told her was that Manny had almost been caught by immigration and he had to move to another place, another city so that he could continue to work and send money back to his mother and brother and sisters. His family. He had left in a hurry and didn't give his cousin any indication of where he was going exactly or any message to give to Opal. She did not know what to do, especially since she wanted to tell him how her breasts had been swelling and sore and that she had started to feel sick, even

at work where she never allowed herself to be sick and how she always felt like throwing up on the floors and almost did twice but because she had just cleaned them she wouldn't and didn't, but she did throw up in the toilet, the same toilet that weeks later, she had to sit on when the cramping was so intense that she felt as if her insides were twisting to her outsides and that she was coming undone and she pushed and pushed to get relief and she felt the burden move. The relief finally came but when she got up to flush, she did not know that it would be like that, that it would have looked like that, so red and small, and clear and alien and...

She wanted to scoop, to gingerly take it out, to take him and place him in a container or bag or basket or bin, cradle him, touch him love him but she couldn't; she could not; all she could do was flush. And she flushed and flushed until it was gone. He was gone. It was gone.

And although she had already cleaned that bathroom, the mirrors, the tub, the floor, and yes, the toilet, she cleaned that toilet again, and again until its white porcelain shined brilliantly and she could see herself and the shock produced tears frozen on her face, the tears that burned but the tears that she refused to wipe and flush away.

But after those tears and that moment, that incredible dirty agony, she didn't remember if she had cried or screamed or what; but she did what she always did. She went back to work and cleaned until her assignment was done.

The ringing of a phone somewhere in the house brought her back to the present. The grandfather clock in the corner read 2:13. There was no time to mourn over spilled milk. She was behind schedule. She would come back to finish the den later. Now she had to clean the stairs.

I Met Myself Inside My Reflection

FAITH BROWN

I was under an influence
looking into the glass reflector
when I saw my self

I leaned in
and we were almost
one

My fingers spread across
my pores
trying to discover
uncover

The classified secret
to my growth
and how I got here

Suddenly
I saw all my stages

My laugh lines smiled
at the
inside joke

It's funny,
in reflection you must
remain objective
to the subject in
front of you
who happens to be yourself

All in order
to grow

But we forget
our younger selves
for the sake
of growing

I met myself
inside my reflection

I hadn't seen her
in a long time
and I apologized

Ghosts in the Outfield

JACK WERNICK

The Red Sox play a midsummer game:
the bribe-roasted peanuts
the crusty vendor's pushcart
the chipped green paint

Honor roll,
student council,
art awards,
starring in school plays—
I never stopped trying to pride you, Dad.

A carton of orange juice
You poured over my head.
A humiliated son
shoved on the school bus with sticky hair.

Your favorite joke
for years and years.
The orange tint in my hair,
thanks to your juvenile prank.

The team gathers once more for
your ninth inning.
Back in your season ticket seats,
your house of worship/Fenway Park.
We shovel the dirt on home plate then walk away.

I never realized what it meant,
you leaving the game in the 8th inning.
I recall our car rides home together,
listening to the sportscaster.
Waiting for him to announce
You've won your dad's love.

Chopping Block

KYLAN BARRAJANOS-POWE

It had been a long time since mother passed, since father locked the door. All the twin's friends had told them of the outside world, of how they would make new lives beyond the village, while they stayed among the mountains, taking care of their father.

"Are you sure about this?"

Emily twisted the knob on the stove, setting it ablaze. She picked a small pot from the cabinet beside her, and prepared it with water, pinches of salt, and set it on the fire. Tying his belt, Tim looked past the window, towards the frozen waste, towards salvation. Snowstorms would frequently come and go, and no one had reason to leave the house except in cases of emergencies, which, in their fathers' words, were "never and far in between." Pantries were filled once every month, but when the family started to arrive around the holidays, the twins would trek daily to the nearest village to stock up and quell their father's nagging.

Tim knew he had no other option.

"Of course."

"They're on their way, if we don't leave now..."

A creaking movement came from above them. Father was stirring in his sleep again, which meant he would be up soon, or he had smelled the stew. Stew was Emily's favorite thing for Thanksgiving. Emily had decided to start the week before, on account of Tim's plan to escape that night, but, as the weeks became hours, Emily became hesitant. The town was a three-day trek from the house, but once they were out, they were free.

Tim paused for a moment, taking in the aroma of carrots, onions, shallots, and other vegetables that Emily had loved to put into her stews; that was one thing Tim knew she found solace in, comfort in food, vegetables most specifically. If she wanted, she could be a chef, or a farmer in her own right.

"We have no other chance besides this one."

He grabbed one of his tools from its stand, a pickaxe, and weighed it in his hands as father had taught him.

"Don't you want something more to life?"

Emily looked down at the onion. Onions had been all she'd known, onion farming, onion growing, onion soups, the world's largest, most potent onion. All dad had taught her was to cook, and all mother had taught her was to farm.

"I..."

With slight hesitation, her left hand guided the knife's blade down. Cutting each onion into fourths, eights, and still smaller pieces, she held her head in her hand, attempting to stem her tears. Dumping the dice sized chunks in the bubbling pot, she slid the remains of the onion into a nearby bin and began swiftly

chopping a large carrot. Emily continued.

“...I know father needs someone to take care of him. If he can’t rely on us, are we any better than him?” Grabbing a second carrot from the table behind her, she continued chopping. Would she end up like her mother, growing a bounty of food, only to fall from her own hubris from the “Rutabaga Incident,” with 40 pounds of vegetables burying their mother in a coffin of her own making.

The twins’ father didn’t allow them out of the house unless necessary, and only to the village. Some of the family thought it for the better.

He was once a tower of a man, casting a shadow over his children. His arms were lanky, but muscular, and hands calloused from years of working as an engineer. Even after years of falls, slips, minor cuts, and fractures, they were still callous and firm and, as they were both reminded, painful. Especially after he lost what he’d loved the most: his job. Yet to the family, he remained the beloved patriarch. Tim became the breadwinner, taking over his father’s job in the nearby village, and soon finding himself with the same firm strength and rugged personality. Were it not for the kindness of Emily, he would have remained that way.

Emily didn’t see father that way, she saw him as a protector, firm, but guided, and now it was her job to protect him.

It was best for her not to look at her brother, as she would see him patting himself down, his pockets filled with equipment. Tim zipped the last of his coats, and stared back at Emily, her light brown hair shining in the kitchen light.

“Please, Emily. We have *one* shot at this.”

She said nothing. He clenched the gray door, staring out at his salvation. Then back again. His back towards the snow, at his sister, hunched over, chopping yet another onion.

She froze, holding the knife above her other hand.

“I can’t leave father, not today. But you can.” She could feel his icy blue glare.

The door slammed shut.

Collection: Duxbury Beach

MORGAN SANGUEDOLCE

Just out of frame of these photos were crowds of loud happy people enjoying the New England summertime. I took them because I found myself staring in these directions spacing out, which is why the images involve a sense of distance. But when I look at them I don’t hear the quiet stillness that they evoke, I still hear the ocean waves and surrounding chatter and the laughter of my traveling companion.



THE HOUSE, DUXBURY BEACH, MA



Searching for Signs

DEDIPTA BHATTACHARJEE

I drink coffee and wait for a sign
from the world.
For myself.

And then they come.
Dozens
like a bouquet of tulips
their petals scatter over me.

Tell me to move on.
Forward.
Not behind.
Walk ahead
they all scream.
The petals.

But I pick them up
brush them through my fingers.

Postcard

JACK WERNICK

CHARACTERS

ELIOT – son, teenager, creative, intelligent, sensitive, determined

PAUL – father, crowding 40, pragmatic, jock, macho, scrappy, blunt

THE TIME

The present. Winter.

THE PLACE

A hotel room in Miami, Florida.

*ELIOT and PAUL are in a hotel room. ELIOT sits at a desk, chair turned towards
PAUL, who sits on the edge of a sleeper sofa, leafing through a sports magazine.*

ELIOT

(Disappointed) I thought I was getting my own room.

PAUL

(Mollifying) E, it's a suite. Your mom and I sleep in the bedroom. You get this room.

ELIOT

That's not what you promised me.

PAUL

Hotels are expensive. Besides, you're too young for your own room.

ELIOT

I'm almost old enough to vote. You went back on your word.

PAUL

Hey, easy there, fella. Let's stay positive, have fun. We're on vacation. You can practically come and go as you please.

ELIOT

(Sullen) Whatever.

PAUL

E, be a sport. We'll go for a nice dinner tonight.

ELIOT

Where?

PAUL

That famous deli on Collins Ave your mom likes.

ELIOT

We went there last time.

PAUL

Didn't you enjoy it?

ELIOT

It was ok. But, I'm on a diet. Corned beef is not exactly my scene.

PAUL

It won't hurt you once in a while.

ELIOT

I don't eat meat.

PAUL

Since when?

ELIOT

Since last week. I'm trying to be healthy, prevent methane gas.

PAUL

What's that?

ELIOT

It's from cows. They produce gas that harms the ozone.

PAUL

You mean farts?

ELIOT

I prefer flatulence.

PAUL

How does not eating meat prevent methane?

ELIOT

(Patiently explaining) If fewer people ate meat, there would be less of a demand for it, and farmers would raise and slaughter fewer cows.

PAUL

(Pauses, slowly nods) Guess you got a point there, sport.

ELIOT

I read about it online.

PAUL

You can get turkey or skip the meat if you want.

ELIOT

Promise you won't make me eat half your sandwich like you always do?

PAUL

Buddy, you don't have to do anything you don't wanna. You're on vacation.

ELIOT

You always stick your corned beef sandwich down my throat, no matter how much I don't want it.

PAUL

Your old man's not so bad.

ELIOT

It's not personal. I just don't wanna eat meat, so don't try to make me!

PAUL

Okay. Don't sweat it.

ELIOT

I know you like to feel connected to your roots, Dad, but brisket and potato salad isn't health food.

PAUL

What do *you* suggest? Salad? That tofu stuff? Beans? Forget the ozone, people should stop eating beans if they're worried about gas.

ELIOT

A plant-based diet has been proved to be much healthier than the meat and dairy diet you and Mom worship.

PAUL

(Defensive, puts the magazine down by this point.) Your mom's a great cook!

ELIOT

No one's saying she isn't. I just don't eat meat. It gives me a stomachache.

PAUL

So don't eat it! No one's forcing it down your throat.

ELIOT

(Dubious) We'll see about that.

PAUSE.

PAUL

Wanna get changed, come with me to the pool? Your mom's taking a nap.

ELIOT

I'd like to scope out the gift shop first. I wanna get some postcards to send to my friends.

PAUL

We just got here. You can do that later.

ELIOT

I wanna do it *now*. I always do that first. I'll meet you at the pool in a bit.

PAUL

I don't want you wandering around the hotel aimlessly.

ELIOT

Dad, I'm on vacation. Wandering around is how I relax. Besides, what are you worried about? I'm not gonna get kidnapped.

PAUL

Why not go with me to the pool? That's what *I* call relaxing.

ELIOT

I don't want to get too much sun. We're from Boston. This is Miami. I haven't seen the sun since September.

PAUL

So put on sunscreen!

ELIOT

I don't enjoy lying by the pool for more than half an hour. I don't see what's so fun about sitting in the sun. It's boring.

PAUL

This is Miami! The hotel has a nice pool. We're on vacation. You're *supposed* to get bored!

ELIOT

I don't wanna go with you to the damn pool right now. Why do you even feel like you need me to go with you?!

PAUL

We can check out the female scenery. There's bound to be a pretty girl you can talk to.

ELIOT

(Rolls his eyes) I don't want to talk to strange girls. Besides, you're married. To Mom. *(PAUSE)* *(Determined)* I'm going to the gift shop and you're not gonna stop me.

PAUL

Who said anything about —

ELIOT

You didn't *have* to. You're always trying to get your way with me. Maybe that's 'cause Mom always bosses you around.

PAUL

(Bellows) I run the household!

ELIOT

(Snide) Bull-loney.

PAUL

(Playfully) I can still knock you out.

PAUSE.

ELIOT

Dad, I'm a teenager. You really wanna hit me? You know I'm no fighter. And you should never threaten your child with bodily harm. That's bad parenting.

PAUL

Don't take everything so seriously. I'm just saying, I'm the boss of our house.

ELIOT

Sure, whatever you say.

PAUL

Are you mocking me?

ELIOT

(Mocking) Never.

PAUL

Your father was a tough kid growing up —

ELIOT

(Rote) In Dorchester, I know. I think I read that. You were the leader of the

ghetto.

PAUL

The Irish kids used to try to beat the crap outta me and your uncle walking to school.

ELIOT

Yeah, I've heard this story before.

PAUL

Your father never took shit from anyone. Still doesn't.

ELIOT

(Sarcastic) Impressive. That's quite a philosophy of life. But that was forever ago. There's more to life than how tough you are. You're a successful businessman, family man—

PAUL

It's important to let guys know you can take care of yourself.

ELIOT

We have different ideas about friendship. I avoid guys like that.

PAUL

(Ignoring him) I was a damn good ballplayer, too.

ELIOT

So I've heard.

PAUL

You were never a big sports fan.

ELIOT

I like baseball.

PAUL

Yeah, you do.

ELIOT

I'm just not very good at it.

PAUL

No, you have no talent.

ELIOT

(Hurt) Dad!

PAUL

You played. I appreciate that. You just never had much of an arm. That's why I had you play catcher.

ELIOT

I could catch balls, was a decent hitter . . . not a swift runner. Couldn't throw far either.

PAUL

I remember that time you were on third base and I yelled at you to slide into home plate, but you didn't. You got tagged.

ELIOT

(Irritated) Am I gonna hear that goddamn story for the rest of my life?! The reason I didn't slide is because I didn't know how! I'd never done it before! How many effin' times do I have to tell you that?!

PAUL

(Startled) I thought it was 'cause you didn't wanna get your Little League uniform dirty.

ELIOT

I know! You've only told me that story a hundred times. Believe what you want to believe!

PAUL

Aw, don't get cranky. I'm just teasing you.

ELIOT

Teasing?! What are you, in high school?! *(PAUSE)* I know you're disappointed I'm not a great athlete, but there are other things in life. Like schoolwork, student government, band. I like to read. I'm a good student. Does that even matter to you?!

PAUL

Course it matters to me! I wish I'd been a better student, more popular.

ELIOT

Everybody's talented at something. Better to figure out what you're good at and focus on that, than on what people wish you were. Like idiot jocks. Or your parents.

PAUL

I'm proud of you. You're a smart kid. You're going to college and everything. I just think you could toughen up a bit. You never know when you'll need to defend yourself.

ELIOT

I'm as tough as I need to be. We live in suburbia. That's where you decided to raise us. It's more civil and boring than the city you were so eager to escape. (PAUSE) I don't think sports are as important as they were in your day. Most of my friends don't even play team sports anymore. They're either studying or going to parties, playing video games, chatting online.

PAUL

(Reminiscing) I wasn't very social when I was your age. You're pretty popular. That's great.

ELIOT

(Softens) Thanks. Guess I like entertaining friends. And I have good taste in music.

PAUL

So long as you're a happy kid.

ELIOT

I like to think I'm pretty happy.

PAUL

(Still reminiscing, not looking at Eliot) I was a good athlete. I was happiest playing ball.

ELIOT

I'm glad sports made you happy. But they're not everything.

PAUL

Sports are important to a young man's development.

ELIOT

I played sports. Tennis, skiing . . .

PAUL

(Wistful) You were just built for football. I couldn't help wanting to see you follow in your old man's footsteps.

ELIOT

Built physically, not mentally. I never wanted to hurt another guy. Still don't. I'm nonviolent. And definitely not a jock.

PAUL

Can't blame a dad for trying. (PAUSE) (Brightening) Hey, swimming's a sport too!

Wernick

ELIOT

At the Olympics it is. (PAUSE) I'm still not going to the pool with you. I have postcards to write.

PAUL

(Displeased) Hey! You better not get into any trouble in the lobby.

ELIOT

When have I ever gotten into trouble?! You have a good kid on your hands. It's like you don't even see me for who I am.

PAUL

It's hard not to have hopes and wishes for your kids. You want them to catch a break, have it easier than you had. Hard not to have dreams for them too.

ELIOT

I understand. But it's my life. What I want to do with my life is more important than your dreams for me. (PAUSE) Try to forgive me for not liking football, even if I was built for it. And try to accept me for who I am. (PAUSE) I'm going to the lobby to get some postcards. Enjoy the pool. (Walks to the door.)

PAUL

(Surprised) Hey, where you goin'? Did I give you permission to leave?!

ELIOT

Gift shop. Postcards. Bye.

ELIOT walks out as a young man in his early 20s walks by him in the hallway. ELIOT smiles and pauses, as the lights fade.

THE END

Some things I hate

LUKE SEBBEN

I hate that it feels
 as if I've woken up on my
 day off blinked and
 it is already 6 PM.
 I hate that by the time
 I get to Maeve's house it
 will be 7, and if we watch a movie it
 will be 9, and I will have
 work in 12 hours.
 I hate I will have
 to leave in 11,
 and wake in 10,
 if we go to sleep promptly after our film-
 which is quite unlikely.
 I hate that the days
 end, and that
 new ones begin, and that
 it all doesn't last forever.
 And I hate the idea of
 Forever, but I also think maybe
 I love it, too.

moon stain

CHLOE WHEELER

A moon appears
 fresh coffee stain
 waxing gibbous I believe
 in symbolic almonds
 on your desk cup of coffee
 black (just like mine)
 you know not
 the extent to which
 you move me.

A material thought
 gurgled apology
 I almost forgot
 salad on the floor
 and in my teeth I hope
 you can't see
 just how fragile I am
 in this small sliver of time
 we have together
 you offer almonds.

maybe

CHLOE WHEELER

There was a carpet, a television, a piano with sheet music glued to the seat a copy of *Anna Karenina* wedged in between the cats who sat poised on cinnamon cushion thrones purring mellifluous in sync with the buzz.

There was a plastic cup of tepid water and a tablespoon of ashes in a conch shell, your mom was scolding us for smoking too many cigarettes as she swatted imaginary flies with her left hand, while her right hand offered us coffee? Comfort? Answers?

There was a can of blueberry Red Bull in the corner of the porch that was left by our friend who had recently scurried off to Italy with a suitcase stuffed with white-capped oranges, and a head full of fractals—fronting fearless, but (truthfully) very scared and very, very small.

I (later) had a headache so I yanked down the blinds as our other friend (let's call and see if she's free tonight) gave me consolation that the world would eventually stop spinning and soon enough I'd be able to step over the gap into train car 7415 going eastbound to everywhere —so I shivered and leaped.

I stuffed something vague into my backpack while I redrafted a message to send to my aunt about you while R.E.M. played dimly in one ear. I was going to write a five-star rating, all glowing and grinning with teeth, but something stopped me. I decided to take a toothpick and a breath mint

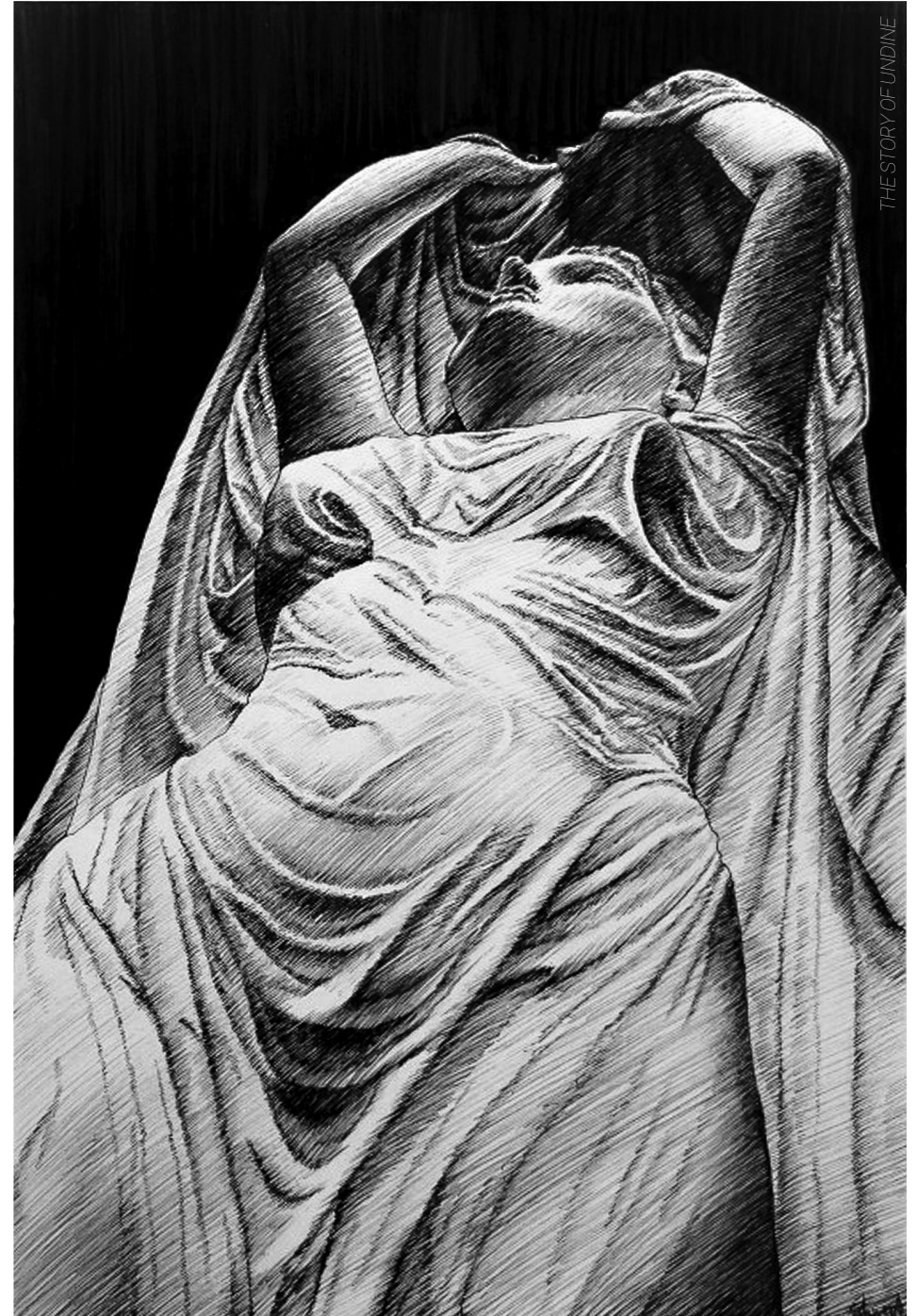
instead.

So I'll leave you with a mumbled "MAYBE" in your voicemail, if you ever decide to check it (I don't know if you ever will). In the meantime, we can just lie back, cancel camping trips and distract ourselves with the curious sharp edges of moonlight.

Collection: The Harmony of Opposition

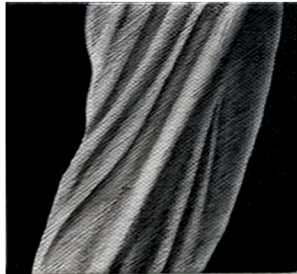
SHIVA ABBASZADEH

There is beauty and contradiction in the representation of fabric using marble. It is an oxymoron and a challenge. Let's add another element of conflict: converting this to the 2-dimensional. Whether this be the one directional hatching I am constantly drawn to, or the realism I recreate using the flatter consistency of acrylic paint. How can I achieve the most depth and effortlessness using these methods? That is the new challenge.





SCULPTURE DRAWING



Separation Anxiety

JULIAN GRAJALES

The swaying leaves of the lone tree above moved their shadows over Amaya's face. She let the cool breeze settle onto her warm brown skin as she sat cross legged on the grass, her back leaning against the thin trunk of the young oak tree. Two squirrels raced across the paved road nearby as joggers, with labored breathing, pushed their legs, their feet pounding against the tarmac. She could hear it all with her eyes closed, but every other moment she opened one eye and scanned for Ronan, the rich boy she babysat every Tuesday afternoon.

Ronan's parents lived on the Upper West Side. Amaya lived on Junction Boulevard, in Queens, a world away. Her instructions were clear: pick Ronan up from his private school on Riverside Drive, take him to his aikido class on 59th street and pick up Mr. Michael's medicine from the pharmacy four blocks from John Jay University. When aikido class was done, she was to return Ronan home and prepare his dinner while he watched afternoon cartoons in his underwear and tank top. But today, his aikido instructor was sick, so they had an hour to kill after picking up Mr. Michael's medicine.

On the way to the green space where Amaya now sat, Ronan had stopped holding her hand. He ran ahead of her, jumped on and off empty benches, pulled leaves off defenseless shrubs, and tried to pet every dog that sauntered by them. Amaya didn't scold him. She had once because Ronan would not stop screaming on a packed 1 train, but the following day Mr. Michael and Miss Alice scolded her.

"Ronan isn't like your son, Amaya. He has to be free to do whatever he wants."

Now, under the shade of the tree, she rubbed her calves in a steady up and down motion as Ronan raced around her. She wanted to hear her own son's voice, but she had no wifi nor an international calling card to dial her parents in the sleepy town of Barrancabermeja. Amaya would fill up with questions as she went about her day: she wondered what her son was doing, how he was styling his hair, how fast he was growing, what he learned in school, which classmates he had a crush on, or what his teachers thought of the nice shoes Abuela had bought him with the dollars sent home. But when she finally had him on the phone, all her questions would dissolve, and a ball would form in her throat, weighing on her vocal cords like a boulder on a piano fallboard. The calls were always short, and her tears were slow to reach her chin.

"Ya, Ronan. Vamonos." The boy halted his giggles and groaned. Amaya gathered her things and wiped Ronan's face and hands clean. He ran ahead of her on the asphalt walkway.

its momentary life, without any clue as to what had transpired before it broke free.

A Moment Before Time

JULIAN GRAJALES

The chrysalis was already softer than it should be by the time the boy noticed it hanging from the bent blade of grass by the slender tree. He watched with careful patience and intention as the chrysalis bulged in one direction and then another. The young butterfly struggled to break free of the transformation pod it had built in its former life. In no time, the boy grew tired of waiting and walked away, preferring to gaze at the screen of his mother's cell phone than the slow plodding of the natural world. But the yellow and red chested warbler, perched in the tree branch above, stood patiently in its observation of the butterfly's soft thrashing.

The butterfly would continue its struggle to be born with nobody excitedly awaiting the moment of its birth, ready to welcome its delicate grace, petal-soft wings, wrinkled antenna feelers, and squishy body. Nobody to gasp as it took flight, no parent to beam proudly as it lifted its wings in search of the lightest touch of air, lighter than the air pushed away by a feather. Nobody would celebrate the butterfly's milestone or compliment it on the dazzling sunset orange color woven into its wings.

Using its inbred instinct, and observation of other birds, the warbler could wait statue-like. It could freeze its scant black eyes on the chrysalis without blinking or retracting the thin veil of mucus sideways for over an eternity, an eternity to which it never paid any mind. There was no mechanical watch on its wing, nor did it examine the stars or the position of the sun to determine the exact time some ape-derived beings were so proud to have constructed.

No. The warbler watched and waited, knowing it wasn't the right time to lean forward on its flimsy tree branch, spread open its wings, and aim its small beak for its prize. It sat, hoping the caterpillar would break through a butterfly, silently encouraging the butterfly to overcome its struggle against the shell that kept it from the world, the shell that stopped it from traversing the air as the warbler could, the sturdy membrane through which passed the scent of pollen and sweet juice hidden in the genitalia of flowers the butterfly now craved with its re-organized array of desires.

The butterfly that pushed and bent the chrysalis hypnotized the warbler into recognizing its meal soon to be delivered by the natural order of things. So confident was the warbler of its meal that it was too distracted to notice the boy had left his mother's side and had locked his eyes on the bird while turning a small rock in his dirt-stained hand.

The warbler failed to observe the rock that would fatally strike it to the ground, nor would it have heard the boy's initial cry of delight and subsequent silent turn toward guilt. A moment too late to alter the course of the warbler's fate.

The butterfly would be born, a whole saga unraveling before it and aimed at

Environmental Hazard: We Never Quit

MELISA JN. PIERRE

I wasn't going to write about
the gas station
I never use anymore
the under-resourced hoods
those boarded up bricks and boards
that were thriving do-gooder hoards
of community good
replicas of what gas stations do with their pumps

stand in the middle of my life
every time my daughter crosses the street
for a sugar cone
forget about the dusty grey
smoke-inspired rage
the neglect
that cloud foaming with anger at the neck
in the distance
trying and near succeeding in consuming
our perseverance
our patience
this place chimed and hummed out
jingling pocket change once

gas
lighting us up
in all kinds of economies
until neglect
eating us for lunch
walking out on us
in the middle of a storm
brewing at our borders
neglect is gas
waking us to bomb shells
shelling us apart like peas exploding from their pod

casts
left with no guardian
no cover

hoods' autonomy in flames
smoldering in monopolized greed and abandonment
gas
looped us in
mopped us up
cleaned out our hood's ambitions
left us in the lurch piling on the dirt

us
behind the cloud you see
us
behind the cloud you smell in your sleep
us
shrouded in dust clouds
discovered in the showers that you take
gas walked out
like rejection does
often in silence
gas
hoods
ghost hoods are why
I wasn't going to write about the
gas station

thank God
my daughter got her sugar cone
crosses the street back into my arms again
wish monopolies would love our hoods and cities like that
wish they'd stop discarding us
dispensing with our dreams
undressing us
out of our underthings
the whole selves we bring
the bare-naked skin
to the shelling game
like garments parted from flesh in unrequited haste
like gnats and fleas battered for their sting
silenced yet still we bring

wish they'd uncross our streets with their cloud
quit telling on us
how our hoods endowed
yet we can't be caretakers anymore
how so?

with the dust clouds you bring
 being so loud
 deafeningly loud
 suffocatingly loud

Let my daughter cross over
 without coughing up
 pump some love into us

tear down the bricks
 gaslight our everything
 show up for once
 with some courage
 without the staged script
 I wasn't going to write about the gas
 stationed in our lives
 stamped on our guts
 the neglected hoods
 folding my breaths into hope
 then my daughter
 crosses the street and
 gas pumps my life

Memory Song

HELEN BAUER

June 2016

The sun was still shining high in the late afternoon as I made my way home after the last day of sophomore year. My back was stooped under my backpack, heavy with summer assignments. My arms were full of glossy college brochures depicting faraway campuses. I walked with slow steps down 56th Street, watching each foot land on the ground before me, thinking about the long summer ahead. I should have felt relief at the thought of no more lunches in the library and gym periods spent in the back of the locker room. No more ducking groups of tenth-grade girls on my walk out of the school building, where I either hurried ahead or lingered behind to avoid their indifference and the sound of their laughter to jokes I was too far away to hear. Instead, I shivered in the spring heat; visions of my white bedroom walls and noiseless house, save for the creaking of the floorboards and passing cars played before my eyes. Quiet, except for whatever music I decided to play. Theo was the family music fanatic, and his record player sat boxed on my bedroom floor, collecting dust. His precious Audio-Technica never made it out of the bubble wrap since arriving at 56th street. The box full of his record collection sat beside it, still in chronological order of release, the same way he'd kept them in the milk crates he'd used to store them. Theo was always like that; organized, like he was preserving his things for me. Like he wanted to leave me precious souvenirs. Those souvenirs, now encased in cardboard and stationed on my floor so long they were probably decomposing, used to have a home. Three years ago, in his dimly lit bedroom at the old house, with the afternoon sun shining through his thin, white curtains, Theo had the crates stacked against the wall. Next to them was a coffee table that the record player stood on top of. He allowed me to shuffle through his alphabetized archives—no one else.

My thoughts turned back to the bleak summer ahead as I continued my final walk home of my sophomore year. The excitement of summers spent under sprinklers at Prospect Park, or racing to catch vanilla ice-cream drops with our tongues before they reached our cone-gripping hands were left behind in our childhood. But even in the summers spent at home, when Theo laid atop the blanket on his bed, and I pulled the curtains aside to let in the breeze from the open window, even when Theo was too weak, too tired, too dizzy, we spent the summer months laughing through the heat-haze. I shifted my booklets and brochures from one arm to the other. I tugged on my backpack straps, shifting the weight on my aching shoulders. I kept my eyes on the pavement as I approached my summer-long sanatorium.

Voices pulled me out of my contemplation before I reached our gate.

"I'm just saying, we've done this for eight years and I think it's enough," a dark-haired woman said, stomping down John's front steps. John stood at the foot of the stairs. He was dressed in a black suit and white button down and missing his characteristic smile. Eyebrows wrinkled and eyes lowered, he stood before the woman who looked down at him from a few steps above. As I approached their voices became clearer.

"It's not like he would care if he were alive. I mean, come on, Dad. He was a junkie. If the roles were reversed, he wouldn't do shit for us on the anniversary of our deaths," she said.

"It's what your mother would've wanted, Laurie. She'd be disappointed if we didn't go," John replied.

"That's because he was her favorite," the woman sneered. "This is the last year I'm doing this, Dad."

After a deep sigh, John raised his eyes in time for them to land on me, just as I was walking past them.

"Carmen!" he said enthusiastically. "Come meet my daughter, Laurie. Laurie, this is my neighbor, Carmen." I slowed as I reached John's gate and turned toward the two. Laurie was dressed in jeans, sandals and a tank top. Her shoulders and nose were freckled and red. She peered at me over her dark sunglasses before pushing them back up her nose with her french-manicured talons.

"Hi," we said at the same time. A silent moment passed while we looked at each other before Laurie pulled her phone out of her back pocket and turned away from us.

"Today is June 22nd," John said, leaning toward me and lowering his tone so that Laurie couldn't hear. "My son died eight years ago today. Laurie and I have a standing date. Every year we visit her brother at Greenwood cemetery. We used to bring a picnic, and sometimes her cousins would join us.... Anyway, that was a few years ago. Everyone's been so busy lately..." he said as his voice trailed off.

"So, are we going, or what?" Laurie said, shoving her phone into her back pocket and clomping down the stairs before John could give her an answer.

John gave me an apologetic smile. "Take care, Carmen," he said, barely audibly.

"Bye," I said, without moving. My eyes were glued to John as he walked dejectedly to the car parked a meter from where I stood. Laurie walked around to the driver's side, sandals flapping against the ground as she went. John, with his back bowed, opened the passenger side door, and squeezed his large body into the car. They drove quickly and took a hard left at the corner. Only after they were out of sight did I let out my breath. I quickly wiped my sleeve over my eyes, clearing my vision, before turning and marching home.

June 2013

"Best album of the 70s, hands down," Theo said, looking over at me from his bed, as I flipped *Dark Side of the Moon* around to read the track list. At sixteen,

Theo masterminded my music initiation. He lectured me about rock history from his sickbed, while I sat cross-legged on my big brother's floor. Although he was less than three years older than me, Theo fancied himself a sophisticated taste-maker, and me his dimwitted student.

"That's what you said about *Led Zeppelin Four*," I mumbled, still inspecting the back cover of the Pink Floyd vinyl.

"Okay, fine. Second best album," he said, smiling. His head was propped up on two pillows and the clean, blue sheets were tucked in tightly around his waist. His brown arms, now with a gray, deoxygenated undertone, rested at his sides, on top of the covers.

"What about this one?" I asked, holding up a record with a sepia filtered photo of a concert hall on the front. A soft smile stayed on his lips.

"Play it," he said quietly, as if to himself. I walked over to the record player standing on the dresser at the end of Theo's bed. I carefully unsheathed the vinyl, gently placed it on the machine and set the needle at its edge as it started to spin.

*Just before our love got lost you said
I am as constant as a northern star,' And I said
'constantly in the darkness'*

Joni Mitchell's mournful voice filled Theo's warm room, aglow with the orange light of the setting sun. I watched him as he closed his eyes and sunk into the pillow like he was sinking into the music. His smile remained and he hummed along, voice breaking at the highest notes.

It had been three years since Theo's soft humming introduced me to Joni's melody.

The song, so full of sorrow, would stay restrained in cardboard. A noiseless summer seemed better than one haunted by the soundtrack of his life.

September 2016

The days shortened, almost imperceptibly. I noticed, because most of those sweltering days were spent waiting for night, for sleep, for a cool, welcomed quiet. Sleep, however, was elusive in these still hours. In the bright light that forced its way through the white curtains that once decorated Theo's room, I snuffed out the glare with a pillow over my face. I slept, bathed in light. I woke, wrapped in darkness. One day, then the next. Summer turned to fall.

In the tempered weather, my black lace up boots resumed their march up 56th Street. While I had taken a two-month hiatus, John's buoyant presence on 56th street persisted.

"Good morning, Carmen!" He called to me each day from that top step.

"Morning, John," I replied. As the mornings passed, our routine was cemented.

"Mornin', Carmen!" He'd call.

"Good morning, John," I'd reply. The comfort I found in John's presence grew.

“Good morning, Carmen!”

“Good morning, John!”

The wind picked up, the leaves dropped, and soon the trees stood bare. The chill turned frigid, and John went missing from his top step. It was on a day when fresh snow coated the ground that he reappeared.

“Good morning, Carmen!” John called. His voice sounded shrunken, a ghost of what once was so commanding.

I slowed my steps as I neared John’s gate. Instead of sitting wide-legged on the steps, leaning forward onto his elbows, elbows on his knees in his usual eager fashion, John sat in a chair at the top landing. He leaned back in his seat. The soft brown robe that he often wore in the colder months covered his newspaper clutching hands and was tied tightly around his formerly large gut, now a slender waist.

“Morning, John,” I said. I looked down at my boots and hurried up the street.

I drifted through my morning classes. I rested my eyes on the unfocused movement before me. Between my teachers and me was a thin fog. Translucent but stagnant. During lunch, I sat at a corner table and looked down at my open book. My eyes glazed over Patti Smith’s words, but the words remained on the page, never piercing through the mist between us. Lunches alone were my new normal, nothing like the giggle-inducing meals I’d spent with Theo three years ago. “Monkey business,” mom called my silliness, my constant attempts to make Theo laugh.

Autumn swept up the street on a quiet breeze. It twirled the first fallen leaves, and eventually carried in a chill. One brisk morning, John’s top step was deserted. It remained empty, all the mornings after.

The diagnosis, the attempts at treatment and then the amputation took place in quick succession that winter. When John returned home, Mom visited him often, bringing his favorite snacks, medical supplies he might need and whatever else he mentioned.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come, Carmen?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m sure,” I said, followed by a sigh.

“Okay, but I think John would really appreciate any company right now. You know what a social butterfly he is,” Mom said as she packed the gauze, medical tape and disinfectant cream she’d brought home from work into a ziplock bag.

Glaring at her, as if to shove her out the door with the sheer force of my stare, I finally answered, “Yes, Mom, I know.”

She stopped in the doorway and returned my glare. Hers won. I let out a sigh and pushed myself off the couch.

Blueberry container in hand, I rang the doorbell. John came to the door in a wheelchair, bags under his eyes, unshaven, and with nothing on but boxers and a white undershirt with a mosaic of yellow and red stains along the front of an unidentifiable source. The TV blared in the background. He looked at my mother and a grin lit his sallowness.

“Hi John! We’ve come with blueberries,” Mom said.

“Well, hello!” John said, in a tone of delighted surprise. “Come in! It’s good to see you!”

In the three months since I’d last seen John, he’d been reduced to half of his former size. The man that once reminded me of a grizzly bear with his large body and booming voice had been dwarfed to a slender and aged man. He beamed up at us from his shallow wheelchair before rolling it backwards and into the living room. I stepped over the threshold after Mom and shut the door behind me. John parked his chair perpendicular to the couch and gestured toward it, inviting us to sit. I perched myself on the gray velour seat of the sofa and looked around the unfamiliar room while mom sat between us and leaned toward him.

“How have you been, John? How is everything?” Mom asked, raising her eyebrows in the concerned expression she reserved for the sick, the elderly, and Theo.

“Oh, fine, just fine,” John replied, with his tender and docile smile.

Their conversation faded into the background as I observed my surroundings. The beige and muted red wallpaper looked like it hadn’t been changed since the house had been built more than one hundred years ago—water stains ran down it and the peeling wallpaper around the walls’ corners revealed a lilac purple, the only sign of what had once occupied the home that was now just a house. Stacked next to both sides of the couch and lazy-boy chair were newspapers more than a foot high. Empty bottles of orange juice, cranberry juice and water spilled out of a white garbage bag that leaned against the TV stand on the wall opposite the couch and decorated the floor. Unopened juice bottles stood beneath the wooden coffee table, and on its surface was a mess of unopened mail, disposable food containers, medication bottles and candy wrappers. The wood ceiling fan spun in the light that streamed in through the three front-facing windows. The dust could be seen swirling in the breeze. A coat of it covered the framed photos that sparsely decorated the airless room. A woman with blonde hair and a gap-toothed smile appeared in almost all of them. With her were sometimes two young children, or two teenage children, or two middle-aged children, or a much younger John, wearing a smile of confidence that I hadn’t seen in a while.

“And how are you, Carmen? I see you walking home with that heavy backpack everyday. Studying hard?” John asked, with a blueberry between forefinger and thumb, which he popped into his mouth after asking the question.

“Yup... studying hard,” I said. John looked at me expectantly, eyebrows raised, chewing now on a newly inserted blueberry. I gave him a polite smile, and he turned back to the blueberry collection in his lap.

I returned to the framed photos decorating the wall. A family, I thought as I observed the faces, smiling through their transformations—children into adults, adults into old folks. A family used to live here. The house was so full and yet so empty. An image of my unfinished bedroom and the clean, beige furniture of our house next door intruded on the reflection. Our house was doubly empty.

“I like to sit out in the yard with her,” John said. He smiled and looked at me with glassy eyes before facing the photo I’d been considering. In it, the blonde

woman held a reluctant gray cat up to the camera. The cat's arms were outstretched in front of it, and its eyes shone red. Next to it, slightly out of focus, the blonde woman smiled with her mouth open, mid-laugh. The gap between her front teeth gave her a child-like visage.

John addressed the photo. "I like to talk to her. Take care of her. Her urn, you know. She doesn't say much back." He laughed quietly. The skin around his eyes folded into deep creases that stretched onto his cheek. "But she's there."

John observed the photo. Mom and I observed John.

Mom softly cleared her throat, disturbing the stillness. "Are those the new socks?" She asked softly. John looked down at his legs, one of which ended just below the knee.

"Oh, yes! Thank you! I wear them all the time," he said.

Mom eyed his amputated leg for a moment before saying, "Do you take them off periodically?"

"Oh, well, you know I'm always cold, so I like to keep them on at home."

"Ok." Mom's searching gaze looked from one shin to the other. "You should really take them off every once in a while, though," Mom said, reaching toward John's leg. She gently pulled the sock down and off the end of his amputated leg. The socks' elastic band was imprinted onto his skin in red lining. Below the mark left by the elastic, the skin was a deep shade blue, with purple and red veins branching out. It was swollen and bulbous. Mom, leaning away from me so her face was hidden, stiffened at the sight of the bruised skin. She quickly regained her composure and leaned back in her seat, sock in hand.

"Let's leave that off for now. Much better. It needs circulation," she said with a tense smile.

Before we saw ourselves out, Mom placed the medical supplies on the cluttered coffee table.

"Just in case," she said, attempting a smile but looking more like she'd eaten something sour. We stepped over unopened mail and rolled up magazines. Turning for one last goodbye, John's melancholic smile halted us.

"Thank you for coming by. It makes my day seein' you," John said, looking at Mom. "And you too, Carmen." Mom pursed her lips and looked down.

"Take care, John," I said, and shuffled Mom out the door before her polite smile could collapse.

After he could no longer walk, John spent every morning back there. I would stand at the kitchen window, fishing hot toast out of the toaster. I'd pause as I watched him roll himself out onto the back porch using his one leg. He would slow himself with his foot as the wheelchair rolled down the shallow ramp and come to a halt before the little garden. The silver urn stood at the front. He talked to it quietly, all the while pulling weeds and watering the flowers that grew up around it with the watering can he kept near. He'd pour water on the vessel, too, rinsing away any grime that had appeared since the day before. And every morning, after his chat and maintenance, he would bring the urn to his lips, kissing his wife goodbye.

It was already November, but John did not return to his stoop. In the mornings as I stood at the window, I'd wave to John as he rolled himself in after spending the morning with his wife. When he saw me, he'd wave and grin. Eventually, his morning visits to his wife ended, too. I'd stand at the window, chewing on buttered toast, waiting for John to come out. The silver urn began to smudge. Dead leaves collected around it.

Weeks passed before we saw John again. Mom and I each carried one heavy bag on the way home from the grocery store. In Mom's hand was a box of sugar-free cookies. We stopped in front of John's house so she could deliver them. She rang the doorbell and knocked twice. I watched her from outside the gate as she held the heavy bag in her left hand. We waited. Mom transferred the bag to the crux of her arm. She rang again.

"John?" she called out. "You there?" She knocked again.

"Let's just go, Mom. He's not in." I hopped from foot to foot and shoved my free hand into my pocket.

She turned to me, wearing a puzzled expression.

"Well, where could he be?" She asked with wide eyes and furrowed brows. She turned back to face the door and rang again.

"John? Is everything alright?" She paused and waited for a response. None came. She tried the knob before banging on the door with her palm. Crouching to set the groceries down, she began rifling through her purse. She pulled out a key chain and eventually found a match. She crossed the threshold and turned back toward me with an open hand gesture that meant *stay put*. She walked into the dim hallway and the house swallowed her.

My heart thumped against my ribcage and echoed in my ears as the minutes passed. I kept turning and looking around me, hoping that when I looked again at the door that stood ajar, Mom would be exiting it. I placed my grocery bag down on the bottom step and wiped my sweaty palms against my jeans. On shaky legs I ascended the stairs.

The hallway was untouched since I'd last walked through it, save for a pile of unopened mail on the floor next to the door. I stepped over it, entering the house, and a putrid odor intruded my throat and lungs. I winced at the smell, tensing my body, and forcing myself forward. I entered the familiar living room. I stepped over clutter as I walked through the darkness, toward the hall leading to the back of the house. As I walked toward the lit room at the end of the hall, I covered my nose and mouth with my hand. It shivered against my face. In the quiet, I heard Mom moving around the room at the end of the hall. A bedroom came into view. A wooden dresser holding framed photos and jewelry; a white vanity with photos wedged into the mirror's frame, the bench tucked beneath the table; to my right, against the wall, a chair no longer visible under a mountain of clothes; two matching bedside tables with matching lamps. Mom stood beside the lit lamp. The wheelchair was parked opposite. In the middle, a bed. A heavy white comforter covered his body.

Turned away from me, Mom pulled the heavy white comforter to the top of

the bed, over the pillows. The body beneath was still. Mom rested her shaking hand on John's body and stood quietly, hanging her head.

"Mom," I said. I walked around the bed and stood behind her. I put my hands on her narrow shoulders and they began to shake. "Mom." I wrapped my arms around her, resting my face on her shoulder. Her sobs erupted and filled the still room.

In the dark hallway, a cane rested against a wall. A discarded umbrella in a corner. In the living room sat the couch with sunken seats, the coffee table littered with discarded belongings. A sliver of light from a streetlamp cut across the wall. A cool breeze pushed a piece of mail by the open door.

We sat on John's stoop while Mom made the call.

"Yes. 56th street," Mom said, wiping her nose on her sleeve. The grocery bags sat at my feet.

"Not long. A couple days maybe?" she said into the receiver. In the distance, sirens sounded. I shut my eyes as dizziness sent me rocking forward.

"Next door. Right next door." Mom's voice sunk into the distance. I clutched my knees while memory pulled me back to a thirteen-year-old body, at the end of a dim hallway, this one belonging to the home of my childhood.

October 2013

"What do you mean he's not responding! What do you mean he's not responding!" She yelled in the paramedic's face. "What do you mean!" She grabbed the collar of his white button down.

"Hey! Hey, now!" Dad pried her fingers off the man's shirt. She looked from the medic to Dad. Between us stood the gurney, the medics' supplies, the walker Theo used on occasion. Even with this gulf between us, I saw the whites of Mom's eyes as she beat her fists on Dad's chest, shrieking incomprehensibly. Her face glistened. She took a breath and turned toward the door.

"Let me see him!" She yelled in a deep, commanding voice, shoving her way past the other paramedic.

"Let me see him!" She shrieked. I watched her from the end of the hall, a length of tunnel between us. She forced her way past the men trying to calm her. Dad clutched at her shoulders. She broke free of his grip and swung open the door to Theo's bedroom. She stood in the doorway and turned to face his bed.

Mom froze. A silence erupted. I watched her unmoving profile. The air solidified. Congealed. She dropped to the floor.

"No! No! No, no, no, no!" She howled. Dad pushed past the medics. "No, no, no, no," she screamed, muffled by Dad's chest. He cradled her head in his arms, rocking her back and forth. She gripped his shoulders while he hunched over her. His head was next to her ear, and he spoke to her softly and she continued to howl. His body absorbed her screams.

The medics and Dr. Costa quietly receded, gliding past me to the back of the house. In the light of Theo's room, Dad held Mom, squeezing her tight as she convulsed. From the dark, I watched their stiff sway.

November 2016

I caught my breath as the sirens pierced through my remembrance. The whirling lights rushed onto the street and before they came to a stop, Mom grabbed my hand and pulled me up. She guided me down the stairs, abandoning the groceries. She led me gently to our door. Medics rushed out of the ambulance and up John's stairs, passed the open door. The gate swung on its hinges. The leaves whistled in the wind. The neighbors gathered on the street, speaking in hushed voices. Our door swung shut.

Weeks passed and a snowless December descended on the city. The gray sky was low, trapping a bitter cold. I smoothed my black dress down as we got out of the car. Mom slipped her fingers into Dad's as they walked toward the cemetery's entrance. I watched them walk through the tall black gates, remaining on the gravel as shallow green hills came up on either side of them. Gravestones rose from the ground in every direction. Mom dodged a puddle in her black boots as they turned round the bend, following the other attendees. The incline became steeper, and Dad put his arm around Mom's shoulder. She leaned into him. They kept their pace. Sassafras and Elm trees three stories tall leaned in toward each other, high above the gravel road. They blocked out the overcast sky. Mom, Dad and the other guests in black made a right onto the lush grass.

Standing next to the pastor was John's daughter, Laurie. She wore a deep frown and pursed lips. People came to greet her. They rubbed her shoulder and spoke to her in soft tones.

"He was such a special man," said the gray-haired man in a suit.

"If you need anything, anything at all—," said a woman cradling Laurie's elbow.

For each condolence, Laurie turned toward the person, gave an almost imperceptible nod, and turned back to the hole. Her eyes stayed downcast.

The service was short and cold. John's belly laugh was buried with his body. When the service ended, she was the first to begin the steep walk toward the exit. Mom and Dad exchanged a look of sorrow and watched the indignant woman march to her car. The wind blew her coat behind her. She shoved her hands in her pockets and continued through the biting wind. She finally reached her car and slid into the driver's seat, shutting the door behind her. Staring at her hands on the wheel, she stretched her fingers and studied them. I thought I saw her soften.

Then the key was in the ignition. The car roared to life, and she was gone.

I turned toward Mom and Dad, leaning into each other and watching the gravediggers cover John's casket in soil. As I walked toward them, I heard Mom's humming grow louder, singing the familiar Joni song.

Standing behind them, I rested my cheek against Dad's tall shoulder and wrapped my arms around each of their torsos. Their hug split and quickly mended around me.

The Hereafter

JUDITH SCHOOLMAN

Gone. Transitioned. Passed away. Bit the dust. Croaked. Took a dirt nap. Passed over. Went to a better place. Was called home. Kicked the bucket. Gone to the Lord. Gone to Eternal Rest. Bought the farm. Met their maker. Shuffled off this mortal coil. Anything but “Dead.”

Many of us are so afraid of death that we can’t even use the word, choosing euphemisms both funny and elegiac to describe the “end of life.” I force myself to use the real word but death terrifies me. I don’t want to die. I don’t want those around me to die. I have been worried and preoccupied my whole life with the end of life. What does it feel like to die? Is there a light? Is it like falling asleep, or floating? Will I find out that I’ve been wrong all this time and there really is a God?

Just five years after my father died from a stroke he suffered on the Long Island Railroad, my mother died of a massive heart attack. It was more likely a broken heart than anything else. She died on New Year’s Eve. She left no instructions. In earlier years, we all joked about putting my mother on an iceberg, as the Inuit were credited with doing during times of famine. But, with global warming, it was hard to find icebergs in New York Harbor. For me today, it is not just about “a final resting place” but also about implications such as carbon footprints in our fragile environment. At least my father had told us kids that he wanted to be cremated. This was contrary to Jewish tradition, but made sense to a man who at every opportunity called Jewish religious observance “bullshit.” My mother didn’t like my father’s decision, harboring unresolved religious conflicts of her own. We children out-voted her to honor my father’s post-life choice. He was nice and comfy in his sturdy paper box in my middle brother’s closet. But given the fuss she made about cremation, my mother was to be buried. In Jewish tradition, the dead are not embalmed and are buried in plain pine coffins. Bodies are shrouded. So, it was odd when my brothers and I were meeting with a funeral director who asked if we wanted my mother to have her hair done. She never had in life, so why now? But in my grief, I almost said yes. Calmer heads prevailed.

I supposed they should be placed together. Where? We didn’t do synagogues, but only a Jewish cemetery would do, and Jewish cemeteries might not do ashes. Until recently, cremation wasn’t “done” by members of my cultural community—too reminiscent of the Holocaust. For some, it is against Jewish law, which lists specific rules for care of the dead and says that bodies may not be defiled. When my grandparents died, there were “shemira,” rituals where someone sits with the dead until burial, reciting prayers. But traditions have changed and now many Jewish leaders accept cremation as kosher. Still, it was New Year’s Eve,

Schoolman

so everything was closed. Since I am the only daughter, and very good at organizing dinner parties, my brothers said, “You take care of the funeral. You do it. We’ll pay.” In a family that whispered the word “divorce” and called cancer “the Big C,” it’s not surprising that discussing after-life plans was not on the agenda. My grandparents and relatives of prior generations were planners. My paternal grandfather was the treasurer of a benevolent society established in the early 1900s, the First Buzeur Vereinschaft Association. Members of the association were given subsidized funerals in cemeteries in Queens as well as pensions for widows and orphans. Where my grandparents are buried is in the back corner of the massive cemetery off the Long Island Expressway. It is overgrown, damp, and smelly. Now I know it’s the smell of human and plant decay.

I have spent much of my professional life writing about the finances of death. Overcompensating for my terror, perhaps. I’ve written articles about burials, including one about a booklet, “Burying Your Own Dead,” which had advice on carrying dead bodies in the trunk of your car. One article on pre-paid funerals exposed a dark secret from a friend’s mother who, when interviewed for the article, told me she didn’t want to be buried next to her husband. When my own parents died, I had no one to advise me. I had to make decisions I wasn’t prepared for and later came to question. I worked on auto-pilot, thinking along the same lines as my relatives before me. I called the funeral home that had taken care of extended family burials. I bought two plots, sight unseen, at New Montefiore cemetery in Pinelawn, Suffolk County. My mother was to get a big hole and my dad was to get a little one. Mom on the aisle and Dad inside, just like their seats at the Philharmonic.

An ice storm barreled down the night before their burials. The Long Island Expressway was likely to be closed due to dangerous conditions. My middle brother suggested we postpone. “Dad doesn’t want to go. He likes it here.”

Rather than postpone, I told him I would put Dad’s box and Mother’s casket on a sled and pull them to the cemetery if I had to. Luckily, the hearse made it through. Only we children, a few family friends, and two of my mother’s former students showed up. Amid sword-sharp snow showers, my eldest brother caught the flu. I stepped into a muddy pit. Selma and Joe Schoolman were laid to rest in the quickest burial on record.

My parents’ deaths were expected in theory, not in practice. So decisions were made quickly and emotionally. Today, I would have likely advocated cremation of both, despite my mother’s wishes. From a carbon footprint perspective, cremation, despite furnaces that heat up to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, is about one-quarter less intrusive than traditional burial. Here are some more numbers, from World Funeral News, one of many organizations serving the after-life industry.

For burial, the estimated carbon footprint is 833 kilograms. Much of the carbon emissions, about 730 kg., come from building of the underground niche (pouring concrete, lead shields). Transportation also has a large impact, as does embalming, and construction of the coffin. Most coffins used in burials have

synthetic varnishes, glues and other materials that account for 14% of caskets' impact. In cremation, the total impact is estimated to be 233 kg. The actual cremation emits about 202.4 kg. The coffin (27.8 kg) and transportation account for the remainder. So burial uses CO₂ emissions equal to about 3.6 cremations. According to US Funerals Online, flame cremations in the U.S. produce as much CO₂ as burning 800,000 barrels of oil per person. That is equivalent to a flight from London to Rome, the group said. And cremains need to be treated, because ashes have a high Ph level and are not conducive to plant life. Companies such as Let Your Love Grow market a soil mixture that purports to address the high Ph levels of cremains, making them suitable for planting or disbursal after a 90-day treatment period.

While I'm not one to do the math, the numbers sound huge. And sometimes, because we're thinking in terms of kilograms, a number system we Americans aren't used to, the amounts can become irrelevant. For many families, including my own, it's very emotionally difficult to part with cremains. With burial, it's fairly sanitized. Someone else does it. But with those of us whose parents and relatives were cremated, it can become very personal and very fraught with the weight of culture, tradition, and the possibility of literally getting your hands dirty. Besides, burials aren't about the dead, they're about the living. And it's the living that have to pay, and pay. It wasn't cheap burying my parents. The plots cost \$3,000, the headstone about the same. Perpetual care cost another \$3,000, so their graves' plantings would be nice and tidy for all eternity. But their cemetery is usually empty of the living, except for the dark-clad young man who lingered near where my parents are buried, asking if I wanted him to say a prayer. My father surely would have risen from the dead.

Their cemetery, built to catch the "overflow" from Jewish cemeteries closer to the city, is park-like, heavily treed and green. But the air is not as pure as it appears. About 94% of decomposing bodies turn to gasses such as carbon dioxide, methane, ammonia, water vapor and hydrogen sulfide. Duke University and the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies wrote that, "The waters that percolate from cemeteries carry other decomposition products, especially nitrogen that can potentially pollute groundwater." Long Island is especially vulnerable to groundwater pollution, a possible cause of cancer clusters over the years.

As I consider my own post-life plans, especially amid Covid and bouts of sciatica, and a desire not to saddle my only child with the unpleasantries, I've been looking for eco-friendly alternatives. I came across the Natural Death Society, a British group that espouses "Lifting the Lid on Dying and Funerals." Who said funeral arrangers have no sense of humor? It explained why the term "six feet under" is accurate. At that depth, there is anaerobic decomposition, and truly going back to the earth. Any shallower, there isn't the same kind of decomposition—that's aerobic, like how mulch is made on the forest floor.

Had I had the knowledge and the emotional where-with-all at the time of my parents' deaths, I would have encouraged my brothers to consider other options for my parents. One of the "newest" methods, which is actually among the old-

est, is "terramation" or "natural organic reduction." In today's terramation, the body is sealed in a container with organic materials such as straw, flowers and wood chips. It takes about 30 to 60 days for air and microbes to begin breaking down the body and the plant material. Then the remains "cure" for a few weeks, after which they can be planted in a flower bed or donated to an ecosystem restoration project. Some deceased farm animals are also planted in this way. The process uses one-eighth of the energy that a flame cremation uses, according to US Funerals Online. "In terms of emissions, the process saves 1 metric ton of CO₂ from entering the atmosphere," the group wrote. This is legal in California, Washington State, Oregon, and New York. No matter what option one chooses, it has to adhere to New York State guidelines. You just can't plant your Bubby in the begonias.

I doubt my mother would have liked a more-eco-friendly burial, such as using a container made of mushrooms and other biodegradable materials. My dad wouldn't have cared.

I am the lone family member to visit my parents. Every year, my son places a shell from Cape Cod on the headstone and I give them an update on the family. This summer, as we drove out of the cemetery, my son yelled, "stop the car. I forgot to tell them I got an internship."

My parents tell me they're lonely out there. All the mishpucha (family) are in Queens. I tell them they could have been there too, if they had only talked about it.

Getting my parents permanently situated those years ago was the beginning of a new chapter for me. Within months, I had registered with an adoption agency, renovated my apartment and considered alternatives to a life as a reporter. I saw that life, and death, had alternatives. I soon drew up a will so that my son would be taken care of and my journey to the beyond would be well planned. I had wanted to be cremated. Then I would be sent off into the universe by a band of bagpipe players. I left that detail out of the will's final draft. I opted for having my ashes strewn at Jones Beach, Long Island, five miles from my childhood home.

Of course, I need to update this request given New York State and maritime law. Unless my son becomes an organic farmer, I don't care to be human compost that's part of some kale field. I could definitely go for terramation and a burial at sea, maybe taken to Davy Jones' Locker by outrigger canoe. Flowers are optional. And, like generations of my family, there will be bagels, lox and laughter.

Home

ISAHMAR CASTRO

A couple of square feet
 Walls
 Bed
 Fridge
 Weekly rent;
 This is home for mom and me.
 She watches me as I pretend to be asleep

We Slept Together

MOLLY SCHWARZ

We slept together—no I mean literally,
 we slept together and I watched
 the heave of your chest while I embraced you,
 with your hand brushing the side of my face.

I tapped your nose just to watch
 you scrunch your face up in response,
 imagining that, maybe, in your dreams,
 you felt a little annoyed, so I could confirm
 that you're real.
 I like that I mattered enough that I could annoy you,
 get that small rise from you,
 reach out and provoke you, so
 I can confirm
 that I'm real, too.

We curl into each other
 and once we're both up,
 you tell me that it was the best sleep you've had in ages.
 I believe you, I really do.
 But we don't sleep like that together
 ever again.

Mealtime Cathexis

MOLLY SCHWARZ

Fried eggs on my brain,
but seeing you makes them
scrambled.
Breakfast for dinner,
but you only ever came for lunch.

I thought we could eat together,
you and I,
but instead we watch each other
chew from afar,
promising to “Catch you next time,”
when we know
neither of us will be around.

I hope your eggs taste good
in Bed-Stuy
in Williamsburg
in Bushwick
in Ridgewood
in your shitty kitchen
in your family home
in bed,
because I know you bring
the entire pan to your room
and eat over your pillow.

I came over one time
and put hardy slices of rye bread in your toaster,
then left.
I waited for the machine to warm them up,
and then I didn’t wait
anymore.
Cold revenge is cliché.
That’s why hot rye—hot, mysterious,
inexplicable, unremarkable
pieces of rye—
Maybe they’ll burn,
maybe they won’t,

I don’t know what exactly I intended,
But I don’t know if I cared past a certain point.

Now I stir my oatmeal, intimately
and alone.
I don’t cook much for anyone—
besides myself, for breakfast—
anymore.

As Homeless Age, Cities See a Surge in Lonely Death on the Streets, a found poem

PAMELA LASKIN

Fuller, Thomas. "A Rising Tally of Lonely Deaths on the Streets."
New York Times, 4/18/2022

Their bodies were found
on public benches
lying next to bike paths
crumpled under freeway overpasses
stranded on sun-drenched beaches
five homeless deaths a day.

Two hundred eighty-seven
took their last breath
in plain view
on the pavements
of L.A. county.

Holiday, 2022

PAMELA LASKIN

This year
inside the car
a coffin
waiting eight hours
in line
for bread
a gallon of soup
peanut butter, jelly
some meat for the kids?
they are four

but wait
it is Christmas
some desperate chips
melt inside the cookies
small token
for children
crying in the back seat.

Winter Flower

DEDIPTA BHATTACHARJEE

I took this picture at the Queens Botanical Garden, where I once worked in the summer. Coming by in the winter, the place gives off nostalgia for those summer memories, but looking at the flowers, even in the bleak cold winter, there is a rare kind of beauty. Taking this photo was my attempt of remembering how beautiful the garden looks all year round. It serves as a reminder that while we spend most of our time waiting for spring and blossoms, even winter holds something to appreciate.



where all the lost souls go

REBECCA RAGHUNATH

In a life so livid no soul is unknown,
 I wait beneath the fireplace
 To take me to where all the lost souls go.

Though on earth my sins were never atoned,
 I pray, it's He, who will lead me into His embrace,
 In such a life so livid no soul is unknown.

Taking a bite into a minefield of woes,
 Holding on for tomorrow's grace,
 Take me to where all the lost souls go.

Never lose hope as the story unfolds;
 Hope writes like a ghost in tomorrow's chase.
 In a life so livid no soul is unknown.

Fall into a cracked hole,
 Disappear in disgrace,
 Take me to where all the lost souls go.

And You, who mold me into a creation of gold,
 The power You hold chooses my next face.
 In a life so livid no soul is unknown.
 Take me to where all the lost souls go—

Dollar Bill

NINA CAPILLE OPPENHEIM

When his father came back into the room, raving, with a gun, Bill realized at once that it was nothing like the movies. There was no slow motion, no gleam of metal, no narrow escape route. Bill had only felt lead fear in his torso and the horrible reality of years of small battles coming to a final head.

Earlier they had smoked a joint and then done some work around the house. There was a feeling of levity that Bill had never experienced with his father before and he thought since they were men maybe things would be different. But then his father drove his hand back through white-streaked, wiry black hair until it stood up in tufts and had mumbled, "You've got to get out of here," and when he came back he was pointing the gun at Bill.

"Get out of my house," his dad had growled.

Bill had looked up stunned.

"Get out of my house, boy. Think I'm playing? I know you were coming for a home invasion. I'm ready."

"Dad," Bill stuttered.

"I don't know you," he said, saliva coating his lips, "get out."

Bill had risen slowly, lifting his hands from his knees, as if to demonstrate his innocence, and after the terrible sound, had crumpled to the ground.

Later, at the hospital, he had overheard the social worker say the words, "mentally ill and chemically dependent." He had been speaking about Bill's father and, for a while, the specter of it and the long haul off of pain killers had haunted Bill.

That had been ten years ago now and Bill had done his best to move on. He had spent five years consumed by a quest for rims, wheels and hillbilly heroin, but now he was done. He had stood on line at the union hall, done his time as an apprentice, and then found a side job that had turned into a company job. He had worked in those years since he last saw his father, once he was clean, to work an honest living and take care of his lot.

Now Bill surveyed the thumbprint spec of land that he'd inherited when his mother's parents had died. He wanted to do the right thing before he settled down to watch the game. He could hear twigs snapping underfoot as he set to work putting small things in order, his big shoulders tilting ever-so-slightly forward from a lifetime of physical labor and shame. The winter cold was cut by the smell of a faraway chimney blowing a faint trail of smoke over the farm. He picked up a few loose logs and tossed the firewood back into the pile by the crumbling shed. He plodded along the edge of the potato field to the make-shift structure that covered his grandfather's old John Deere. While he worked, he told himself this was good, he was doing right, work before leisure. He cleaned up, tossing scrap

wood into the pile with the fire logs, put away the tools, and went in to wash up.

Inside the little house, a log cabin his grandfather had built on a WPA land grant, he had a six pack of Yuengling waiting in the fridge and the embrace of the big brown chair. The Eagles were playing the Cowboys. He told himself this was a good life. Bill took a beer from the fridge and put one on ice in the freezer. He turned on the TV in time to hear the CBS NFL anthem, a gladiator drum beat that could still nearly lift him out of the recliner in anticipation. The flashing lights, the pyrotechnics, the enthusiastic pre-game crush of helmets still gave him a rush of adrenaline like something good was about to happen. The TV camera panned the skyline of Philadelphia, the gilded statue of William Penn peeping up above the tailgate parties in the lot that used to be Veteran's Stadium. The Eagles were playing at home, less than an hour away over the bridge and into the city. The closeness of the action made him feel like he was part of something.

When Bill finished his second beer and got up for a third, his cell phone buzzed from where he'd left it on the faded arm of the chair. Knowing no one would call him in the middle of the game, he accepted and ended the call without thinking about it, going to the freezer during the commercial break. When he got back the phone was vibrating again. This time he noted the 801 area code. Utah.

"Bill, it's Peg. I'm calling about your daddy."

Bill clamped his mouth shut like a fist. He'd never called his father daddy in his life. He made a sound like a grunt to let her know he was still there.

"It was his heart," she went on, "you know he'd been taking those pills for more 'an five years now." Peg had a faint southern accent and a funny way of talking about the dead. She said the words ashes and canyon and told Bill they could wait for him a few weeks, "hell, even a couple of months." She laughed nervously and said, "What's the rush, now."

Bill pressed the little red circle on his phone and sat unmoving in the chair. Figures moved across the television screen but the sound faded as if he had cotton balls in his ears. When there was only one beer left in the freezer it occurred to him that he could get in his truck and drive to the lodge, keep drinking, and watch the game there. He thought he might be able to get some oxy if he went out, but he thought better of it and finished his beer at home. He nodded off alone in the chair and late in the evening pulled himself up and stumbled down the short hall to bed.

The sun, next morning, shone brilliantly even as it hovered just above the horizon. Long bars of light shone through the trees, glaring stripes between the shadows on the long, gravel driveway. He pulled over the rut at the end of the path slowly, almost tenderly, and then sped down Pennsauken Road past the shuttered farm stands and Minnie's Christmas shop, a lopsided cottage that sold holiday ornaments year-round.

He had woken up with a bad feeling that he couldn't place and then he remembered. A woman he hardly knew had called to ask when he'd come out for his father's funeral. Bill never wanted to go further west than Pittsburgh ever again.

At the work site, he walked into the trailer that served as an office to clock in and said "G'morning" to Sherri. She'd been a cheerleader in high school, a kind of jock goddess who had expanded considerably in size, having had five babies in as many years.

Sherri flicked her eyes up momentarily and said "Morning." Afterwards she stared at the computer screen and gripped a coffee mug that said, "We don't have a maid here," and in all caps, "GET YOUR OWN COFFEE."

Bill walked out and joined the men waiting for the day's work. The contractor would get there soon and give out assignments and locations. In the meantime, the guys stood around with hands shoved in pockets, stomping against the cold.

"Know anything about spreading ashes," Bill said. Puffs of his breath faded in the cold air.

"Yeah," said Motor, who claimed to know something about everything but who was about as trustworthy as thin ice in the first freeze. "Yeah, I do. Gram, Gramps, moms—all of them are out back of the farm. Tell you about it. Hold on a sec." He excused himself to give out cartons of cigarettes. Selling marked-up cartons was the side hustle to Motor's true side hustle of selling oxy.

The morning talk usually had to do with football in winter, baseball in summer, or some outrageous thing that had been witnessed while driving. Bill realized that he had practically made an emotional outburst.

He creased his face and said, deliberately unemotional, "My dad died. His lady out west said something about spreading ashes."

"Sorry to hear," one of them said and then shifted away.

Bill turned toward the guys and tried to remember what the Eagles had done yesterday but there was a blank spot in his mind.

A moment later, Motor came out of the office, practically dancing down the two steps, relieved of his cartons. "Yeah, man. Ashes. You go in with a body and come out with an urn. That's it, bro. Then you gotta do something with them." He reported this loudly and with joy, not bothering to even mug a kind of sorrow. The other guys looked up.

One of them swiped at Motor's IQ, "There's only a couple of things to do with ashes. You either keep 'em or put 'em out. Somewhere nice usually."

"Yeah, that's what I said," Motor grumbled defensively, "like the farm."

"Or down at the shore," another guy said, "if they liked that sort of thing."

They moved on to something else. Bill could hear the voices but couldn't keep his mind on the talk. Then, over Motor's shoulder, Bill saw Sherri come out of the office, a dirty white puffer jacket pulled around her. The fake brown fur of the coat's interior framed the open V of her neckline. She walked right up to them with a hard face.

"Kill the motor." Sherri looked at Motor with eyes like knives and a hand raised as if she might backhand him hard across the chest. Then she turned to Bill with milk soft eyes that suddenly seemed wet and warm and said, "Oh, hon. Why didn't you say?"

Bill thought that this was the best of a woman like Sherri, a hard-working girl

with a tough exterior who would shrug it off in an instant if she knew someone was hurting—even if she hardly knew you. He'd get flack for this later from the guys. He got lucky though, now. The boss's black, double-cabbed pick-up pulled in next to the office. It was time to get to work.

Ten hours later, after hanging drywall on the vaulted ceiling of a new church, Bill felt just a little bit of the confused grief wrung out of him. He drove his truck through Cherry Hill back home toward Hammonton and was astonished when the sky above the dormant fields turned purple and then flamed pink. He thought of Sherri and wondered what it would be to go home to a woman like her and a family. He didn't want to go back to the silent house on the farm and turned toward his mother's house. She was the only person left around here who had known his father.

Bill drove past the horse farm and the contiguous fields whose markers and boundaries he knew by heart since childhood. There was nothing but farming fields all around. The sun slipped below the pine trees that lined the fallow vegetable field across the street. While he jostled and bumped down the long path to the house, he could see the clouds of tan dust that his wheels kicked up in the dying light.

His mother had been renting the house for near 25 years from old man Balwin. It was a brick-red rancher with paint peeling on three sides. The fourth, facing the street, had fake red vinyl siding, a project that Balwin had given up on after installing one side himself.

Bill put the truck in park and saw a woman leaving the house and getting into her car. She must have been a client of his mom's. Her hair looked fresh done. Then his mother darted down the steps, red hair flying and a large handbag extended in front of her.

He heard her call out with laughter in her voice, "Marsha, don't you dare leave this bag again! The last time I brought it to your house I came home down Pine going fifteen miles an hour high as hell on melon balls at 3am!" She handed off the bag and stepped back and nodded when she saw Bill, pointing and telling the woman, "That's my son."

He waited with his mother while she stood with her arms crossed against the cold. The other woman backed up and pulled away.

They turned to walk inside and she said, "Bigos is stewing in the crock. Help me clean up around the chair and then we can have some dinner."

The aluminum screen door creaked shut slow behind them, suspending its closure on rusted hinges and a winter wind that held it open a moment longer. Inside he could smell the stew right away. It was his father's favorite. He walked past the dining room table with the faded vinyl placements that had been there since his teenage years and past the clutter of bills, notes about hair appointments, the crock pot on the counter, and grabbed the broom. His mother washed her hands and clattered down two bowls and two glasses in a flash. She quickly ladled out the hunter's stew over mashed potatoes, put a liter of coke on the table, and they both sat down to eat.

Glancing at the salon room floor, she smiled teasingly and said, "That's not bad, kiddo. You ever want to quit construction and come work for me, I'll pay you in small bills and hot meals."

He thought she had made Bigos, the recipe handed down from his dad's Polish mother, as a kind of tribute but then he realized that she hadn't. "Mom, you don't know."

She looked up at him, her face creased in question and looking older all of a sudden.

"I got a call from Utah. Dad died. Heart attack." Bill shifted uncomfortably in his seat and set his spoon in the bowl. He waited for her reply but she sat in silence, gazing absently across the table.

Finally he said, "Mom? Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, honey, I'm okay,"

Bill felt there was something in her face he didn't recognize.

"His lady says they can wait for me to come out, spread the ashes. Tell the truth I'm not in a rush to go back out there."

She got up moving in a funny way, gingerly, unlike her normal vigorous self. She refilled their bowls at the kitchen counter.

"I thought you knew," he said, "I thought the Bigos was for dad."

She returned, placed the steaming bowls gently on the table and sat down again.

"Your father," she began and Bill felt a wave of heat come over his chest and arms that he didn't understand. "Stan was not your father." The heat flared and Bill felt it prickle all over his torso and travel up his neck and face, too. She went on, "Your father was a man called William Groves. Stan took the Groves name when we got married. He took your real daddy's name. Stan's name was Nowalski."

Bill was aware of the room in a strange way as his mother went on, of his large hand resting on the worn wood arm of the chair, of the silky look of the meat that was cooling in his bowl and of the distant sound of mallards beyond the door in the yard.

She went on, "I was pregnant with you. Bill was happy. But six months along he told me he had a girlfriend who was pregnant too, due a month after you. When the baby was born, there were tubes, wires. They didn't know what was wrong. The baby lived but Bill felt he had to go be with them. And not long after that, I met Stan. He loved you and he said he'd take our name, instead of us all changing to his. And I thought that was a pretty good sign of a good man. I guess I'm not such a good judge of character, though."

Bill shifted in his seat, "Mom, why didn't you tell me this before? You could have told me this ten years ago."

She went on as if he hadn't spoken, "After I got out of beauty school, Stan got his wires crossed—that happens to some men at that age—and we split up. You know the rest."

Bill stood up, walked to the salon doorway and gripped the wood frame as if

to steady himself.

He said, "You remember when this was my room?"

She nodded.

"When I was a kid, I would lay in there at night. I knew he wasn't right in the head. I knew you weren't getting along all the time. But I could hear the clink of the ice in highball glasses and your voices and that was something."

His mother got up, put the plates in the sink. Then she turned to him and leveled, "It hasn't been easy."

Bill grunted. That wasn't enough.

She looked right at him. "I love ya, kiddo, but I'm going to tell you now the way I had it, with tough love. This is a moment in your life when you're gonna decide how to live the rest of it."

Bill forced himself to make words come out, "Mom, can you hear what I'm saying? I want to feel like I had something normal in my life."

She looked at him out of dark eyes that held things he didn't recognize.

"I know you had a hard time with him, harder than what's normal. But if all you have are those memories of laying in that bedroom when you had a family, then that's what you have. You've got to build a life with what you've got."

Bill swayed in his old bedroom doorway for a moment and then, without saying a word, walked out the front door. The hinge squeaked and he was gone before it slammed shut.

He drove away from his mother's, down the country road. He sped up going past the orchard and accelerated past the empty fields, but he couldn't see anything in front of him. He was back in his father's house in the desert.

He could hear his father's words in his memory, "I don't know you. Get out."

Bill had risen quietly but before he could stand all the way up he had heard a sound and then had felt heat spreading through his right thigh, a searing hot pain.

He remembered brief moments of consciousness in an ambulance when he clocked wetness spreading on his jeans and EMTs around him. The Percocet had been first prescribed at the hospital and the animal desire for more had consumed almost five years of his life until his sometime dealer, White Mike, dropped dead from an overdose. Bill had spent six days shaking in withdrawal and terror of the pills he'd just bought. He'd nearly forgot how he'd gone out West to repair the relationship with his father, the man he now knew he didn't share any blood with.

Bill drove to the lodge and parked. He touched his leg to see if there was blood, as if he'd lost track of the years. He saw Motor's truck with the big American flag on a pole out of the flatbed. He felt a rush knowing he could buy from him.

Bill got out and walked around front. As he turned the corner of the building toward the entrance, three burly guys burst out hooting on their way to their trucks. He thought he recognized one of them, a guy with a long, gray-streaked beard, who pulled a bandana that looked like an American flag up over his face.

The lodge was so old that you wondered if the crossbeams could hold up the sagging roof. Despite that, it boasted four large, flat-screen LED TVs that made

it a destination on game nights. Before long, Bill was on his way home with what he'd come for.

In the brown chair, Bill flipped to the news and waited for the drug to take over. There had been an arrest in Bellmawr. The FBI was there. Bill had seen those January 6 guys. His gut reaction was that they were psychos but when he looked at the facts, he saw that he was a piece of garbage to the world as much as they were. He tried to let the thoughts wash away, but some persisted: a woman like Sherri, the years he'd lived with no markers of failure or achievement, just time slipping by.

Bill plodded to bed. The haze didn't knock away the questions: what kind of father would he have been? Was it too late? By the time he pulled up the covers he had made up his mind. If he woke up in the morning, he wouldn't use again. As he fell asleep, he had the fleeting thought of his father who had also once been a little boy.

When spring came, Bill cut the grass that grew in a ragged patch near the front of the house. He was surprised again to see the sharp points of bulb stalks pushing up through the recently frozen ground, with no fanfare and no special tending, as they always did.

John Brown's Body

OYÉSHIKU CARR

Editor's note: The language found in this story reflects historical accuracy but may be triggering for modern audiences.

Perhaps it is lunacy to know the outcome and still do the deed.

"Our Savior knew and none daren't call him crazy."

When John Brown mentioned this to Captain Avis, his jailer, Avis said, "Surely, you aren't comparing yourself to Jesus Christ?"

Brown propped himself up on the cot where he was resting, his muddy boots sullyng the rough wool coverlet by his feet. He had been bayoneted in both legs, and they were stiff from walking the dirt track that separated the Charles Town courthouse from the jail. "That would be blasphemy, sir. All I'm saying is that I can't figure why those two pigeons roosting as my defense want me to say I didn't know what was in my own head."

"Perhaps they are trying to save your life."

Captain Avis was warden of the jailhouse in Charles Town, and having led his marshals to join the siege of the armory, was witness to the events at Harpers Ferry. He leaned against the cell bars, watching Brown with an ironic smirk.

"By breaking the commandments?" Brown's voice sounded fatigued and coarse. "'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.' I reckon if the Lord thought it a rule for others, it must also be true we not violate the sanctuary of our own conscience."

"Perhaps, Mister. Brown. But in my view, your attorneys have a hard furrow to plow. You will not admit to being wrong, and the rightness of your wrongheadedness might be understood through the lens of hereditary deficiency."

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Brown was sitting upright now, a current agitating his raw-bone frame so it seemed he was ready, like a rocket, to burst upward.

"Not crazy, sir. Mayhap misguided; but I am of the mind that whatever transpires here will not be your final judgment. Calm yourself. Let us read scripture together, and I will ask Jimmy to bring us coffee."

Jimmy was Avis' son. A ginger-haired boy. There being much notoriety surrounding Brown's capture and incarceration, Avis figured the best way to control access to Brown and avoid a scoundrel willing to accept a small bribe to allow some reporter or curious citizen to catch a glimpse of Brown in his cell, was to hire his own kin. Other than Jimmy, who took Brown's toilet every evening, only Avis's deputy was allowed into the area with twin cells where Brown was housed alone.

When John Brown disappeared from Missouri in 1858, folks who knew his name from Kansas, where he and his sons had hacked pro-slavery men to death

with broadswords at Pottawatomie, thought he was dead or gone to Canada. It was a surprise when he turned up in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, leading a band of armed Negroes and trying to start an insurrection that would destroy slavery. He failed and lost two sons in the attempt. If he were not John Brown, perhaps he would have been left to grieve and reflect on his lifetime of folly, to contemplate the sin of having outlived his children by causing their deaths. If he were not John Brown.

His trial was held at Charles Town courthouse, just seven miles down the pike from Harpers Ferry, where the black waters of the Shenandoah and Potomac, turbid with conjugal fury, were joined together. It was a national and local affair. Newspapermen in linen suits came from as far north as Boston, and local folk, entranced by the concluding spectacle of the recent events that had animated their humdrum existence, showed up dressed for Sunday service. Negroes, of course, were kept away, and the courthouse was ringed by state militia. As Governor Wise intoned, "Now that John Brown is caught, he's gonna stay caught."

There were more spectators than the architecture of the court had ever anticipated. A square box, with galleries that overlooked the bench and the defendant, was packed full, so Judge Parker took the unusual step of allowing folks to sit in the jury box. There was no jury, because John Brown had not injured a peer or committed a crime against a single person. John Brown had committed a crime against an entire state. And no jury was needed to adjudicate treason. A single man, Judge Parker, empaneled by Governor Wise himself, would do that.

Day 1

Having suffered three wounds from bayonets and sabers during the fight at the armory, Brown limped into the courtroom leaning on a gnarled wooden cane. All wondered how Brown could stand, but there he was, folded, brown and sturdy as a leather cap. One marveled at his physical strength until you caught sight of his wine dark eyes sparking beneath bristly brows and understood that his physical stamina was but a fraction of his spiritual strength. Here was a man of unusual endurance.

Brown had two lawyers: Mister Botts and Mister Green. They had volunteered, without obvious duress; and, perhaps seeking to promote future careers as defenders of the famously maligned, they promised to faithfully defend Brown and so were retained as counsels. Mister Botts, heavysset and red-faced, dressed in black with a voice like a braying ass, effected the countenance of a true barrister. Mister Green, assisting, was thin and reedy, his name emblematic of his legal acuity.

"Please ask the judge if I may address the bench." Brown was now lying on a cot that had been brought in for the purpose of his repose.

Gripping his lapels, Botts cleared his throat and raised himself to his feet. "Our client wishes to make a statement, Your Honor."

"Does he intend to make a plea?"

Brown ignored Botts' raised eyebrow and pushed himself to his feet.

“Perhaps, Your Honor,” Botts suggested.

“What do you wish to say, Mister Brown?”

Brown’s voice, when you heard it, was higher than you would have supposed, although not thin and reedy like a flute, but clear and sonorous as Gideon’s trumpet. He spoke softly, on account of his wounds, his voice rising above the heads of the onlookers, reaching into every alcove, the way the psalmist says God’s voice excavates the soul, every word a clear note.

“I would like to request a postponement of this trial, which I know I deserve and have no wish to shirk. As you can see, I am still sore wounded. My hearing is impaired and rendered indistinct. I have not heard all of what the Court has said this morning. I would be glad to hear what it said on my trial and be able to at least understand what questions are asked of the citizens and what their answers are. If that could be allowed me, I should be very much obliged.”

Judge Parker risked a quick glance at Governor Wise and rapped his gavel. “I’m sorry, Mister Brown, but this trial has waited on your wounds long enough. We will commence tomorrow with testimony on the three charges of insurrection, treason, and murder.”

That first night, seeing Brown reading his Bible, Captain Avis asked if he was a Christian and if he believed in the final judgment. “I do,” Brown replied simply. Avis entered Brown’s cell, and every night afterward they could be found reading the Testaments together.

“I can’t say I approve of your solution, Mister Brown, but I agree that we have created something untenable here in the South.”

“And what would that be?” With his head slightly turned down, the smolder of Brown’s gaze remained hidden.

“I say rather all the darkies be sent back to Africa, from whence they were plucked. I myself am a member of the Colonization Society, same as that fellow Lincoln. I do believe that it is an area of commonality that should be encouraged north, south, and west.”

“And you would send them all? The recently arrived who have memory of their native lands with those born into slavery who know none other bonds than what they have been allowed to establish on these shores?”

“I would. Though it may seem harsh, this is a white man’s country. We were wrong to bring them so I rather we send them back than continue an erroneous practice. Besides, many have become Christians, and mayhap they will serve some good purpose in that their heathen brethren will hear the gospel more willingly from those of their own color.”

“The gospel opens all hearts willing to hear it whether white or brown. I have met many a heathen in America, lighter than you and I, Captain; men who went to church every Sunday and still committed unspeakable acts.”

“You speak of Kansas?”

“I do.”

“And did you not commit acts?”

Brown looked up, his coal eyes aflame. “If I sharpen my sword and my hand

takes hold of justice, I will render vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. Thus sayeth the Lord.”

“Deuteronomy, I recall. But John says, ‘If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.’”

Brown nodded and thumbed through the worn leather Bible his wife had sent and which Captain Avis allowed him to receive. “‘Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.’ And make no mistake, Captain. Slavery is a sin of the Spirit.”

“I do not disagree with you, Brown. Still, I think you might have pursued other, more moderate means.”

“Captain, the Lord called me to loosen the bonds of wickedness. To free the oppressed and break every yoke. I could not do other than I did and say I was a believer.”

Avis took his leave then but stopped to listen when Brown raised his quivering tenor to sing his favorite hymn “Nearer to Thee Precious Lord.”

Day 2

That morning before session, Captain Avis escorted Mister Botts and Mister Green to Brown’s cell. Brown was lying on his bed reading. He did not look up immediately when Captain Avis let them in.

Botts waved a telegraph he had taken from inside his coat. “Brown,” he said too loudly for the intimate setting. “I have here a dispatch from A.H. Lewis in Akron, Ohio. Do you know the man?”

Brown set down his book. “Lewis, you say? From Ohio.”

“Yes. He was a neighbor when you lived there.”

“I do not recall the person, but the name seems familiar. I rented a house from Colonel Perkins there that I made into a stop on the railroad.”

“According to Mister Lewis, and I quote ‘John Brown, leader of the insurrection at Harpers Ferry, and several of his family resided in this county many years. Insanity is hereditary in that family. His mother’s sister died with it, and a daughter of that sister has been two years in a lunatic asylum. A son and daughter of his mother’s brother have also been confined in the lunatic asylum, and another son of that brother is now insane and under close restraint. These facts can be conclusively proven by witnesses residing here, who will doubtless attend the trial if desired.’ There we have it.”

“Have what, sir?”

“Our defense,” Mister Green noted excitedly.

“What defense?”

Green stretched his willowy arms forward. “Hereditary insanity, sir. What you did, what you attempted to do...well, most folks think it was plumb crazy. And now we have the offer of witnesses who will attest that your messianism is not a crime but an affliction. Surely, sir, you must be ready to admit such.”

“I am not.”

Mister Botts, deflated, asked, “So you will not allow us to make such a plea?”

“I will not stand in your way. I have entrusted you with my case to do your best as you see fit.”

In court, Botts pontificated, flourished, and expounded upon the dispatch. Laying it atop Judge Parker’s bench, he raised his voice to the galleries. “John Brown is guilty, yes, but guilty by insanity, and he should be pitied his crimes and incarcerated in an asylum for the rest of his natural days.”

Judge Parker asked Brown to affirm the claim, reminding him that he had sworn an oath on the Bible to say naught but the truth.

Brown rose up, glancing first at Governor Wise who sat to the side of the bench before addressing Judge Parker. “It is true that there is insanity on my mother’s side and that many of her kinfolk suffered from this affliction. But if I am insane, I should think I know more than all the rest of the world. I say now, clearly, that I am not insane. I am unconscious of insanity, and I reject, so far as I am capable, any attempt to interfere on my behalf on that score.”

Judge Parker dismissed the plea forthwith and set the trial to resume the next day.

Day 3

Witnesses were called. On the charge of murder, Doctor Starry, Conductor Phelps, and Colonel Lewis Washington—grand-nephew of the revered first president, although far less grand in temperament and achievement—testified that they had witnessed the armory captured, prisoners taken, and the murder of Hayward, a Negro, by Brown’s men.

Mister Botts in cross-examination revealed that all heard Brown direct his party not to fire on any unarmed man, an order he gave more than once. Botts countered that any killing—apart from that of Hayward, “Which while unfortunate is not a crime since a white man can kill a nigger in Virginia,”—was in self-defense and placed the blame on the Federal Marines who fired under a flag of truce and later indiscriminately attacked the armory where Brown was holding prisoners.

That night Avis asked, “How did you expect to get out of the jar you had sealed yourself up in?” They had just finished reading about Hezekiah: “‘This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.’ If it had been me, I would have taken the weapons and escaped to the countryside.”

“We was waiting.”

“For who?”

“For the colored. They were coming, I’m sure of it. But I understand why they didn’t. We had the guns they needed with us inside the armory. They couldn’t have made it past the Marines. Those boys had murder in their eyes for any colored once they knew what we was for.”

Brown seemed morose, so Captain Avis did not press him further. “Shall we read more together?”

“Not tonight, good jailer. Perhaps you can bring me my dinner?”

The day’s testimonies had agitated Brown’s sorrows. Avis was barely out of sight when he dropped his face into his hands and breathed three or four hacking sobs. When they stopped, he noticed Jimmy sitting outside his cell, wide-eyed; and he recalled the youth of Watson and Oliver, his boys killed at Harpers Ferry. He started to sing “So Lovely Fades the Blooming Flower,” and as he did so, he moved so that he could rest a hand atop Jimmy’s russet head.

Day 4

On the charge of insurrection, Armstead Ball, master machinist at the Armory, and Sentry Stephens testified that Brown told them, “It was his object to free the slaves and his determination to seize the arms and munitions of the government in order to arm the blacks to defend themselves against their masters.”

Brown did not deny he had spoken thusly.

Day 5

Botts and Green called Brown to testify in his own defense. On the charge of treason, Brown proudly admitted that he had authored documents for a provisional government, of which he was commander in chief. He said its constitution was adopted in Chatham, Canada, and provided for a general government including a Secretary of War, Secretary of State, Judge of the Supreme Court, and all other officers, including a House of Representatives. All had taken an oath of allegiance to this constitution that superseded any allegiance to the slave-holding constitutions of the states and of the United States itself. When Judge Parker asked if he knew the implications of what he was saying, Brown answered that he knew exactly the position he had placed himself in, and if his life was forfeit, he was prepared to suffer.

Witnesses for the defense had been called, but none answered the subpoenas. Brown, for the first time since the beginning of the trial, became agitated and sprang to his feet, overruling Judge Parker’s gavel with his clarion voice until he was allowed to speak. “May it please the Court,” he began.

“Notwithstanding all the assurances I have received of a fair trial, nothing like a fair trial is to being given me. I gave the names of the persons I wished to have called as witnesses and was assured that they would be subpoenaed. I wrote down a memorandum to that effect, saying where those parties were; but it appears that they have not been subpoenaed as far as I can learn. And now I ask if I am to have anything at all deserving the name and shadow of a fair trial. At the least, it appears I have no counsel in whom I can rely, but I still hope counsel may arrive who will attend to seeing that I get the witnesses who are necessary for my defense.”

These were hard words, and after brief consultation with Mister Botts, Mister Green arose and said, “Mister Botts and myself will withdraw from the case. We can no longer act on behalf of the prisoner. He has undermined our strategies,

and now he declares that he has no confidence in our counsel. As for my part, I feel confident that I have done my whole duty, so far as I have been able, but I should feel myself an intruder upon this case were I to act for him from this time forward."

The court erupted in tumult, a melee of spectators leaning in to watch the lawyers depart, straining against newsmen trying to exit the court to reach the telegraph. The unexpected disorder caused a sheen of perspiration to moisten Judge Parker's considerable forehead. Until this moment he had believed he was in control, that the trial was straight forward, the conclusion foregone. His role, as magistrate hand-picked by Governor Wise, was not simply to deliver a preordained verdict but to ensure that all forms of a fair trial, every principle of law and justice, be observed so that the inevitable scaffold remained shrouded in shadow. If Brown were convicted without a fair trial, abolitionists in the north would portray southerners as a vengeful rabble rather than as reasonable men. But the fanatic was John Brown, and Judge Parker was charged with making this fact clear. Brown's statement and his lawyers' response had upset the orderly court process, and Judge Parker knew Governor Wise was looking to him to put it back on course.

He struck his gavel three times. "The idea of waiting for a new counsel to study our code and review facts that have already been read into the record, cannot be admitted. John Brown is free to disencumber himself of his present counsel, but he cannot delay these proceedings by asking the court to install a new one."

Brown seemed satisfied with Judge Parker's ruling for he did not contest it. He sat down and remained motionless as Mister Botts and Mister Green gathered their papers and abandoned the courtroom. Soon Brown was alone, hands atop the table, tapered as if in prayer.

Day 6

The courtroom was as silent as in that final moment of churchly devotion, when each person reflects on their sin and makes firm resolution that this time, they will walk with God in all their doings. Brown himself sat with eyes closed as if steadying himself for one final stirring. He knew the end was close and like his savior in Gethsemane, he prepared himself.

A feeling of dreadful expectancy descended over the courtroom. All knew what was coming but not the slightest sound of elation or triumph was uttered from the crowd that during testimony had enthusiastically shouted threats and imprecations. Nor was the silence interrupted during the whole of the time occupied by the forms of the court. Finally, Judge Parker struck his gavel and intoned, "In the case of John Brown vs. the Commonwealth of Virginia, the court finds the defendant guilty on all counts, specifically insurrection, treason, and murder. What, if anything, does the defendant wish to say before I deliver his sentence?"

I opened my eyes and fixed my gaze squarely on Judge Parker. I would say my next words facing him, but they were not meant for him alone. I was con-

scious of wanting to speak to everyone in the courtroom as well as to those who would read my words after my death. I believe I said something approximate to the following (although I will not vouch that every word here is precise): "May it please the Court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, of a design on my part to free slaves. Had I so interfered on behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or on behalf of any of their friends and suffered and sacrificed what I have in their cause, it would have been all right, and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment. I see a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that men should do to me even so as I do to them. It teaches me further to remember them that are in bondage, as I am bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice and mingle my blood with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done. I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. I had vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed, it might be done."

I sat down.

Judge Parker shifted in his chair unsure of what to make of such an unusual statement, which was neither confession nor plea for leniency. He seemed perplexed as to the meaning of my words, which more than anything, was what made him uncomfortable. He looked over at Governor Wise, who nodded expectantly, and rapped his gavel.

"This court sentences John Brown to death by hanging. The sentence will be carried out two days hence at noon. May God have mercy on his soul." A single pair of hands began clapping and was quickly shushed. Silence reigned as the bailiff's men led me out from the court. Men removed their hats and women sobbed into their handkerchiefs. I had not expected that.

"How are you feeling?" Avis asked me that evening with tenderness.

I was not sure how to answer. My feelings were a jumble, but something in me still wished to spare him my anger and recriminations. I said, "I trust God with both the time and manner of my death. The time has come for me to seal my testimony for God and humanity with my blood, and I do believe, more than ever before, that my dying will do vastly more to advance the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote than all I have done before in my degraded life."

"Oh, John," Avis said, covering his eyes.

"Remember, Captain, Jesus of Nazareth suffered a most excruciating death on the cross as a felon." I was trying to speak bravely.

"I knew you believed you were he."

My damp eyes glinted with mirth at Avis' indignation. "No, Captain, I do not. But perhaps I am like one of the convicts crucified with him. Blessed at the last moment to enter into heaven."

We sat facing each other until he composed himself. I said, "Remember me to my wife, Captain. And send dispatch to her not to come here or spend any of her scanty means only to become an object of derision by all sorts of papers. Let her not be gazing-stock for the curious. Will you send to her that I said so?"

Captain Avis nodded. When he was steady, he spoke again. "There are rumors that you are to be rescued. They say one thousand abolitionists will come down to free Old John Brown. Do you believe it is true?"

"One thousand abolitionists! We hardly had that many in Kansas when the slavery men were right there in need of killing. I expect not."

"So, you do not think they will come?"

"We shall both see." But I didn't imagine anyone now wanted to lose his life for John Brown.

The Last Day

I presume what happened will be recorded and remembered both by those who simply wish to commemorate my final moments and those who want to use them as a point of argumentation for or against the question of slavery. They will record that I gave Captain Avis, my jailer, with whom I often read the Bible and who showed me kindness during the days of my incarceration, a silver pocket watch, which was an heirloom from my father, and that I gave my hat to the boy who took my toilet at the prison. They will record that on my way to the gallows, I sat in a wagon, atop the pox box that was to be my coffin. All this is true.

But the memorialists will not know my thoughts. It was December, and on that morning, I was bewildered by the gossamer light—angels' wings—hooping and twirling in the winter sky before turning into photons of white and speeding upward toward heaven. It was the brilliance of angels. I would soon be dead, and I feared suddenly that that brightness of heaven would always be beyond me. I wanted to cry out. Cry out my fear and beg God to warm and heal my pain, not the searing pain in my thighs, but the gushing bleeding in my soul. I realized that it was I, I alone, who had caused the death of my boys and that of the others. Even so, I wondered why I was so certain that what I had done was right and whether it was God or the devil that led me to believe so.

The memorialists will not know that I failed to notice the people lining my route in silent observation or that I only became aware of the soldiers arrayed to prevent my rescue when the wagon stopped moving. It was then I remembered that Captain Avis had confided in me that there were rumors afoot of such a mission, but I knew they were ill-founded. I was serving my purpose. Even my friends needed John Brown dead now.

Perhaps it is lunacy to know the outcome and still do the deed. If I had been consigned to an asylum like my aunt and cousins, I do not believe I would have changed my purpose, though it doomed me to permanent incarceration. No, the difference is that I acted on my convictions, and while some call it crazy, they do so only because they believe my actions futile. But I could see a future, just beyond the veil. One where the monuments to man's vanity, the towers, palac-

es, solemn temples, and all things not serving God's purpose dissolve and pass away. A brave new world of free people, united in common purpose, indistinct by race or region.

The chill made my weathered face flush, like it becomes when I am overwrought with feeling. I stood on the gallows and felt a coarse rope slide over my neck, the last touch of my mortal life.

*Adapted from "The Trial of John Brown" <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/browntrial.html> and Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John* <https://civilwarnotebook.blogspot.com/search/label/John%20Avis>.*

Saint Mary's Fair

YASMILKA CLASE

Cotton candy fumes
fill the air
in this dead end
carnival

You're my sister not my mom
before I respond
Cat interrupts
we miss our stop

Clown faces
surround us
none of them look like Emily
wasn't she by the Ferris wheel?
Cat talks over the 6 train screech
while I play balloon darts
You're the oldest so I blame you
as I miss every balloon

A scorched sun
follows us
on our search
with empty stomachs
and dry tongues
we question
if our trio
should be cut down

Emily and Raymond
pizza in one hand
pepsi in the other
we got bored so we left

Cat and I exchange a look
eyebrows furrow
pupils dilate
as we inhale
sticky cotton candy

we run up the train stairs
half of my body
in the cart
stand clear for the closing doors

I Write Books

ELIJAH SINGER BRAHMI

I'm Elijah and cartoons are my medium of choice. This drawing is of the ideal writer, the persona of the kind of cartoonishly devoted writer I aspire to be. With "I write books" written on his forehead so there's no mistaking what he's here to do.



GENRES UNITE

Genres Unite

ELIJAH SINGER BRAHMI

This work was very fun to make. I've always been a fan of personified characters, as a cartoonist they are some of the most fun to draw. Characters like Earth Chan, Hitalia, fast food mascots are just a few examples. In this piece I decided to turn the main genres of literature into a fun cast of characters. That being poetry, fiction, non fiction, historical fiction, plays, and screenplays. I used key stereotypes and hallmarks of each genre to construct their personas like the plays guy looking like Willam Shakespeare for example. (*Genres from left to right: Fiction, Nonfiction, Creative Nonfiction, Plays, Screenplay, Poetry*)



PRETTY PRIVILEGE

EMMA MILLER

CHARACTERS

ROSE — Mr. Barrow’s brilliant, “never lost a case” attorney (who’s determined not to break that winning streak). Not much to look at, but her wardrobe costs more than the moon landing. 40s.

KATHY — One of Rose’s paralegals, freshly minted from an elite university and eager to continue proving herself. Meticulous and rule-abiding. Has the brain for litigation but maybe not the stomach. Early 20s.

ADDISON — Mr. Barrow’s executive assistant. Conventionally attractive, but overly made up, like all of life is a commercial audition and she wants to be prepared. This case is her first time in a courtroom. Early 20s.

THE TIME

The mid-2010s.

THE PLACE

The women’s bathroom in the New York County Supreme Court building.

SCENE 1

A multi-stall women’s restroom in a New York City courthouse. Informational posters about the importance of jury service decorate the walls, along with a prominent sign that reads, “ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING”.

ADDISON stands alone in the bathroom, touching up her makeup. SHE wears dark lipstick and a dressy but not-quite-appropriate-for-court ensemble. Once SHE’s satisfied with her makeup, SHE pulls out a vape pen and starts to vape.

ROSE bursts into the room stage left. KATHY, staggering under a pile of binders, follows closely behind.

ROSE

What the hell just happened in there?

KATHY

Whoa, Rose, they’re going to hear you down the hall.

ADDISON

Do you always scream at your witnesses in public bathrooms?

KATHY

(To Addison.) And I don’t think you can have that in here? Sorry —

ROSE

Do you understand what you did?

ADDISON

I told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

ROSE

Not in your statement to investigators, you didn’t. Certainly not in trial prep with us, you didn’t.

ADDISON

Well, I wasn’t under oath before.

KATHY

Actually, when you sign an affidavit, that counts as being under oath.

ADDISON

I’ve recalled some new facts since then.

ROSE

You’re a fucking snake, you know that?

ADDISON

At least I’m not a lawyer.

ROSE

Months of prep, and you’ve been holding out for the most dramatic moment to drop the bomb. This isn’t Law and Order, sweetie—real people’s lives are at stake. Yours included.

ADDISON

If you wanted to know about the stuff I talked about on the stand, you should’ve asked me about it earlier.

KATHY

Seriously, if you could just put that away —

ROSE

It’s not actually of interest to me what my client does in his personal life.

ADDISON

Based on your reaction, it seems like it is.

KATHY

Should I be taking notes on this?

ADDISON

You asked me to be a character witness. I witnessed his character.

KATHY

The office might be a more appropriate place—

ROSE

Sounds like you witnessed more than that.

ADDISON

Which means?

ROSE

That you're a whore, Addison, in addition to—

KATHY

Whoa! Alright, I think we should all take a deep breath. Emotions are running high, we've been in that stuffy courtroom all day. Put away the vape, Addison. Put it away. Please. Thank you.

ADDISON

Now what?

ROSE

Now you fuck right off and—

KATHY

Now you go home. Thank you for your time.

ADDISON

Since I'm done testifying, I get to watch the rest, right?

KATHY

No, not yet. We can still redirect tomorrow morning, so you're under oath until that's over.

ADDISON

Then I'll see you tomorrow morning.

SHE starts to leave, then pauses.

Jurors like pretty girls, don't they? It makes them feel good to look at a young,

Miller

fresh, vulnerable face. Imagine that! They like tragic, beautiful witnesses more than aggressive, washed-up lawyers who can't even do their makeup, right?

ROSE

Get out.

ADDISON

And when I batted my eyes and said Mr. Barrow was a big fat liar and a sexual deviant, they ate that right up, huh? Cheated on his wife of 40 years—that sure seems like the kind of guy to deserve a fraud conviction. A professional liar.

ROSE

Get out!

ADDISON

Shrill. I don't think jurors like shrill. I'll see you tomorrow.

ADDISON exits.

KATHY

What do you want me to do?

ROSE

May 25th.

KATHY

I don't know what that means.

ROSE

Barrow's granddaughter graduates from high school on May 25th. I told him we'd make sure he could attend.

KATHY

Alright, well, then let's do what we can to ensure that.

ROSE

Jurors don't like mistresses. Judges either. Well, they do, but they don't like it when other people have mistresses. Especially ones four decades younger... She's probably, what, your age?

KATHY

I guess so.

ROSE

Fuck. Alright, so we still have the deleted emails issue, and then there's this new stuff about the affair with the EA. Those are our weak points right now.

KATHY

Yes.

ROSE

I can work with that.

KATHY

I'll call us a car back to the office.

ROSE

Order some food too. It'll be another late night.

SHE takes a long look at herself in the bathroom mirror. KATHY watches her.

KATHY

Are you okay? Some of what she said—

ROSE

Come on. We have work to do.

ROSE and KATHY exit. Lights out.

SCENE 2

The next day. Lights up on the same bathroom as before. ROSE stands alone in the bathroom looking triumphant. SHE smokes a cigarette, gleefully exhaling at the "ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING" sign.

KATHY enters the bathroom. SHE hasn't showered—or slept—since yesterday, and it shows.

KATHY

What the hell just happened in there?

ROSE

Pretty cool, right?

KATHY

Because I think maybe it shouldn't have happened.

ROSE

I wish you could see your face right now.

KATHY

This time yesterday, every one of those jurors hated us.

ROSE

They really did!

KATHY

Addison made Barrow sound like such a bad guy.

ROSE

He is a bad guy. But now he's a bad guy because he cheats on his wife, not because he insider trades over company email.

KATHY

That's insane.

ROSE

Opposing counsel thought they were so sly too, trying to make it all about his affair. It was a great strategy—just for us, not them.

KATHY

I can't believe her testimony ended up helping us.

ROSE

I killed closing arguments.

KATHY

And they all seemed so eager to let him off.

ROSE

Turns out, trying to cover an affair with staff is a great excuse for destroying internal communications during a fraud investigation. Ha!

KATHY

But that's not even what happened.

ROSE

And sure, maybe we could've argued the missing emails were all circumstantial. But "circumstantial" to you and me sure sounds like "guilty" to a lot of other people. "Purposefully deleted, but for a morally bankrupt reason that is not fraud," is way more appealing.

ADDISON enters the room. SHE'S clearly been crying.

ADDISON

Why did you do that?

KATHY

I don't think you should be here.

ROSE
Oh hey, thanks for winning my case.

ADDISON
You humiliated me.

KATHY
We can't—

ADDISON
You used me.

ROSE
You tried to use me too. Difference is, I bounce back. Want a puff?

ADDISON
You shouldn't have shown that photo.

ROSE
You shouldn't have sent it over company email, sweetie.

KATHY
Opposing counsel submitted it themselves after your testimony yesterday. We didn't go digging for it, I swear.

ROSE
I bet they sure regret that one!

ADDISON
He promised me he would delete it.

ROSE
Weird, right? Because he's pretty damn good at deleting things.

ADDISON
It was personal!

ROSE
I'll say.

ADDISON
I don't have a job anymore because of you.

ROSE
I'd love to take credit, but that one you did on your own.

KATHY
Rose, you shouldn't smoke in here.

ROSE
Do you want to know your mistake?

ADDISON
That I slept with my married boss? I got that, thanks, no further punishment required.

ROSE
What? No, no, sleep with whoever, that's not where you went wrong.

KATHY
Why don't you give me the cigarette?

ROSE
The thing is, you're right that jurors like pretty girls. But they don't respect pretty girls. They don't want to rule in favor of pretty girls. They want to look at pretty girls, and they want to fuck pretty girls, just like Mr. Barrow does. And little girls like you don't take down big men like Mr. Barrow, no matter how pretty they are—because to him, and to that jury, they're still just girls.

KATHY
You're being really nasty.

ROSE
There's a difference between attention and respect, and it's worth learning.
ROSE's phone blips with a text notification.

And on that note, our client wants to take us to dinner. Kathy? Surf n' turf?
ROSE starts to exit.

KATHY
No thank you.

ROSE
Are you serious?

KATHY
I'm not hungry.

ROSE
Suit yourself.

ROSE exits. ADDISON starts to cry.

KATHY
Addison, I am so sorry—

ADDISON

Don't. I don't want your pity.

SHE takes a deep breath, and starts to pull herself together. Looking in the mirror, SHE wipes away her smeared makeup and reapplies a layer of dark lipstick.

ADDISON turns to KATHY.

How do I look? Do I look good?

Blackout.

The Trial of Stephen King

GEORGE YOUNG

Stephen King died.

Died when jealous fan and failed horror fiction writer, Barnaby Cooper, shot him. The uber-successful author just finished reading from his latest publication to a University of Maine creative writing seminar. The assassin took him out by shooting King from behind. He raced from the eaves wearing the disguise of a stagehand; faded jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

King died as did so many of the characters in his books. The bullet entered the author's considerable dome and exploded his even more considerable forehead toward the audience, dropping his head to the lectern, a look of total shock on his face as the light of life flickered on and off. Blood and brains from the wound jetting forward onto the frozen front row. One woman in particular caught so much blood spatter, her yellow dress could have been sold as a Jackson Pollock haute couture design.

Stephen King, shocked look leaving the road map of his 74 year-old face, sat on an uncomfortable wooden chair in a room that had no ceiling, or walls. A floor of colorless stone greeted his feet. The air had a hollow stillness. No breeze. No sound save for the scraping of King's shoes as he shifted his view from side to side.

A few other people occupied the room. None close enough for King to examine.

"Not really what I expected," the author said out loud. A voice overhead cut King's further musings short.

"Elstreth Adams, son of Mildred and George Adams. Father of four and grandfather of eight. Married to Angela nee' Chandler for 62 years. Successful doctor. Community leader."

Stephen King discerned a name here and there, "Mark" and "Tamer" and "Zhou." More blue clouds, in the same flattened "U" shape, traveling. More people making the final trek.

"Stephen King, American book writer. Father. Husband of Tabitha." King lifted his head when he heard his name. He stood.

A flash of electrical current ran through the ground under King's shoes when they pressed down on the cold stone of blackness. He jumped back, but another charge shot through his feet. He hopped from side to side to deaden the effect. King heard a grinding sound. To his right he saw a bluish shape, but this time it did not flatten into a "U." A young man with albino white skin and black hair, dressed as though he worked for 1-800-GOT-JUNK, walked to the author. A second young man, the other's Twin, appeared and walked behind him. They covered the ground between themselves and King, stopping five feet short of the

author. Their eyes, as dark as their hair, fixed on him. King took a step back, and another electrical charge jolted him forward to within a foot of the first young man.

"You did a nice job cleaning out the attic," said King with a laugh, addressing the young men. "Thanks for decluttering my life. All I had to do was point. You know the radio ads?"

Neither young man moved or changed expression.

"Tough room, Purgatory," continued King. "Low on the humor scale."

The young man in front lifted his right arm, extended his hand, and grabbed King's left forearm, the power of the grip mechanical, even hydraulic in its pressure. No human being had this strength. Four fingers and a thumb that closed as though an industrial crank turned in the tightening direction.

King broke the grip.

The overlapping voices in the room ceased. All activity halted. The young men stepped back. A muttering chant began. The young men receded into a shadow in the room.

King collapsed from the exertion. He lifted himself into a bent form of the yoga downward dog position. He shuffled his body in the direction of where he thought the main voice originated.

"The contract which landed me here has been violated." He ground out the words between his upper and lower teeth. He spit out the partial sentences in response to the pain as it shifted positions throughout his body.

"What is it, Stephen King?" a voice replied, echoing through the emptiness. "Check yourself. You are here for a reason, which you know."

"My contract has been violated."

"Tell me more." The voice lost its echo.

King got to his feet and looked around for something, anything, to steady himself.

"Walk forward," said the voice. "You will find what you're looking for."

King struggled along with the same effort he exerted when he lay on the ground. His body ached from the electrical charge. He bumped into a stone table with his pelvis. Again he collapsed to the floor. He gained his feet, leaned against the table, and exhaled through clenched teeth. The last of the electrical charge left his body.

King grabbed the wooden chair. He walked it to the stone table and sat. He folded his arms across his chest, and blew air out of his lungs. He filled them again. Energy returned.

"We are waiting, Stephen King."

"I believe the contract read, 'at the end of his natural life.' I don't, as you can imagine, have a copy of the agreement with me, but that was the language, and I do not think that has occurred. My life did not end naturally."

The muttering chant began again. King heard the rustling of paper. The chant dropped to a murmur and rose again after a couple of minutes. Like a siren, it was omni-directional. It flew past him at times. He shifted his position in the chair

and placed his left elbow on top of the stone table.

"Yes, the contract does read as you say. You are correct, in one sense. However, another interpretation would be that your natural life was always meant to end with a murderer's bullet."

"I would not call that 'natural.'" King replied. "As a matter of fact, if you were to take a poll, I can guarantee you that a majority would not deem any murder as premeditated as mine, as natural."

King stood to deliver the last line.

"And why is that?" asked the voice. "What is natural, Stephen King? Cancer ravaging the body at the end? Internal organ failure? Massive heart attack? Are those natural?"

"Yes, much more so than a piece of lead piercing the brain." King laughed at the last statement as he tapped his forehead. He folded his arms and waited for the response.

"A .44 caliber slug is no more, or no less, a foreign and uninvited interloper than a tumor, Stephen King. How about an artery clog brought about by years of smoking and drug use? That does not strike us as natural, either. You indulged in both and also, as you would readily admit, engaged in heavy alcohol use for years."

King cleared his throat.

"I do not deny any of that. However, I have been clean and sober for decades. I also survived a significant car accident." He paused. "My point is that I am still owed a few years. I could have made it into my 90s. I intended to try."

The chant returned to a murmur, and emanated only from below his feet. All activity and other voices halted. King sniffed. No smell, or atmosphere. An olfactory vacuum.

"Your interpretation of 'natural,' Stephen King, is open to much conjecture."

"I stand by my argument," said King. "My life did not end naturally. A murder might be considered natural by the Mafia, or a philandering spouse, but not for everyday people."

"So you say," replied the voice. "You have presented no evidence to counter, and if the interpretation is up to the individual with whom you signed the contract, I can tell you what *their* interpretation will be."

"My position would be an easy one to defend in a court of law," said King.

"We have heard that before." A laugh, like dirt clogging a carburetor. "What's your endgame, Stephen King? You no longer have a place in the world of mortals. Your death was public. As powerful as we are, we cannot erase that."

"Because the one with whom I signed a contract, as you say, did not follow through on his promise? Not *my* problem. *He* broke the contract. And in the case of any legitimate complaint, what have you *done* in the past?" asked King.

Muttering. Multiple voices.

The broken voice came back, but some of the murmuring, now at the louder level of chattering crickets, remained in the background. He addressed King.

"Fair point, Stephen King. We will return shortly."

“Less than an eternity?” He got no laughs from the voice or the murmurers.

King exhaled and hoisted his body up onto the top of the stone table. He looked at his fingernails, one at a time. They needed trimming. Had they grown just since he’d been here, King wondered.

Muted voices started anew, as did activity in the room. Overlapping conversations filled the background.

“Stephen King?”

“Still here . . . oddly.”

“We have discussed your point-of-view on your contract, and have found it to have some merit, at least enough to grant a hearing.”

“Really? A hearing? I have to go through a hearing to—”

“You would prefer the alternative?”

“What is the alternative?”

The Twins reappeared from the infinite nothingness.

“I see,” said King. “Okay, what is the protocol?”

“Protocol?”

“Yes, you know, how is the jury empaneled? How do we handle chain of custody? What is the process for disclosure? Geez, I’ve turned into John Grisham.”

“You have watched too much television . . . or perhaps you have written for too much television. The holder of your contract will hear your case.”

King ran a hand along his lantern-sized jaw.

“Really? Judge. Jury. And executioner. All rolled into one biased adjudicator? And who will represent the holder of my contract?”

“Johnnie Cochran.” The voice did not hesitate.

King laughed, slapping his thighs. A jagged growl greeted his guffaws.

“You are not joking, I take it?” asked King.

“No.”

“What are *my* choices?”

“Abraham Lincoln or Clarence Darrow . . . though I must check to see if Counselor Darrow is still on good terms with God.”

“President Lincoln will be fine. Do I get the Gregory Peck version or Daniel Day-Lewis?”

“We don’t understand,” said the voice. “You get Abraham Lincoln. He has been sent a copy of the contract.”

King slapped himself in the face. Hard. On purpose. An overhead light flicked on. Ahead of him a wicker chair bathed in a golden glow appeared. His vision fuzzy, King realized his glasses were knocked from his face when electricity slammed him to the ground. He crawled around on the floor and located them. The ground under King shifted enough to level him again. This time, when he recovered, King stood. In front of him, sitting in the wicker chair, sat a woman. Her hands on the arm rests, a black cigarette glowing, its wisp of smoke dropping to the floor, not rising to the ceiling. Its tip was not red but gray. She brought the cigarette to her colorless lips and pulled on it. She exhaled. A plume of red smoke drifted to the air. Save for her hair, and a dark gray fitted dress, she showed no

color, not even her skin; so pale her bones showed through like an x-ray.

“A redhead. Of course.”

“You’re seeing what you want to see, Stephen King,” she said with a voice of sandstone and grit. “But admirable that I do not present to you as a man. I must say, while God is debated as man or woman, or neither, I am always associated with the male sex. Why is that?”

“Can I have a few minutes to think about that?” asked King. “I’ve thought about it. Treachery on the scale associated with the Devil could only be perpetrated by a male. Yes?”

She crushed the cigarette out on the colorless floor using her bare feet and stared straight ahead. Her face, the consistency of Florida asphalt . . . in August, bleached by many years in the sun. Her mouth, a straight line and also colorless, distinguishable from her cheeks by their lack of bones, but just so. The woman’s eyes gray, no pupils. She lifted a few papers in King’s direction, and ignored his last question.

“Now, your issue with the contract is intriguing. I must say, I have only reviewed these arrangements two other times. And both times I prevailed.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Joan of Arc and Rasputin.”

“That was unexpected. Joan, I mean.”

“Why is that? Because she’s a woman?”

“Yes. Oh, and that whole self-sacrifice thing for God and country.” As he spoke the word “God,” another jolt dropped King to his knees.

“How did you stumble into that one?” The woman laughed. It split the dead air like a knife-sharpening wheel.

“What?” asked King, gaining his feet. “Saying ‘God?’”

This time a red light slammed into King’s chest, knocking him back twenty feet. He fell, and crawled back to his previous position.

“Noted,” he grunted.

“Mister Lincoln will be here soon. You’ll have a few minutes to consult with him, and then he will present your case. Mister Cochran will be able to respond. That exchange finished, I will rule on the outcome.”

“You?”

“Well, yes Stephen King,” she replied, her voice rising with the sound of choking on a razor blade. “Who else?”

“Someone a little more impartial would be nice.”

“Yes, it would be nice,” she replied and looked past King and into the recesses of the room behind him.

“Ah, Mister Lincoln,” she said. “So *not* good to see you.”

In he walked. As tall as King imagined. But no hat. Clean-shaven, another surprise.

King, not accustomed to, nor expecting, this presentation of Abe Lincoln, stared at the former President and wanted to ask the obvious question. Lincoln beat him to it.

“My life as a counselor did not include the beard or the hat, Mister King,” he said.

King extended his hand, but Lincoln did not shake it.

“You have signed a contract that distresses me, Mister King,” he said. “But you are owed representation and it is my duty to provide it. I will do so. I have left my personal feelings on the matter elsewhere. Is that acceptable to you?”

“It is.”

“Well and good,” said Lincoln. “Tell me why you feel you should not be spending the rest of eternity within the confines expressed in the document.”

King reached for the contract, which Lincoln surrendered from a satchel draped over his shoulder.

“Somewhere in here the terms state ‘at the end of his natural life,’” said King, flipping and skimming pages. “I don’t believe being murdered fits that description. I am owed more time among the world of mortals.” He stopped on one particular page and jabbed his finger at a point at the bottom. “Here it is.”

Lincoln leaned over and read where King pointed. Without looking up, Lincoln addressed his client. “Have you thought about the fact that your natural life is not the same as that of another person? You have had an incredible life. With all due respect, Mister King, aren’t you confusing natural with normal or some other term closely associated with the lived experience of most people? You may have abdicated a so-called normal life when you entered into this contract.”

“Really?” asked King. “Just whose side are you on, Mister President?”

“You must understand that your opponent is obsessed with words, both their superficial and hidden meanings. If you would like to *temporarily go back*—and let me stress that you will eventually return here, whether we get out of your agreement or not—we will have to make a case that any interpretation of natural life lends itself to an organic death, and not one by purpose, such as,” Lincoln cleared his throat, “a murder.”

King waved off the former president and walked towards the woman in the wicker chair. He stopped when he saw the 1-800-GOT-JUNK Twins walk towards him.

“I would like to fire my lawyer, please,” said King, turning away from the woman. Johnnie Cochran barely noticeable at her right. He looked towards Lincoln.

Lincoln stiffened.

“What’s the meaning of this, Mister King?” asked Lincoln.

“Given your history, Mister President, do you think you’re the best person to represent my case? Your unfortunate demise in April of 1865 won’t color your thinking or diminish your capabilities?”

“Not in the least,” said Lincoln. “I protest this move your hon—ah, what is your—” Lincoln hesitated. “Just how should you be addressed?”

“Judge would be appropriate,” she replied. “And I have to agree with Stephen King. Much as I know having you represent him plays strongly to our interpretation of the contract.”

Lincoln bowed, and this time shook King’s hand. He evaporated into the recesses of the room. King watched, and turned back to the Judge.

“I suppose I am down to Clarence Darrow?”

“Mister Darrow has a tenuous relationship in Heaven,” she replied. “I’ll have to check and see if he is in good standing there.”

“How will you do that?”

“Why, I’ll check and see if he’s here with us, of course.”

“Geez,” said King. “He didn’t start out here, did he?”

The Judge put both her translucent white hands on the desk. The red wood color either reflected or insinuated itself into her fingers, turning them ruddy.

“Mister King,” she said, folding her hands together. “The human system of law is very flawed, just in case you weren’t paying attention during your time as a mortal man. And we are following the system of human law here.”

“What has this to do with Clarence Darrow?”

“Lawyers are no exception to the frailty of Man.” She laughed. “Why attorneys are considered *the problem* in the system confounds me.”

“And Darrow?”

“Are you ignorant of Leopold and Loeb?” asked Cochran, who spoke for the first time. “Counselor Darrow has had a very inconsistent career when it comes to crime and punishment.”

“I am not ignorant of Leopold and Loeb.”

“Did you forget that those two men bludgeoned an eleven-year-old with a steel chisel, caving in his skull. And then to avoid identifying him, they poured acid on his face and stuffed his body into a drain pipe?”

King said nothing as Cochran continued.

“Afterwards they went out for something to eat. For several days, they lied to the police, hid evidence, and carried on their lives as if *NOTHING* had happened.”

“Western law, heck *Roman* law, believes everyone deserves their day in court and to be represented,” said King, addressing both Cochran and the Judge. “Even Leopold and Loeb.”

“Yes, but he didn’t have to take the case,” said Cochran.

“Oh, like the O.J. Simpson murder case?”

“Couldn’t—”

The Judge interrupted Cochran’s reply when she leaned back in the wicker chair. It creaked and made a cracking noise that sounded to King like the breaking of bones. “Yes, Mister King, the chair is made from human bone,” said the Judge, short-circuiting King’s next inquiry. She laughed that grinding wheel laugh again.

“Let’s go, Mister King,” she said. “Mister Darrow, conveniently, *is* here.”

“Convenient for who?”

The Judge stood and pointed a finger, finished with a manicured nail, at King. A rumble, then a deep grinding sound. King braced himself for a jolt of electricity. None came. The Judge sat down.

"I have agreed to this hearing, Stephen King," she said, her voice filled with a barber's shaving blade sharpening on a strop. "And I will hear your case. But do not engage me with your famously sarcastic humor."

King bowed. Darrow entered the room. Johnnie Cochran adjusted a silver tie and shook Darrow's hand.

Darrow was dressed in his Scopes Monkey Trial garb: a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, black suspenders, black pants, and black shoes. No tie. Hair uncombed. His impressionist artwork of a face made its way to the author.

"You, King?" Darrow coughed out, extending his right hand.

Stephen King shook Darrow's hand, which he found powerful to the point of pain. He pulled free from the grip of the lawyer.

"Gotta work on that handshake, King," said Darrow. "You'll never survive in here with that womanly grab." Darrow paused. "Survive in here . . . now that's funny. That's funny!" He slapped King on the back. "Let's go to work, shall we?" asked Darrow.

"Yes, let's." King massaged his knuckles.

"That's the spirit," said Darrow, his voice filling the room. "Like I told those two rich assholes, Leopold and Loeb, I'll have you outta here in no time." He paused again. "No time? Now, that's funny. That's funny!"

"Mister Darrow!" The Judge shouted from the wicker chair, showing evident contempt for the famous lawyer.

"Judge?"

"Try and control yourself. I admonished Mister King for the same frivolity. I don't want to spend a lot of time on this."

"Or what," he said, his eyes dancing. "You'll send me someplace bad? Now that's—"

Darrow laughed again, and a charge of electricity ran through the floor, leveling King, but Darrow stayed on his feet.

"Goodness, Judge. You're losing your touch," said Darrow.

He reached down with his right hand and yanked King to his feet. He pulled the author in close to the point where Darrow's considerable nose touched King's.

"This is for all the marbles, King," said Darrow in a whisper. "You got that? This ain't some book tour debate over the merits of horror fiction in the modern world." He let the last comment sink in. "Oh yes, I've seen you in action. You're a real jackass but you're my kinda jackass."

King pushed himself away from Darrow. "Alright, counselor, enough with the intimidation," he said, pressing himself forward. "You going to help me, or do I have to ask for Bob Kardashian?"

Darrow smiled and winked at King.

"Better."

"Judge?" asked Darrow, and pointed to the area in front of him. "How about a little work time for my client and me? After all, we've just met."

The Judge waved her hand towards the shadows, and the GOT-JUNK Twins walked out and placed a chair, similar to the one King occupied, in front of Dar-

row.

Darrow sat and put his soft briefcase on top of the table. He pulled out a stack of papers, bound with a rubber band. He gestured for King to join him.

"Our argument is simple," said Darrow. "You did not live out your natural life. Now, the Judge is going to ask what that term means, and it will be asked again and again and again. We need to be prepared with several responses."

"And what would those be?" asked King. The room introduced an irritation to the back of his throat. His voice cracked on the last word, and he coughed an ex-smoker's cough.

"Puberty ain't a good argument, King." Darrow laughed.

Out of his peripheral vision, Darrow saw the Judge motion the Twins. They closed on Darrow and King.

"Back off," hissed Darrow.

"They stay there, Mister Darrow," snapped the Judge. "Until we resolve this."

Darrow put on a pair of reading glasses tossing the cord which secured them over his head. He leaned over the stack of papers and flipped through the first three. King lifted his anvil-sized chin towards the "ceiling." The low murmuring lowered to barely discernible and now rose and fell to meet another channel of itself below King's feet that vibrated from sounds mixing with intent.

"King?"

"I heard you." King's words caught in his throat and he hacked out a cough.

"A couple of the responses are easy. You're 74. Average age of death for an American male is 78 or 79. You're owed four or five more years. Our second argument is family genetics. Your father died at 66. Your mother at 59. We can't use that by itself." He cleared his throat and held up his right index finger. "But for the fact that both were heavy smokers who would have lived much longer had they put down the coffin nails. Medical information shows that both would have survived into their early 80s had they not indulged. Theoretical, but part of a legit study. Of course, you hit the tobacco and other things for a while, but I believe you have been on the wagon for—?"

"35 years."

"Good. We'll haul that one out if the Judge gets to a third or fourth rebuttal."

"And in the meantime?"

Darrow exhaled. "How long do you think you should have lived?"

"I don't—"

"Just answer the question."

"Mid-80s. Don't think I would have been much fun after that."

Darrow dropped the reading glasses to his chest. He stared. "Mister King," he said. "Many of us have an instinct about our death. A year. An event. A premonition. If anything constitutes a natural life, that would be it. When do *WE* think *WE'RE* going to die?"

"And that's your response to the Judge? Anything else?"

"We have three strong arguments. I'd say we're ready for trial."

"I would like a few more."

Darrow stood. "Follow my lead, Mister King."

Darrow pushed the chair away. The Twins' body language changed. Both stepped further forward, crossed their arms over their chests. Volume grew. The murmuring turned to chanting. A mix of language, but nothing King recognized. More voices. Different. A shriek like a diamond cutter through glass.

"Aramaic and Sanskrit, some Latin. Dead languages, for most," Darrow interpreted. He shoved one Twin aside to address the Judge. "Judge, we are going to show that your agreement with Stephen King remains in force. However, we are also going to show that it has not been wholly completed and until such time as it is, Stephen King must be returned to the world of the living."

"Stephen King has lived out his natural life, counselor."

"Not so, Judge. Most American males live to be at least 79."

"That is not a guarantee."

"No, but Stephen, unlike his parents, quit smoking and drinking, and appears to be in relatively good health."

"Irrelevant."

"He has a brother, who is two years older."

"Adopted."

"Never proven. Could have a biological connection."

"Really now, counselor. Do you think we don't know the facts in an instance like this?"

"Damn."

"Anything else?" The Judge motioned to the 1-800-GOT-JUNK Twins.

"How did you get Leopold and Loeb off in 1924, Darrow?" asked King. The Twins approached.

"Technically, I didn't get them off. Just saved them from the death penalty."

Darrow yanked his suspenders and winked at King. He spun around and held up a hand to halt the progress of the Twins. They stopped an inch from King, and both exhaled at the same time: a cancerous rasp of blood and bone. The smell of camphor and formaldehyde. The chanting, circling the room like carrion fowl, louder and louder rhythm with each pass, drowned out Darrow's next question.

"Judge," said Darrow. "You wrote the contract, yes?" Realizing no one could hear over the infinite number of voices, Darrow shoved both Twins to the ground.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!" Darrow screamed at the chanting. One Twin got to his elbows. "YOU BOYS STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE. WE AREN'T DONE YET!"

The Judge swept her arm across the room. Voices stopped. Everything stopped. Darrow snapped his suspenders. A hum, lower than the register of most humans, began in place of the chant.

"Judge," said Darrow. "You wrote the contract, yes?"

"I did," she replied, and leaned forward. "And Stephen King signed it of his own free will."

"And your position is that Stephen King's natural life ends when he is shot and killed by a jealous fan?"

"That is correct."

"Then you know had he not been given the status and success of the greatest horror writer of his time, he would have lived a longer life. He would have lived a longer *natural* life."

The Judge sat back in her chair. Its bones creaked. The hum accelerated. A gray wash of light inflicted itself on the Twins, who gained their feet. Darrow stared at them until they backed away.

"His life is only ended by a murderer's bullet," Darrow paused and waved the contract, "because of *this* agreement. The duration and end of Stephen King's *other* life is unknown, but it is not because he is gunned down due to his, ahem, wholly staged and, you'll have to forgive me, *unnatural* life as a great novelist."

The Judge stood and hissed at Darrow, who didn't move. She spat black blood in his direction and ground her teeth together, breaking the front ones at the roots and hacking out instructions to the Twins. They moved past King to a stone wall behind him. One of them reached forward and pulled. A door opened.

"Go!" The Judge shouted. Darrow hooked King under the arm and led him to the doorway. The Twins disappeared.

"You will be back, Stephen King," the Judge screeched. "I have something planned for you."

Darrow halted King's progress just before the author exited through the doorway. "How are you going to explain your resurrection? You're not even religious."

"Are you joking?" asked King. "This whole event is the comeback story of Richard Bachman, gone for the past couple of decades but finally revealed as a real person. And my next book is a winner too. I'll call it *The Trial of Stephen King*."

Darrow put his reading glasses in his shirt pocket. "You do understand when the Judge says you will be back? There is nothing I can do about that."

"Yes, I understand I'll be back," said King, heading through the now open door that led to a stairway. "Hope you're still where I can find you. I'd like to see how the Judge enforces a non-existent agreement between the Devil and Richard Bachman."

He trotted up the stairway.

Stephen King closed the large-print version of his manuscript to robust applause from the University of Maine students. He choked out a jagged laugh.

"Hah! I'd like to see how the Judge enforces a non-existent agreement between the Devil and Richard Bachman? Ahem," he faked a throat clearing, but tasted the copper of blood. "Uh, Helluvan ending? No?" He staggered when he stepped back and waved. The chemo exhausted him. But it was more than that. The latest scans were bad.

The applause died.

Some laughter, but more than a few breaths caught as the Master of Horror, all color gone from a face that never had much of it, dropped over the lectern. He

hacked and saw clots on the glass and metal surface. Reflections of the students gleamed. King took them in. Another coughing spasm started, then subsided.

“Well, then,” he croaked out. “Shall we see how the Judge rules on suicide?”

The gun in his mouth.

His brains on the stage.

Summer 1976

JOHN ATTANAS

The corner of 42nd and 8th
littered with shards of glass,
crushed Budweiser cans.
Cigarette butts and spent matches
peppered the sidewalk.
A girl in frayed shorts
and platform boots
next to a shuttered liquor store,
her laugh so loud it echoed in Central Park.

He was drenched in sweat.
Humidity plus fear
on this corner,
desperate Manhattan.
His aunt whispered,
“Let’s go. It’s almost curtain time.”

Forty years later, he returned to catch
the new, hit musical.
The one all his neighbors were talking about,
though none had seen it.
The columnist in the *Times* declared the
Disneyfied neighborhood an abomination,
the tourists from middle America, appalling.
He didn’t care.
The new glass towers
and bustling passersby told him
everything was different.
He would not be murdered today.

He took his wife to an overpriced dinner at *Marseille*,
then to the theater.
As he sank into the plush orchestra seat,
he wondered if he had forgotten something quaint
from his past.

Then the overture began.

The Hands of my Father

ANGIE VANESSA GUZMAN DIAZ

The hands of my father carry chaos.
The sweat of sweltering days, dripping down from his temple,
Vigilant with his rifle, camouflage, deep in the jungle.
His heavy hands don't know tenderness nor patience,
My father was taught with severity, with yes sir, no sir.

A hole was put in my father from a very young age,
too deep to reach without hurting myself.
A hole he doesn't know he is carrying wherever he goes.
The hands of my father carry the pain of past generations.

Insolent sore bones attached to memories that become
seemingly ordinary, a necessary slap to maturity.
The hands of *my* father have the shape of *his*.
Calluses break through those rough working palms,
always pulling the rusty chain of yesterday,
while the sun keeps burning over his thin hair.

The hands of my father holding his first born child,
“*A hungry little girl*,” he says while kissing my feet.

Orquídeas Negras¹

ANGIE VANESSA GUZMAN DIAZ

Wet soil in between my fingers
I heard the roosters singing
Flowers blooming under orange trees
Mouth open with glee.

Wake up, run fast
Shut the door, shut your mouth
Painted faces of war
Planted the seeds of carnage

Coffee beans scattered everywhere
Wrinkled hands shake
An armed conflict full of despair
The house is a silent shadow of hate

My mother teaches me how to hide
From the louder gunshots outside
The pale faces of people I have never seen
Limb by limb disappearing in the mist.

Witness of a recurring history²
A yellow butterfly born with broken wings³
The Magdalena river turns burgundy
Breaking the spine of my childhood dreams.

Dry soil in between my fingers
I heard the vultures singing
Flowers burn under winter trees
Mouth open with grief.

The flower has bloomed.

¹ Colombia's national flower is the Orchid *Cattleya Trianæ*, which symbolizes endurance and resilience. “Orquídeas negras” represent the grief of war.

² The Colombian armed conflict has lasted for more than 53 years. This war between the Colombian government, far-right paramilitary groups, and far-left guerrilla groups, such as FARC, ELN and EPL, marks years of repression, massacres, forced displacement and poverty.

³ Refers to the yellow butterflies from Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous novel, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. The yellow butterflies symbolize hope.

Lucidity

SAMANTHA MAENDEL

Medium: Oil pastel on paper. I'm excited to explore different textures and blending of oil pastels and looking to experiment more with oil paint in the future.



Good Citizen

SAM RAPPAPORT

I didn't ask that my first job involve saving the world, but sometimes it just works out that way.

My mom's friend Anita kept coughing at work, so they let her go. It wasn't her fault she had to live next to a cement factory and breathe in tiny particles of dust and trash and chemicals all day long. And it wasn't her fault that her chronic lung condition—brought on by the dust, showing itself in bouts of uncontrollable coughing—happened to coincide with a surge in Salax-5, the fifth variant of the Salax virus, which first showed up 17 years ago when I was still in my mom's belly. None of it was her fault, but the company couldn't have her working the front desk and falling into coughing spasms every five minutes, so they fired her.

Maybe they felt bad, or maybe Anita just knew how to finesse a situation, but somehow she got them to hire me in her place. I didn't ask her to do that, and I didn't know I had the job until my mom told me that I needed to be in the office the next day. But I know Anita was just trying to do a good thing.

I had planned to only work through the summer until I'd leave for my freshman year of college, which was upstate on one of those serene campuses with gothic buildings and perfectly manicured lawns. But then Salax-5 came around and the college shut down its buildings. So now school is back on a screen. I mean, half of the school I've ever done has been on a screen. Schools are always closing and opening. We're all accustomed to it now, even though I know it didn't used to be like this. I was just looking forward to leaving—to living in a dorm room next to a gigantic grass field with half-naked students reading on towels and drinking beers, instead of sharing a one-bedroom apartment with my mom next to the cement factory.

Anyway, now I'm stuck saving the world for the foreseeable future. Colin, the CEO of Good Citizen, doesn't like when we talk about *work*.

"Work?" he says. "This isn't work, friends. This is saving the world."

Then we all clap. We always clap after Colin speaks. It reminds me of those old videos of North Korea when all the people start clapping ferociously every time the dictator stops talking. Or the State of the Union, when—after every other sentence the president says—one half of the room jumps to their feet and cheers.

Good Citizen. Saving the world. That's what it says, printed in big red letters, on the front of the desk I sit at. Those are the first words that every person getting off the elevator reads. Not that many people come into the office, on account of Salax. Beyond the occasional celebrity or corporate executive that comes in to record a video message of hope or encourage people to sign up for something or other, it's really just me here—and whatever couple of other employees decide

to come in on any given day.

That's why it was so easy for Eddie to pull me into the storage closet last week without anyone noticing.

"Do you see that?" Eddie said, his hand still gripping my forearm.

I followed his gaze to a shelf of pencils against the back wall of the closet. He stood motionless, his eyes locked on the second shelf from the top. The closet door closed behind us.

I knew of Eddie mostly because of his hair—jet black, rigid, sharp even, always pointing in different directions. We'd never actually talked. But it was my job to know who everyone was.

There was a document I sometimes tried to memorize when I was bored. Employee names, positions, and how long they'd been a member of the "Good Citizen family." I knew Eddie did something with words—copywriter, content strategist? Something to do with telling the story of the brand.

"Do you see that?" Eddie said again, this time firmer—his fingers still around my arm.

He looked crazy. Like he hadn't slept in a week—like he'd seen a ghost. I thought of how I might maneuver out of his grasp—who I'd run to first. I tried to breathe slowly to calm my mind. Sometimes, I do this thing—I count to five on an inhale, hold for three, exhale for five. I pretend I'm slowing down time, the things happening around me, absorbing it all, making a record, buying time to plan an escape.

"Please!" Eddie yelled. He pulled me to the back wall. "What do you see?!" He turned and looked at me for the first time. That's when I saw it in his eyes: fear.

"Please, just tell me what you see," he begged.

"Pencils," I said, knowing that wasn't the answer he was looking for.

"Look," Eddie said, pushing the pencils aside, bringing his finger toward a piece of dull wall. "It's...Hawaii..." His mouth hung open, and his eyes grew wide as if he were staring into another world. And he might have been, considering Hawaii no longer existed—hadn't since 2041. People mostly said Hawaii now as a kind of metaphor for paradise, or what's been lost, or what to hope for. Valhalla. Elysium. Heaven. Hawaii.

"I don't—I don't see anything," I said, now feeling sorry for Eddie, wishing that I could see what he wanted me to.

Tears glazed Eddie's eyes. He looked in my direction, but it was like he no longer recognized me, as if he didn't recognize anything. He loosened his grip on my arm right as I attempted to pull away. I fell backward into a box of T-shirts. Eddie tilted his head, staring at me, but more staring through me. Or rather, staring at me while thinking about something else completely.

Suddenly, he snapped out of it. He looked surprised to be standing over me. He spun around, letting his gaze linger on the back wall. Then he grabbed a box

of pencils and sprinted away, the door shutting again behind him.

I felt beneath me: soft T-shirts. *Recycled polyester*, it said on the box. *I'm a Good Citizen*, the shirts read.

I pushed myself up. Before heading for the door, I paused at the wall of pencils. I reached my hand out and touched the concrete. It had been painted over with a kind of off-white color. I let my finger glide down a section of the wall—feeling the unevenness of the paint—the rogue droplets. But there was nothing else there.

My mom told me it was in the same year that strawberries went extinct that they started building the checkpoints. All of a sudden, it became necessary to regulate peoples' movement. There had been a summer of detonations—violent attacks that had taken lives, including that of a senior administration official. In a matter of months, sections of the city were cordoned off. It was impossible now, unless you had a verifiable reason, to stroll through the residential neighborhoods with manicured lawns or visit the shopping centers that sold chic, designer clothing. Other areas of the city were abandoned. Highrises that once housed important companies were left to rot. Entire neighborhoods were relocated—pushed outside of the cordoned off areas. These developments, the administration had claimed, were in the interest of everybody.

There are three checkpoints in between my work and home. The first marks the edge of the commercial district, which is where the office is located. The next one leads into the residential area along the water—Zone 1. Sky towers. Greenery. People in apartments with views of the entire city, or what's left of it. The final checkpoint marks the beginning of a large expanse of industrial plants, shipping stations—and in some areas, abandoned factories that have been transformed into military bases.

I live at the far reaches of the Industrial Zone in a sort of interstitial limbo, termed the Industrial Residential Zone—a few blocks from the cement factory.

Most people actually live further out in what's called the Outer Residential Area—but if you only watched TV—you might think the city was actually along the water. There aren't any checkpoints between the Industrial Zone and the Outer Residential Area. But there's talk of putting some in. There's always talk of putting more in. For now, soldiers in the street act as mobile checkpoints—stopping people, asking for qualifications of access.

Some people like the checkpoints. Some people don't. The people who like them say they decrease crime and make us all safer. Even some people living in the Industrial Residential Zone or the Outer Residential Area say this. Sometimes, I wonder if those people really just want to live in Zone 1—along the water. The checkpoints, then, are representative of a safety that will one day arrive—a comfort found in the imaginings of a better future—a fantasy.

Most days, in the early evening, I meet Max at the cement factory to watch the sky turn crimson. The color—the intense brightness and hue—started last

year. Now, like clockwork, the sky bleeds into a watercolor painting every night. Max and I climb to the top of a checkpoint wall (the cement factory makes checkpoint walls—there are about a dozen pushed up against the perimeter at any given time) and just sit. Sometimes, I'll bring dinner. Sometimes, we'll fall asleep on our backs, looking toward the sky.

Somehow, Max got his hands on a couple of oranges. They hung in a bag from his waist as he climbed to the top of the wall. I watched them reaching toward Earth as I followed Max up. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Eddie and the storage closet. What had he seen? Maybe he was just crazy.

Max was already peeling an orange when I got to the top of the wall. He threw the peels toward the ground and watched them fall, but at a certain point they'd disappear out of sight, into the shadows. From here, you could see all the way to Zone 1 and then all the way to the levy on the other side of the Outer Residential Area.

"The seals are gone," Max said.

I caught sight of a droplet of orange juice running down his chin.

"I thought they were already gone," I said, making an effort to seem like I was interested.

I cared about things. I did. But Max, on the other hand, was involved. "We need to be involved to make a difference," he'd say. He was a Good Citizen.

"Those were the sea lions," Max said. "And that was, like, five years ago or something. Now it's the seals. The last one was being kept in the London Zoo. His name was Harry. He was... 12..." Max's eyes flickered back and forth—reading something in front of him—an invisible text. "And he died 14 minutes ago."

Each time a species went extinct, Max cataloged it—in the sense that he told me about it—spoke it aloud. Maybe it was his way of mourning everything we'd lost—everything we would lose. But it also seemed to act—this obsessive cataloging—as a sort of motivation. It was something tangible to look at—to be angry at. And it was simple: the animals were disappearing. We had started with a lot, now there were a few. The same thing was happening with people, but the animals might have been a little easier to talk about.

"Did you take action today?" Max asked.

I rolled my eyes. "I don't even have the app downloaded," I said.

"Come on," Max said, "You work there now. Be involved."

"I am involved," I retorted. "I work there now."

"That's not how it works," Max said, flattening out on his back. The sky was crimson, turning into orange at the edges. But Max could have been looking at anything. Porn. Netflix. Hawaii...

Our parents had chips, but their parents didn't have chips. And still, some people didn't have chips at all (seers). But pretty much everyone had them now. There were different companies—Monax, Verizon, Apple—different kinds of chips—but somehow, for some reason, a few decades ago—everyone decided to start putting their phones in their heads.

Good Citizen has the second most popular app in America. You get activist

points for watching videos and sending holograms to your friends—‘being involved,’ as they say.

“It’s about raising your voice,” Max would often argue. “It’s the only thing we have—I mean, it’s how we can maybe make a difference. And it’s just about numbers, it’s a numbers game. Ultimately it works because we’re exerting influence. That’s what it means to be involved.”

One of the victories of this ‘Influence’ that Good Citizens exerted came in the form of the Clean Air National Trust (CANT), an endowment dedicated to funding new modes of purifying the air. The air had become a big problem for everyone, not just the people who lived near cement factories.

Timothee Chalamet made a video announcement for the creation of the fund (which coincided with the release of *Dune 12*). The next year, giant air purifier towers were erected in parts of the city. There were six of them so far. Four in Zone 1, and two in the Commercial Zone. They worked a little bit. Now there were pockets of clean air—mostly toward the sky towers and the water. That’s part of the reason some people were pushing for more checkpoints—to protect their air.

One day, while looking out the window of the office’s fifth floor cafeteria, Gloria started talking about a herd of sheep grazing in the streets below.

A few days later, Marcus ran from a meeting room yelling that his dead mother had commandeered the video conferencing apparatus.

That same week, Lily fainted in the bathroom, and when she came to, she said she had been underwater, desperately trying to escape a building-sized cephalopod.

“It must have been the Cretaceous period,” Lily whimpered, her tears dripping onto the arm of Miss Swarthmore, who had rescued her from the floor of the lavatory.

It was amidst this chaos that Colin invited me to his office for a chat.

“We don’t condone bad behavior,” Colin said, looking down at me from behind his standing desk. “That’s why I’d like you to know that we’ve let Eddie go.”

“Oh?” I said, trying to affect the appropriate level of surprise. I’d never spoken a word to Colin before, and I hadn’t told anyone about the incident with Eddie.

“The closet,” Colin said, letting the word hang between us as if he wanted me to reach out and take it. “Questionable behavior is automatically flagged in the system.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The system?”

“Cameras,” Colin spat, pointing to the corners of the ceiling. “They’re all hooked up to Glen.”

“I don’t—”

“Ganglial Labor Executionary Network. It’s—well,” Colin let out a laugh,

“it’s not really important. What’s important is that what Eddie did was not only questionable behavior, it was bad behavior. It was the worst behavior! I mean, this is why we do this—to make the world a better place. And we’re so focused on the world that we forget to put our own house in order and then...”

Colin walked out from behind his standing desk to where I was sitting. He put a hand on my shoulder.

“We stand with you,” he said from above. “We stand with you, and this will never happen again.”

The office door opened and Colin’s assistant Lindsay poked her head through.

“Sir, the Secretary of the Perimeter—”

“Yup!” Colin held up his palm. “Jumping on now.” He returned his attention to me. “The entire cerebral health services team is available to you whenever you need.”

I nodded, stood, and started for the door. Colin caught me by the arm.

“We’d also ask for a certain discretion...in regard to all this,” he said, releasing his grip. “But of course, we’ll stand with you in whatever way you feel appropriate.”

I encountered no one on the walk back to my desk. Midway through the hallway I passed a red door, behind which a soft, mechanical whirring seemed to be in conversation with a series of high-pitched beeps. I passed this door every day, and yet, this was the first time that I noticed the small typeface on its corner that read, ‘G.L.E.N.’

So Colin thought that Eddie assaulted me. I mean, he did assault me, kind of. And I guess it was nice that Colin was taking it so seriously. *Eddie lost his job for God’s sake.* I didn’t feel great about that. Should I have told Colin the truth—that Eddie hadn’t done anything, that he...needed my help? *What would I have said?* Eddie went crazy? He saw Hawaii in the storage closet? *That wouldn’t have helped his case.* And besides, I had a strange feeling that Colin knew everything already. That this wasn’t about supporting me—about calling out ‘bad behavior’... *But hadn’t Eddie made me uncomfortable? Afraid, even?* Wasn’t it a good thing that after an insane person had trapped me in a closet they felt the consequences? *Perhaps.* Perhaps.

Three days later, Timothee Chalamet announced his bid for president of the United States.

The announcement came through the Good Citizen app at 8 pm on a Thursday. One minute Max was telling me about the dwindling penguin population, the next minute he was yelling into the sky chanting, “Chalamet, Chalamet, Chalamet!”

Clean air and safe cities. That was the platform. *Good Citizens for a better future.* That was the tagline. Good Citizen was now in the business of electing presidents.

Max switched the announcement into holographic mode so that I could watch

too.

“For too long,” Timothee Chalamet said from behind a lectern stamped with the Good Citizen logo, “the brokers of power in our country have been led by greed and inclined toward bad behavior. No longer! Today, we reclaim hope. Today, we recoup a vision of the future. Today, we harness the power of good. Today, we begin saving the world!”

Floating images of ecstatic Good Citizens filled the air around Timothee Chalamet’s holographic head. A ticker next to the lectern showed that there were 20 million users tuned into the stream.

“This is huge,” Max said.

“I hope he does something about the penguins,” I said.

Immediately after the address finished, Max signed up to be a virtual canvasser for the Chalamet campaign.

More people began to see visions at work. The scenes themselves were all over the place, adhering to no set rules or categories. Yet, there were themes that started to emerge for certain people.

For instance, Lily kept cycling through different geological time periods, always finding herself—when a vision hit—being chased by some kind of extinct behemoth. When the visions were new, fear was the primary response. But as they got more familiar, the fear gave way to excitement and then, eventually, to benign intrigue. So instead of fainting when suddenly finding herself in an oceanic world dominated by oversized beasts, Lily began to calmly take note of her surroundings. She carried around a diary of all the creatures she’d encountered. It even seemed now that she walked with a sort of eagerness, awaiting the next time she might fall into a Jurassic forest and be able to add to her index.

In the same way, Marcus now, instead of running from the room when his dead mother appeared to commandeer the video conferencing apparatus, would stay and have a conversation. Marcus, whose mother had died a decade ago, seemed to be happier now than before the visions. He’d sometimes talk about how glad he was to have the opportunity to rebuild his relationship with his mother. No one squabbled with this. No one said that his mother—the one in his visions—might not be real.

Gloria became particularly defensive one day when a colleague told her that he could not see the herd of sheep grazing below and that, in fact, the only sheep left on Earth were on the remnant islands of New Zealand.

“I like my sheep,” Gloria snapped. “So why don’t you keep your bleak, sheepless reality to yourself and let me have this.”

Anita died in an isolation chamber as my mom and I watched from home. A particularly aggressive case of Salax had rendered her incapacitated in the course of only a few days.

“How’s saving the world?” Anita asked through the video com, an oxygen disperser gently humming in the background.

“It’s getting pretty strange,” I said.

Anita laughed. “Strange can be good,” she said. “It can also be bad. I’ll tell you...I never imagined that the last days of my life would be spent in an oxygenated suitcase. But I guess it could have been worse.”

After Anita died, my mom stopped leaving the house. There was news that the college I had gotten into had almost completed construction on a sterilization bubble and that in-person classes would soon resume. But I didn’t feel good about leaving my mom in the state she was in. I set aside my imaginings of a collegiate future where I would read books on grass fields alongside beer-drinking peers.

I put my mind on saving the world—on putting Timothee Chalamet in office. I signed up as a virtual canvasser alongside Max. I started to be more involved.

Colin would sometimes walk by my desk and hold a fist in the air. “You’re an important part of the movement,” he’d say, “don’t forget that.”

I felt like I was a part of something. I felt like I was making a difference.

As I was leaving the office one warm and dusty afternoon, I caught sight of a crowd gathering on the sidewalk. Someone at the center of the mob was shouting. I recognized his voice.

“They’re inside your mind!” Eddie yelled. “They don’t care about your future! They’ve gutted your imagination! They’ve harnessed your fantasies!”

A gaggle of security guards descended the office steps and headed toward Eddie, who continued to shout—faster, louder. I kept a distance, watching the guards push through the crowd. Two people nearby had climbed onto a set of scaffolding to watch the commotion. I decided to join them. I pulled myself up through the web of metal poles, but when I looked down the crowd was gone.

A vast tundra of ice reached for miles in all directions. Three emperor penguins stood ten feet to my right, looking just as surprised as I felt. I blinked, but nothing changed. The ice shifted and croaked beneath my feet. A wind picked up and cut into my cheeks. I inhaled and counted to five. The air felt sharp in my lungs. I’d been here before. There had been a dream some weeks ago in which I’d tasted the stinging cold and walked upon the ice. This place, I knew, was a terrain lodged deep inside of me. The penguins turned away and pushed themselves into a tight little ring. I closed my eyes and listened to the gentle cawing of the birds, hoping that I might stay here for just a few more minutes.

Pixels Anonymous

ERKINAZ SHUMINOV

Your dreams are drowning.
I know it.
We're all living in the remains of
a fantasy
that didn't come true.
I don't think it ever will.
I don't think it's supposed to.
A lock of brown hair like
a mud puddle
settles possessively over your eyes.

Why don't you push it away?
Like you push yourself away.

You said you feel like a pixel
when you're all muddled inside and
no one can figure you out. Well,
I'm blurring into pixels myself.
Give us a foggy moon, a few unsure clouds, and some airplanes
in drag as stars.
Remember that night when the clouds were
battling the moon for screen time?
I don't believe that either came out alive.
I don't believe they were supposed to.

On the sidewalk, in front of the house, where
we made a hole in the tree for
the phantom squirrels.
At the end of the block, near the window shop, where we hid when we
didn't want to be caught during *Manhunt*.
When you get to your rocks,
stop.
Think of the squirrels. Think of the shop.
Think of the night when we watched the sky fight.

Dead Clock

ERKINAZ SHUMINOV

I partly see you and partly assume what you are,
hiding in the in-betweens as something unseen
happens around you.

Meanwhile,
instead of writing, I've been googling,
trying to find your past online and seeing where I fit.

Spending time
orbiting images of your past like clock hands.

I think my unmade bed
answers how I don't spend my days.
Am I in the time of my life?
Softly and soundly lost, winging it
on a desk in a bedroom in a building—
maroon and seven-tiered, overlooking a pharmacy and a church,
in the middle of tree-lined streets and delis—
ruminating mistakes and deliberating line breaks,
as passengers hop on and off the B36.

I want more. Or maybe just different. I go to the
park. There, among the broken Modelos
and sunflower seeds, is a memory
not yet recovered. I wind down—my chance
will come like the messiah,
oily and bright.

Up In Smoke

MIKE DAY

By March of 2016, my cousin Josh and I were practically flat broke. Four years prior, our ambitions brought us to California in pursuit of riches at the height of the Green Rush. Our goal was simple: relocate to LA, find the alleged A-listers, move in next door and infiltrate their circles; all so that we could sell them bougie, top-shelf weed in shiny packaging. It sounded like a slam dunk—at least it did back in New York.

Our money came from the remnants of my florist business in New York City, which I purportedly ran long-distance but in reality, I was losing clients by the day. Josh's job was to manage the money I siphoned out of the flower shop and limit my access to it because of my "poor financial decisions."

A few months earlier, we stopped paying rent and lost our big house in the Hollywood Hills. Overnight, we crammed our few belongings—suitcases, remnants of a mobile office, and favorite pillows—into our shiny sports car. It was all we had left from the pile of money we'd burned through to keep up with those flashy Joneses. It turned out that we were the new millennium version of the Beverly Hillbillies.

We had no permanent address, and we hopped around L.A. a lot, staying in Airbnb's for one month at a time. When cash was tight, we did one or two-week stays while we waited for money to come in from New York. That month we were staying in a run-down cottage in the less-than-fabulous part of Hollywood, where working actors, hookers and broke homosexuals lived. We fit in perfectly.

The thing about Hollywood is that the closer to the intersection of Sunset and Vine you get, the seedier it turns. On any given day, you'll likely see countless rows of igloo-shaped tents with blue tarps lining the boulevards and tucked behind alleys. You'll possibly encounter used hypodermic needles, neatly piled up in the corner of any given bus stop. I suppose those little green benches plastered with cheap-looking real estate ads also make for perfect shooting galleries. And near the tents, the trash and the bus stops, you'll probably find an ill-fortuned man or woman, passed out or dead near said pile of needles. And you'll definitely find a gaggle of transgender prostitutes wearing Party City-quality wigs they were convinced would help them land a John and make a quick buck on a corner. If you wait around long enough, you could absolutely/positively see a fight break out if the girls didn't clear a corner in time before the next shift arrived. It's never cute.

This is the rough, more raw side of Hollywood. Beyond the red carpets and glitterati, beyond the oversized sunglasses, stilettos, and Kardashian sightings. This is the Hollywood of *Pretty Woman*. "*Welcome to Hollywood! What's your dream? Everybody comes here...Some dreams come true, some don't...*" Every

morning during my runs, that voice from the movie would play on loop in my head as I passed by the gold stars embedded in the terrazzo sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard. It was a far cry from our life in the Hills, but for now it was home.

We were living in our third place in a little over four months. Since we bounced around a lot, I often forgot our address. Thankfully, there's a Madonna song for every situation in life. Twice already that year, her song *Vogue* helped me remember where we lived:

Grace Kelly, Harlow Jean, picture of a beauty queen. That line was for our previous digs on Grace Avenue, off the 101 freeway.

Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, dance on air...They had style; they had Grace. Rita Hayworth gave good face. I'd have to go through the whole rap to remember that we lived on Hayworth Avenue that March.

Springtime in L.A. is a spectacle with few parallels. Like Central Park back in New York, flowers are everywhere. The hillsides turn chartreuse and gold-enrod yellow from the short rainy season. The freeways are lined with vibrant bougainvillea in coral, fuchsia, and red. The succulents and giant agave plants blossom totems of petals, defying the blowing winds and the earth that pulls them down. Everywhere you look the street medians and houses are flush with white iceberg roses, which I imagine is the official flower of Los Angeles. My favorite sight of all was the Jacaranda trees: lavender majesties that canopied over the streets, raining down on passers-by and paving the roads with purple petals. Spring wasn't shy.

Like many humans in the neighborhood, I was a nocturnal animal. Josh would call me a man-bear or his pet goat. "I hate when you go into goat mode, Michael... You eat all our groceries in one night..." he said, although he was accustomed to me slinking out of bed in the middle of the night and disappearing to forage for sweets. Lucky for me, he was a sound sleeper, and my nocturnal rummaging didn't bother him. What did bother him was the mess he'd wake up to the next morning and the charges on his credit cards. Although we shared all the money, I had no cards of my own. I'd just gone through a bankruptcy and didn't have a bank account at the time. Four years of reckless behavior with lavish trips around the world, shopping sprees, and overall debauchery landed me in Chapter 7 court.

To Josh's credit, he worried about the finances at every step. I was the bean maker. He was the bean counter. I assured him more money was on the way: "Don't worry, it always comes. I promise," I said to him once as we boarded a flight from LAX to Paris. Standing at the gate he insisted we save money and stay home instead. I insisted that I needed inspiration for the cannabis product line up we were developing. It was all fun and games until I was forced to break my promise. One day the money stopped pouring in, turning into a trickle—a dry arroyo like the ones all around L.A. And now, Josh resented my overconfidence and inability to count money properly. "I shoulda never gone into business with

you,” he’d say when we’d fight. My biggest fear was that he’d disappear in the middle of the night, leaving a note behind.

I’ve always been a sleepwalker, talker, and occasional screamer. Sleep and I didn’t get along. I imagined the sleep god as a vengeful asshole that I’d somehow crossed in the past. The handful of pills I took every night, sometimes without water, would surely be enough to make any normal person slumber and drool all over themselves for ten hours straight, but they provided only long blinks for me. I swallowed my seven pills at 9 pm on the dot, as per doctor’s orders: one white pill—whichever one of the “pam sisters” I was on at that moment: Diazepam, Klonazepam, or Lorazepam—each used at different times to treat childhood trauma; two yellow Seroquels: to treat severe depression and induce slumber, but instead they made me feel wholly uninhibited, tapping into my most basal urges. On bad nights I’d jerk-off freely in my sleep, or while sleepwalking around the room. A couple of times, I woke up with my dick in one hand while standing in front of the open refrigerator. My other hand would be knuckle-deep in a jar of mayonnaise or peanut butter or raspberry jam. It turns out that masturbating while eating is an urge buried deep in my circuitry.

I’d do absolutely anything under the influence of Seroquel—all in the middle of the night, neither awake or asleep. Another fun side effect from the doctor prescribed orgy of substances was that danger didn’t register. Ever. More than once, I’ve “woken up” in the car, driving down winding roads on my way to Greenblatt’s on Sunset Blvd—a deli that was open until 2 am. The goat in me knew how to get there with my eyes closed—how I never crashed into a tree or drove off a cliff remains a mystery. A part of me didn’t mind if I drove off Mulholland Drive in the thick of night; it would save me a lot of trouble and there were worse ways to go out. The thought of a mixed berry tart made that idea okay. I’ve found myself navigating sharp turns, trying to follow white lines through heavy eyelids. It felt no differently than when I played Mario Kart with Josh. By the time I arrived at the parking lot, I was just lucid enough for a pants check. I tried not to fall down the steep wooden staircase leading to the glorious pastry counter where I’d stock up on cookies, cakes and tarts. I repeated the mission in my head: *Get three things and disappear before anyone notices you’re a zombie. Maybe four.* Once back in my car, I’d slam said items down my beak in quick succession. The bag full of goodies would never leave the parking lot. One night, I drove off a sidewalk, hit the curb and as a result, cracked the radiator.

By the time I got home, I was more awake than not. I tried to clean up my mess, but in reality, I was terrible at covering my tracks. A stomach ache was already in progress. The next day Josh encountered chocolate frosting on the steering wheel, pastry cream on the dashboard and wrappers on the floor. Even when I thought I’d cleaned it, he always found out.

An early morning argument ensued and I was reminded of how irresponsible I was. He said he was going to cut me off entirely and even threatened to leave me if I didn’t stop. He never did. I think he was more sympathetic to my predicament than he wanted to admit—until he got in the car that morning and found

that the radiator was broken. I played dumb but he knew it was me.

I never fought off those chemically induced impulses but rather embraced them as a necessary side effect of my prescribed treatment. I was just a doped-up passenger along for the ride, even though I was at the wheel. In my sleep, just as in my waking hours, I trusted the melange of pills and muscle memory to guide me through the darkness.

The rest of my evening pill regimen consisted of half of a triangle of Lamictal, which purportedly regulated my bipolar mood swings—I came to appreciate this one the most as it anchored me when I felt a manic or depressive episode coming on. If I failed to take it, I’d likely pay for it with a severe depressive episode and a trip back to the Del Amo psych ward. In addition to this orgy of meds (which I refused at first, but later came to accept as allegedly necessary), I took 30 mg of melatonin, just for good measure.

To seal the deal and roll out the red carpet for Mr. Sandman, just before swallowing said pills, I’d smoke a stiff fat joint of indica to knock me out. But, rather than acting as a sledgehammer, the combination of all of these substances amounted to a tiny mallet tap, like the orange ones they use on your knees to check your reflexes. The pills didn’t zonk me; they just made me zombie-like, ravenous, and horny.

Like clockwork, right around midnight, the witching hour began. One perk of our cottage on *Rita-Hayworth-gave-good-face-Avenue* was its proximity to a tiny and decrepit strip mall with a 24-hour taco joint, a 7/11, and a horrifying laundromat. One night, I un-blinked with an insatiable urge for dark chocolate paired with something savory—I imagined a jar of lightly salted Planter’s peanuts. I carefully peeled off my blanket, slithering out of bed like a naked snake. I tiptoed over to Josh’s black skinny jeans that were accorded on the floor and carefully retrieved a bank card from his wallet, and then another, just in case one had insufficient funds.

I collected my clothes and snuck out of the house, making sure I held my belt buckle tightly so it wouldn’t rattle as I got dressed on the front porch—anything to avoid waking up The Enforcer. Outside, the warm Santa Ana wind was thick with a bouquet of jasmine, honeysuckle, and mimosa. In the quiet darkness, an owl hooted, crickets chirped, and frogs croaked. It was like walking through a botanical garden in the dark.

The half-block walk to Santa Monica Boulevard led me past other shabby-not-so-chic cottages, past a sketchy alley, and into a parking lot. Along the way, I imagined a feast: maybe a Dove bar, a York peppermint patty, peanuts, maybe a strawberry Pop-Tart. I salivated with every step, half asleep, mostly stoned, entirely munchy. Turning the corner off of Rita Hayworth and onto Santa Monica Boulevard, my intoxicated vision was blinded by the severe yellow sodium lights from the parking lot and a slight strobe of blue and red lights. Silence gave way to chaotic street sounds. The night creatures were out in full force and Dollar Store regalia.

There were some flashing police lights in the distance, but I didn’t process

what it meant. In the space between sleep and awake, everything is on a seven second, live feed delay. My brain buffered all the information my senses collected making every step a leap of faith. My stomach pangs demanded that I keep walking.

As the noise and lights intensified, fear began to creep in. I forgot what made me get out of bed and walk this way in the first place. My adrenaline pumped, but not enough to make me as awake as I needed to be. When I turned the corner, I saw two policemen handcuffing a screaming prostitute while two others pleaded with the cops to let her go.

"She didn't do it, Mister Officer" one of the girls said. The one getting handcuffed was wearing jeans, hightops, and a tank top. My foggy brain managed to think about how shabby she looked. It was barely drag. Her two girlfriends wore mini-skirts and they looked like they had tried harder when getting dressed that evening. One had red boots on. They were more legit looking walkers of the night. There were also a couple of Latino dudes sitting on the stoop, laughing and pointing at Ms. Girl in cuffs. A cab driver—that poor, endangered species seldom seen in Los Angeles—sat in his vehicle shaking his head as he watched the show unfold.

One of the cops saw me stumble onto the scene. He instantly examined me: my posture, my gait, my hands, all in one look. I dodged his eyes. *Can he see me? Do I look high? Do I have pants on?* I could tell he was quickly evaluating if I posed a threat or not. He was all business at that moment. Because I slept naked, sleepwalking out of the house without clothes on was a real concern for me. I often worried that I'd be *that* guy, standing in line with a bottle of Evian and a Snickers bar while wearing a sweatshirt without pants on. So a pants-check was usually the first thing I did upon entering any establishment in the middle of the night.

The door to 7/11 was shattered in a starburst pattern. It looked like the Big Bang could have begun right there, on that tempered glass with credit card logo stickers peeling off. It was face height, and I wondered if the girl in cuffs had a matching wound on her head. Inside the joint, ghoulish-looking characters lingered about the short aisles. Near the beer fridge and next to the dehydrated hotdogs that perpetually turned round and round, I saw someone who looked a lot more fucked up than I did. He was counting the same three dollar bills over and over. Maybe he was trying to make them multiply with his will. Maybe he was just stuck in a dope-loop. A couple of kids were conspiring to ask someone to buy them a 40. At one moment I felt like all eyeballs were on me. A tragic looking lady stared at the hotdog while she scratched incessantly at her knees. I checked for pants again.

I collected my items, not being very picky about what I could gather: two bags of M&Ms, salted peanuts, a Snickers bar, some watermelon gum and a dark chocolate Dove bar. It would do just fine. I stood in line, swirling in place. My eyes probably crossed as I was trying not to tip over. The guy in front of me was arguing with the cashier. Something about a pack of cigarettes. "...But the

sign says..." he said, wringing his hands. The cashier dismissed him, glancing outside at the cops. The fluorescent lights above bore deep into my pupils. Even though I wasn't all there, I considered whether or not I was in danger and that I just didn't know it.

When it was finally my turn, I poured my bounty onto the counter, relieved that I'd made it that far. The guy inspected my face while he beeped each item through: "It's blah blah dollars and blah blah cents." Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out one of the cards and hoped it would work.

PIN the little gray box demanded.

Fuuuuck. What's my PIN? Dammit.

I tried one combination. Denied.

I tried another one. Denied.

I knew that if I failed a third time, the card would automatically be blocked, and lights might blare "STOLEN" or "STONED" or "EMERGENCY. THIS GUY IS LOADED ON DRUGS. PLEASE DETAIN ALONG WITH MS. GIRL."

I considered whether the cashier would motion for the cops to come inside or not.

Come on, Michael. You know this.

I couldn't remember the numbers, only the pattern: down the middle, to the right. But was it the middle right or bottom, right? *It's Josh's birthday or something stupid like that. Why isn't there a Madonna song for this? Fuck. Wait, Josh's birthday is the day after Madonna's birthday, what numbers are those?*

I'm not sure how long went by while my noodle was deliberating these combinations.

"Come on, buddy..." the cashier said.

"I don't know my PIN, sir," I said.

"Then just press the CREDIT button."

"Ohhhh. Right." The screen on the machine then prompted *ZIP CODE*.

"God fucking dammit." I definitely said that out loud. My vision, blurry; my balance, fading. I tried to read the name of the bank on the face of the card, which would determine the city it was linked to. My brain hurt from too much thinking. Outside the red and blue police lights were still strobing. Danger felt imminent, and I was certain that Josh was going to bitch at me in the morning. I considered if it was all worth it.

"Come on, guy. Move over. Next?!" The cashier said.

"No, no," I mumbled. There was no way I was leaving empty handed.

This is the Chase one. It's from New York. Aha! That means it's from the flower market! I punched in 10001. Hurray, New York!

"Receipt?" he said.

"No, thank you," I scooped up my purchase and darted out, pushing the door open with a little too much force, startling one of the cops. *Ah fuck.* He glared at me, at what I was carrying, and at the speed with which I was bailing. I could read his thoughts: *Did this dumb stoner just steal that?*

I hid my face and squeaked away after exchanging a fist of solidarity with Ms.

Girl, who was still bent over the hood of the cop car. The two dudes were still laughing. The cabbie was still looking. The two other ladies were walking away. “Don’t worry. I’ll come getchu, girl.” I could still feel the cop’s eyes on the back of my head but I was afraid to look back. The last thing I wanted was to “wake up” in the back of that patrol car next to my new bad-drag friend. I speed-walked away, turning the corner back onto my street. *Rita Hayworth, gave good face!*

I didn’t know how long I was away because the part of my brain that kept time, along with the “danger alert” part of it, was still sleeping, maybe even masturbating, next to Josh. But, I knew I didn’t have too many steps before I’d be home. I unwrapped each item: the prizes I’d just won from traversing that shit mess obstacle course in that tragic strip mall and stuffed my face as quickly as possible. The heavy perfume of flowers in the air competed with the sugary, starchy, sodium taste of shitty chocolate and cookie in my mouth. All of which made me roll my eyes in ecstasy as I stumbled down the sidewalk, each step a blissful sensory overload that made me wonder if I was dreaming, because if I was, I didn’t want it to end. Once it was clear that I wasn’t dreaming, I looked back and saw the cop car pull away. In the distance I heard the same women cackling into the night.

I was still chewing as I entered the house, slowly closing the squeaky screen-door behind me. In the kitchen, I quietly tucked the empty wrappers under the bottom of the garbage bin, burying them as gently as I could. It wasn’t unlike Josh to go through the trash to see what I’d done the night before but I had nowhere to hide the evidence. I was too fuzzy to devise something more practical. I carefully took off my clothes, still licking my gums and molars of the remnants of goods, stripped down naked, and slithered into bed. Inch by inch, I settled on my side, aglow with satisfaction. Through the darkness, just as my eyes shut, I heard Josh say: “I know where you were. You think you’re so slick. Don’t you?”

“Good night,” I said. But he didn’t respond.

Bits of Me

MICHELLE LIN

In this piece, I tried to convey a sense of chaos and scatteredness in my life as well as who I am as an artist and designer through the different colors and scattered items.



A Trip Home

MICHELLE LIN

In this piece, I wanted to capture a mundane moment in the life of a New Yorker through a scene in the subway. I used shades of blue to convey how close the people are towards you and used ink for a more stylistic approach.



Exit

59 Street
4th Avenue
24 hr booth

59

Street

Machi and Rulfo

WILLIAM QUINONEZ

“Hey, I made us some quinoa and found a couple of pomegranates on the way over here,” Machi said, shaking Rulfo awake. “Are you still asleep? Look, I got the day planned out and I wrote it on some newspaper. First, we have to stop by the food pantry and get some old bags of bread and see if we can find a yellow milk crate. Do you think I can borrow your knee pads one last time? Hey—”

“Dude, it’s like four thirty,” said Rulfo, his voice muffled from underneath the blankets. “Here, pass me my glasses.”

Machi tossed them to him. “Yeah, I know, but we gotta get going. Big day today.”

Bouncing on his heels by the side of the bed, wet and covered in mud from taking a trail through the morning dew, Machi stood, almost half-floating. He tried to avoid stepping on old nat geos and fabrics Rulfo used to sew clothes for them both. Machi had a pool cleaning net in one hand and a giant pole in the other. It hit the ceiling fan and scratched the wood floor.

Rulfo groaned as he stood. “Okay, I’m getting up. Do I need anything?”

“No, no, you’re good Rulfo. I packed everything. You’re set.”

“Okay, let me take my meds real quick. And where’s my book? One sec.” He rummaged through his drawers. “Okay. Hey, are you wearing my hat?”

Machi had an entire collection of articles on. He wore a yellow raincoat and brown fishing boots, plus a backpack that rattled with the sound of tin cans with every step. “Yeah, it’s the only one I have right now. I gave my other ones away. How have you been feeling lately? How are the meds? Are they working?”

“Yeah, a little bit, I guess.” Rulfo scratched his head. His hair was much longer now. “I don’t know, I just feel confused a lot. Like I forget what I’m supposed to do and what I want to do.” He put on his dad’s work pants and his favorite brown sweater.

“Well, dang, don’t worry. I got us a plan. Talk about purpose and direction. We’re going places. After we get the food, our next stop is the river. I want to show you something. I think you’re going to like it.”

“Ok, alright.”

“Grab your boots. Let’s run it.”

They walked outside under gray blankets and a swollen sky. Rulfo followed in the steps of his friend and thought of his room and his sleep. He wasn’t sure how long it had been since he left his room. *What happened?* He thought to himself. A question that only confused him more and led him down a rabbit hole of unhealthy thoughts.

“Hey, did you have any dreams, Machi?”

“Yeah, I did, but I can’t remember,” Machi said, walking ahead. “Something

about old buildings talking. I don’t know, what about you?”

“I had the same dream I’ve been telling you about. I was wearing a costume, like a ninja turtle or something. It started with me as a little kid, but then I got bigger. Older. But the room I was in got smaller and smaller, and I just paced around. I thought I was going to suffocate. The windows were getting smaller too. And the room started to fill up with paper and clutter and things from my life.”

“Man, Rulfo. That’s wicked. Do you think it means you’re stuck or something?”

“Maybe.”

People were walking, ghost-like, with their hands in their pockets. They breathed in the mist and faded down the street into buildings and corners. There was a still silence that clothed the morning.

After passing by the pantry—where Machi took some bread and found a crate—the two friends cut through the park and walked through the wet grass. The birds watched them, and the bushes and trees seemed to listen to them.

“So, the medication makes you feel weird?” Machi asked.

“I don’t know,” answered Rulfo. “I think it’s supposed to keep me from floating away. But now I feel like my feet are cemented to the ground, like I’m dragging my legs around. I can barely move, and I can’t think either.” Rulfo continued to watch Machi stomp forward in boots two sizes too big. He couldn’t see where they were going. He stopped trying to register what was around him.

“Dang that’s rough,” Machi said over his shoulder, splashing in puddles. “I feel like I’m floating, too. But you remember what blind-boy would say. That no matter how lost we get, there’s a great wind that’ll carry us. What if I told you that you could let go and don’t have to worry any more? You know, Rulfo, I don’t mind hanging out in your room if you don’t want to go outside no more. But I have this idea. I made something for you.”

They walked to the river and made it down to the rocks. There was a blue tarp covering a pile of what looked like junk and trash. Machi, with electric eyes and fidgety hands, uncovered the heaping mountain. It was a statue made of car and skate parts. Like a scarecrow, it was wearing old clothes that belonged to both of them. It wore a skate helmet and, now, after Machi’s careful maneuvering, knee pads. He put the yellow crate down as the altar and the old bread on top for the birds to visit and peck at.

“It’s a pyre,” said Machi, “and an offering. Like one of those funeral ceremonies. But instead, I made it using all the stuff that’s causing problems for you. Everything that’s old and dead.”

“You put my books and clothes,” marveled Rulfo, staring at the effigy. “And my pictures, too? Why?”

“Because all those things were making you really sad and hurting you. And I know they’re just things—they’re not important—but they’re not helping, either.”

“So, are we just going to throw it in the river?”

“No, we’re going to burn it.” Machi pointed at a rickety, makeshift pad near

the bank. “We’re going to send it off on that little boat and then light it up. It’s covered in gasoline already.” He put his hand on Rulfo’s shoulder. “It’s going to be alright. We’re putting ourselves on this pyre. I mean, our old selves. Our worries and confusion. It’s like a stage for our fears and longings. We can set it up, then watch it float away. It’s us. It’s you. Let’s stand here today and not be defeated by the ugliness in our heads. Let’s accept it and watch it go.”

“Yeah, I want that,” Rulfo nodded. “I want to get rid of all of that stuff too. It’s just hard, but I do want to feel better.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Why? Why do you do so much for me? It makes me sad that I can’t do stuff for you. I try to, and I’m going to keep trying, but it’s hard. I feel like I don’t deserve you.”

“It’s okay, Rulfo,” Machi patted his back. “That’s why I built this boat. It’s for all our trials and all our hurt. It’s for our old selves and our new selves. And don’t worry. One day you’ll see that you deserve better, and you’ll want to do better too. It’s why we were put here, I think. Also,” he turned back to the river, “I want you to come work with me at the pantry. And in the summer, we can visit my uncle on the farm. We can just work for a while and not think so much.”

Machi emptied his backpack and passed a pair of swim fins to Rulfo. Machi took off his raincoat and boots and bared down to his trunks. “Come on, dude, we’re going in. We’re going to push the float down the stream, then we’re going to take it to the middle of the river and light it up.”

Rulfo rubbed his arms. “It’s freezing, man.”

“Yeah, it’s cold, for sure. But that’s what it’s about. Letting go is hard, but we’re going to immerse ourselves for the sake of letting that hardship pass through us. Come on, Rulfo, let’s do it.”

Rulfo’s eyes were blank and heavy. He had nothing anymore. He felt cold but clean. Every day, Rulfo had wished that he would just disappear, that the part of him that had to live in the world would just leave his body behind, go somewhere else. He would have already left at this point, if not for Machi always knocking on his door, no matter what time. Machi was the one who would show up with coconut lentils and tell him about the railway confessions he overheard. How people just like the both of them are out there searching.

Machi was the one who took him here today, to send his sadness off on a boat and burn it down. All in the hope of helping him.

Rulfo cracked a nervous smile and took a step into the water.

La Monja (The Nun)

DAELI VARGAS

I was going to be a *monja* at age 13, I told myself
 When the *chicos* in Cristo Rey forgot my existence
 To romance the *bonita* Honor Roll *chicas*
 When only *fantasmas* gave me *amor*
 When *ni mi mejor amiga* couldn’t stop talking about *su novio*
 When mami called me una *aburrida*
 Who couldn’t get into the groove of her *cuerpo* like her *tias*
 From K to 8th, Cristo Rey gave me *mucha fe*
 That all I had to do was preach about how long I kept *mi virginidad*

Robot Girl

DAELI VARGAS

I silence myself to the point of turning into a robot
 No one sees behind the frozen glare
 People have the power to program me
 Without a conscience
 Without listening ears
 A shell of artificial organs
 Artificial blood too
 and nothing runs deeper than the desire
 to be real
 to somebody

A Little Light in the Corner

TOM WEBBER

Jimmy was trying his best to fall asleep, but he couldn't. Wide awake, he listened to the scream of a police car racing closer and closer. The screeching of the siren flew up from the street, jarring his brain. His body trembled. Then, the siren stopped, replaced by the shouts of a group of men cursing at each other. Jimmy pictured two cops jumping from their car trying to break up a fight before it began. He pictured fists, knives, guns, blood.

He missed the quiet of his old neighborhood, the snug feeling of lying in his bed in their old apartment on Claremont Avenue at Union Seminary. He wished Daddy had never read about how East Harlem was the poorest neighborhood in all of America. He wished Daddy had never decided to start a church here and then make the family move here. He wished they weren't the only white family in their building. The sidewalks of East Harlem shook with the boom of transistor radios. The tall buildings blocked the sun. The streets rained litter. Even the people were different. Many of them were brown-skinned, though he wasn't supposed to notice, and spoke in a rocket-speed language he couldn't understand. Spanish.

Nine-year old Jimmy struggled to be brave. He wanted to make Daddy proud of him and for Mom to let him go down to the outdoor basketball courts by himself. But it was hard. Especially with Peter away on a fishing trip with Grampa Beecher. The empty bunk above him added to the trembling in his chest. The sound of his brother breathing would've eased his own, slowed the hammering of his heart. If Peter was up there on the bed above him, Jimmy felt certain he wouldn't call out for his parents again tonight the way he had last night and the night before. He had to make it till morning without calling out. He simply had to.

The shouts and curses on the street had quieted and he was almost asleep when he heard the growl of an airplane flying overhead. Through his bedroom window Jimmy watched the plane blink across the sky. Realizing the window was open, his heart pounded harder than ever.

Last week at church, two boys had argued about which was better, the tenements or the projects.

"Projects are more safer," the older boy had said, like he knew what he was talking about. "In the tenements, people can break into your apartment and rob you blind, easy. All they gotta do is climb up the fire escape and bust in a window. The projects ain't got no fire escapes and ain't no burglar can break through them thick, metal doors."

"Yeah, but the projects got roofs," countered the younger boy who had told Jimmy he lived in a tenement on 100th Street. "Ain't no sweat for a robber to

drop down on a rope from the roof and smash through your window.”

“We live in the projects on 102nd,” Jimmy said. “Tenth floor. A robber wouldn’t lower himself down to ten, would he? He’d break through a window on the top floor, fourteen. Or thirteen, maybe.”

“You never know,” the younger boy said. “Them robbers be slick.”

Jimmy closed his eyes and tried not to think about robbers. He thought of his family’s summer cabin in Maine and breathed in the scent of salt water and seaweed drying in the sun at low tide. He was fishing for flounder with his father in their rowboat off Preble Island and got scared when Daddy caught one and held its wildly flapping body in his hands to remove the hook. But that was a different kind of fear. More excited than afraid. Like riding down a steep hill on a bicycle. Whenever he was with Daddy, Jimmy felt sure nothing bad could happen to him—like a robber busting through his window while he lay in the dark in a strange new bedroom, in a strange new building, in a strange new neighborhood. With no Peter in the top bunk.

Then Jimmy remembered what Mr. Answick had said last week in Sunday school. About how Jesus had to spend three days in Hell for the sin of asking God to let this cup pass from his lips. Three days in Hell for asking not to be crucified. Jimmy shuddered at the thought of Jesus hanging on the cross with nails through his hands and feet. For six long hours. Of course everybody had to die someday, but the idea of nails hammering through hands and feet made Jimmy sick to his stomach. And Jesus had been so young, only thirty-three. Daddy was thirty-seven.

Please God, Jimmy prayed. Please don’t let Daddy die. Not until he’s at least seventy or maybe eighty. And when he does have to die, don’t make him be crucified.

Jimmy thought of Daddy being nailed to a cross and almost called out then. Just in time, he thought of that time last year when he’d gone to the Yankee game with Peter. Of sitting high up in the grandstand with the great green field rolled out below them like the wide, western prairie in the movie *Shane*, and cheering their heads off when Hank Bauer hit a game winning homerun deep into the bleachers. He so wished Peter was home. If only Peter was snoring up there on the top bunk, Jimmy felt certain he wouldn’t be afraid and wouldn’t call out for Mom and Daddy.

Again, he was almost asleep, when a string of *TATA-TAT-TATs* exploded through his window. Then silence. Then another round of ear splitting *TATA-TAT-TATs* that sounded like gunshots. What if somebody’s mother had been shot? What if a boy was lying on the sidewalk bleeding to death? And how did it feel to have a bullet enter your chest? Was it worse than having nails hammered through your hands and feet? And if a robber did burst through the window, would he have a gun?

It was then that Jimmy called out and didn’t stop calling out until he heard the sound of his mother’s feet in the hall. The slap of her footsteps calmed him and he pretended to be asleep when she entered the room, sat on the side of his bed,

and stroked his forehead.

The next thing Jimmy knew it was morning. Faint sunlight filtered into his bedroom, but he had no desire to get up. He wanted to stay in bed all day with the covers pulled over his head so that Daddy couldn’t look him in the face. He had let his father down. Proved he wasn’t grown up enough to go outside by himself. He didn’t want anyone to see him. He didn’t want to see anybody. Jimmy had never felt like hiding from people before. Certainly not from his parents, the two people he loved most in all the world.

Lying in bed, Jimmy became aware of muffled voices coming from Mom and Daddy’s bedroom. He guessed they were talking about him, discussing how to deal with their scaredy cat, baby of a son who kept crying out for them in the night.

Jimmy slipped out of bed and snuck down the hall to their bedroom. Through the closed door he could hear Mom’s voice.

“Cal, you have to talk with him. Find out what he’s afraid of. What keeps him awake at night. Ask if he’s having nightmares.”

“It’s a stage,” Daddy said. “Most children go through stages when they repress their fears during the day only to have them spring to life at night. The dark frightens them.”

Jimmy took slow, silent breaths. His parents were talking about him and they had no idea he was listening. How could he possibly tell them about robbers and a boy bleeding to death on the street and Daddy being nailed to a cross?

“It’s more than a stage,” Mom said. “Our moving to East Harlem has upset him. He’s afraid. You have to let him know it’s all right to be afraid. If he has fears he’s repressing, he needs to talk about them.”

“He doesn’t want to talk about them,” Daddy said. “He wants to put aside his childish fears and act more like a grown-up.”

Daddy’s right, Jimmy thought. I don’t want to talk about my fears. I want to forget all about them. Tonight I won’t call out. Not for anything.

“He needs to talk about what’s frightening him,” Mom repeated. “And you’re the person he needs to talk to.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Jimmy heard the bed creaking and feet hitting the floor. His father was getting up. Still barely breathing, Jimmy hurried down the hall and back under his covers.

A few seconds later, Daddy entered the room in his underwear. Careful not to hit his head on the top bunk, he sat on the edge of the bed and bent towards Jimmy. Jimmy kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He could feel the heat of Daddy’s body through the blanket.

“What was it last night, Jimmy? Was it a bad dream?” His father’s voice was gentle, as if Jimmy had hurt himself and Daddy had come to comfort him.

“I heard noises.”

“What kind of noises?”

“Loud noises.”

“Was it the firecrackers?” Daddy asked, placing his hand on Jimmy’s arm. “Was it the firecrackers that scared you?”

Jimmy saw the fuzzy hair on his father’s arm and resisted an urge to stroke it. “They sounded like gunshots.”

“They did sound like gunshots.” Daddy moved his hand to Jimmy’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “But they were firecrackers. Local teenagers practicing for the 4th of July. They shoot them off the rooftops.”

Jimmy said nothing. How could Daddy be so sure?

“But even if they were gunshots,” Daddy said, “it’s nothing for you to worry about. People don’t shoot people they don’t know and none of the people we know own guns.”

“They don’t?” Jimmy was glad to learn this about people. But suppose a person who did own a gun shot it by mistake? What if a robber lowering himself down on a rope and busting through the bedroom window was surprised to find a boy in bed and fired his gun without thinking? He wanted to ask Daddy how it felt to have a bullet enter your chest, or for nails to go through your hands and feet. Instead, for the first time that morning, he looked directly at his father. “Daddy, will we ever go back home?”

Daddy smiled through tight lips. His short brown hair, showing more and more gray at the edges, hadn’t been combed and his blue eyes looked sad. The muscles in his jaw moved in and out. It occurred to Jimmy that leaving the Seminary had been hard on his father too. That he also hurt for his old home and old friends and was only pretending to be strong for the rest of them.

“I know you miss the Seminary, Jimmy. I miss it too.” Daddy paused and stared out the window. “But this is our home now. East Harlem is our home.”

“For always?” Jimmy asked.

“I can’t say about for always. Only God knows about for always.” Daddy brushed some hair from Jimmy’s forehead and Jimmy felt the warmth of his fingertips. “For right now, East Harlem is where we’re meant to be. The people here need us.”

“But the people here are so different. Everything’s so different. And so noisy. The noise wakes me up and I start thinking about things.”

“About what things?” Daddy asked.

“Just things,” Jimmy said. “Things I don’t want to think about.”

Again Daddy looked away like he, too, had things he didn’t want to think about.

Jimmy sat up and hugged his father. Daddy’s muscular arms drew him close and he could hear Daddy’s heart beating; strong and regular, like it would beat for always.

“Daddy, what’s it like to die?”

“I’m not sure, Jimmy. It all depends. I imagine it’s sort of liking falling asleep and then not waking up.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“I don’t plan to.” Daddy gave Jimmy a tighter hug. “Not for many years.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too.” Daddy rubbed Jimmy’s back. “Moving to East Harlem has been hard on all of us, especially on Mom. Let’s try and help her not worry so much.”

“You mean like me not calling out at night?”

“Jimmy, you can always call for us. Whenever you feel afraid you can always call for me or Mom. But there’s no reason to be afraid. Nothing’s going to harm you.”

“When’s Peter coming home?” Jimmy kept his arms pressed tightly around his father. He hoped he would never be too old to hug Daddy or for Daddy to hug him.

“He’ll be back Monday.” Daddy said. “Three more days. Maybe until Peter comes home we can put a light in your room at night. A little light in the corner. How would that be?”

“That might be good, Daddy. A little light in the corner might be good.”

Contributors

SHIVA ABBASZADEH is currently a student at City College, double majoring in architecture and studio art. Originally from Long Island, she moved to NYC to attend CCNY in the summer of 2019. She has a passion for art, architecture, and music, creating art and producing music while she is on the path to become an architect. She plans on graduating from City Colleges' Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture in 2024 with the hopes of continuing her involvement in the subjects she loves.

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KYLAN BARRAJANOS-POWE is a recent graduate of City College Center for Workers Education, majoring in interdisciplinary arts and sciences, with a concentration in literature, media and the arts. In addition to writing fiction, he occasionally freelances as a production assistant for films. In his free time, Kylan enjoys creating and experiencing fiction through video editing, reading, and the rare video game.

HELEN BAUER is an undergraduate student at City College CUNY, majoring in English literature with a double-minor in black studies and Jewish studies. Helen is an enthusiastic fiction reader, and enjoys learning about the religious and geo-political/historical contexts that produce moving works of fiction in her academic studies. After graduation, Helen plans to attend graduate school,

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DEDIPTA BHATTACHARJEE is a student at City College majoring in creative writing, Asian studies, and publishing, with minors in art history and journalism. From a young age, she has loved poetry and how the genre can express so much with so little. She has been published in *Poetry in Performance* and awarded the Esther Unger Poetry Prize. Aside from her studies, Dedipta loves traveling through the city and finding the perfect coffee spots to write poems, prose, and try her hands at different mediums of fiction and creative nonfiction.

ELIJAH SINGER BRAHMI is a freshman at City College, majoring in studio art. Born in Manhattan and raised in Brooklyn and Queens, NYC, he is a Jewish, gay, transgender man who is passionate about underground cartoons. Eli is a cartoonist and has been writing since a kid. He hopes to graduate CCNY in 2026 and have a career in publishing or as a freelance writer.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN is a first-year student attending The City College of New York, and plans to major in Visual Arts. Born and raised in The Bronx, he has been interested in writing and art for nearly a decade. He plans to graduate in 2026 and pursue a career in either graphic design or writing.

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OYÉSHIKU CARR is a CCNY Master of Fine Arts student, returning to school in 2022 after three decades of experience in the public and private sectors. A graduate of St. Paul's School and Wesleyan University, Oyé holds an MA in history and a PhD in comparative modern African politics from Boston University. He has worked for the US Department of Defense as a senior research advisor to US African Command in Djibouti and Germany and owned a small business in Harlem. He has also taught high school history on both the East and

West Coasts. Oyé was a Fulbright Scholar, a Boston University MLK Fellow, and is a Fellow of the Institute for the Advancement of Social Sciences at Boston University. He has a deep love of stories and storytelling and enjoys writing about the human experience within the context of historical events.

ISAHMAR CASTRO is currently a City College student majoring in English education with a minor in black studies. Born and raised in NYC, they are passionate about dancing, traveling, and cooking. They plan to graduate from City College after the spring semester of 2024 and hope to pursue a teaching career.

YASMILKA CLASE is a recent City College graduate. Born and raised in the Bronx with roots in Dominican Republic, much of her poetry speaks to the melancholic experience of identity or lack thereof, uncovering familial memories and relationships.

MIKE DAY is a storyteller and MFA creative writing student at The City College of New York. His roots are anchored in South Florida, New York City and Los Angeles. His writing has an unapologetic rawness that seeks to encapsulate the Queer Latino-American experience of a middle-aged Gen-Xer. He's currently writing a dark comedic memoir about his misadventures during the height of California's Green Rush.

ANGIE VANESSA GUZMAN DIAZ is currently a student at City College majoring in digital design. She's originally from a small town in Colombia, not easy to find on a map. When she was 4 she experienced guerrilla warfare: her family hid for 2 days while the town was partially destroyed, police were killed and innocent people were taken away from their families. At 19 years old she decided to move to the U.S. by herself. She plans to graduate in 2024 and hopes to pursue writing and a career in motion graphics.

DILIANNY ESPINOZA is a Venezuelan visual artist and architectural designer based in New York City. She has always been passionate about art, design, and poetic writing, especially when they go hand in hand with surrealism and pop art. Focused but not limited to editorial illustration, her conceptual artworks can translate simple or complex topics into eye-catching, understandable images for projects ranging from murals, covers, marketing, products, and more. She is currently completing her MS arch program at City College. She is estimated to graduate by the end of 2023 and plans to pursue a career integrating architecture and visual design.

RYAN FITZGERALD grew up on Long Island and is currently a high school English teacher in New York City. He attended American University for his undergraduate degree and Queens College for his master's degree. He is currently attending The City College of New York for his second master's degree. He has enjoyed writing poems and songs since he was in elementary school and plans to continue pursuing creative writing for as long as possible.

JULIAN GRAJALES was born and brought up in so-called Queens, NYC, on land stolen from the Lenape and Canarsie peoples. Raised by Colombian immigrant parents who inspired him to become a musician, writer, journalist, and social justice activist, Julian has had essays and articles published in *Jacobin Magazine*, *Truth-Out*, and *The Independent*. He was the co-founder, host, and correspondent of *Working Class Heroes Radio* and was most recently given an honorable mention in *Elegant Literature's* November 2022 short story contest. He hopes to attend City College's MFA in creative writing program after having graduated from City College's Center for Worker Education in 2023.

JACK'SON PHILLIPS GRANT, a native New Yorker of Caribbean heritage, is a NYC high school English teacher by day, pseudo gospel, jazz, and blues musician by night, and faux athlete every other weekend (when not recovering from the previous weekend's exploits and injuries). A lover of culture, language, and music, Jack'son infuses his challenge and love for exploring multicultural identity in his fiction (both short and long form) which is often peppered with drama (occasionally his own) and poetry. He lives at home with his wife, children, canine, rodents, and birds, some of whom he actually gets along with.

NICOLLE "NICO" GUTIERREZ (they/them) is currently a senior at The City College of New York, majoring in English with a focus in creative writing. They hail from Barrancabermeja, Colombia, and immigrated to the United States along with their mother and sister when they were five years old. They enjoy reading a wide variety of things, from fantasy to horror. In their free time, they spend time with their two cats and dog and play video games.

SAM HERNANDEZ is a poet who lives in Brooklyn. She is an MFA candidate at CCNY. Her work aims to explore the intersection of the surreal and the mundane.

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AYESHA KHAN is a third-year student at the Sophie Davis BS/MD program, with a deep interest in how social issues, like the climate crisis, impact human physiology and well-being. Aside from this, Ayesha is a huge concertgoer, a painter of middling talent, and a gardener who could talk about her plants for hours.

PAMELA LASKIN is a lecturer at The City College of New York where she directs The Poetry Outreach Center. She is the published author of five books of poetry and three young adult novels. *THE LOST LANGUAGE OF CRAZY* (Atmosphere Press, 2021) is the most recent. She is the winner of the 2018 Leapfrog International Fiction contest for her book, *Why No Goodbye?* published in 2019.

MICHELLE LIN is an undergraduate student at City College. She resides in Brooklyn, New York, and majors in electronic design and multimedia. In her free time, she sketches and reads manga online. She aspires to explore the field of graphic design in the future.

SAMANTHA MAENDEL is a student at City College, majoring in childhood education. She hopes to work with elementary students from underserved communities, and is passionate about art, creative writing, and road biking.

SCARLINE MARTINEZ is currently a student at City College, majoring in psychology with a minor in philosophy. Originally from the Dominican Republic, they moved to Florida at around nine years old, where they spent almost a year; then, they moved to New York permanently. They are passionate about art and addressing societal challenges faced by minorities. They plan to graduate from City College in the spring of 2024 and hope to pursue a career in neuropsychology and data science.

EMMA MILLER is a Utah-born writer and editor living in New York City. Her creative work has appeared in *Promethean*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Apparition Literary Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and she has bylines in outlets including *Money*, *Time*, *USA TODAY*, and *Forbes*. Her short play *PRETTY PRIVILEGE* debuted at the Chain Theatre Play Festival in summer 2022. Emma is pursuing a creative writing MFA at The City College of New York and has two guinea pigs named Hamlet and Horatio.

LYNDON NICHOLAS is a fiction writer based out of Brooklyn, NY. He received his MFA in fiction from The City College of New York. He is currently

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MARINA PALENY is a 2019 graduate of the language and literacy MA program at The City College of New York, with a decade's worth of experience in teaching high school composition. Originally from Donbas, Ukraine, she immigrated to California in 2000 with her family. Having studied English and become an English teacher, she moved to NYC to continue her studies and develop her career in Bronx, NY. She is passionate about Ukrainian literature, translation, and plants. She currently resides in Nashville, TN.

ISSIS PALOMO SÁNCHEZ is a recent graduate of the MFA program in creative writing (poetry) at The City College of New York. A current resident of New York City, she and her family immigrated from Havana, Cuba, as political refugees. Her favorite poets are Audre Lorde and William Blake.

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REBECCA RAGHUNATH is an English major, concentrating in creative writing at City College for her undergraduate degree. She plans to graduate from City College in 2024. Born and raised in NYC, Rebecca enjoys exploring hidden gems in the city from libraries to museums to cafes and restaurants. She also carries her pen and paper and music wherever she goes. In her free time, Rebecca enjoys giving back to her community through mentoring and volunteering.

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MOLLY SCHWARZ is an MA student in English literature with an interest in Asian-American literature and translated Asian literature. She is currently in her first year of the program at City College. Her writing ranges from book reviews to fiction and poetry, and her reading interests span across genres, from sci-fi to historical fiction to memoir. She obtained her undergraduate degree in English literature with a minor in Spanish from Fordham University and is a proud Brooklyn native. She hopes to pursue a PhD in the future in English literature.

LUKE SEBEN is currently an undergraduate film student at The City College of New York. Splitting his time between Yonkers and Brooklyn as a child, he now resides in Harlem, where he hopes to soon complete his degree and then travel the world, translating his experience into poems, prose, and illustrations all throughout. Besides writing, Luke also loves painting, watching movies, and playing soccer. He hopes to one day have a small farm in the mountains of Brazil.

CORINNE SHEARER is currently a graduate student and adjunct lecturer in the English department at City College. She is also the book review editor for *OyeDrum Magazine*. Outside of the literary world, she works as a dancer, choreographer, and teaching artist. Her research interests include 20th-century American poetry, performance studies, and literary theory.

ERKINAZ SHUMINOV is a graduate student at The City College of New York, pursuing a master's in language and literacy. She's worked in nonprofit development for eight years, most recently with the international organization Soliya, and previously with Urban Upbound, the Association for Union Democracy, and PEN American Center. Away from work and school, she can be found taking walks, trying new teas, and amateurly taking photographs. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

KRISTEN STRMEL is currently enrolled in City College's creative writing MFA program. She has a love of all things sci-fi/fantasy, from Star Wars to Ancient Greek mythology. She is primarily a fiction writer but dabbles in poetry every now and then. Kristen works in a library on Staten Island where she spends her days scoping out the sci-fi section. She is on track to graduate in 2023 and hopes to become a writer-librarian.

RAYN VALLEAU is a graduate student at City College, majoring in poetry. They are based in Astoria and run an LGBTQIA+ support group for writers called Queer Writes. He plans to graduate from CCNY in the Fall of 2024 with hopes of earning his PhD and becoming a creative writing professor.

DAELI VARGAS is a student at City College, majoring in English (with a concentration in literature) and a part of the publishing certificate program. She was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. She is passionate about indie R&B music and watching Spanish-language soap operas. She plans to graduate from City College, pursue a career in book publishing, and maybe go to graduate school.

TOM WEBBER is a graduate of Harvard College with a Ph.D. from Columbia. He has written and published two books. *DEEP LIKE THE RIVERS* (W.W. Norton), an oral history of slavery in the United States, was runner-up for the Bancroft Award and has been published in Japanese. *FLYING OVER 96th STREET* (Scribner) is a memoir of his childhood growing up white in Black and Puerto Rican East Harlem. Both books received excellent reviews. Tom is currently enrolled in the MFA program in creative writing at The City College of New York.

JACK WERNICK is an award-winning playwright who hails from Boston. He's also an editor for *The Theatre Times*, a global performing arts publication. Jack's a graduate of Antioch College and is currently an MFA candidate in creative writing at The City College of New York. He also teaches in their first-year writing program. When he's not reading, Jack enjoys cycling, traveling, cooking, and writing.

CHLOE WHEELER is currently an undergraduate student at City College, majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. In 2020, she was selected to participate in Alice Hoffman's Young Writers Retreat at Adelphi University. While writing is one of her primary passions, she is also a musician and visual artist. Residing in Huntington, NY with her two cats, Camus & Leo, she hopes to pursue a career in the arts. Instagram: @idontreallyexistokay

GEORGE YOUNG is a former dancer once humiliated by Bob Fosse. He switched to film production where he enjoyed tremendous success for 35 years. Credits include *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *The Internship*, and *Junior*. He produced three video games for George Lucas based on the *Star Wars* canon, Rebel Assault, Jedi Knight, and Force Commander. He currently writes for the publishing industry because he missed the rejection from his years as a dancer. His debut novel, *TIME Blinked*, was released in 2021 by Celestial Echo Press. His second book, *DracuLAND*, dropped on Halloween, 2022, also by Celestial Echo Press. He has several short stories in print and digital anthologies. A full list is available upon request.

STEPHANIE ZLOTNICK is currently an adjunct instructor of English at The City College of New York. She holds an MA in language and literacy from CCNY and a BS in art history and museum professions from the Fashion Institute of Technology. She is passionate about writing, teaching, baking, and taking lots of photos of her cat, Gloria.

I met myself
inside my reflection
I hadn't seen her
in a long time
and I apologized
- Faith Brown