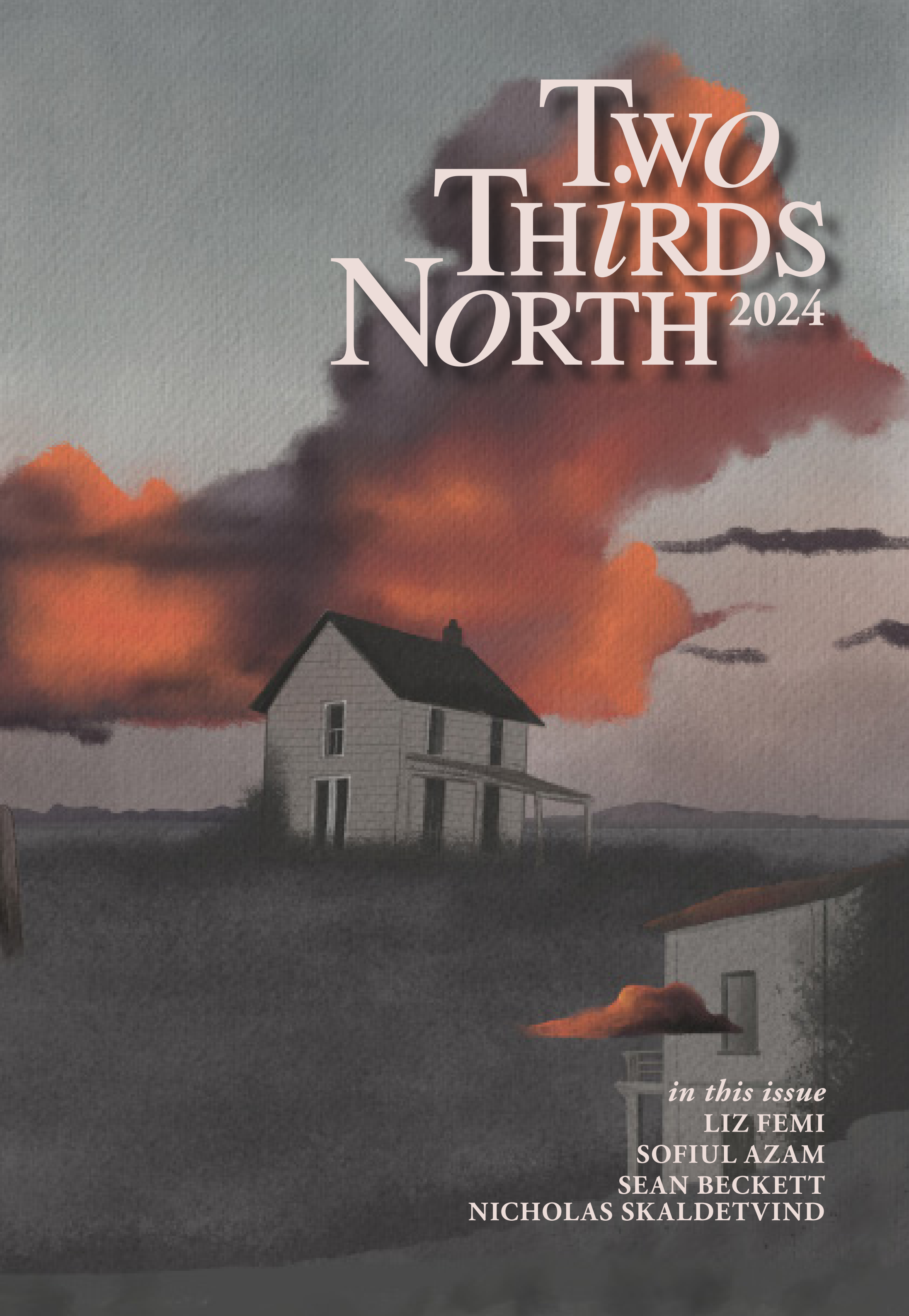
Two Thirds North
2024



in this issue
LIZ FEMI
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TWO
THIRDS
NORTH

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Editor's Foreword

It is as if I think in stanzas now, or in lines, or in images crafted by someone much better at it than I. On my drive to town, as the wind sweeps gusts of snow and ice across the road, and the blues of the shadows merge and separate from each other, *stands in a Sahara of snow now*, echoes in my head, *a Sahara of snow now*.

When I first sat down to write this foreword, a snowstorm blew over the south of Sweden. We woke up to windows covered in small drifts, and we were told to stay put if we did not have anywhere urgent to go. I did not. I had nowhere I had to go, and cancelled all, as it turned out they all were, unnecessary, appointments. It was cold inside: there are drafts in my house; some windows need mending; the door does not sit quite as well on its hinges as one would hope. How cold it must be outside. How cold for those who do not have a house. We had nowhere we had to go. We did have somewhere to stay.

The ditch is nearer.

Poetry makes nothing happen. Except that it does, it does, it cannot be stopped, and poetry is all the loss, all the mud, all the broken hearts and dreams and plans and children and families. Poetry is all there is, in all of its ugliness, its honesty, its lies, its reduction to bare language, its metaphor, its nakedness of our nakedness in the mirror we refuse to look into.

This year, *Two Thirds North*, it seems to me, expresses loss and the expectation of loss, more, perhaps, than other years. *Plus ça change*, I called a section in a previous edition. Perhaps I should have again.

And fears, like windows left open in the night, like in Gavin Holland's "from after the storm":

scared that i have
forgotten too many of our memories.
that you have to live through me, and i am trying
to die.

Memory is a salvation and a burden, a treasure to keep and a cross to bear. It is bearing witness, having to name, having to call it.

Something for your poetry, no?

The section “A Trickle of Faith” begins with Bobbi Sinha-Morey’s “A Trickle of Fate.” I suppose I was trying to be witty, or worse, profound—both seem uninteresting now. But the poem does something rather fine, it shows how memory is always just beneath the surface, just waiting to be brought to life again, to merge with the present: “Slight as a pin prick / I’d been reminded again of a dear friend.” For me, that first line is what does it, the slight pin prick that is enough to draw blood from the well, to open the floodgates.

Sofiul Azam’s “Shadows of the Sunset” concludes, “You didn’t give us an indication you were dying / or we simply didn’t realize it. You didn’t give us enough time.” I say “concludes” because it is a word equally laconic as these lines: this is a fact that cannot be changed. Time runs out, and all that which is unspoken will so remain. The father who asks, “Does it get any worse than this?” knows that it does not, and that it will.

Dolce et decorum est. The old lie, the current lie, the lie, I am sure, of the future. Tristan Fernandes’ “Dear Amar Singh” echoes this pointlessness of war, and the deaths of those without names, or those with names forgotten: “The dying man looked familiar, like someone from his own Company; like someone of the hundred soldiers he was responsible for. Here, in front of him, one of his men lay dying and he could not remember his name.”

For in truth, / We have no gift to set a statesman right.

And, yet, and yet, *a mouth*—here it comes: *spring and all*, so much that has been buried pushing through fertile soil, taking root: *they did not know*. A new spring, and the hope that it must bring, is also present in the multitude of voices gathered here. There is the immeasurable love for a child in Caitlin Thomson’s “One More Mile,” the sense of belonging and the beauty of being in Alina Zollfrank’s “Creature Comforts,” and though the journey is long and spans both continents and decades, Thomas Lavelle’s narrator in “Statue of Hjalmar Branting” does, in the end, find “landmarks / a familiar crossing, and in time a way home.”

Maria Freij, Poetry Editor

TAKING FLIGHT

Earning You

Dom Fonce

I mouth the words I wish I'd said to you. When I see the yard filled with flowers and feathers, I know you heard. I finger your name on bark. You materialize, my son, to stare at me, voicelessly, your face still and enough. Pale like a man carved from soap. Every day, I sacrifice my goat of an ego, try to understand the universe is good in every decision. Every day, you arrive. You are self-work surfacing. A tower I break and rebuild from sunrise to sunset. The rabbit I finally catch. When I close my eyes, you leave. I walk the greenery, water slowly the sprouting foxglove. A hawk lands in our tree, spreads itself, then wings off. An earthworm inches deeper into the dirt. A beetle lands on my shoulder. I take off my shoes and sit in the grass. My skin eats the sun, lungs inhale the clouds, ears gather chirping. This is not greed, but due. This is how I earn you.

Rain Sparrow

for Helena Qi Hong

Yuan Changming

Above this wild wild world covered
With layers and layers and layers
Of red dust, my selfhood
Has long been tired
Tired of flying
Flying alone
Day & night

But where can I perch?
Do I have a nest at all?

O for a solid
Respite before
Continuing my lonely
Flight, snuggling my inner-
Most being in the heart of your
Soul, and settling my weathered body
Right at the A-spot of your tenderness

Videos of Denice

KITTY STEFFAN

I went to see Denice before she died.
I did her hair and she did mine.
Last call, last supper,
pepperoni mushroom
in her turquoise kitchen
with her bad blue coffee
and her sour white wine to chase away
the bad blood
on the walls she gave up on.
It's not washing away, she said,
it's been a rough week and I found out everything
I think
and I think I'm staying
I waited my whole life for death
to do us part as vowed and written and shouted
and I said come on Denice, but she said no, leave
me, just take
and watch these.
I wanted the water on my side for this
so I parked on the side of the bridge.
Soul-skin stripped she speaks
about the darkness underneath
laundry piles and dishes months older
than her daughter's daughter.
Of his nails and needles
and his knives and bottles and
the laughter who says
it's alright to die
if one is not fit for this life.
Denice tells Denice that spring is coming soon.

Her springs were always black this way
fall after fall, broke-drunk summer
after broke-drunk summer
winter stasis, the thorny truce
and the children, my God,
the children.

Cold pizza tastes better when you're crying, she says
looking into the camera
tethering on the bridgeside
she's not crying, it's just water
rushing under the bridge
and that awful, birdlike
day-before laughter.

We First Heard the Birds

LM Vail

We first heard the birds, then
sunlight and the crack
of early spring,
February melt.

My darling waited three days
to bleed, but
there inside her it pulsed
your mother's blood
and yours.

She waited three minutes and
drew a bath while you drew
two lines, pink and parallel
who sang the chorus
of her lifesong.

We have called other babies
ours before, but none so small
as to fit between these words, on
my fingertip, inside a single
curve of this p
o
e
m.
I don't know what to say, she sat
on the edge of the tub
unblinking.

Little seed you are
a speck a mite a peppercorn and
by the round moon’s making are made
rounder and new.

We listen, we wait,
this pale bright morning,
and I tilt my face to the sun.

Eleuthera

LAURA SOBBOTT ROSS

1. *n.* an island in the central Bahamas.
2. *adj.* free — derived from the feminine form of the
Greek adjective, eleutheros.

Eleuthera, the ancients said
from their Ionian blue shores.
The word itself, a white sail
billowing open. *Free* is what it means,
at least in the stunted vernacular
of tongues and wind. Between the two

of us, four children have set roots,
and we've let go into the expanding current.
Eleuthera. Aren't we giddy, waist-deep in it,
our toes gone tactile in an earth eased
and obscured by glittering aqua.

God, but it's raw here. The light.
The sound of the island's stone brim
wincing into luster. Just last night,
a tide disguised itself as a stray cat's
hunger, pooling mournfully beneath
the pomegranate and the flame trees,
rising to the ledge of our open window.

Today, it's ours, and it's older
than our grown children or the sea turtles
that have glided in, beaked and brazen
enough to nip at the soft edges of us.

Their painted faces swallowing
what we offer in exchange for a spot
on this shimmering excursion called ocean,
called morning, called Eleuthera,
called *this-is-what-we've-been-waiting-for.*
Stingrays, stirring and curious, spread
their wings in a footing across our naked feet.

Talisman

LENA HUNTER

Because Copenhagen had become a drag, because everything I wrote that spring was dead-eyed, and because David Bowie, at the same age of 29 and a half, had done it, proclaiming “if we can’t write here, we can’t write anywhere,” I decided to seek a creative revelation in Berlin.

I arrived in Neukölln in June, during a languid tarmac-scented heatwave. I rented a room in a cool, plant-filled apartment, shared with a wiry juggler from England. I quickly fell into a rhythm; drinking coffee at Katalog, wine at the local bar and record shop, Press, and swapping news with the regulars of each. Afternoons were for talking; nights were for parties.

This is it, I thought: momentum, energy, intrigue. I channelled Bowie, playing *Sound and Vision* on repeat.

One morning, as we discussed a travel column I was writing, Clara – a well-read regular of Katalog – suggested I consult Joan Didion’s packing list for inspiration. I picked up *The White Album* at the next English bookshop I saw.

This book was in my bag, on that Sunday afternoon, when I saw a purple baby swift, bristling with new feathers, bulbous eyes gummed shut, on the scorching pavement outside Press. It looked like a freshly pulled tooth, stark pink on a metal tray. I put it in my hat and took it home. I called it Didion.

One evening soon after, I joined an Eastern European wine-tasting at Press, serving Slovakian, Georgian, Czech and Bulgarian wines. My friend Isabel was there, a fiercely red-headed handstand artist, with her new boyfriend Vicki – a tall but softly spoken hoop artist from Sweden. We sat on the warm curb, swapping glasses.

"There are some really old traditions for fermentation in Eastern Europe beside wine," said Vicki.

"In Bulgaria, they're famous for dairy. They make this yoghurt that has all kinds of crazy health benefits. It's anti-carcinogenic, anti-oxidative… There are even studies that say it gives elderly people improved cognition and *joie de vivre*."

I thought impulsively of Bowie, who had consumed only milk, bell peppers and cocaine the year he lived in Berlin. "I haven't heard of it," I said. "How's it made?"

He told me what he knew. In the hill towns of the Rhodope Mountains, local people boil ewe's milk and ferment it with an artisanal starter culture, according to recipes passed down through generations. The yoghurt's Bulgarian name is *kiselo mlyako*. He spelt it slowly for me.

The magic health benefits of *kiselo mlyako* are entirely due to the microbes. These are native to the land - found in the soil, bark, flora, and anthills of the region. It's a centuries-old symbiosis: the mountains, the shepherds, the sheep, the ants and the bacteria, cultivating one another.

But I was more concerned with the small life I was cultivating in a shoebox in my bedroom. Didion had become loud and active. She peeped insistently, swaying like a cobra, yellow mouth wide, and gagged theatrically on a 3ml plastic syringe filled with dog food and yolk.

I watched as her blueberry eyes slit open to shrewd black beads. I cleared my schedule to be ready with the syringe night and day.

A week passed. Soon, I'd visit my boyfriend in Copenhagen. The mood between us was sour and cancelling on account of a bird would not have flown. I trawled the internet for wildlife hotlines, ornithologists and animal sanctuaries, but could not find any that'd take a wild swift. None of my friends wanted Didi for the weekend. I decided to sneak Didion over the Danish border in her shoebox.

Meanwhile, Berlin's curious knack for synchronicity intervened. Clara, pleased to have been instrumental in the naming of Didion, recounted the story in English and German to everyone in Neukölln. This was how, on the morning of my journey, a stranger, a local woman in her seventies who spoke little English, came to introduce herself as Paola. She pressed a bird guide into my hands. "Young birds are so fragile," she said, in a voice fringed with yearning.

I saw my chance. I pinned Paola to an agreement that I'd deliver Didion to her apartment at 11 o'clock that night and give her a masterclass in bird feeding. She seemed nervously pleased with the task and promised to help me find a sanctuary.

At 10:55, the hot night was as motionless as an oil slick. I walked the two blocks to Paola's apartment building with a bag of bird-care paraphernalia in one hand and the shoebox with Didi noisily shuffling and peeping in the other. She needed an appetite for the feeding demonstration later. Under my arm was a bottle of Bulgarian Aligoté from Press.

Paola lived alone on the top floor. She opened the door in her nightgown. Barring her two cats from escaping with her slippered feet, she showed me into the kitchen. There were patterned tea towels, doilies and mahogany, a half-smoked cigarette in an ashtray on the table.

The cats drummed across the hall, nudging the living room door open to show a large empty birdcage. "My parents used to keep parakeets," she explained. She watched intently, lips tight, as I fed Didi in the yellow lamplight. I knew she'd do a good job.

I stood up to leave and Paola reached for a tiny drawer in a wooden dresser. She pulled out an emerald feather. "This was from one of our parakeets," she said. "Would you like it?" I thanked her and tucked it gently between the back pages of my passport. A talisman, I thought as I walked out.

When I stepped into the numb darkness of the street, a crescendo of emotion erupted inside me. A rush of love, like a flare in a canyon, illuminated the dim contours of a great void. Stunned tears sprang to my eyes, and through a kaleidoscope of black crystals I saw with perfect clarity the threads of chance that now converged in me. Hot with love and pain, I began to walk away. Until the coach pulled out of Alexanderplatz and Berlin receded in the dawn, I wept.

While I was away, Paola found a sanctuary.

One year later. I'm in Brixton, South London, taking a course I chose because Joan Didion is on the reading list. The room I'm renting is just minutes from Bowie's birthplace. Lucky, I thought, and dyed my hair red to match.

Right now, between St. George's Day in April and St. Peter's Day in July, is when ewes in the Rhodope Mountains will be milked. These are also the weeks when common swifts arrive in Europe from Africa to breed. By autumn, they will be gone. I'm yet to see a swift over Brixton's rooftops, but I do see scores of wild parakeets wheeling and diving in flashes of green.

And every day, I carry Paola's feather in my pocket. It is a talisman, after all. It brings me synchronicity.

Just This, Here, Now

Grapefruit

Greg November

Snake Man fondles a grapefruit. Kate didn't notice him approach the citrus stand and is startled by his hemp and sweat aroma. Pawing at a bin of limes, she offers a friendly-enough smile, and he salutes her with his grapefruit. Usually, Snake Man stands up by one of the paseos with a large yellow boa constrictor draped around his shoulders, entertaining tourists and kids and the dirty semi-homeless. Where is his snake now?

Stoned Vender watches them with mild interest. Kate and Snake Man are the only people in front of the stand, which is the last before the edge of the market, before the parade of fruit, flower, vegetable, nut, and oil venders gives way to the empty street and beach beyond. The morning is overcast but warm and the market is not as crowded as it usually is. Strange for a Saturday. Where is everyone? And where is the snake?

Snake Man holds his grapefruit aloft. "Mighty grapefruit, class of the citrus kingdom, bestow us with thy vitamins and earthly goodness."

He picks up a second grapefruit and touches it gently to the first, making them momentarily kiss. He tries to nudge Kate with a knobby elbow, although she's too far away and the gesture ends up more like a strange jerk.

"Where is everyone?" Kate asks Stoned Vender.

He shrugs, looks around. "This is pretty typical for the midweek market."

Midweek? Then, with embarrassment, Kate remembers: it's Thursday. Could she have become a cliché so quickly? Approaching noon in a California beach town and she'd forgotten what day it was. Distracted, she drops a lime from the bunch in her hands. It hits the ground soundlessly, rolls away and again she says, "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," Snake Man says, "That little lime is small but tough."

From inside the stall, he bends down and retrieves the fallen lime, examines it, dusts it a bit, and then holds it out to Kate.

College Boy is in bed back at Kate's tiny apartment. Or he was when she'd left, conjuring a sudden urgency to buy fruit in order to let him disappear without them having to speak to one another. Last night he'd said he'd take her to Rincon today. He'd said it like it was dirty talk. Kate had explained that she didn't surf, and that she had to work, but College Boy had pulled her toward him. They were in bed. He kissed her and then spoke softly into her ear that it didn't matter, he would show her how. "You'll surprise yourself," he whispered.

Kate buys the limes and drops them in her canvas bag along with the mango and berries she'd gotten from other stands. As she walks away Snake Man calls her name.

She stands in the middle of the street as Snake Man strides over. He's maybe seventy but moves like a much younger man. His skin, like the vender's and everyone else from this place, is tanned and leathery. But Snake Man is solid-looking, more powerful than the vender, with broad shoulders perfect for balancing a six-foot boa constrictor, his wisps of sea-bleached hair revealing a scalp pocked from decades in the sun.

"Lass, I'm going to eat these grapefruits down at the beach. Can I request your company?" He holds up his own loaded canvas bag.

Kate tells the man she has to go. He extracts a grapefruit from the bag and holds it out to her. “Take one, then. My treat. Vitamin C is so good for the organism. Good for growing young bodies like yours.”

Kate holds up her hand, declining. “I take a supplement.”

“It’s not the same, Lass. Come now.”

To end the encounter, Kate accepts the grapefruit, dropping it into her bag with the other fruit, hoping it doesn’t smush the berries, which are in their own small plastic bag.

Snake Man whistles as he strides toward the beach.

Kate has been in the town just over a year and things have slowed. That seems to be the word for it. She’d moved across the country in a dusty rush and the first few months out here had been exciting and specific. She spent her days at the beach watching the surfers and volleyball contests, joining in a time or two when asked. Or she walked the paseos, digging the various shops, the Spanish mission architecture, sand and palm trees and sunshine and all that. The whole place had a smell, a bit floral but not any specific flower she could identify, baking clay rooftiles and coffee and hemp, tortillas, open ocean air. At night she heard seals and waves from her apartment. It felt like vacation until her savings ran out and she was forced to get a job.

She’d temped for a while, answering phones here and there, spending one entire day sitting in the empty office of a just-fired employee just in case the phone rang (which it didn’t) until getting placed as a server at a luxury hotel in the sea-facing hills behind the main part of town, where she’s worked ever since, lulled by pleasant weather and sun-lacquered hills, courting a feeling of placement but instead what she feels is misplaced, detoured rather than established, and unlike anyone else in this town she'd chosen after consulting a friend from college who lived somewhere near LAX. "It's the northern fringe of Southern California," her friend had explained. A borderland, was how Kate thought of it, which appealed to her. And now she's here, eleven or so months in, with a job and an apartment. But restlessness remains, dulled maybe by ocean breezes, but not settled. She'd gone thousands of miles from home but hadn't arrived at a destination so much as another stop on the way to some other place, still unknown and further off.

Unfortunately, she had no other connections in this state. The friend who'd directed her to this beachy borderland had since had a baby and was busy with all that. Despite the people who knew her around town, Kate hadn't made any real friends. There were the folks she worked with at the hotel, but they had their own group and in the time Kate had been working there, last night was the first time they'd asked her to join them. They'd gone to Wildcat—Shitty Kitty, as everyone called it—and that's where she'd encountered College Boy. He approached her at the bar, remarked on her drink choice. Even in the dance club lights and fog she was disarmed by his long, feminine eyelashes. Soon they were dancing. Later, they'd gone back to her place.

She flexes toes in flip-flops as she walks, feeling grains of sand. Not even the end of February and here she was in a summer dress and flip flops, the temperature near eighty. She'd tried expressing this to her mother the last time they'd spoken, but it hadn't had the same effect on her mother as it had on Kate. Flip flops? You abandoned me to wear flip flops in the winter? Kate had explained that she was twenty-four, not fourteen, and it's not abandonment to seek adventure. Yes. Yes, it is. In our situation, that's exactly what it is. The conversation went like that until both of them were so exasperated they screamed and hung up. Kate imagined her mother on the other end complaining to Rog or Kev or whatever other ridiculous forty-year-old man she was with. They were all the same, thinking an avoidance of polysyllabylism in their name would keep them young. Kate's mother had her when she was the age Kate is now. Whenever that fact burbled out of the mind murk, Kate pushed it down.

I'll take you to Rincon.

What burbled back, sometimes, was surprising.

Kate's apartment is on one of the shady streets west of the main drag which holds the market. She pauses on the small patch of grass between sidewalk and doorway. It's a tiny place, a room really, a hovel, the kind of closet space carved out from an existing home and converted into a room for rent because the town was already so crowded and expensive. One of the other servers she worked with had explained to Kate that he rented a couch rather than an apartment. He didn't actually live anywhere; just rented that solitary piece of furniture in someone's living room from midnight to six in the morning. A place to crash, that's all he needed. And he wasn't the only one who did that, he said. Isn't that homelessness, Kate said, but the other servers scoffed at that. They chuckled and called her repressed, a Puritan. Home isn't where you sleep. Home is how you live. Surfing, caving, busking, those things are home. They spoke with authority and Kate imagined they knew something she didn't. But she was getting closer. I'm here. I've arrived. Soon I'll shed my previous skin entirely. Then, maybe, I'll be home, too.

The palm tree in front of Kate's place waves in the breeze. She loves the tree in some kind of ridiculous way she'd find hard to explain. She loves it especially on overcast days. Somehow it seems more tropical to her on days like that. The wind kicking up, clouds bulging above.

Suddenly the curtains in Kate's one small window are pulled aside and College Boy's face appears in her window.

Inside, College Boy sits shirtless on the futon, which he has folded back from its bed position. He turns from the window when Kate enters. He's got the streamlined, muscular build of someone proficient in water sports. The sheets they'd slept in, that Kate had been sleeping in for weeks, are rolled in a clump on the floor. "I didn't notice how small this place is last night," he says, looking around with a funny smirk. "Sure is loud, though."

Kate realizes now that she doesn't actually know how old he is. She called him College Boy last night on account of the classes he said he took at City, but that didn't mean anything. She'd figured he was near her age, although with the light of day came a suspicion that College Boy was in fact a bit younger, an actual college boy. He'd looked well-fed and healthy the night before, operating in the loud club with a casualness that told Kate he probably came from money.

They'd gone back to her place because he'd joked that his wasn't suitable. After three or four vodka tonics, it was the kind of logic that appealed to Kate, although ordinarily she'd have preferred to not reveal her single room apartment. College Boy is the only person other than herself and the landlady, a stout-looking retired cop, who'd been inside the apartment the whole year.

Kate sets the bag of fruit on the counter by her sink, still only two or three steps from College Boy on the futon, a small island countertop between them offering the illusion of "kitchen" and "bedroom." Open cardboard boxes stashed and stacked in the room's corners and clothes stuffed in the narrow closet with the off-track accordion door complete the picture that Kate now sees as dingy and sad.

"That's the fridge," she says. "It's sort of a humming maniac."

"I wasn't confused. I know what a humming fridge sounds like." He smirks again, not in an arrogant way, but not uncomfortable either. Kate struggles to remember his name.

"What's in the bag?" he says.

"Fruit."

College Boy pumps his head like her answer amuses him in some way. "Were you in desperate need of fruit this morning or did you just hope I'd be gone by now?"

Kate pulls the limes, mango, and berries from the bag and sets them on her counter. Finally she extracts the grapefruit.

"I love grapefruit," College Boy says.

Of course you do.

He peers around the room. "This doesn't look like a girl's place," he says.

"It's not," Kate says, sounding a little sharper than she'd intended. She pretends to arrange her fruit on the counter.

"I'm sorry," College Boy says after a bit. "I would have left, but the thing is I don't think I remember your name. I mean, I don't remember your name, and I didn't feel right leaving and not knowing. I'm Donald. You know, in case you don't remember my name, either."

Kate feels calmed by this, College Boy Donald's not remembering her name. It means the night before had been exactly what she thought it was. She wasn't wrong. Her sensory apparatus still functioned. What had started as fear and turned to irritation had now morphed into relief, maybe even mild happiness. Yes, that's what it was. She was just the slightest bit happy Donald was still there, that he'd stayed long enough to become reassuring. After telling Donald her name, Kate yanks open a drawer, the one that always sticks, and clanks her hand around until she finds her one sharp knife. Okay, okay, she can do this. Be a nice girl who does nice things, cuts up a nice grapefruit for the nice boy. Kate goes to work slicing, tossing the rinds in the trash and wiping juice on a balled towel nearby. Donald watches her from the futon. "You should compost those rinds," he says. "Help return some of the energy you've taken from the planet."

"Don't tell me," Kate says, smirking. "You speak for the trees."

Donald remains deadpan and explains that each of us can be a better person if only we want to. It's not even about big things. "It only takes small changes," he says. "For example, not throwing your grapefruit rinds in the trash. They're still food, just maybe not for you."

Kate deflates somewhat. This is the sort of thing her mother used to say, cycles of energy, high and low vibration food. Kate was raised by a vegetarian in Connecticut before there was much besides jiggling blocks of tofu and vegetables to comprise the diet. Her mother also practiced yoga before it exploded on the scene, before it was trendy. Kate remembered her mother in pajamas, saluting the sun, or in warrior pose, fingers reaching to a yellowed patch in the ceiling Kate imagined as a tiny, upside-down lake. Again, the thought comes to her that her mother then wasn't much older than Kate is now, deliberately slicing a grapefruit she has no intention of eating.

She retrieves rinds from the trash and sets them on the counter, figuring maybe she'll chuck them later; no use taking a stand now. She watches as Donald reaches arms behind his head, clasping fingers in an exaggerated stretch bordering on showy. From his seated position on the futon, he extends an arm to tap fingertips against the window he'd earlier looked through to see her standing on the lawn, waiting, delaying. So, his armpits are hairless. Chest, too, in fact. She sees now that there isn't a hair anywhere on his body beyond his head; he looks sculped from wax, maybe stone.

"Do you shave your armpits?" Kate gestures with the knife.

Donald turns to face her, still stretching, as if in a pose. "And my chest," he says. "My junk, too. Back, arms, legs."

"What do you have against hair?"

"Slows me down, that's all. Creates drag."

"Are you talking about in the water or just in general?"

"The water, mostly." Donald pulls in his arm and sits up. He uses the fingers of one hand to press back the fingers of the other. Then he switches and does the same thing with his other hand. This guy never stops moving, Kate realizes, watching as he flips around on the futon and then extends his other arm toward the window, once again tapping lightly on the glass. With his back now turned, he says, "Don't you remember last night you wouldn't stop rubbing your hands all over me? Right here on this very bed or whatever it is. You said it felt like flying."

Kate, who'd thankfully finished with the grapefruit and moved to peeling the mango, stops. She grimaces, then realizes even with his back turned, he might see her expression in the window reflection. It seems lurid, mean almost, to have her words presented to her in the light of day. Resuming her mango work, she says, "You said some things, too."

Donald stands from the futon and shows his palms, surrendering. In only his boxer shorts, Kate is impressed by his build: powerful thighs, chest, and shoulders, the hairlessness. There are sleep lines on one side of his face and when he comes up to her, when he wraps his arms around her and she drops the knife in the sink, when he puts his cracked lips to the spot behind her ear, she tells him his breath is rancid. She turns in his grasp but he doesn't let go. She flails her hand toward the half-peeled mango and finds instead a piece of grapefruit, rindless, sectioned like an orange, and feeds it to him. Donald chews it still holding her, juice running down his chin and dropping, one drop, two drops, on her own exposed shoulder.

"You're not from here, are you?" he says, chewing.

"I'm from Connecticut."

"I've never been east of the Salton Sea."

His grip on her is soothing, edging even toward stimulating, and she settles against him. He presses his hips forward, just so, and she feels the hardness in his boxers. Kate feeds him another grapefruit section and eats one herself. Immediately, a surge runs from her taste buds, through saliva glands, and into her chest, and she clamps her lips shut. In a moment of forgetfulness, of impulse, had she just put a piece of grapefruit in her own mouth? She chews slowly, trying not to contort her face as the bitter juice coats the inside of her mouth. Years ago, in seventh or eighth grade, they'd had a special health counselor come to their science class to talk about taste buds and so forth. She'd brought with her a sort of kit to test for what she called super tasters, those whose taste buds were more attuned than ordinary and so they experienced one or more of the tastes in a more extreme way than others. The counselor had tested each student in the class and Kate had been the only super taster in the class. It was her bitter receptors. "Congratulations," the counselor said, beaming. "You've got a superpower."

Donald releases Kate and steps back. “Are you okay?”

Kate presses her lips tighter, then thinks *oh, fuck it*, and turns to the sink. She spits out pink mush and then rinses her mouth with a handful of sink water. When she turns back to Donald, he’s smiling. “You know,” he says. “You should compost that.”

Donald hands her the towel from the counter and after Kate wipes her face, she attempts a smile. “I don’t much like bitter things,” she says.

“That’s funny. I thought the grapefruit was sweet.”

“I’m a bit of a super taster.”

“You know what?” Donald says. “I am, too.”

He laughs and Kate realizes the look on her face must be something between skepticism and outright disbelief.

“Never met another one before,” he says. “My super taste is sweet. Birthdays are always a real drag. But a semisweet grapefruit is about right. Guess you experienced it the other way, huh?”

“I always thought I was unique.”

“Unique enough.”

Donald leans back against the counter, affecting a casualness that Kate would probably feel embarrassed to show herself.

“I wonder what it really tastes like,” she says. “You know, to a normal taster.”

“No way for us to know,” he says. “It doesn’t matter, anyway. It tastes how it tastes to us.”

Donald gets dressed, then swipes the grapefruit rinds and mango skins off the countertop and shoves them into the deep pockets of his cargo shorts. Will he carry them around all day? He stands in the middle of the room, pockets puffed with fruit parts, looking uncertain of what to do next. Kate feels an urge to say something that would break the awkwardness, but at the same time a competing urge not to. They each remain where they are, neither saying anything.

"What brought you to the west?" Donald says finally, his question like a twisted valve releasing a bit of the pressure that had built in the room.

Kate has the answer ready. It's the same answer she's given to everyone who's asked: the need for adventure, to see a new part of the country, carve out my own way. She begins to give this prepared explanation, but the polite smile of disappointment that blooms on Donald's face, stops her. Just as she's given this answer many times, he must have heard it many times, from various passers-through in this beautiful beach town. *Unique enough* had downgraded to *not unique at all*. Kate imagined Donald plotting his exit and though that's exactly what she'd hoped for originally, it's different now. She stops speaking and then switches from the answer she's always given to the true answer, the one she's never uttered, even, really, to herself.

"My grandmother killed herself." Kate pauses, gauging the effect of her words, but Donald only watches, waiting for the rest of the answer, an unbelievable demonstration of poise, and she suspects his earlier casualness was not affectation at all. He might really be that steady. As her chest pounds, Kate continues her explanation. Her grandmother had come to live with them, as there was no money for a home and only enough for a caregiver once a week. Her grandmother needed more. She had some form of dementia that made her mean. She was always lashing out at Kate and her mother, accusing them of keeping her hostage, feeding her trash, forcing her to stay awake all night. Some days she didn't know who they were and would loudly interrogate for hours on end, even through the closed door of her room. A time or two her grandmother actually called the police, although the situation became pretty obvious to the officers once they arrived.

"One day I heard my mother scream and ran upstairs. My grandmother had taken a whole bottle of her pills. She was slumped on the bathroom floor and her skin was blue. Afterwards, my mother became unbearable. She smothered me like you wouldn't believe. She began sleeping on the floor in my room, asking where I was going every second. Do you know people always thought my mother and I were sisters? That's how young she was when she had me. My whole life I'd never had a mother who was only a mother and now I had too much of one, I guess. I couldn't take it, so I left. I got out. And, well, here I am."

"You just left her alone?"

Kate was realizing this was a skill of his, the ability to say without judgement what would sound like accusation or rudeness in another.

"It's what they do," he says. "I mean, *mothering* is right there in the word."

Having spoken so baldly about her mother and grandmother, Kate now clams up. While Donald looks around for his shoes, she swallows several times trying to calm her still-buzzing taste buds. Before leaving, Donald pauses at the door and Kate fears he will mention surfing again, but any mention of Rincon seems to have burned away in the sunlight. "I hope to see you at the Kitty tonight," he says, lightly patting his rind-filled pockets. "You don't meet a fellow super taster every day."

For a while Kate stays in her room. Why had she said all that about her mother and her grandmother? But she knows why. Kate has been a different person since arriving in the town. She'd always been the quick one, ready with a joke or a comment about this or that. Her friends used to call her Sharpie. Before landing in California, she'd never been known for keeping her mouth shut. And now? She'd been borderline monastic since showing up in this beach town. The repressive from back east. And Donald had loosened some valve that controlled all that. At least partially. Because, of course, what she'd told him was not *entirely* true.

She showers and gets dressed in her work clothes, fixes a cheddar cheese and quince paste sandwich to eat on her walk to the beach, a habit she'd started at some point after coming to the town. All ways by the beach. Wherever she had to go, she liked to take the way that led by the beach, even if it wasn't the fastest or most direct. If she had time, she would sit for a while on one of the benches positioned where sidewalk met sand and look out at the gray waves and the offshore derricks ten miles out, like ships guarding the coast, before heading off wherever she was going. Other days, she'd only cruise along the beach walk and briefly peer out at the water before turning uptown again.

Today she has time to sit. Growing up in the Farmington Valley, her only experiences of coastline were the rocky, marshy sort by the Mystic Aquarium. She knew Connecticut had sandy beaches, but she'd never been. Her first genuine experiences with sand and waves and sun had been right here in this small California beach town. She hadn't expected the oil derricks, and at first hadn't the faintest idea what those distant shapes protruding from the water were until a clerk at the temp agency explained it. She had a brother who worked on the derricks. The oil men spent weeks out there, sequestered in the sea, pulling sludge from earth guts twelve hours a day. Kate thought it would be a job she could to, but her co-worker had laughed when Kate asked how to get involved.

A sound reaches Kate on the beachwind. Is it her name? Is someone calling her name?

Snake Man approaches along the walkway, as rollerbladers and dog walkers adjust their gaits, a few pointing or, if they're tourists who haven't been in town long, gasping, holding palms to open mouths. Snake Man, as usual, is shirtless, only now his large yellow boa constrictor is draped along his shoulders. Snake Man looks impressive, his sun-browned, salt-brined skin every bit as reptilian as the snake's. The snake, in fact, looks smoother, easier to touch, the contrast of its dull yellow against Snake Man's leather skin striking. When they sit next to Kate on the bench, she scoots away a few inches. The boa constrictor undulates around Snake Man, its forked tongue flicking the air, smelling. Up close, she sees that the snake's yellow and white skin has strange patterns to it, a confluence of diamonds, circles, and jagged lines that seems intended to disorient. The shapes appear faded, and Kate wonders if that's a product of age, beach air, or human captivity. She finds herself wondering if the snake has a name. Or, for that matter, if Snake Man has a name. He reclines against the bench, legs extended into the sandy walkway, arms at his side, his head tilted down toward the snake's head. He is talking quietly, the boa constrictor flicking its tongue as if in conversation.

Suddenly, Snake Man comes upright and sighs heavily, the snake rising and falling with him. "Did you eat your grapefruit? Pretty delicious, yes?"

"Yes," she says. "Delicious."

Two young boys, maybe thirteen years old, skinny in bright colored bathing suits, both with surfboards tucked under an arm, walk by on their way to the water. As they pass, laughing about something, Kate expects to get a whiff of sunscreen but does not.

It's a futureless town, a place without consequences, the enduring present tense of "surf's up" and as Kate watches the boys walk toward the ocean she feels a surge of admiration, ridiculous in its nature, for the unburdened way in which they carry themselves.

Is that why she came here? Seeking to emulate the forgetfulness of the beach? Snake Man looks at Kate, smirking. He is talking about the power of the grapefruit and it strikes Kate now that she and her mother were each in the wrong place. It was her mother who belonged here, free spirit that she was and all. Despite efforts to not be, Kate was too guarded for this place—yes, okay, maybe even repressed.

She was also, even in her moments of honesty, a liar.

It had actually been Kate who found her grandmother, dead and blue in the room she'd taken over in their house. Kate's mother had been at the store and in a panic Kate had called 911 and felt foolish because they kept asking questions she didn't have the answers to. How long had she been like that? What pills had she been on? What was her medical condition? "Just send someone!" she'd yelled into the receiver.

When Kate's mother returned, she was greeted by a fire engine parked in front of the house and two paramedics carefully loading a stretcher with a form under a sheet into an ambulance. She'd run up to Kate, wrapped arms around her, and drew Kate into a desperate hug, two grocery brags left behind in the street. From that moment, her mother hadn't drifted more than a few feet from Kate until the morning she drove away, heading west. Her mother had been inside that day, not watching Kate leave.

Next to her, Snake Man has closed his eyes and is breathing slowly, the boa constrictor has stopped its tongue flicking, its undulations, and for the moment is motionless. Kate peers out at the waves, trying to identify the two boys from the rest of those floating, gliding, splashing in the sea. Before she's certain she's picked them out, Snake Man lets out a sort of wheeze, shudders a bit, but does not open his eyes. Then his chest stops rising and falling. His eyes are closed, hands crossed over his belly. Kate watches him for a moment, heart thundering. She looks to the ocean, to the bobbing surfers, checks to see if anyone on the sidewalk can help, but Kate and Snake Man are on an island, no one else near enough to notice what's happening on their bench. She watches unbreathing Snake Man, a surge rising from the muscles in her belly, her overwrought heart. She can't speak, doesn't even know any words.

Then Snake Man inhales sharply and his eyes flutter open. He looks around as if uncertain where he is, licks his crusty lips. When his glassed expression falls on Kate, he looks menacing for just a moment before softening his expression. "Lass," he says, closing his eyes again and leaning back. "I was having the strangest dream. You were in it. Isn't that strange? Here I am, afternoon at the beach, dreaming of you who is right next to me."

Finally recovered, Kate searches for a fitting response but can't find it. Snake Man wishes her well as she stands to leave. "Work beckons all, even in this sunny, dreamy town," he says. "Even the snakes have to work sometimes."

Kate heads up the street, wondering which is true: her version of the town or Snake Man's.

Annie McNair

E.G. Silverman

I grew up in Squirrel Hill, so when my architect friend calls to tell me there's been a shooting at Tree of Life, it's my turn to play the role of so many before me, watching the disaster unfold on television and saying I never thought it would hit so close to home. But I have thought it. Any Jew has thought it.

My grandparents were born less than twenty-five years after the Civil War. Though they didn't immigrate to the US until they were teenagers, they easily could have spoken to people who'd witnessed that war and slavery. My father was born in 1920. He could have heard firsthand from someone who remembered Abraham Lincoln being assassinated, just as I remember Kennedy being shot when I was ten. When I was growing up, the Holocaust seemed like ancient history though it was only a decade or two in the past. I was twelve when a woman stopped me on Murdoch Street, a block from my house, to ask where she could get the streetcar to downtown. I saw the tattooed number on her forearm. After I gave her directions, she asked if I was Jewish. I said I was. Then I can believe you, she said. The message was clear. I scoffed at her. Now I understand. History isn't that distant.

The talking head coverage of the Tree of Life killings makes me angry, though perhaps it's frustration looking for a scapegoat. Trump claims it was their fault for not having an armed guard. How dare he. Then after reading perfunctory condolences, he's back to ranting about imaginary invasions from groups he loves to decry. It's the liturgy of his worship, the call and response his congregation adores, their bloodlust. They come to his services to shout their wrath. Is he ruthlessly smart or hopelessly delusional? Or both?

I'm annoyed at the media for not understanding that Squirrel Hill is the name of a neighborhood, not a town. It's part of Pittsburgh. They make it sound like a shtetl even though less than half the population is Jewish these days. The bakeries and kosher butchers, except for one, closed up decades ago. There's an op-ed in the NY Times declaring Pittsburgh to be the least anti-Semitic city in the country. What a load of hooey. Various analysts issue breathless proclamations labeling the shooting a hate crime, a terrorist attack, or some other meaningless characterization. It was a Jew-killing.

The NRA sounds off about the Second Amendment guaranteeing the right to carry AR-15s, but there was no well-regulated militia at the Tree of Life.

Pence offers Christian prayers for the dead and a fervent call to kill one more.

The next morning, I drive from my home in New Jersey back to Squirrel Hill. First stop is the house I grew up in on Beacon Street, where my parents lived for 58 years. It's been spruced up by the new owners with a fresh coat of brown paint around the windows and along the roofline, the overgrown rhododendrons trimmed back, the concrete walkway and steps redone, a swing set installed in the back yard, visible from Schenley Park next door.

My grandparents escaped the Jew-haters in Eastern Europe—Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Bessarabia. They remembered the Holocaust in real time, as did my parents. To them anti-semitism was a fact of life. To the

Tree of Life massacre, my parents would have said, what did you expect? eventually it's always the Jews. They were Republicans at heart, Israel first, law and order—no bleeding-heart liberals got their votes. But the Republican agenda, the anti-science zealots, the conspiracy theories, Bush and his wars—even for close-minded bigots like them, it was too much. Before their deaths, they had been voting reliably Democratic, disgusted by my brother, a hardcore right-winger, who bombarded them with forwarded emails, which they had no idea how to open even if they had wanted to, their computer used only by father to play card games.

I left Pittsburgh for college in 1971 and returned only for occasional family visits. When my parents got old and then sick, the visits grew more frequent. Eventually nursing homes and finally, funerals.

First was my father's. The funeral home was an old Tudor-style brick building, the dimly lit chapel lined with drab dark wood, the pews bare and worn, the air heavy with death and despair. I heard stories from a dozen people who remembered my father, most of them patients from when he was still practicing medicine, one a union representative from the United Mine Workers describing to me how my father had been instrumental in getting Black Lung recognized as a disease so the mine workers would qualify for disability payments. "We all owe your father a lot," he'd said, his eyes searching mine for assurance that I understood.'

The burial was wet and miserable, rain and platitudes that rendered no solace, a fitting end to a life that had had its good days, but which for the last twenty years had been about keeping my mother at home so she could wait on him, and he'd never have to leave the house on Beacon Street. It poured all through the graveside ceremony. Lucky it wasn't snowing. My sister and I had to spring my mother from Western Psychiatric where she was being held under involuntary commitment for psychotic depression. She'd weighed 64 pounds when she was admitted. This was the sixth or seventh time she'd been in there. They'd zap her with ECT and after a few months they'd have put enough weight on her to let her out, but she'd be back. Each time, the intervals grew shorter.

My mother was in a wheelchair, a blanket over her lap, a man from the funeral home holding an umbrella over her head, while the rabbi was extolling my father's virtues as a healer and family man, neither of which were particularly true. "Why doesn't he hurry up and get on with it?" my mother hissed at the rabbi. "Doesn't he know it's raining? And I have to pee." When my mother was admitted, she'd excluded my father from the HIPAA forms. During the two weeks he'd been hospitalized before his death, she'd refused to take his calls. My parents, married for more than sixty years, did not speak to each other for the final weeks of my father's life. Two years later, as my mother lay in bed after a nurse in Magee almost killed her, I told her that if there was anything she had to tell anyone, it was probably time that she ought to be saying it. She just stared at me, her jaw hanging open.

"Mom, do you have anything you want to say to anyone?" I tried again.

After deep consideration, she said, "I have to pee." She was consistent.

A couple of years after my father died, she starved herself to death. An aid found her dead. I'd seen her a few days earlier and she could no longer sit up or talk. There was nothing but skin stretched across her bones as if she put herself through a concentration camp. My mother's funeral was worse than my father's, hardly anyone came, snow instead of rain.

Now, Tree of Life beckons me to Pittsburgh for the first time since then.

After paying brief tribute to the house on Beacon, I figure I might as well swing by the temple. I park on Shady and walk the last couple of blocks. The area is taped off as a crime scene, perhaps hiding blood and body parts still inside the sanctuary.

"There's a thing going on at Murray and Forbes," says one of the officers guarding the site, a blond woman with freckles and kind eyes. "I heard the kids from Allderdice are organizing some sort of vigil. You could check that out."

I make my way back up Shady and turn right onto Forbes at the ugly medical building that now occupies the corner next to Maxon Towers where my mother's parents lived after they sold their house on Marlboro. The sidewalks are thickening with mourners, heads down, trudging toward Murray.

I stop in at the Bagel Factory, where my sister and I usually met for breakfast if we happened to be in town at the same time. On a television behind the counter near the chalkboard of specials, a woman is interviewing an elderly man in a yarmulke. The two clerks behind the counter are turned toward the television. One, a squat, heavily tattooed woman with green hair is saying, "Can you believe this shit? I think that Rabbi guy was like in here, maybe it was Tuesday, picking up matzo ball soup and bagels. Now he's dead."

"He's not dead," the clerk with a shaved head and a skull earring says. "They held the Rabbi like hostage but let him go cause he was afraid of what shit a rabbi could put on him, you know, like a blood curse?"

"Like Trump said, it's literally their own fault for not having armed guards in there?"

The guy shrugs, his back still to me. “I saw they didn’t want to pay for them. Jews aren’t going to lay out money for that kind of shit.”

“Sorry, but could I get a black coffee to go?” I say.

The guy spins around, wondering how much I heard.

“Like, no offense,” he says and gets me my coffee.

“Hey, no charge,” he says when I hand him money. “Like everybody’s in mourning.”

Evening is raining and chilly, but people seem undeterred. A microphone on a stand is set up in front of a real estate office just down from the corner. The crowd fills the intersection and spills down Forbes across Murray, past the old stone Presbyterian church on one side and the Rite Aid and Jewish Community Center on the other, and up Murray toward Darlington. People carry posters, banners, candles, umbrellas, and, of course, phones, being sure to record everything so they can post it. Speakers offer a prayer, lead chants of vote! vote! vote! and rant against guns and violence. It is moving and ridiculous, heartfelt and put-on, sincere and predicable. Mostly, it is sad and loving and futile. It is all anyone can do, and it means little, accomplishes nothing.

As I am turning away to return to my car, a woman approaches me as if she has something to say. She’s around my age, with a disarming, impish smile. An umbrella decorated in swirling pink and black turtles is balanced on her shoulder. She is examining my face searching for recognition. “Bill?” she says.

I nod.

“Annie McNair,” she says.

The name is vaguely familiar, but I can’t place where or why.

“You don’t remember fucking me?”

I must look pretty stupid, standing there with my mouth hanging open.

"Three Rivers Arts Festival," she says.

A highlight reel of mental video tape that I haven't viewed in decades spools through my head.

"Well, do you?"

"We fucked at your house. Not at the festival."

Her face lights up. "You do remember."

One summer when I was home from college, I got a job working at the Three Rivers Arts Festival for three weeks in July. Annie was an art student at CMU. We'd hang out, have a couple of beers and smoke dope in the stairwells of the festival headquarters building in the Gateway Center. After the festival was over, we got together a couple of times before I returned to school. I think she had a boyfriend, but she took me to the bed she shared with him.

"You remember the house on Hobart Street? I bought it and fixed it up. You want to see it?"

"Right now?"

"Come on."

That's how she was, living in the moment, the way I wanted to, but rarely did.

Her house is in the middle of the block, a few streets over from my parents' house, constructed of solid brick, probably close to a hundred years old, with a large porch with brick pillars. She's had the trim painted white, gold, and black, the colors of the city's sports teams—Steelers, Pirates, and Penguins—and a Steelers banner is draped between the pillars.

"I thought you were from Cleveland," I say.

"When in Pittsburgh...."

"You never left after CMU."

"I like it here. I got married. One thing led to another. Pittsburgh's my home now."

Inside, the house is nothing like I remember, though my memory is more of the clutter and ramshackle furniture than of the house itself. As best I recall, her bed, or rather

her boyfriend's bed, was a mattress on the floor of a small room on the third floor, under the eaves, clothes strewn over everything. Now the house sparkles, the oak and maple floors gleaming, the house dressed up as if done by a decorator. There's lots of art displayed on the walls, an arresting combination of abstract and objective, as though the artist has decided to capture reality in terms of shapes, colors, and forms, as if it were architecture rather than landscapes, portraits, or still lifes.

Over the living room couch is a painting of a woman and a child holding an object, perhaps a vase or a bottle, their pale orange faces generic, flat, and yet full of expression, somehow universal, both joyful and sad, longing and complacent. The signature on all of the paintings is hers.

"I like them. This one especially."

"You're being kind."

"Are you famous?"

"I lacked the fortitude to be a starving artist. So, I became a graphic designer. I have an advertising agency, or, as we call it now, communications solutions. I paint for myself."

The house tour begins in the kitchen where she pours us each a glass of a white Bordeaux and ends up on the third floor. There are two rooms and a bath. An easel is set up near two large windows overlooking Hobart. Painting supplies are scattered across desks, tables, and the floor. Canvasses in various stages of completion are everywhere.

From there, we cross the hall into the smaller of the two rooms. Stacks of boxes are lined up against one of the walls.

"This is the scene of the crime," she says.

On the wall near the bed is a painting of two figures, a woman standing behind a man, a long blue curve snaking off through a field of green into the distance. The woman's hands are around the man, her palms on his belly. His hands are below his waist and a glorious stream of yellow arcs out into the landscape, flowing across the canvass to merge into the blue band like a stream into a river. "That's us at Frick Park," she says.

We'd been drinking and I had to take a piss. It was night and the park was deserted except for us. I tried to do it in private, but she insisted on standing with her arms around me.

"I thought that was really weird."

"Then why'd you do it?"

"I had to piss. You didn't give me a choice."

"I thought it was so intimate. I felt in love with you."

"We were pretty drunk."

"What's the point in being drunk with someone new if you can't feel in love with them?"

She has slipped in behind me, her hands on my stomach, as that night, as in the painting.

"Am I supposed to piss on the bed?"

"Do you want to?"

"Will it make you feel in love with me?"

Her fingers unbuckle my belt. I turn around and we kiss. She pushes a pile of sweaters onto the floor and opens the bed. We're of the age and experience where there's no hurry, passion held in check by patience and procedures. She likes to kiss and touch and gape at each other, stopping to explore, smile, and chuckle. "I love you," she says.

We doze afterward, but images of Tree of Life and the throngs of people in the streets keep flooding into my mind. I have a half-dream blurring the clerk at the Bagel Factory with an Allderdice student I watched beg the crowd to stop gun violence. When I open my eyes, Annie is awake her face close to mine.

"It's hard to get it out of your head, isn't it?" she says.

"When I was at Allderdice, we had plenty of fights. There were six plainclothes cops stationed there. Kids got punched in the hallways. But nobody got shot. Nobody even thought about violence at temple."

"Where I grew up in Pepper Pike, nobody had guns. Nobody got shot."

"Things were simpler back then."

"No they weren't. You're forgetting."

"You're right. Vietnam and the draft were hardly simple."

"Then it was war. Now it's.... I don't know what you call it. War against ourselves?"

"What can you do but fuck a stranger?"

"You're no stranger. You're a love from the past. Who knows? Maybe a love of the future."

"Speaking of loves from the past, what happened to the guy you were sharing this room with?"

"I married him."

"But I thought––"

"That I didn't love him?"

"You did give me that impression."

"He was cheating on me with a girl living on the second floor."

"You used me to get back at him?"

"You could put it that way."

"And here I thought you liked me."

"I did like you."

"But you married him."

"I thought he'd shaped up. But then his cheating started up again."

"Why didn't you call me? You could have used me again."

"It was a lot harder to find people before the internet."

"You tried?"

"There was nothing to try. I didn't know anything about you."

"How long were you married?"

"A few years. It was fun and messy and then it was time to grow up and he wasn't ready."

"You were ready to grow up?"

"There's different ways to grow up."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning growing up isn't the same as growing old."

"Though often they go hand in hand."

"Growing up means accepting responsibility. Growing old means giving up."

"Giving up what?"

"Your dreams? Your hopes? Everything and waiting for death?"

"So, you grew up but not old?"

"And he didn't grow at all. Except his gut."

"How does your giving up on being an artist fit into this dictum?"

"You saw my studio. You saw my paintings. I gave up nothing. But I accepted responsibility for making a living. And taking care of children."

"You had children? With he who wouldn't grow up?"

"I had one with him. I thought it might make him change. That was a mistake. Then I had one with my second husband."

"You made the same mistake twice? How does that fit with accepting responsibility?"

"He died of leukemia. He was forty-two."

"Sorry. That was stupid of me."

She scoots over and hugs me to her, front to front, her chin on my shoulder. "So much death," she says and rolls over onto her back. We're side by side, staring at the ceiling. There's a sun overhead, and a mountain scene, a river, a forest, and a moose.

"My son Jeff's in North Carolina. He's a programmer. Becky's an art teacher. She's in Colorado with my two grandchildren. Want to come with me to visit them? Rocky Mountain high and all that?"

"Right this minute?"

She laughs. "Sure, why not? We're grown up but not old." She looks at me askance for a moment. "You haven't grown old, have you?"

"We're supposed to be in mourning."

"I'm sick and tired of being sad. Nothing ever changes."

"Plenty changed for the victims. They're dead. Everything's changed for their families, for everyone who knew them, for everyone who can't walk into a temple without worrying whether they might get shot. It's for them that we're in mourning."

"You're confusing mourning, loss, and fear. Mourning is a process done out of respect and tradition, often done for people we hardly know. It has its place. But I've done enough mourning for a lifetime.

"Real loss is felt by absence. Someone dies, your husband of leukemia for example, and it's the absence of his presence that never lets you forget, that rips at your heart, that makes sure the pain cannot be eased. This, another massacre of innocent people praying at a house of worship fills us with horror because it is in our neighborhood and it is people who could have been us, but we didn't know any of the dead, they didn't make up a part of our lives, so our existence goes on unchanged. There is no absence, no emptiness, no hole that can not be filled. We rage at the injustice, but it is not the same as losing someone we love. There is no absence of their presence."

"We think the loss is personal, in the gut, but if you forget for a moment, you forget the loss too."

"Exactly."

"Then why are all those people in the streets? How do you explain the outpouring of grief?"

"Fear. It's Tree of Life, not Columbine or Newtown. It could have been them. That's what they are afraid of. It's not for the dead. It's for the living."

"Many just want to post selfies."

"Sad but true."

"You think I shouldn't have come?"

She looks at me with a smile, touches my face lightly, and sweeps a hair from my eye.

"I'm glad you came," she says.

"Yeah, me too."

"You hungry?"

"Yeah."

She gets out of bed and starts putting on her clothes.

"Come on," she says. "Get dressed. I'll make you dinner."

Creature Comforts

ALINA ZOLLFRANK

For I can't wash, trim crimini mushrooms without
blasting *In the Hall of the Mountain King*;
For I keep minty sanitizer at the ready without
touching a gleaming handle;
For my brooding ideas dash ahead without
patience for time, toes, and heels;
For I startle at pealing chimes without
answering the looming call;
For I won't construct my night nest without
the oozy bog of a heated rice pillow;
For I won't dare descend stairs without
pandiculating like the neighbor's ticked cat;
For I saw her perched upon the fence post without
regard for dazzling life in my chirping garden;
For I must protect the chirps' origins without
interfering in nature's wise ways too much;
for I feed the swooping bushtits, house finches without
holding their wings excessively;
for I sling nectar in humble dishes without
surveying hummingbirds for taste preferences;
for I imagine my yard as idle paradise without
defying gravity from my easy couch perch;
for venerable beagles pile at my feet without
worrying about life's tomorrows;
for we all hum full-fledged melodies without
thrumming like a true timpani;
for the feasting chickadee cocks his head without
complaints about the frivolous tunes inside mine;
for the brown mushrooms are tender,

the cat has chased its flippant tail,
the hummingbird pursued the bright horizon,
the warm underbellies of my beagles remain;
For their mild eyes, they melt,
they pledge, plead:
Just this. Here. Now.

from after the storm

for eloise

GAVIN HOLLAND

five years have passed, now.
five years since i last read to you
                    as you sat, half-awake, in my lap.
five years since i last heard your
                    breathless pixie dust laugh.
five years since i last saw life in your wild
                    blueberry eyes,
since i missed
                    my chance
                    to say goodbye.

there is so much i don't remember.
the day you were born, your favorite food,
why you never cried when you hit your head,
why you didn't mind the rain. but i remember
the light of excitement in your eyes when i told you
we could watch star wars together when you got older,
the bright mischief in them as you stuck a piece of toast
in the wii. i remember how you couldn't quite sound
my name out right, how you learned to laugh before
you were ready to talk. how your smile made us all
forget how to frown.

it's been five years, now, and i'm terrified
that i'm the same person i was
                    the day i lost you,
even though i know that if you met me now—
with my bearded face and changed name,

eyes dulled by grief and growing up—
you wouldn’t
                              recognize me at all.
it’s been five years and i am still scared
that i didn’t do enough while you were here,
that when i held you, i didn’t hold tight enough,
that that’s why you’re gone. scared that i have
forgotten too many of our memories.
that you have to live through me, and i am trying
to die.

someone once told me, trapped inside
by a storm, that each thunderclap
is just you in the clouds, knocking down
block castles. to think, i used to be afraid
of lightning.

Shadows of the Sunset

i.m. Shayaan Azam (2012–2021)

SOFIUL AZAM

I

At sunrise we hardly think of sunsets that might pull you
like inescapable magnets or eat your dear ones like black holes,
leaving only cold numb memories. Son, after your death,
I have only sunsets now, no sun ever to be pictured
breaking the spine of darkness the way it always did.
You know I'm a poet, always thought poetry's the best thing
that ever happened to me, that it would promise me
like a mother to a child who lost a toy, but it can't promise me
or console me anymore. You took poetry's powering light with you!

II

Millions and millions across the world die of diseases
or in accidents and wars. It always unsettles me
but your death leaves me shattered like a wooden beach house
hit by a tsunami. Breakers around my legs calm me down
under the summer sun but nothing comes to my rescue
from my personal grief. Grief seems to be a private thing
that defies all logic of the grandiose mourning on a public scale.
I know every analogy even by the best poets is inadequate
to describe the shock I don't know how long I'll be reeling from.

III

You didn’t give us an indication that you were dying
or we simply didn’t realize it. You didn’t give us enough time.
I don’t know how to hold this grief of your death like a flower.
Will you ever rise like a newly-risen sandbar in a river?
You put an end to garrulity in my garrulous mind.
Lifeless is the fountain of the words I used and considered
more precious than gemstones on a table of spalted wood.
How would I trace the last remnants of garrulity in my taciturn mind?
The watershed moment tells me that nothing stays the same for long.

IV

I see your face everywhere but when I look deep, you are absent.
All I need is a mythical touch to bring you back,
to erase the sum of regrets you have become.
Nothing feels right while you lie eaten by maggots in the grave.
Everything’s now a battle, fiercer never so than at the moment –
even drinking water or listening to the silence in forested hills.
Words were as effective as a skin balm but not anymore.
Nor are the words my chase anymore, for a tiger
with its festering wounds cannot chase down any deer.

V

In your mother’s dream you came and cuddled on her lap.
It might not be as thrilling as horseback riding
but it’s the only safest thing you wanted as if for the last time.
As you disappeared, you told her to take care of your sister
– just a kid who doesn’t have the vocabulary of grief yet –
who sings, “My Brother is the best, the best there ever was.”
If we scolded her for anything else, you cried in secret.
You beamed when you took your newborn sister for the first time.
Your sister believes you are not dead, simply invisible like a soul.

VI

You disliked disputes so much as if they were grains
of scratchy sand that only leaves one's eyes bloody.
Your death dissolved some of them. Like pearls for monkeys,
you left ideals that we could have picked up as treasure,
and proved that even a small kid could teach anyone
the lessons of grace we proud adults so miserably fail at.
I teach at universities but you are the best teacher for me!
Yet nothing good will ever happen to me again; this I know for sure
because nothing can diminish the grief of a bereaved parent.

VII

Your love for animals either living or extinct always inspired me.
You loved forested hills and the sunlight falling on them.
We have a photo standing on top of a hill in the blinding sun.
While over half the world lives paycheck to paycheck,
I am moving from one crying fit to another.
Does it get any worse than this? I'm much deeper
into this grief than I'm hopefully picking up further.
Like a deadly virus of any pandemic, shadows are invading
our happiness and pulling down what we built in the sunlight.

VIII

What if you returned to say, "Won't we have a movie night tonight?"
There will always be movie nights except that we won't have another.
I remember your shrouded face – cold and smiling –
in the coffin. And whenever I think of your grave,
I think of a yellowjacket captured by a Venus flytrap.
Last year I was about to die of a respiratory problem
and two days before you died I could have died in a car accident.
An incorrigible wretch, an absolute bore, remains alive
while you became extinct like the dinosaurs you loved so much.

IX

You died at nine, and I’m trying to console myself with an elegy –
nine lines for each stanza, and nine stanzas for that matter.
Last time when a book came out, you bit it in one photo
as it often happens in the terrible twos. This time
there’s none with the new one. My son, you are not here
to dissolve a father’s regrets swelling like a tidal surge.
Life won’t be astounding like glass-blowing or easy again
like monsoon rain, and unimaginable puddles will appear
on the road once smooth like the rubbed iron handle of a tube-well.

Meditation on the Night

LAURA SOBBOTT ROSS

I love the beauty of it.
Its great solitude and engulfment.
Saturated,
a word that sounds like being
kissed too many times.

I once tried to ignore it,
to shoo it away
with satellite sound and lamplight.
And wakefulness.
Now I listen.
Am I brave enough?
Am I weary enough?
My ear pressed against it,
where I ready myself for grief,

but find, instead,
the small glass sound of crickets,
the hushed essences
of the day's slaughters and dances,
the smoke and brine of our encampments.
Canticle sounds like an intricate piece of the heart,
but it's just a common praise song.
Tonight, it sings of trains and rivers,
of moths— their wings, a beating cilia
fanning currents inward, while moonlight

is a precision, its own weather,
ancient and mild, a lullaby gone
cellular. Crave, the ivory name
for each bone that cages the heart. I think
of the dead, those I kissed, those I wanted
to love me. The stars, a philosophy
reeking light; the sky still
changing hemispheres—
Andromeda, Perseus, Auriga, Cassiopeia—
a continuum of small burnings.

Ghazal Widdershins

Joshua St. Claire

After it ended, I tried to make the fixed stars run widdershins.
I'm a double fool. My begging couldn't even move one widdershins.

The compass erases the arc *where you made me end where I begun.*
I brush the ash off my wings. I can sing now that we're undone
widdershins.

Spider cities spin silken roads until the whole world is webbed.
All roads may lead to Rome, but I'd rather stay homespun
widdershins.

The scalene triangle snaps to attention. The bowhead is reassessed.
Everything that ends right must have begun widdershins.

Another baby boomer boss cuts the pension, cuts the pay, cuts
it up, cuts it down.
Just a typical Tuesday, life imitates *Saturn Devouring His Son*
widdershins.

It was never really about the moon or the music or the rocket
or the racket;
The Monolith is more than a movie screen when we watch
2001 widdershins.

The streets are empty now. The strange snow is settling everywhere.
An eye for eye leaves the whole world winter with a shotgun
widdershins.

A Trickle of Faith

A Trickle of Fate

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY

Slight as a pin prick I'd been
reminded again of a dear friend
who had underwent an open-
heart surgery, a senior citizen
nearly eighty whom me and my
loved one had grown to know
so well and the thought that he
may not live through it shattered
my prayers as if no tears, no deft
hands could mend him, he like
a broken chessman. A pair of
threads tied my heart in place,
left me alone with hollow
evenings, and a pale light
threatened to flicker out inside
of me; my world upended like
a teacup, my thoughts nearly
vocalic, the many tense and
careless inflections that now
inhabited me. Nothing more
than a trickle of fate tapped
at my window and now all
I ever hear day after day is
a sheaf of whispering leaves
and my spirit has become
like scratched leather. He
may not last long in this life
and if he is lifted up past
the clouds I'd had seen the
truth in God's eyes; my world

would be so thin and words
would lay so heavily upon
my tongue. Above me outside
my window is the wintry blue
sky and I picture my hope
like a porcelain pot cracked
irreparably down the center.

The Breatharian

Jason Zeitler

The rumor going around the village was that the holy man had survived for weeks on nothing but air. It was said that in all that time he had not once stirred from his spot on the outskirts of the village, where he sat lotus style beneath a palu tree. Crowds had begun to gather to catch a glimpse of him. One day Sumith and his friend Bandula were walking home from school, wearing their white uniforms and black backpacks, when they encountered the crowd. They, too, had heard the rumor—many, many times, in fact—so they knew why the people were there.

At the back of the crowd Bandula stood on his tiptoes, straining to see what the spectacle was all about. Despite a recent growth spurt, he was short for a fourteen-year-old and a bit on the chubby side. “Shall we go see for ourselves?” he suggested, again rising onto his tiptoes in a vain attempt to get a better look.

Sumith grunted to communicate his displeasure at the suggestion. He was a year older than Bandula, and it seemed to him that his seniority obliged him to be more restrained. Besides, he was not overly curious when it came to spectacle. He derided people who stopped to gawk at traffic accidents, for instance.

Bandula pretended not to have heard Sumith’s grunt. “Can you believe he hasn’t eaten or drunk a thing for forty days and forty nights?”

"Don't lie," Sumith said.

"No, man," Bandula protested, "it's true." His belly quivered as he laughed. "Ask Lalitha."

Just the mention of Lalitha, Bandula's older sister, made Sumith blush. The other day he'd been bathing in the local tank with his family and a number of other villagers, including Lalitha, when her water cloth had come undone, exposing one of her breasts. She was only seventeen, but already she looked like a woman of the Sigiriya frescoes. Sumith had turned away, as if he'd seen nothing, but the vision remained seared in his memory.

Bandula was still laughing. "Lalitha saw him herself last evening. She says that even if he does eat, it can't be much because he's an absolute beanpole."

Sumith's resistance, like the holy man's body, was wearing thin. Ascetics always piqued his interest. He enjoyed learning about the Buddha and often read Jataka stories and other religious texts. He looked at Bandula, said "Are you coming, then?" and pushed his way through the crowd.

The holy man was even thinner than Lalitha had said. He wore only a sarong so that his protruding ribs were visible, and his skin was taut and leathery like the headcover of a Kandyan drum. He might have passed as one of the twists in the palu tree's trunk. Was it really possible, Sumith wondered, that the man had not eaten for weeks? He had that strange, otherworldly look of a saint. He also had scraggly, shoulder-length hair and a bushy, chest-length beard similar to the madman who'd appeared in the village a few years ago claiming to be Jesus. Sumith knew very little about Jesus, but he knew enough to know that he was not South Asian and that he did not have green eyes. And surely—Sumith laughed inwardly at the thought—Jesus did not have brown skin, as he was not a Cochin Jew.

"They say he's what's called a breatharian," Bandula said quietly and reverently as he and Sumith stood there gawking at the front of the crowd.

The breatharian sat motionless in the lotus position with his eyes closed and an utterly serene look on his face.

***

Throughout the rest of the day Sumith's thoughts returned to the breatharian. Where did he come from? Why did he choose Sumith's village? And what exactly was a breatharian, anyway?

That evening at dinner, Sumith spoke to his family just enough not to arouse their suspicions that his mind was elsewhere. He ate quickly, excused himself, and went to his room.

He lay in bed reading the Dhammapada by the light of an oil lamp, but he could not focus. Finally, he gave up. Something was not right, he thought, about the breatharian's going weeks without food or water. He'd recently learned in biology class about the digestive system, and he recalled Ms. Kusuma saying that the average human could not survive more than three days without water.

And supposing it were true that the breatharian had fasted for weeks, what was the point of it? To show off? If so, that would not be a very Buddhist thing to do. The Buddha himself rejected extreme asceticism, believing that such practices only added to suffering and did nothing to bring about enlightenment.

Sumith sat up in bed and removed his shirt. All the mental exertion had caused him to sweat. He glanced toward the open window. It was a sultry, moonlit night. With each passing moment, the singing of the tree frogs out in the garden seemed to grow louder.

There was no getting around it: he'd have to speak to the breatharian. His mother would not be happy about that, but he had a right to think for himself. She often told him he could pursue whatever religious or intellectual inquiries he chose, in the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. He remembered a couple of lines from a poem she used to read to him, "On Children": "You may give them your love but not your thoughts, / For they have their own thoughts."

Just then his mother appeared in the doorway of his room, looking concerned. She had yet to change out of her sari and into her nightclothes. "Is something the matter, darling? You weren't yourself earlier."

He did not want to lie, so he said nothing.

She came over and untucked the mosquito net from under the mattress and sat down on the bed beside him. "Does it have to do with a girl?"

"Aiyo, no," he said, suppressing a laugh. "Well, at least not in the way you're thinking." He had yet to tell someone about Lalitha's water cloth.

"What do you mean?"

He told her then, and they both had a good laugh.

***

As time passed, the crowds on the outskirts of the village grew smaller and smaller until eventually no one turned up to see the breatharian at all. Only Sumith's interest did not wane. He told Bandula of his plan, and each day after school for a week, the two of them did dry runs to see if the breatharian was still in the same spot. Sure enough, each time the boys crossed the bund, with the tank on one side and the rice fields on the other, they would see the breatharian in the middle distance, as motionless as a statue and as emaciated as ever.

On the seventh day, when they reached the end of the bund on their way home from school, Sumith said rather mysteriously, “It’s time.”

“You mean now?”

“Yes, now.”

They stood with their thumbs in the straps of their backpacks and squinted in the late afternoon sun. Green bee-eaters flitted about here and there on the dirt road, dustbathing or eating insects caught on the wing. In the shallows of the tank a lapwing erupted into its loud, scolding did-you-do-it series of calls. A stray dog materialized out of nowhere, trotted up to the boys, and unceremoniously sniffed at their feet.

“Shoo,” Bandula said and kicked at the dog.

It yipped and ran off.

A voice suddenly came from the opposite end of the bund. Lalitha was running toward them. “There you are, you idiot! I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

The boys exchanged glances.

Lalitha came up to them with her arms akimbo. She was wearing a floral chintz dress, and her hair was in plaits.

Sumith blushed and averted his eyes.

“What is it?” Bandula asked her with irritation in his voice.

“Mother needs your help. Father had to go to Tissa for supplies, and one of the cows is calving.” Their parents were subsistence farmers.

Bandula gave Sumith an apologetic look. “Sorry, brother, I have to go.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Lalitha asked scornfully. When neither of the boys responded, she glared at Sumith. “This was your idea, wasn’t it? You’re an even bigger idiot than he is.” She looked in the direction of the breatharian. “I should have known you wouldn’t be able to keep away, being a religious zealot yourself.”

“Sumith just wants to talk to him,” Bandula blurted out.

Sumith frowned. That was what he got, he thought, for entrusting Bandula with a secret.

“Are you still here?” Lalitha shouted at Bandula. “Go on. Mother’s waiting.”

“Oh, all right,” he said and trudged back across the bund.

Lalitha followed him. After a few steps, she said over her shoulder, “Looks like you’re on your own now.” Then with a flick of her plaits she hurried after Bandula.

Sumith watched them go. As they receded from view, a herd of water buffalo disturbed a crocodile sunbathing on the shore of the tank. It galloped to the water and dove in, scaring up a purple heron as well as egrets, ibises, lapwings. The heron emitted a croak-like groan as it lumbered into the air. In a body the birds scattered helter-skelter, flew out over the rice fields, circled back to the tank, and then landed in the water one by one.

Sumith turned around and made his way down the dirt road. With each step his heart beat faster. As he drew closer to the breatharian, he saw that his eyes were closed. He stopped a few paces away from the man and awkwardly waited for him to open his eyes. He considered saying something or clearing his throat, but he was afraid the breatharian’s eyes might be closed for a good reason. What if he were meditating? Or what if he slept during the day because he stayed awake all night on the lookout for leopards and bears?

As he waited, it occurred to him why the breatharian had chosen this spot. It was a ruggedly beautiful edge of scrub jungle. Between the palu tree and the jungle was a stand of rosewood and Ceylon oak. A muster of peafowl, with their iridescent blue and green feathers, foraged in the undergrowth. Cassia bushes and lantanas of various colors were in bloom.

The breatharian opened his eyes. “I have been expecting you.”

Sumith’s heart skipped. He looked back over his shoulder, as if the breatharian were speaking to someone else, but no one was there. “You’ve been expecting me?”

The breatharian waggled his head. “That surprises you?” He gestured toward the bund. “I saw you and your friend.”

A brief silence ensued as Sumith contemplated the implication of the breatharian’s remark. So, he had been watching Sumith and Bandula watch him? That meant that his eyes had not been perpetually closed. Sumith scrutinized his face. The man had the features of a Sinhalese, and he spoke fluent Sinhala, but he did not behave like a Buddhist at all. Sumith wanted to get straight to the point and ask what a breatharian was, but he was afraid it might make him sound like an idiot. Instead he asked haltingly, “Why are you here?”

The breatharian smiled and said, “With every breath we take, we inhale two things: air and prana.” He turned his head and with a sweep of his arm indicated the jungle. “Both of these things are in abundance here.”

Sumith knew the word “prana” from studying Hindu literature in school. It meant “life force.” But what that meant he had no idea.

“Prana is the energy that connects and animates all things,” the breatharian continued, seeming to sense Sumith’s confusion.

So the breatharian was a Hindu. That would explain a lot. Maybe he was a yogi. Yogis sat in the lotus position and meditated just like Buddhists did. Sumith had no interest in becoming a yogi, but he was glad he had come. He felt as though he were in school receiving a lesson, and that suited him just fine.

With the backs of his hands resting on his knees, the breatharian positioned his fingers into the jnana mudra. "Prana exists everywhere. It is all around us. In stones and earth. In plants and animals. In you and me. Even in the air itself." He took a deep breath. "Can you feel it?"

Sumith admitted that he could not.

Suddenly the breatharian's face darkened. "Then you must learn!" he cried, and appeared to wince at his own words.

A peacock screamed in among the trees, and then peacocks all over the jungle joined in, making one guttural scream after the other.

Amid the din, the breatharian smiled a mad contorted smile and in a softer voice added, "You must learn to surrender your mind." Jerkily he thrust up a hand with the palm facing outward. He remained in this pose for nearly a minute. Then he returned his hands to his knees, re-positioned his fingers into the jnana mudra, and closed his eyes.

The lesson, it seemed, was over.

***

The moment Sumith set off for home he knew he'd have to speak to the breatharian again. Now that the ice had been broken, it'd be that much easier. Besides, Sumith was unsatisfied with the way the first meeting had gone.

A strong wind blew as Sumith walked home. Dust collected in his eyes and nose and left a gritty film on his uniform. Once he was home, he bathed at the well and put on a clean T-shirt and a sarong. Then he fixed himself a plate of unripe mango covered in chili powder and went barefoot out onto the veranda. This was the life, he thought, as he sat down on a chair: enjoying the simple pleasures, impermanent though they were. The air smelled faintly of the sea. The trees—frangipani, mango, neem, tamarind, weera—were flowering or in fruit. Purple bougainvillea and red hibiscus, which formed a border around the garden, were bursting with flowers.

Still, he felt unsettled. Something the breatharian had said was bothering him: that bit about surrendering the mind. It was easy for someone the breatharian's age to advise the surrendering of the mind, since he already knew the way things were. But Sumith had yet to experience the life of an adult, not to mention the touch of a woman. How could he possibly surrender his mind without knowing what he was surrendering?

The raucous, two-note call of a koel pierced the air, rousing Sumith from his thoughts. He resumed eating and was on his fifth slice of mango when his eyes were drawn to the field opposite the road. Some of the neighborhood children were there flying kites, and a small boy was chasing an errant spool across the field. The boy squealed and, giving up the chase, looked helplessly up at the sky. A hundred feet above ground his kite whirled uncontrollably and then nosedived into the canopy of an enormous palu tree.

Sumith laughed to himself, looked out over the garden, and savored another slice of mango.

***

Early the next morning before school Sumith went to see the breatharian. This time his eyes were open. He waved to Sumith. “Hello, young man. How are you? Have you come to ask more questions?” Behind him the jungle teemed with birdsong.

Sumith nodded but suddenly felt shy. The man might take offense if Sumith were to ask him how he’d survived so long without food and water.

The breatharian smiled with his eyes. “If you will not ask me a question, then I will ask you one. Did you know that prana provides nourishment for the body and the soul?”

“You believe in a soul?” Sumith said, overcoming his reticence, even though it was not the question he’d intended to ask.

“And you do not?”

Sumith shook his head. He was surprised at the breatharian’s ignorance. How could he be so disciplined in body but not in mind? It was common knowledge that no self-respecting orthodox Buddhist believed in a soul, or a permanent self. The concept did not jibe with the fact of the impermanence of all things. Sumith had learned that at temple from an early age. And more recently, what was it that Ms. Kusuma said? That the universe itself was in constant flux, expanding inexorably toward infinity? So how could anything possibly be permanent? “I’m a Buddhist,” Sumith said.

The breatharian smirked. “Even Buddhists need prana to survive.”

Blood rushed to Sumith’s face. Something was different about the breatharian—not just in his manner and in his voice but in his appearance, too. Sumith had the sudden urge to flee. “I have to be to school.” He quickly turned tail without breaking into a run, his heart pounding violently.

He found himself on the other side of the bund before he knew it. Halfway to school he bumped into Bandula and Lalitha and almost wept with joy at the sight of them.

"Brother!" Bandula said, clapping Sumith on the shoulder.

Sumith clapped him back. "Glad to see you too."

Lalitha made a face and went on ahead.

Bandula stared at Sumith inquisitively. "So?" he said, unable to contain his curiosity. "How'd it go with you-know-who?"

Sumith described their first conversation but kept quiet on the second.

"Did you find out how he does it?" Bandula probed.

"There wasn't time for that."

Bandula shrugged. "Oh, well. Better luck next time."

They took each other by the hand and walked silently for a while. Lalitha was far ahead of them now. Other children in white uniforms dotted the road. Here and there along the way, adults stood in their yards, brushing their teeth or watching the children go by.

Bandula grinned from ear to ear. "Aren't you even going to guess how things went with the cow?"

"False labor?"

"No, man." Bandula laughed. "Just the opposite." He let go of Sumith's hand and held up two fingers. "Twins. Both bulls. Can you believe it? We had a devil of a time getting them out."

Sumith said nothing and was silent and thoughtful the rest of the journey to school.

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The villagers spent the following day in religious observances for Vesak. In the evening people were out in full force. The men and boys wore white kurtas and sarongs, while the women and girls wore white saris or dresses. Colorful paper lanterns hung from trees along the roads and from eaves of buildings. Oil lamps flickered on windowsills and on altars. In front of the temple an electrically lit scene from a Jataka story was on display. All over the village food stalls offered free food and drinks.

It was customary on festival days for Sumith and his family to go to temple. They did so on this day like any other, and after they returned home, Sumith told his parents he was meeting Bandula at a food stall for ice cream. He left the house and sneaked unnoticed to his bedroom window and climbed through. Two minutes later he re-emerged—wearing a black long-sleeve shirt, denim jeans, and his backpack with the machete his mother used to crack coconuts—and headed for the road.

He looked out of place among all the people dressed in white. But no one paid any attention to him. On the outskirts of the village, instead of stopping at a food stall, he veered off toward the bund. He reached it just as the sun was setting. In the tank, water birds waded silently, getting in their last fishing before dusk. A solitary bull elephant stood nearby in a patch of rushes and reeds spraying itself with its trunk.

Sumith gazed across the bund. He could not see the breatharian, so it was safe to assume that the breatharian could not see him, either. He took out the machete, then stole down the embankment and made his way along a path that encircled the tank. Where the water ended, he stepped off the path onto a grassy field, avoiding elephant and buffalo dung as best he could in the crepuscular light.

He skirted the jungle's edge for a few hundred meters until he reached the opening of an elephant trail, at which point he disappeared into the brush.

The full moon was already high in the eastern sky. Sumith followed the trail by its light. He was well into the jungle when he heard branches breaking. He crouched down behind a tree, his heart racing. Whatever the animal was, it sounded big. His worst fear was that it might be a sloth bear because they were so vicious.

Then he heard more branches breaking, and the unmistakable rumble of an elephant. He breathed a sigh of relief. Elephants he could handle, so long as he kept his distance. Their eyesight was poor. He squinted into the darkness. Thirty meters away was a solitary bull easily weighing over six tons. If Sumith had not heard it and known what to look for, he might never have seen it: its gray hide blended in perfectly with its surroundings. It stood there gently swaying its head and trunk from side to side, its tusks glimmering in the moonlight. Sumith remained still, until the elephant went crashing through the brush toward the festival lights, intent on raiding farmers' crops while everyone was preoccupied.

He continued on the trail, tightly gripping the machete. Shortly he reached the breatharian and hid behind a cassia bush and stood there, watching. The breatharian was still sitting beneath the palu tree. Peafowl roosted overhead; Sumith could hear them rustling in the branches of the trees. From somewhere far off came the tu-whoo-hu of a fish owl.

An hour went by, and the breatharian did not move. The man was determined, Sumith would give him that. But so was Sumith. And he was bent on finding out the truth. He would stay here all night if he had to, even at the risk of his parents' sending out a search party for him.

Another hour went by, and still nothing happened. Sumith's eyes grew heavy. He sat down to make himself more comfortable and within minutes dozed off.

He awoke to the sound of voices. He jumped to his feet and peered through the branches of the cassia bush. A figure was standing in front of the breatharian, arguing and gesticulating wildly. Sumith was too far away to see or hear clearly. He put away the machete and crawled through the dirt and creepers until he was seventy or eighty feet from the palu tree.

He lay motionless with his head slightly raised. He could see the figure clearly now. Every feature, protruding ribs and all, was identical to that of the breatharian. What was being said was still unintelligible, but it did not matter. Sumith's heart sank in spite of himself. A part of him did not want it to be true. Deep down, he wanted to believe in something beyond himself, something more vital and permanent. What if he simply chose now not to believe his eyes? But as he blinked in the moonlight, he knew with absolute certainty that he was seeing things as they truly were.

Lux Aeterna

Marc Janssen

After Morten Laurdinsen's "Lux Aeterna"

I Introitus

And grant them rest—

Beneath the concrete of the Hawthorne Bridge
Beneath the enforcement of the Steel Bridge
Beneath the filth of the Morrison Bridge
Even there, deep set in there, you can see
A finger of light extend toward the dark
Twin candles of the Convention Center,
Lights them and moves to paint brick facades rust.
It will be night soon, dusk uncertainty.
Bulbs blink on across the city while hope
Struggles in the brackish black Willamette.

And grant them rest—

II In Te, Domine, Speravi

Dark has settled in—
Cars hush on Naito Parkway,
Wraps her coat tighter.

Like that vagabond Paul and his buddy tramping from town to town, a fat lip, blood in his hair, in jail and out again, people throwing rocks, waiting for mercy, feeling it, finding it, losing it, wasting away while getting stronger, hungrily stronger, weaker.

Dark has settled in—
The Voodoo line is shrinking—
Limp gut complaining.

Like that loser Francis who sits cross-legged outside the marbled establishment, moved and moving, laughing at the stones, one empty hand out; the other, cradling mercy.

Dark has settled in—
Blue tarp is pushed off a bench
Finds a recessed door.

Like travelling to that new old town, birthing in a cave surrounded by sheep; raised up in darkness knowing there would be no mercy.

Some say we can gave them a hand, but there they are living and dying, smoking and fucking, crying and sleeping on the grass next to the Portland Spirit. Others, well, no mercy in sight.

III O Nata Lux

Born light of light

“My body doesn’t look as good as it used to.” he said.

At sixteen, Yreka Municipal Pool, a quarter to get in; and he was there every day all summer long: washboard abs, arms, legs, and a neck like a tree branch, like a mid-summer oak that could lift a sidewalk, suspend a tire, smash a house. Tan, the color of a dark mysterious coffee. Walking on the burning concrete, before both hands went over his head and he entered the glistening water like young Poseidon.

Pale now under the halogen midnight.
Shaking his tongue behind the hole in his idiot’s smile;
His tattoos look like bruises,
His bruises like tattoos.
He palms a smudgy glass pipe into a hole in his dirt colored coat lining,
Stows a cheap blue lighter.
Holds out his fingers like ruined roots;
Hands with few angry shouting pock marks,
They are smeared with disappointment and madness;
Stands with feet together laughing and holds out both twig arms,
“Look at me now!”
Allows a view.

Nos membra confer effici
Allow us to become members of
Tui beati corporis
Your holy body.

IV Veni Sancte Spiritus

There is a place
Ignored by the Union Bank Building
By the Umpqua Bank Plaza
By the Benson Tower,

A place where the sidewalks are kind of sticky
And the sheet sometimes smells like sweat
But there is a sheet in that row of efficient blue steel bunk beds,

And when you arrive they have to take you in.
Though they don’t have to, but they may.

A place to
                Cleanse what is dirty
        Moisten what is dry
                Heal what is hurt
        Flex what is rigid
                Heat what is frigid
                Correct what goes astray

You can look for it downtown
        Or above
        To the right
        Or to the left
But at four a.m.
        You cannot look for it inside.

V. Agnus Dei— Lux Aeterna

Agnus Dei
Qui tollis peccata mundi
Dona eis requiem

A finger of light pokes Mirabella
From over Mt. Hood's calm sacred shoulder;
Lights the two convention center candles;
Strokes the Willamette's fluttering eyelids.
The tiny halogen spots go to sleep—
Another treadmill day begins without
Breakfast, or hope for lunch, even dinner
From concrete and steel and glass and towers.

Alleluia. Amen.

Blessed is the Man

ELENA TRAINA

"The girl runned free." Rosa was stuck on this last sentence of her English homework. She was meant to find and correct the mistakes in every sentence. So, it had to be wrong. It sounded wrong, too – she just couldn't figure out why.

She was about to give up and look at the solutions on the back of the workbook, when her mum threw her bedroom's door open with her usual veemenza (feminine: vehemence), as if she were always about to catch Rosa in the act, God knows of what.

'Maestra (f. primary school teacher) Gisella called.'

'What about?'

'Your essay. She said you wrote that you're interested in "the occult."'

That tone meant trouble.

'We had to write about our passions, so I wrote about magic.'

'She thought you meant you were into satanic stuff.'

Rosa held back a laughter.

'I am not.'

'Then what on earth did you mean?'

Rosa couldn't believe how little her mum knew her. If only she'd taken the time to glance at Rosa's bookshelf, she'd have understood. The piles of fantasy books; the Tarot cards; the peel-away nail polish that came with the

Halloween special issue of *W.I.T.C.H.* magazine.

'That I like watching *Streghe* (f. witches) on Rai Due, mum. That's it.'

'Teachers talk, Rosa,' said her mum. 'I am sure maestra Gisella must have told your Religion teacher, by now. What am I going to tell maestra Eleonora when I see her in church?'

'Ask her if it's okay to dress up like a witch for Halloween.'

Rosa's mum shook her head. She suddenly noticed that Rosa's bed cover was not nice and flat, so she straightened it up, vigorously.

'I can't believe Miss Fiona is expecting you to dress up for such an americanata (f. an American thing, derogative).'

For Rosa's mum, the list of things she called "americanata" grew longer and longer every year, and it didn't just apply to the obvious, like putting ketchup on tortellini. First, it was Coca-Cola. Then Indiana Jones, and anything by Spielberg. Now Halloween, which Rosa's class had learned about yes, first from American films, but then properly from Miss Fiona, who was English, not American.

'Can I still invite Vero over? We were going to watch a film.'

'You can invite Vera over, but you won't dress up like witches.'

'Vero, mum. Everyone calls her Vero.'

'Vero's not a girl's name.'

Rosa bit her lip. One more strike and her mum would make her go to confession.

'Vero (true, indeed),' agreed Rosa, hoping to make her mum laugh.

'This is not a pagan house, signorina (f. little lady). You're being ungodly.'

Rosa hated being called "signorina" almost as much as her friend Veronica hated her name being shortened as either Vero or Vera.

Rio's parents, instead, called him "amore," "caro" and "tesoro" (masculine: love; m. dear; m. treasure, darling). Apparently, a child as good at Italian, Maths, English, sports… well, everything, deserved as many terms of endearment as they could think of. His teachers would add "bravo" or "bravissimo" (m. good, very good) to Ottimo (m. excellent) on his tests, for which he had barely opened his books.

'The liceo scientifico (m. scientific high school) will be a walk in the woods for you, Rio,' said his dad, driving him to football practice. 'I am so proud.'

'It was multiple choice,' said Rio. 'I got lucky.'

For the difficult questions, he'd used a counting-out rhyme, but for the rest of them, he was able to guess per esclusione (by elimination), discarding the blatantly wrong or most absurd options.

'La Juve could do with some of your luck, this year. Shall we go and see them play Milan in two weeks?'

'At San Siro? Yes, please! Forza la Juve, la Juve, la Juve alè,' Rio started to sing.

'Rio, stop! You're going to break the windshield!'

When they got to the pitch of the oratorio (m. Catholic youth centre) in which Rio's team practised, his dad got his kit out of the boot.

'Don't let them put you in the goal.'

'They wouldn't dare,' Rio bragged.

From the beginning of primary school, Rosa had been picked second-to-last for every team sport in P.E., just before Barbara Mariani, who was taller than everyone but had zero limb coordination. Yet even Barbara beat Rosa at the corsa campestre (f. cross-country race), four years in a row.

When Rosa crossed the finishing line ten minutes after everyone else, she walked in pain to the refreshment station, her side burning with every breath. The bidella (f. school janitor) Pina, who was wearing a bright red tracksuit instead of her usual uniform, handed her a cup of tea and lemon. The tea had gone cold, and it didn't help with Rosa's side stitches. If anything, it made her abdomen hurt even more.

'It'll be better next year, tesoro,' Pina said, 'there, take all of these, too.' She handed Rosa a bunch of Kinder Chocolate bars. All the other runners had only got one each. Rosa hid them in her sweatpants before her mum could see them.

Pina walked Rosa to her parents, who were chatting nearby with some maestre and other adults. 'The important thing is to take part,' said his dad, cheerfully, when he saw her.

The group of adults around him all nodded in approval. Her mum, Veronica's mum, and the bidella, too.

Rosa didn't say a word until she and her parents got to the car.

'I don't want to take part, next year.'

After a moment of silence, her dad replied: 'But you have to do some kind of sport. It's important to be healthy.'

Rosa's mum kept quiet.

'I want to join Veronica's hip hop class, then,' said Rosa. 'Dance is a sport.'

Her parents knew that Rosa loved to dance. She was the first person to get up when those awful Itañol songs for group dances were played at weddings, or on the beach in Bibione. She'd dance on her own, way before everyone else dragged themselves to thrust their hips to "Mueve la colita" and "Bomba."

'Hip hop is not a very feminine type of dance, is it?' said her mum. 'It's quite… aggressive.'

'But Vero–'

'If Vera jumps off a cliff…' Rosa's mum said. 'Why don't you do ballet, instead? Classical dancers are all so graceful.'

'Whatever. But no more corsa campestre.'

'We'll see,' said her dad. 'It's supposed to be a big deal in the medie (f. middle school).'

As if Rosa didn't have enough reasons to dread the medie, already.

Rio couldn't wait for the medie to start.

And not only because of the football tournament they held every year, but also because he'd finally get proper English lessons, and not just one hour per week with Miss Fiona, the English mother tongue teacher.

Miss Fiona had bright ginger hair and green eyes and wore lipstick which made her lips look wet. Also, she painted them beyond the lip line, and Rio found it very distracting. Hadn't she been taught to colour within the lines?

Once, she caught Rio staring at her lips, and she asked him what he was thinking about. Rio looked out of the window and pointed to the sky.

'It's raining cats and dogs,' he said, in English.

That stunt got him a plus on his diary, just below six rows of Ottimo.

Rosa's grades with Miss Fiona were average, but once, in an oral test about landmarks of London, she was caught so unprepared, she got Appena Sufficiente (m./f. barely acceptable).

Rosa felt her knees wobble when she walked back to her desk. Before she sat down, she looked again at Miss Fiona's scribble on her diary.

She brought it back to her and whispered, ‘Appena is with two p’s.’

Miss Fiona corrected the spelling mistake, in silence.

That day, during the intervallo (m. recess), Rosa didn’t fancy playing with her classmates as she was still worrying about her grade. She left the playground and looked for Miss Fiona near the back entrance where teachers smoked cigarettes and drank coffee from the vending machines.

Miss Fiona was smoking with a couple of teachers Rosa didn’t know, and with maestra Gisella, the Italian teacher.

‘Miss Fiona, can I show you something?’ Rosa said.

She exchanged an amused look with maestra Gisella and said, ‘Go on.’

Rosa danced the routine from Britney Spears’s “Crazy” while singing the chorus – off-key, but getting all the dance moves and the lyrics right.

When she finished, one of the teachers clapped enthusiastically.

Maestra Gisella also seemed to appreciate the performance, even though she complained about kids listening only to English music, ‘no offence to Miss Fiona.’ Next time, why didn’t Rosa choose something by Laura Pausini, instead.

Singing in English was the whole point, but Rosa didn’t say it. She hoped Miss Fiona understood her good intentions.

‘Who did you say that song is by?’ Miss Fiona asked.

‘Britney Spears.’

Miss Fiona put off her cigarette and threw it in a bin.

‘Careful, Rosa. She’s a bit of what you Italians call… a zocòla.’

The group of teachers laughed, apart from the new P.E. teacher, who raised his eyebrows and nervously adjusted his collar.

Rosa didn't laugh, and she didn't correct her English teacher, who'd said "zocòla," instead of "zoccola" (f. whore).

That afternoon, while Rosa was nibbling on two Oro Saiwa biscuits for merenda (f. afternoon snack), Rosa's mum got a phone call from Miss Fiona.

Her mum made mhm-uh noises without saying much, aside from 'I'm sorry' and 'thank you' and 'goodbye.' When she hung up, she turned to Rosa, who was holding on to half an Oro Saiwa without daring to put it in her mouth.

'Rosa, no one likes girls who show off,' her mum said, coldly.

Rosa was confused. Her parents always told her to do her best at school, to study hard, to be brava (f. good). 'It's your job,' they'd said more than once, like her mum's job was to cook and to keep the house and everybody's clothes clean; and her dad's was to go to the office even if he didn't like it that much, and even if his boss was sometimes "a bit fascist."

"A bit fascist," incidentally, was what Rio's dad had called his Religion teacher, maestra Eleonora, when she sent out a note asking parents to confiscate their children's Pokémon cards.

According to the circolare (f. school newsletter), it was very anti-Catholic, and not at all "innocent as all games should be."

'Well, I kind of agree,' said Rio's mum.

'We've spent a fortune on those cards,' said Rio's dad, pensively. 'Especially ever since you've been looking for Mewtwo.'

The Mewtwo card, as a matter of fact, was on top of the list Rio wrote at the end of his essay "Caro Gesù ti scrivo"

(Dear Jesus, I am writing to you), which maestra Eleonora had assigned the class to write before Christmas.

Caro Gesù ti scrivo. Just like that children Christmas song about peace, solidarity, love, brotherhood… In his essay, along with the rare card, Rio asked for a Ferrari, a villa with a swimming pool, and for his videogames not to be nibbled away into extinction by that strange computer anomaly the news insisted on calling "baco del millennio" (m. Millennium Bug, lit. silkworm).

The maestra had told the children not to restrain their imagination. They were not supposed to just ask for gifts, but also to share their real desires, their hopes for the future. Small miracles, even. After all, they were writing a letter to Jesus, not Babbo Natale (m. Father Christmas).

In the same letter, Rosa wrote about wanting to be a boy named Rio.

All assignments had to be accompanied by a drawing, so Rosa had drawn him with big brown eyes, like hers, and a haircut just like Inzaghi's and Del Piero's. She'd drawn a ball and a Ferrari, and a speech balloon with the Union Jack inside.

He had always been there, but it was maestra Eleonora who had given her the idea for his name.

The "Caro Gesù ti scrivo" essay was assigned on the second-to-last Religion lesson before Christmas, which maestra Eleonora had decided to dedicate to rosaries.

While she explained how the crown of roses worked – one Pater Noster on the large bead, followed by ten Ave Maria and one Gloria Patri – Rosa's gaze had remained fixed on the blackboard, which read: ROSARIO, or, in Rosa's mind, ROSA + RIO.

'Originally, a rosary was made of one-hundred and fifty beads, like the Psalms,' the maestra explained. 'Does anyone remember how the first Psalm begins?'

Rosa's hand was the only one to go up.

Maestra Eleonora cautiously asked, 'Yes, Rosa?' as if she was expecting a question, rather than the correct answer.

'Blessed is the man.'

The maestra nodded.

Often, when Rosa misbehaved or did something that counted as grounds for confession, Rosa's mum directly or indirectly cited Psalm 1. Especially the ungodly part.

'Brava,' the maestra said, almost in a whisper. 'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly…' she continued, much louder, but gave up after the first line. She had made the mistake of giving out the last assignment for that term at the beginning of the class, so no one was listening. All sixteen children of 4 B were daydreaming about the gifts or, in some cases, miracles, they were going to ask Baby Jesus, that Christmas.

Rosa stopped listening, too. She was looking at the blackboard, again, thinking that if magic hadn't worked so far, surely Jesus could do it for her. He was the son of God, and God could do anything, even let Rosa metamorphose into a boy, a bit like a butterfly. And how figo (m. cool) that would be.

It turned out that neither the maestra nor her mum thought that what Rosa had written in her letter was figo at all.

However, this time her mum didn't throw Rosa's room's door open. Instead, Rosa learned that the maestra had phoned her parents by eavesdropping on them after dinner, while they were watching Mike Bongiorno on Rete 4.

'I don't think we need to worry,' she heard her dad say to her mum. 'It's like witches and hip hop. These things come and go.'

For Christmas, that year, Rosa got pré-pointe ballet shoes.

And, by 1st January 2000, nibbled away into extinction by the silkworm of filial obedience and fear of God, Rio had gone.

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For Rosa's mum's 45th birthday, Rosa's dad decided to take the family to a Sicilian restaurant nearby. Rosa's mum was from Sicily, but they hadn't visited her hometown since grandma had died, the year Rosa started the liceo classico (m. classical high school). Now she had only one year of liceo left.

The restaurant had kitsch decorations on the walls, featuring wooden Sicilian carts and porcelain Moorish head vases.

Rosa looked at the menu. She liked the sound of the arancini (m. rice balls stuffed and deep fried), but she couldn't choose between a traditional ragù one, a prosciutto e formaggio (m. cheese and ham) or a Norma¸ which came with aubergines.

'Can you ask the waiter which one he would recommend?' Rosa asked her mum.

'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

Rosa obliged, and even managed to look the waiter in the eye.

The waiter, a plump man with a short, well-kept beard, seemed pleased to offer his recommendation. 'Get the ragù or the Norma, only children ask for prosciutto e formaggio.'

Rosa felt herself blushing. Even more so when she tried to order a birra (f. beer) Moretti, and her mother made her change it to a limonata (f. lemonade) San Pellegrino.

When the waiter brought the order over, he served Rosa's mum first, then her dad, then Rosa.

'And here's your arancina.'

Rosa's curiosity won over her adolescent awkwardness. 'I thought that word was masculine like it's written on the menu.'

'Ah, there's quite a debate,' he said, smiling. 'It's feminine in Palermo, but the chef is from Catania and they spell it with an "o," instead. It's a long-standing feud.'

'Maybe there should be a neutral gender for it. You know, like in Latin,' Rosa said.

Her mum held her breath as if Rosa had just brought up Sodom and Gomorrah or, God forbid, menstruation.

'What would be the neutral gender for the arancina?' the waiter asked.

'Arancinum, arancini, arancino…' Rosa declined, without having to think.

'Arancinum,' the waiter repeated, as if tasting the sound of the word. 'That would unite Sicily once and for all,' he said. 'We'll have to get new menus printed.'

'What nonsense,' said Rosa's mum when the waiter left. 'Italian has only got two genders. Why do you always have to–'

'It's you who sent me to the classico, remember?' Rosa snapped, but soon forced herself to smile. 'It's delicious,' she said, savouring a mouthful of the arancinum alla Norma.

It tasted like a balmy day on a Sicilian beach, which could only have been made better by an ice-cold birra Moretti.

Rosa's first kiss tasted very much like beer, and marijuana.

Her first boyfriend, Andrea, seemed keen to put on a bad boy act, even though he played the guitar in church at Mass every Sunday. So, he drank, and smoked weed, and shagged half the oratorio while the priest turned a blind eye on his only choir musician left. He was already at uni, studying Law, while Rosa hadn't finished the liceo, yet.

He hated it when people called him Andrea – he didn't like that his name ended in "a," like a girl's name – so Rosa called him Andre.

'Andre, piano (quietly, gently),' she'd whisper to him while they were pretend-fucking in Rosa's room with MTV playing in the background.

Rosa's mum adored Andrea, but soon enough she confronted Rosa about always locking her bedroom's door when he came over.

'I know what you are up to,' she hissed. 'Be grateful I haven't told your dad. You're being–'

'Ungodly, sure.'

Rosa thought that she might as well not pretend, then, and did it without pants in Andrea's room. It didn't hurt, but she felt like it went on for hours, so Rosa fixated on the titles of the books Andrea had on his shelf. They were all for the Bar Exam he needed to pass to become a magistrato (m. magistrate), like his father and his grandfather before him.

'I don't really need to study,' Andrea boasted afterwards, rolling himself a joint. 'My dad is still practising so… I am basically in.'

Rosa's second boyfriend, Mariano, was also basically in when he got a bit too overexcited and forgot to pull out at the right time. Rosa had to beg him to drive her to the guardia medica (f. walk-in clinic) at 2 am to get the morning-after pill.

At 21, Rosa would have been far better off with a contraceptive pill than relying on her new boyfriend's self-control. However, while her GP, dottoressa (f. doctor) Cavenaghi Anna Maria, hadn't exactly refused to prescribe it to her, she had highly recommended against it.

According to her, Rosa was "too sensitive," and all that extra oestrogen was guaranteed to give her suicidal thoughts, at the very least.

'Aren't pills supposed to be very light, nowadays?' Veronica said when Rosa called her afterwards. 'It's not the '90s anymore. How old is your GP?'

'My mum's age. They go to the same hairdresser and do line-dancing together on Tuesday evenings.'

She kept it to herself that dottoressa Cavenaghi had also made fun of her when she'd seen Rosa shed a tear or two, quietly. 'See, what did I tell you? You're too sensitive.'

The nurse at the guardia medica didn't make fun of her at all. Instead, she stroked Rosa's arm and said: 'Look, there really is no need to cry. This happens all the time. To women of all ages. You'll have forgotten about it tomorrow. Well, maybe you *try* and not forget it next time.'

The nurse turned to Mariano, who was white and tense and had droplets of sweat on the tips of his curly hair.

'W-what?'

'Why didn't you wear a condom?' the nurse asked.

'I don't know.'

The nurse's voice hardened. 'There's more than one way to be a man. Choose better, next time.'

The nurse left, and Mariano sneaked out for a cigarette while Rosa stayed inside for the fifteen-minute observation period, in case the pill made her throw up.

Just looking for something to do, she picked up a satisfaction questionnaire from the reception desk and started to fill it in.

Sex: ☐ m ☐ f.

For lack of a better option, she ticked F, per esclusione.

Meanwhile, she heard Mariano having a frantic conversation on the phone, probably with his brother Luca who, in his prime, must have impregnated more than one young lady within the boundaries of arcivescovo (m. archbishop) Dionigi Tettamanzi's diocese.

The last time Rosa had heard of Luca, he had settled down with a nice Italian girl he'd met on Erasmus, which reminded Rosa of her dad's favourite saying, something about how wives and oxen had better be picked from one's own country.

Rosa missed her chance to go on Erasmus, as she hadn't managed to convince her parents while she was an undergraduate and she wasn't succeeding now, halfway through her two-year magistrale (f. master's degree).

For both degrees, Rosa had chosen to study Lettere (f. Humanities), which, according to financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, was the degree with the highest unemployment rate in Italy. At least Erasmus would have added some excitement to Rosa's empty CV, or a new language, even. Dutch, for example.

'I don't think there's much demand for Dutch speakers out there,' her dad said, when she'd brought up Erasmus once again over dinner.

'It certainly won't get you higher up the graduatoria (f. ranking, list),' her mum added, pragmatically.

The infamous graduatoria. The national list of candidates for the maxi-concorso (m. competition), the public competition allegedly based on qualifications and exams to access state jobs, including teaching. Teaching was part of Rosa's parents' plans for her, and for a while she had kept her options open. But by the end of the first year of her magistrale, she'd made up her mind.

‘I don’t want to teach.’

Rosa’s mum collected the dirty dishes, opened the cupboard under the sink, threw the peach skins and stones and any leftover food – Rosa’s plate had the most – in the compost bin, closed the cupboard and opened the dishwasher, all making as much noise as she possibly could.

‘What else are you going to do with two degrees in Lettere?’ her dad said.

As her mum finished to load the dishwasher, the caffettiera (f. espresso maker) started to gurgle.

Rosa just shrugged. She had no clue, other than she would love to see the real world. Or at least the Netherlands. It sounded like the sort of place where a sentence containing the words “girl” and “free” wouldn’t necessarily sound wrong.

‘Teaching is great, Rosa,’ said her mum, finally. ‘Drink your coffee.’

Rosa’s mum placed a tazzina (f. espresso cup) in front of her with such violence it was a miracle the coffee didn’t spill all over the tablecloth.

Rosa didn’t touch it.

‘Of course, you would say that. You work for the state.’

‘It’s worked out fine for me. Fixed contract, fixed salary. Lots of time to raise children. You don’t have many options if you’re a woman and you want to settle down.’

Rosa refrained from saying, ‘Who says.’ They’d had that argument before, which had ended with, ‘Women *have* to settle down.’

Rosa didn’t agree. If there was more than one way to be a man, like the nurse had told Mariano, surely the same was true for women. But sharing that would have only added cascades of fuel to her mother’s ever-burning fire.

Rosa’s mum drank her coffee in one sip, while her dad stirred his for ages, with a clink, clink, clink noise. Rosa watched him draw the letter “o” over and over again, mesmerized, and for the first time in years, Rio came to her mind.

‘Where’s the sugar?’ she asked, absent-mindedly.

‘I don’t think there’s any left. I’ve stopped buying it, since we don’t use it,’ her mum said.

Rosa threw her coffee in the sink and put it in the dishwasher. She ran the tap to get rid of the small pool of black coffee before it stained her mum’s precious granite sink. She couldn’t stop thinking about Rio. She missed him and envied him, in equal measure, and so much she was finding it hard to breathe.

Rio would have gone on Erasmus to some English-speaking country, or even got himself a Fulbright scholarship for an Ivy League university, if he’d wanted to. More importantly, no one would have given a shit about whether he would settle down or not, or whether he added sugar, milk or half a litre of sambuca (m. anise-flavoured liqueur) to his stupid coffee.

At the coffee vending machines outside the lecture hall where Rosa had just defended her master’s thesis, Veronica produced a laurel wreath and placed it on Rosa’s head.

‘Congratulations, dottoressa.’

Rosa’s friends and coursemates cheered loudly, some of them demanding to move from coffee to prosecco.

As they were heading towards the Cortile del Filarete, the university’s immense cloister, Veronica pulled Rosa aside. ‘Where are your parents? I can’t believe they missed your viva.’

‘I told them the wrong time. They’ll be here soon, though.’

‘Why–?’

Rosa bit her lip. ‘I lied about my thesis. I didn’t want them to find out.’

‘Oh, Rosa. What did you tell them it was about?’

‘Pope Adrian VI’s impact on religion in the Burgundian Netherlands.’

Veronica laughed. ‘Honestly, I’m amazed by the stuff you come up with.’

In the Filarete, Rosa handed Vero the hardback copy of her dissertation. ‘Can you pop it in your bag before they get here? I only have this useless handbag my mum bought for me just because it matched the dress.’

‘Sure,’ said Veronica, hiding the book in her normal-size shoulder bag. ‘You look fabulous.’

‘I hate these fucking heels.’

Several other groups of students all dressed like they were going to a job interview with Prada were scattered around the cloister. Every now and then, someone started the goliardic song “Dottore, dottore” and the anthem would bounce from one side of the colonnade to another. Rosa watched as some fresh grads also gave in to the ritual of hurdling over the hedge, which last time, for her bachelor’s graduation, she had managed to avoid with the excuse of being on her period.

Rosa’s parents showed up fifteen minutes later, while Rosa and her friends were still hanging out and drinking prosecco under the colonnade before heading over to a bar for the aperitivo (m. aperitif with buffet).

‘It’s all over, I’m sorry,’ Rosa said to them. ‘Some people were ill so I was asked to go earlier.’

‘Well, how did it go?’ her mum asked.

‘108,’ said Rosa.

‘Ah, peccato (m. shame, pity, sin),’ her dad said.

Rosa didn’t know what her parents were expecting. She’d said goodbye to the lode (f. Honours) after she’d accepted a 21/30 in Philosophy of Language, the hardest module of the course.

'She did great,' said Veronica. 'None of the others got more than 106,' she lied. Three of Rosa's coursemates had graduated with lode.

'Well, you'll have to tell us all about your thesis at home, then,' her dad said. 'I know nothing about religion in the Netherlands; I thought it was quite an interesting choice.'

'Yes,' Rosa's mum agreed. 'Peccato.'

Rosa poured everyone another round of prosecco, while her parents went on listing so many of their daughter's sins, it would have taken her more than a lifetime of rosaries to atone for them.

Her dad: 'We could have listened in to some of your peers' defence for comparison. Peccato.'

Her mum: 'Ah, we didn't get to meet your supervisor. Peccato.'

Dad again: 'Peccato, we could have asked her about the concorso.'

Rosa only half-listened, until her mum crossed the line.

'If only you hadn't broken up with Mariano,' she said, dramatically. 'He was not as handsome as Andrea, but better than being alone, at your age. You should have invited him anyway. Both of them. Oh, well, peccato.'

As if. If Rosa had wanted any boys from her past to be there at her graduation, she wouldn't have picked either of those two in a million years.

She would have picked Rio, always. Even if he was made up.

Rosa took off her laurel wreath and handed it, along with her tiny handbag, to Vero. 'Hold these.'

Then she kicked off her heels, sprinted towards the hedge and jumped. She hit it and fell on her knees on the other side, though not as hard as she had predicted.

She laughed along with her friends, and someone, maybe Veronica, started to chant: ‘Dottore, dottore, dottore del buco del cu’, vaffancu’, vaffancu’.’ Every student in the cloister joined in, as they were all watching her.

Rosa’s mum appeared to be assessing the damage – watching Rosa’s tights, ripped in several spots, and her dress, all dirty – while failing to hide her shock at her daughter’s unprecedented levels of ungodliness. She didn’t even protest at the song’s rude lyrics, and its repetition of “dottore”, instead of “dottoressa.”

When Rosa got back onto her feet, she saw her dad talk to a student she didn’t know, and heard him complain: ‘We haven’t even seen the hardback copy of her dissertation, she’s said she had to turn it in. Peccato.’

It was indeed a shame, as the guy at the print shop had done a tremendous job. The hardback book hidden in Veronica’s bag had a purple library buckram cover and gold foil lettering, reading: *Witchcraft and Shapeshifting Trials in Utrecht from 1590 to 1660.*

Rosa moved to Utrecht in 2014, and one year, ten months and one week later, she found Rio.

She saw him at an open-mic night in a bar near the Griftburg. The place served cocktails in jars and was lit up by magenta, warm orange, and gold spotlights.

Hosting the night was a guy wearing a leather jacket, leather boots and a studded choker, and his name, Noah, was the first on the blackboard with all the musicians lined up to perform.

Noah played “Recuerdos de la Alhambra” on classical guitar, then Bach, then a piece by Ludovico Einaudi, maybe “Le onde” or “I giorni,” Rosa always got them mixed up.

Then there was a husband-and-wife duo, a woman who sang in Dutch and gently strummed a guitar with the back of her fingers, while her husband sang harmonies. Before their last song, the man got out a musical saw from a small case. On the first note that he drew with his bow, Rosa let out an audible gasp. It sounded like a soprano vocalizing from the back of a Gothic cathedral with infinite ceilings.

Then, everyone stood up and danced with a band who played covers and someone behind the bar switched on the strobe lights. The music was so loud, people were shouting into each other's ears in lots of different Englishes: the local one with the serious tone and the intermittent accent, and a familiar, cantilenante (m./f. lilting, singsong) variety which Rosa heard everywhere, because Utrecht was full of Italians. She hadn't learned much Dutch since she'd arrived, but her English had inevitably improved.

The band was supposed to be the last act on the blackboard, but then Rosa saw someone else add their name, the piece of chalk held in his tanned, slender fingers tracing the "o" at the end, big and round. The band wished the crowd a good night, and Rio came on stage.

He wasn't at all like Rosa remembered him.

He stood firmly like a tree that had been planted near streams of water, or someone who'd never questioned his right to find himself wherever he was.

His hair was fair, and bouncy and light like chaff, though much shorter than it used to be. Its soft shade of mustard matched his corduroy dungarees, which he wore over a black t-shirt decorated with small, embroidered roses. They looked like a crown around his chest.

People sat back down politely, and those who were still chatting were encouraged to shush.

Rio apologised as he showed the audience a notebook and said he had poetry, not songs. 'Probably for the best, as, if I sung, I'd make you all leave.'

Hearing his voice made Rosa feel a magical, tingling sensation – what she had hoped she'd feel when trying on her ballet shoes for the first time, only to find out they hurt her toes, and balls, and ankles. Just like those heels her mum had made her wear for both her graduations.

Rosa noticed that Rio's white sneakers were comfy and sensible, instead. She then felt the weight of his notebook in her sweaty hand, marvelling at how little space was left on the page. Many sentences and words had been stricken through in chains of little loops, and the remaining lines formed a dense block of neat handwriting. Only the title stood out, bold and traced over with a bright green highlighter.

Rio took a long breath. Rosa held hers.

'Blessed is the man,' he started.

When Rio read his first poem, Rosa was the only one still standing, dancing to his words, to his melodious accent.

Statue of Hjalmar Branting

THOMAS LAVELLE

Except on labeled grids like Manhattan
north of 14th with streets crossing avenues,
or Pittsburgh's South Side, where named streets
cross numbered streets, I almost always
get lost and got lost after lunch.

Wished again for some cosmic Gretel to drop
stones not crumbs behind me as I walked,
or better, draw flashing lines
or arrows to lead me home,
to work or some intersection I'd know,
say, Drottning- and Barnhusgatan.

Absent stones and lines I found
no way back and found instead
myself in a park, with benches, hedges,
a huge sculpture neither equestrian
nor royal, but a 1920s labor hero.

The lost park's art was bronze hyperbole,
Branting posed preaching, full moustache
near enough Stalin's or Sadam's,
at his feet Swedish huddled masses
waiting for suffrage and eight-hour days.

Leaving that park the way bronze Branting
pointed, I gradually found landmarks,
familiar crossings, and in time a way home.

Unfamiliar Hills

Slow Waves

NICHOLAS SKALDETVIND

Stalling the ache to wake,
to push myself
out the door
until the sun
returns I watch sideways rain tease
the pregnant pomegranate tree.
I know exactly how I found
my way here. Re-reading
the messages of old
lovers, the great books of verse
imitating the myths
from my rocking chair
I weighed one beach room
against another, considered
names of water on a map.
We arrive at certain conclusions, the end
of this season for example. Shirked daylight
and the consequent migrating birds, nine
of ten suns rising as gray doves have us believe
that finally, this sun, this light, still
with its obsession to leave
and we go on living in its obstruction.
Some things exist in harmony: your glass of water
In the window turning the color of the dawn.
Beyond: unfamiliar hills,
slow waves breaking into white disembodied caps drunk
up by the shore.

Steady Digression to a Fixed Point

Nicholas Skaldetvind

Musing on fainting voices in the lustrous streets of Vasastan
where I ice-skate with Johanna there is a distance between
memory and my eye. Which lie do I cling to? I continue
feeding on a shadow of perfection through a tangle of noise
into the disposal of familiarity of Erland's, waiting for a date
who doesn't know where to meet me.
I'm going over what I should have done instead
of what I did and thus revisiting a possible life
by grieving. Grieving Tilde Stege
before open an open window letting in the lull of winter
three flights up from the small room in København
that used to be when we used to be.
I'm wondering if I'm any good or not behind all the busy
bicycling to the next borough each day bells of the city's
churches toll against the regulated signature of Edenic Time.
The hours we spent beholding the importance
of a few birds' intricate weave over cemeteries
and the brooding frost-bitten apple orchards
under each limb that's lost its use under the weather-bent hoar light—
no Spring skips its turn, Emma Jane saying nothing.
I am patient in this certain slant of twilight darning
a good yarn about the beautiful women I've known.
Still unknowing how much the present one
(Beatrice Landeskog) seated across from me can see
all their raging beauty in my dithering eyes.
All things that don't change—like the cup their different hands
made around a glass of beer (wine in Spain requires a few lithe fingers)—
are like voices of children calling out to one another in the grove of apple
trees
where my crushed heart lies purposeless as a bird.

Where My Father Lies

S. D. Brown

That day at dusk in 1948, the orange glare from the sun confused our eyes. Along the uneven roads of Chatam, a dingy tramcar rocked at an uncomfortable speed. It must have arrived at a moment when the Chatamites were absorbed in gossip, for she was unseen by them.

On that day, the district was decorated in style. There was a banner of crimson, written stylishly, to welcome Miss Marvaline Palmer from her long absence. The cleaned streets complemented the decor. Everyone dressed as if they wanted to be remembered in style. All seemed to forget their original purpose for assembling at the port that dusk.

When Miss Marvaline Palmer got off the tramcar, she smelled the dead atmosphere around her. It remained the same as it was some ten years before her departure. Her lips were as red as the crimson banner, and she carried a cage with a small chirping bird as she strolled like a zombie toward the house she shared with her father before his death. The people gathered at the port did not seem to recognize her. She passed by them as if she were invisible.

It was long after she had arrived and left before Francis Cummings, Miss Marvaline's enthusiast and former best friend, realized that the tramcar had arrived, but she was not there. And it was not long before she asked the crowd to speculate the reason behind Miss Marvaline's absence.

All of a sudden, the crowd began to roam about. Frances started to ask everyone if they'd seen the expected guest.

"No," said Mr. Fern. "I haven't seen her."

"Then again, you weren't looking," snapped Francis Cummings.

The crowd laughed at Mr. Fern.

"Quiet you all!" yelled Francis Cummings. "We all missed the chance to show her that we all cared."

The people held down their heads in shame. Apparently, they all felt ashamed to have missed her because of their own vanity.

Ten years earlier, the abrupt departure of Miss Marvaline Palmer had struck melancholy in people's hearts. Some people even went as far as to speculate that she was greatly missed solely because of the bird farm she ran with her father. Everyone missed the familiar sounds of Miss Marvaline and her father arguing about a pet of their choice.

"Yuh wouldn't like that bird at all," Miss Marvaline would tell her customer.

"Let the customer choose what she likes," her father would say.

Often, their arguments would continue for hours. Customers would have to quickly choose a bird, estimate the price, put the money on the countertop, and leave them bickering.

Everyone in the district of Chatam viewed this quirk as a part of their appeal.

"Those two can't live without each other," a young girl had told Miss Francis Cummings after visiting the farm. She came back empty-handed because the father and daughter were not fighting.

Later, Miss Cummings befriended Miss Marvaline Palmer.

At first, Miss Cummings had assumed that they were husband and wife and that their quarrelsome nature was the essence of their charm.

Their friendship, at first, lasted for two and a half years. Everyone in Chatam seemed to envy the fact that Miss Cummings befriended Miss Marvaline before them and was able to go a great distance with her without much fuss, unlike them. They knew nothing about the conversations that took place between the two women. So, when their friendship ended abruptly after three years, they all speculated, and they all believed they were right. Miss Cummings allowed them to spin their theories to ease their inquisitive hearts.

The women's friendship blossomed shortly after Miss Cummings visited the bird farm and discovered they were constantly arguing because Miss Marvaline did not know her place as the daughter. She assumed her identity as the wife.

"Marvaline, I've told yuh once before, put the bird cages over there when you're finished so they don't get mixed up with the ones you are doing," her father would say.

"But Donovan, yuh know I've tried that, and it didn't work. I just keep on forgettin', so leave mi alone and let mi do mi ting," the daughter would answer.

She'd then creep up behind her father, put her arms around him, and hug him tightly while kissing him on the ear.

"Come on Marva, yuh play too much," Mr. Palmer had said.

But Miss Marvaline did not stop. She continued to kiss him on the ear, and by the time she finished caressing him, she'd won him over.

Realizing Miss Marvaline's scheme, Miss Cummings intervened. She pretended she wanted to buy a bird and insisted on having Miss Marvaline's advice on the matter. And it was at that point of being shown a pet chosen by Miss Marvaline that Miss Cummings said,

"Donovan seems like a pussycat."

Miss Marvaline, at first, pretended she did not want to comment on what Miss Cummings had said. But as her client spotted a bird, something that Miss Marvaline thought unsuitable for her personality, she blurted out something about the disagreement she had with her father.

"Oh, that's just silly ole Donovan."

Miss Cummings pretended she did not know that the man in the shop was her father and asked her if he was her husband.

"Who? Silly ole Donovan? He's mi pop."

Miss Cummings eventually bought the bird and left the farm quite contented. The next day, she went back to return the bird. She explained to Miss Marvaline that she'd made a wrong decision about the bird and asked if she could exchange it for the one her advisor had chosen.

"A told yuh that he wasn't for yuh. He is a big show-off," Miss Marvaline explained.

Miss Cummings listened attentively. Miss Marvaline loved being correct and to have her way. The way to win her heart was to obey her.

The women's friendship originated after that second meeting and ended after three years. It was quite clear that the friendship closed its doors at a time when Miss Marvaline did not get her way.

While they were friends, however, Miss Cummings got to know that the father and the daughter came to Chatam to forget the bitter memories of a dead mother. They were so secretive about their background that it prompted Mr. Fern, a busybody, to leave the district for a while to investigate them. No one knew what Mr. Fern found out, but after he surfaced, a nasty rumor had spread that

Mr. Palmer poisoned his wife with arsenic. Even though this was never proven, it enabled everyone in the district of Chatam to turn their backs on Mr. Palmer and his daughter. He could not even get a job, for people were afraid.

So, Mr. Palmer and his daughter went on about their business and opened a shop on a farm they had purchased. At first, we Chatamites would not respond poorly to their business. It was the pleasant sounds of chirping birds that made us notice them. By then, our relationship with the Palmers had gone sour. We were ashamed whenever we entered their shop and spoke with them in forgiving words, but still, the Palmers did not let us into their lives. Therefore, when Miss Francis Cummings befriended Miss Marvaline Palmer, we all felt jealous.

The women's friendship appeared to be an intense union of gossip, visitations, and distant travels to other parishes. They were always secretive, never explicit about their doings. After two and a half years passed, Mr. Palmer died of a mysterious illness and was buried behind his shop. Shortly after her father's burial, Miss Marvaline started to do the most bizarre things.

"Ah saw her stark naked runnin' round some bushes like a pickney," said Mr. Fern one day after coming from his garden.

We all stood amazed. His tale was quite far-fetched and nasty.

"Really, Mr. Fern," Mrs. Varret had said snobbishly. "A grown woman—runnin' around stark naked. You must be a dirty little man for sayin' that."

We all laughed at Mr. Fern and did not take him seriously, for it was our way of dealing with our guilt about mistreating the Palmers.

One day, however, after Miss Francis Cummings visited Miss Marvaline Palmer to try and talk her out of leaving the district of Chatam, we noticed a scar on her arm. We all heard the harsh words and saw the rocks she tossed at Miss Cummings. But still, we did not question her, for we knew it would be useless.

And we, the Chatamites, did not know whom to turn to ask for answers.

"You betta ask Miss Cummings, for she seems the proper one to tell you," suggested Mr. Fern to Mrs. Varret one day.

"Why don't you go along and ask her yourself," snapped back Mrs. Varret.

For a while, we all watched the bizarre behavior of Miss Marvaline toward her friend Miss Cummings, yet we could not question either.

Finally, one stormy night, just hours before Miss Marvaline's departure, Miss Cummings ran to Mr. Fern's door to escape from her friend. No one knew what Miss Marvaline had threatened to do to her, but what was remembered about that special night was the wild look in Miss Cummings' eyes and the outrageous story she told of seeing her friend weeping on her father's grave, with blood dripping from her lips, and the lifeless body of a bird lying on the grave.

Dear Amar Singh

TRISTAN FERNANDES

I

1916

Boots seeped in muck. Screams of shells piercing the sky. Soldiers hovering in their mud holes. No man's land is a sea of barbed wires and pockmarked ground.

Sunrays peaked from the misty sky and dawn was yet to arrive. For the men in the trench, it was cold. Yet, they were terribly clothed. Lacking even a good pair of boots. When they got off the boat, they had no weapons. Now, all of them were holding the famous Lee Enfield rifles. The rimmed Brodie hats covered their heads, offering some protection from shrapnel.

A shell roared right above them.

Captain Amar Singh gripped the rings of the wooden ladder, its rough and splintered surface scratching his skin. The summit of the trench was lined with a pile of sandbags. Even though the artillery bombardment upon the German trenches was terrifyingly loud, he could hear the deafening sound of his heartbeat.

Once he climbed over, he would either be shot dead or, by God's grace, he would survive long enough to take cover in some ditch.

"On the ready!" The yell came from one of the soldiers.

"On-the-ready!"

"On-the-ready!"

"On-the-ready!"

Captain Amar Singh took a deep breath. Next would come the whistle. And then the charge out of the trench. As Captain of his regiment, he had to be the one who led his men out.

The whistle was like an eternal sound that came from all directions in the trench. All he could hear was the sound of death. A part of Captain Amar Singh yearned for home, another part was pumping warrior's blood through his veins – he would fight for King and Country, and for honour and glory.

Yet, as he leaped out of the trench, just for a millisecond, his mind flashed back to the first time he loved, and the first time he marched on this French-land, and the first time he killed.

Outside the trench came a view of the whole world dying. And he'd die too.

Captain Amar Singh had his pistol raised up in the air and yelled for this unit of Indian soldiers to follow him.

He would die for King and Country, and for honour and glory.

II

1914

In his heart was beating fear.

Fear of what comes next. Fear whether he would live, whether he would die. Havildar Amar Singh was stationed inside the camp. This was their last stop until they were shuffled onto boats and sent off to another country to fight a war that had nothing to do with them.

Sitting on his bed, puffing a cigarette, his eyes darted over the letter he had written for his wife. Once he would ship out, all communication with Hindustan and his wife would become fleeting memories. Her letters would reach him months after being sent out; his letters would reach her months after sending – every letter would become a time in a bottle.

Between his fingers, he gripped the grainy texture of the paper.

Dear Sonam,

I know you worry for my life. this is no different than me visiting the North West Frontier. I may be gone for a few months, and like always, I will come back. You know what I dream of. I wish to be remembered like the warriors of old, people will remember my name like Havildar Ishar Singh who fought off a thousand Afghans. And what will do tilling the farmland back at home. We earn so little, not enough to pay back our debt to Paramjit. The British Army pay is much better. Think of the money glory and money I will bring back. This war will be over soon and I will be back home by Christmas.

I beg you, my dear wife, not to worry for me. I am a soldier and I will perform a soldier's duty, and I will come back alive.

You have nothing to worry about.

He looked up from the letter. He needed to send it out before he left this land.

III

1916

Death knocking on his door. Miraculously, he realised, that he had no wounds. How did he come here? He was in an artillery hole filled with dead bodies, the German line at his back, his own line to his front. The offensive had failed. His men were dead, dying, or had managed to escape back to their trench lines. Yet, he remained here, hiding. Gun missing, no food. Alone. Too afraid to crawl out. Yet, he knew it would only be a matter of time before a patrol stumbled upon him. And then he would die. And yet, if he lived through this day, he would just die on another day. Just like all the dead bodies that surrounded him. They lay still.

The stillness of the moment was shattered when a single limb moved under a stack of bodies and mud. Amar crawled, and soon his hands dug through mud and rotting flesh to try and pull the man up as silently as possible. The afternoon grey sky threw heat waves upon them. Halfway through removing torn limbs and pushing and pulling dead men, his heart sank at the sight of the soldier's bloodied uniform. Muscles aching from digging, Amar managed to pull the man out from the heap of bodies.

The man coughed, spurting blood, and Amar said a silent prayer begging that no one would hear him. Now that he had managed to completely pull out the injured man, he regretted it. His right leg was missing; a bloody pulp of torn flesh. He had a small bottle hanging from his belt, which he twisted open and gave to the man. He slurped and coughed ever so gently, and there was a slight dribble of water [running] down his muddy chin. This injured man was a Hindustani soldier.

How long did they lay there in the trench? Amar could hear gruff voices from the trench behind. If a German stumbled upon them, Amar would be killed. He needed to get out of here, escape back to his lines.

The dying man looked familiar, like someone from his own Company; like someone of the hundred soldiers he was responsible for. Here, in front of him, one of his men lay dying and he could not remember his name.

Amar's gaze fell remained upon the dying soldier. What was this that he felt? That could have been him; dying and begging for death.

There was relief in that idea.

He had to cross through no man's land and get back. Yet – he did not wish to. What was this feeling?

IV

The clock ticked to a moment when Amar would be found by the Huns. There were many things in the trench, but only two things mattered – his bayonet knife and the dying Hindustani soldier.

"Kill me, Subadar Amar," the man croaked.

"What's your name?" Amar asked.

The man's voice trailed. "Jasdeep."

Afternoon sun setting, blood trickling from wounds, A cough, a dribble of blood. "I wanted to return back home with medals. I wanted to fight for the Great King of English. Now, I am dying. Please kill me." Jasdeep had a deep cough and more blood erupted from his lips.

Amar closed his eyes and said nothing. He wished he could die too. Except, except. He had something waiting for him back in his trench. In his rucksack, there was a letter from his wife that he had still not read.

At one strange moment Amar thought the man asked him, "Subadar, why did you join this war?"

He said nothing.

Time drifted. "Sahib… Subadar…" The dying man croaked at intervals. "Kill me." The soldier's body had already become deathly pale. What was a worse than death? Dying slowly.

Amar plunged his blade into the man's chest.

Captain Amar Singh did not have an answer. What he did know was that there was a letter waiting for him.

He had to get and went back to his trench.

V

Mud.

Overturned mud.

Underturned mud.

Shell pocked mud.

Mud that went up and down.

Mud with sunken bodies.

And upon this land, Captain Amar Singh crawled, stooped, sneaked across the land. He knew the biggest killer of humans upon on this battlefield was the things unseen. Guns; rifles, machine guns, snipers; artillery shells, mines. His khaki uniform blended with the brown colour of the earth. Were the real killers modern weapons or, the commanders who sent the men to death?

"Subadar, why did you join this war?" Jasdeep's final words echoed in his mind. Amar knew the answer, money and glory, but it did not really matter now...

What does the battlefield sound like when there is no battlefield? It is not silent. There are no sounds of animals. No sound of the rustling of grass. The dead lay voiceless.

And upon this battlefield that Amar clawed and crouched through came a new sound, a deep guttural rumble that grows louder and louder.

For a moment, Amar did not know what to do. Should he continue moving? Move slower? Freeze? Hide in a ditch?

All the while, the enemy aeroplane in the sky grew closer There was no chance that it had spotted him, right? He wanted to run to his trench lines where he could read that letter waiting for him.

There was a change in the rhythm of the aeroplane. Every single fibre of Amar Singh froze. Yet, he managed to twist his head to look up at the sky. It had dropped from the sky and came lower... lower... lower... For a moment, it looked like it would pass over him but then its direction turned. The nose of the plane took a dive towards him.

Amar Singh ran.

The muddy battlefield. Mounds of mud. Sunken bodies. Holes and ditches. Torn limbs. Fragments of barb wire.

Amar tumbled down.

Gunfire.

Mud kicking up into the air.

Flying bullets coming closer.

He was about to die.

He closed his eyes. The rapid barks of the machine gun cut through the growl of the plane's puttering.

Then there another sound that came to his ears. It was so faint that only when it growled and changed in rhythm that it was noticed. A speck appeared in the sky, like a wide winged bird that swooped down. Staccato bursts punctuated the air overlapping with the growling of the two engines.

Was the German plane hit?

As if to answer his question, it swerved in the air, taking a deep left to avoid the incoming attack of the new plane. This new aircraft had red and blue roundels on its wings, markings of the Royal Flying Corps. The British plane turned to the left, following the German plane.

This was a modern war. Two warriors shooting at each other from flying machines. When they killed, they did not see the light go out from their enemies.

All Amar could do was lay so still on the ground that the German fighter could not spot him. So still that a sniper could not spot him. So still that the world and everything around him could not notice him.

One moment the British plane was gilding in the air, the next it was spinning. It began to descend and disappeared, crashing in some place far away.

Amar dared not move. The German plane shot over him. It took a few more rounds around the area and then drifted away.

There was joy in still being alive. There was a want, a desire, to crawl back to his trench, to read that letter that waited for him.

VI

"Don't leave. Don't go. I'm afraid that you won't come back." That voice, he recognised it, and yearned for it. It was Sonam's voice, his wife. He was looking upon a field bursting with wheat crop, but he could not see his wife.

When he left his farm fields, the seeds had just been sown, not a single emerging sprout to be seen. But, here, he was walking through fields of wheat. The crops were long and green; mature not yet ready to be harvested. He reached out and touched one of the crops, the coarse leaves scratching his fingers. There was a musty smell of rain that had watered the crop.

Rain.

Rain was falling upon him. Amar forced himself to wake up from his slumber. A quick glance around, and it came back to him, he'd climbed out of the previous artillery crater only to stumble into another one. He was closer to getting back to his own trench lines, yet still far away. He needed to reach his trench line and read the letter that was waiting for him. He had put it in his backpack, right at the bottom with his other letters.

He crawled out of the ditch and fell into a small puddle of water. The wet mud tasted bitter. He had to keep going.

Maybe, once upon a time, this French land had been an open and beautiful land, flat with grass and towering pine trees. Now, upon this land was a terrible, festering smell. Amar looked down. He was crawling upon a body; its clothes and skin were stained deeply with mud, so he could not make out whether it was a German or British soldier. He thought about Jasdeep. About dying. He too should be left there in no man's land to die.

VII

How long did he crawl for? The trench was not far now. He could hear sounds, maybe even voices.

Almost there, after that... after that he could sleep how much he wanted.

The silence of the midnight sky was broken by a screaming mortar shell from the German side, followed by several more. Amar heard the shells plough the earth and explode in the trenches at the back.

Each explosion was met with a terrible sound and shaking of the earth that was not terribly far from Amar. Second blast – closer. Third – closer still. The next one.

He covered his ears and wished someone would transport him back to his trenches. He wanted to cry, wanted to yell that he would not give up, he wanted to say that this war would not break him – because he had to, had to return home. An artillery shell screamed above him, the sound growing louder and louder, until, suddenly, it exploded right next to him.

Darkness.

VIII

Dear Amar Singh,

I write to you to tell you that everything is well at home. Your pita, your father, is well too. He hobbles around the house, keeping to his routine. He wakes up to bathe in the morning sunrays. The cold in the night keeps him awake, his rheumatism pains him during the cold and I massage his old knees with the oils you had brought.

Every evening we visit the village gurudwara to pray for you. I hope that God continues to protect you and keep you safe during this war. I pray that you win all the glory and medals that you seek.

Paramjit visited us yesterday. The wheat crops are yet to mature and yield their fruit and we have no money to give him. We have already given the money you have sent us, but he demands more, accusing us that we are behind on our payment, and this is true.

The lemon grass you planted continues to grow, giving us a wonderful taste to our tea. I wish I could have made a cup for you.

There is no news from the village to tell. Everything is fine. Yesterday, news came of a new war starting between Britain and Ottoman Empire. War has spread like a forest fire. Oh, how many people will die before it ends.

I hope you are well and fine. I desperately pray for your safe return… hopefully by this Christmas?

Yours Sincerely,

Your Wife

Becoming Redundant

BILL HOWELL

There it is again, no matter what you've heard.
At the edge of a porch light, a tethered terrier bugles to
raccoons, squirrels, skunks and other dogs
just as dusk dusts itself off into total fallback dark, just
letting them know she knows they're there.

A black umbrella, still open in the hall, catches Max's
attention. He decides to have a quick snack
before exploring it: a black cat
could get trapped in a dilemma under there far longer
than any human might happen to imagine.

Someday, somebody's going to hold someone so tightly,
all her parts and pieces will stick back
together again. But that's not going to be you.
Instead, you approximate the hour
from the number of cars still parked on the street.

As usual tonight, the viola down the hall refigures the air
beyond electric light or heat, redefines a world
heard in other centuries. Alone with itself, it refuses
to belong, yet radiates its own moment.
That city song, this longing renting a winter room.

Sine Qua Non

Christian Cacibauda

Инне

During the week she spent away,
I felt distinctly ill at ease.
Not *sick*, so much—but the days
crawled by, each vaguely incomplete,
as if a part of me were missing.
No, not my heart. Let’s not be dense:
The heartless don’t waste paper listing
symptoms of their ailments.
So not the heart, but something else
that *justifies* the heart, assigns
a certain purpose to the pulse—
my *sine qua non*. Latin, meaning:
without which not, or redefined:
without which, not quite worth the beating.

The Road to Siem Reap

Christian Cacibauda

The things they never tell you
about the road to Siem Reap
could fill a *Lonely Planet*
all their own—a travelog
of mustn't-sees, shapes
that grinding poverty assumes:

stunted cattle, as gaunt as wraiths
up mountain roads, stray dogs
all ribs and viscid mange, and worst—
the sallow, dirt-shod waifs
(the oldest, what, no more than six?)
who haunt each gold pagoda,
hawking incense sticks.

And yet, the most unsettling things
you learn about yourself. Like:
if you could, you'd take them in
but since you can't, you find
the milk of human kindness
(and your patience) running thin.

How must we look to them,
I wonder. We the multicolored,
we who wander. The gap-year boys
all dreads and tats, and the girls
immodest—their shoulders, tits,
and lily-whites displayed

in Daisy Dukes and outsized
Beer Lao tees. And the adults?
God! They all but *bulge*—aflush
from too much drink and sun and cash—
a pink parade of elephants
on every second pair of harem pants.

Is it any mystery then, you feel—
just beneath each smile or bow
at the guesthouse, ticket counter,
restaurant, bar, and beach—
the ex-subsistence farmer's vast
and half-diluted hatred
for the privileged, fat, and rich?

This is how the world looks.
This is how it looks at you:
Tuk-tuk, brother? Wanna flower?
Travel book? Massage?

Wherever drivers know the roads
that don't appear on any map
and, once rebuffed, will hurl invective
(untranslatable) against your back,
the memories embrace millennia,
and customs, as they go, die hard.

These people, on the other hand,
survived the likes of Cochin China,
Democratic Kampuchea, KFC,
and Kohls—and all within
the scant two centuries elapsed
since Jesuits, like brazen ghosts,

appeared, Good Books in hand,
and declared the jungles French.
Of course the locals here have learned
to see in us (and scorn) the source
of all that might impoverish
or—eventually—enrich.

A Time and a Place

Find Me

Shanta Acharya

In a child refugee's orphaned eyes, find me.
In the daily promise of sunrise, find me.

Soldiers rescue an old woman, a bag of bones,
trapped in rubble, calling out to the skies: *Find me.*

Women and children disappear without a trace.
In their helpless, anguished cries, find me.

Surveying the desolation of ruined lives
in forsaken cities of grief the wind sighs, find me.

In voices rising from shallow graves, souls cry,
emerging like a flutter of butterflies, find me.

Unheard, unrepresented, they survive like seeds
praying in cracks of abandoned high-rise, find me.

In stories buried in the bones of exiles,
forgotten in the annals of history's lies, find me.

When you're dead you're dead, unless you go to

Gale Acuff

the Afterlife, if there is one, at our
church there sure as Hell is and you're not quite
dead there or in Heaven, if you rate that,
you go on, just without a body and
probably pizza and tacos and pop
and corndogs and comic books and baseball,
I'm not sure I'd call that living nor much
of an Afterlife, neither, but I don't
make the rules, it's God Who did, and one day
when I'm croaked I might get to meet Him and
if He asks me before I'm sent to fry
what I liked most about being alive
I'll answer Being alive, of course and
then we'll see how He likes that apple.

So Many Flowers

Dick Daniels

The largest slave auction in American history was held March 2-3, 1859, in the horse stalls of Ten Broeck Race Course outside Savannah. Terms of sale, published in newspaper advertisements throughout the South, were "One-third cash; remainder by bond, bearing interest from day of sale, payable in two equal annual instal(l)ments, to be secured by mortgage on the negroes." Proceeds, reported to be $303,850 for 436 slaves, were used to pay off huge gambling debts of Pierce Mease Butler, an absentee plantation owner from Philadelphia. The sorrowful two-day event, to be known as "the weeping time," was conducted during torrential rainstorms when some said, "Even God wept."

George Graham, a prominent citizen whose ancestors were on the boat with James Oglethorpe when he arrived to settle Georgia, attended the auction looking for a bargain. Although a "prime field hand" could cost more than $1,000, there was a grading system where lesser males were classified as three-fourths, half- or even quarter-hands—and sold at an appropriate discount. Graham's wife wanted a gardener to tend their grounds and greenhouse where she intended to grow award-winning orchids and other flowers to fill the crystal vases in her home.

During the inspection period, Graham noticed a young man with a withered arm, standing erect and appearing healthy in every other respect. There wasn't much interest during the bidding, and Mr. Graham made the purchase for $300. On the ride back to the house, he described the work to Gideon. His new slave seemed comfortable with the expectations and insisted the deformity would not hinder his performance.

The Graham family also included a daughter on the verge of maturity, Rebecca Winston Graham. She was a gifted musician, playing the piano nightly for her family and for the First Baptist Church on Sunday mornings. Gideon provided lavish floral arrangements to adorn her instrument in the expansive sanctuary. The two travelled together to place the flowers and enjoyed limited conversations on topics like the weather and its effect on his planting and pruning work.

After he was finished with the chores for Miss Rebecca, Gideon was allowed to take a modest bouquet to the First African Baptist Church where he worshiped, an institution actually older than the Grahams' church. First African was also a stop on the Underground Railroad, where a seemingly random set of holes in the basement floor allowed ventilation for runaways temporarily housed in a two-foot-high cavern underneath, awaiting a guide to either the northern states or south to the Florida swamps where they would live among the Seminoles.

Rebecca was "presented" at the Christmas Cotillion in 1860, the debutante ball held in Savannah since 1817. The floor-length white gown and satin gloves were being tailored, and she had begun practicing her steps for the dancing that would last until the latest hours. Her escort visited occasionally to perfect the more difficult maneuvers. As the important night approached, Rebecca was lacking confidence and sought out Gideon for extra practice sessions—chaperoned by her mother, of course!

In their final rehearsal, Mrs. Graham was called away near the end, and Rebecca bestowed a chaste kiss on Gideon's bristly cheek to show her appreciation.

The Grahams were providing flowers for the elegant evening, and Gideon was in charge. After finishing those duties, he blended into the wait staff in order to stay and witness the entire affair. When she was formally introduced and Mr. Graham paraded Rebecca around the stage, Gideon's eyes never left her and the shoulder corsage he had crafted from the prized orchids. Rebecca's curtsey to the audience was by far the lowest and longest of all the debs. She seemed to glide in the air as her escort guided her across the hardwood. Gideon couldn't help thinking about the kiss that meant nothing to her—but everything to him.

Though most in attendance knew political storm clouds were on the horizon, few that night could have predicted this Cotillion would be the last for several years, as the Civil War ended such festivities in the southern states. Rebecca's beau, not officially her betrothed, was one of four thousand Confederates to fall at Fredericksburg in December of 1862—when there should have been fresh debutantes and joyous dancing in Savannah.

Christmastime in 1864 brought General Sherman's arrival, not bearing gifts but "requisitioning" everything of value in the Graham household: money, silver, food, blankets, and winter clothing. Somehow, the foragers missed nine sweet potatoes warming on one of the fireplace hearths. Those kept the family alive until Gideon could sell some flowers.

Gideon was a freed man when the war ended but asked Mr. Graham if he could stay on; they easily came to a sharecropping arrangement on proceeds from the flower market. Tragically, an undiagnosed illness had begun a gradual paralysis of Rebecca's legs. She could still play the piano, and Gideon would be treated to full-length concerts as he worked beneath the windows of the drawing room. There were, of course, beautiful and aromatic bouquets surrounding her. Gideon carried her outside on warm days to absorb the healing sun and keep him company while tending the plants and shrubs. There, Rebecca received lengthy lectures about cultivating azaleas and camellias and how to prune crape myrtles in February.

Neither acknowledged the deep feelings that had taken root, feelings society would not allow to be formalized. Gideon had ignored Mr. Graham's repeated reminders he was free to leave at any time. He was a slave to Rebecca. Her frailty left her vulnerable to the yellow fever epidemic that swept through Savannah in 1876, taking her and a thousand others. Before she slipped away, Rebecca whispered, "I'm sorry we could never be together. But I wish I could still dance with you!"

Gideon savored the moment before replying, "In my mind, we never stopped." First Baptist never saw a funeral with so many flowers.

Statins

for my father

Sean Beckett

One walk weekly. A rhythm regular
as closing banks and tornado siren
testing. Feet planted solid onto each
Sunday: a slow, steady, calendar tread.
That winter I was getting verse by heart,
and you were reading abstracts on facemasks.
We overlapped on Sabbaths for blest laps
of frozen trails scattered around Boston.
That winter you started taking statins.

And sometimes as we walked my phone would die,
leaving us directionless except
for birdsongs, footprints, and friendly strangers.
Now I regret not letting the screen go black
more often. I should have gotten us lost
longer and further, struck more deeply at
that woods' green soul before my schedule's sick
systole sent us spinning out.

Still, despite all, these walks have done their work.
These are the small salvations, the little
deviations that somehow rescue us
from the slitted edge of some regression.
I'll take this statin, better with a meal.
I'll take this thawing wood, swallow it whole.
I'll ingest every bluebell and beech tree,
throw back every bird whisper, every nodding
stem.

prolific

Liz Femi

pick up straws with your best girls.
weave pretty mats for your dolls,
foreign faces frozen plastic in green, red, or blue,
plopped into your tiny brown hands.
name them names like Margaret or Agnes,
then treat them for a bad cough.
cuss about rising kerosene prices,
then tell agbowó-odè he'll get his money another day.
tell about when Dapo lied about communion,
surely inching his way to hell.
and how the flood will come again,
and this time you will surely paddle
with a wooden spoon on a patch of zinc roof,
all the way to the North Pole,
so you can give the fat man a piece of your mind:
how there's no sense in his stories,
when it's too hot for chimneys in Africa.

The Mean House

Ryan O'Toole

I moved into a house on Ferne Lane several blocks from our small Catholic college one day in early spring. I'd been looking for housing for the start of the semester, having just returned from exotic abroad, when an old friend reached out and told me he was leaving for Scandinavia to do fieldwork for his thesis and I could stay in his room if I wanted.

At first, he wouldn't let me pay the rent, insisting I was doing him a favor by staying there. But I convinced him to let me cover the cost, saying that otherwise would offend not just myself but my family and our sensibilities as well.

If you insist, he said, you can pay the landlady Ms. Goth directly.

I was glad finally to have somewhere to stay and also to hear from him after all this time.

Ted and I met two years ago at our freshman orientation. For the first few weeks of college, we ate almost every meal together and often went for hours-long rambles around the florid, late-summer campus. We discovered a well-signed arboretum, full of regional maples, pines, and ashes; a small brick hut where the dining hall's bread was baked, its chimney chuffing white swirls; and a botanical garden and greenhouse on a distant hill, where tropical flora and fauna populated the glass enclosure. Pointing at the canopy, Teddy said he saw a golden tamarin jump between the branches, but I could see that his glasses were fogged.

We grew apart after classes started, as we each settled into our academic niches and made other friends. The library became a sudden necessity to me, and I was studying more than I ever had before. Eventually, we stopped sharing meals and going for walks altogether. Still, we nodded or smiled or said hello in passing.

A week after we sorted out the room over a coffee at a local café, Ted went back on our agreement. I was out on the Cape staying with my grandmother, when he messaged me to say that he thought I'd be better off living somewhere else. I told him that I hadn't been able to find anywhere else to stay. Days went by where I didn't hear from him, and I tried to look for other rooms. Campus housing was full. My friends' dorms and apartments were also full, even fuller with boyfriends and girlfriends staying over.

Long walks broke up the endless down-time and stints watching black-and-white films in the living room, while I wondered if I'd hear from Ted again. Waves boomed in the hollow winter air in place of the summertime crush of mosquitos that I was used to, and the town was nearly empty, except the few cars driving slowly down the wet main street.

Once I thought I had definitely been ghosted, my phone buzzed. It was Ted. He said that I could stay in the room if I still had nowhere else to go. I didn't know whether to thank him or not at this point, and he disappeared again from my life, this time heading north into a wash of polar lights.

I stepped back into the house to the honeyed voices of actors in the living room. My grandmother paused their giant faces and asked about my walk, as if I'd just returned from a trek of the Arctic Circle on dogsled and not a lap of the little town center with its silent chapel and empty shops. She checked my hands for chilblains and started the coffee maker. She asked about abroad and college: Do you miss it already? Are you happy to be going back? I did, and I was. I missed the language and the little marble city. I also missed school and was happy to be going back soon. St. Paul's was small and familiar, the college my grandfather and parents had gone to. It had been expected I go there, too.

Without realizing it, I drifted into talking about Ted, the room he finally said I could stay in, and his inexplicable waffling. We had barely seen or spoken to each other in two years. But in that time, I always thought of him fondly, like a silver memory.

A week later, I moved into the large pink house sitting on the incline of a hill, its lawn patched with grey-green and blonde. Banners of ivy swayed on the clapboard.

I walked up the rotted steps and pressed the black wart of the bell: Bzz. Bzz. Bzz, it rang, mimicking stinging insects. The landlady Ms. Goth opened the storm door with a croak from its rusted spring.

I told her I was the tenant taking over the room of Teddy Thwaite for the semester. She said she knew who I was and looked me over once before letting me inside. She showed me to the staircase that led to Teddy's garret, not pausing to say anything about the house, as I followed her through its hardwood halls. She turned to face me at the front of the stairs.

"There's no funny business in this house, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"You aren't like your friend, are you?"

I stared at her dumbly. “No, I don’t think so.”

She scanned me again and tsked, then turned and walked away, stopping once to straighten a cross on the wall.

When she had gone, I leapt up the narrow stairs, my bags dinging and banging against the shoulder-wide walls. The yellow paint was dotted with black marks from others’ luggage and furniture, forming an umbrous fog that slunk up the stairs beside me.

At the top, the door peeled open to let me in. The floorboards were springy under my bluchers. I slipped off my shoes and kicked them into the corner.

Teddy’s room was sparsely furnished. Two windows dressed in tulle splayed light over a spartan cot, a small desk, and a bureau in the corner. A map of Scandinavia hung on the wall above the bed, one of its corners torn and fallen from its tack. A small note—addressed to me in Teddy’s loopy hand—waited for me on the taut bedsheet. I opened and read it.

Dear Max,

Thank you for taking over my room while I’m out of country. I can’t explain how helpful it is. I should inform you of the reasons for my departure. I am going to research the Himmelian people of northern Fennoscandia, but I also meant to quit my life of decadent materialism [I looked around. What materials, dear Ted, did you speak of?], *at least for a while, and finally because the house you are standing in is a mean and cruel house. Let me explain. The kitchen sink habitually and deliberately spits scalding water on me, even when turned to cold and at impressive ranges, and the refrigerator takes special pleasure in hitting me with its door whenever I go to pluck out milk or fruit. The stairs often move to trip me when I climb them and so do the impish rugs when I walk* *through the living room and hallways. Finally, I have good reason to suspect the landlady and fellow tenants, whom you should avoid at all costs, have been meeting to plan my murder* [!]. *I was left with no choice but to move my summer expedition to the spring. Max, my friend, I hope you can understand my hesitation to let you stay here, but you may be better equipped to handle the slings and arrows of this difficult situation than I am. Thank you again for agreeing to take care of my cat Wampus during my absence. She is out in the garden.*

Yours,
Ted T. Thwaite

I realized then that poor Ted had lost his marbles. I looked out the open window and saw a white cat in the verdure below, sniffing a flower. It looked up at me and mewled. He hadn't mentioned a cat before.

I turned to the next page.

P.S. —Don't worry about keeping in touch during my trip, as I will be hither and thither throughout Hyperborea from Bergen to Murmansk. Postcards to follow.

I put down the letter and tried to see the mean and cruel house teeming with villains, but I only saw the aged and mistreated interior, bland and harmless, of a room that had been routinely rented to college students for years. The hardwood creaked and sighed with my footsteps, and the floor inclined slightly from one end of the room to the other. The gaps in the floorboards were filled with black dust and debris, and a continent of tea-colored mildew spread across the ceiling, appearing like a medieval map.

Teddy's remaining belongings floated above the dingy setting like illumined objects: the small perfectly-made bed (do I disturb it to sleep?); the desk and bureau of matching oak; and perfume bottles spread across the top of the bureau like tiny actors on a stage: yellow, ochre, clear, and minty liquids dressed in smooth or reticulated glass costumes. I didn't know and wouldn't have guessed he had a fascination with scents. He only ever smelled one way: a sporty, bluey smell that he could have picked up from any corner pharmacy. It was a masculine tang. He smelled faintly of it when we met for coffee to talk about the room, and he smelled strongly of it two years ago when we had known each other best. I'd noticed again the dried matte poppies on the insides of his wrists and on either side of his neck where he had sprayed himself, and I tried to remember what they had tasted like the first time under the maple trees, then behind the brick hut, and the scores of times in the misty greenhouse.

A meow came from behind the door, and a small white head nudged in, meowing again. It was Wampus. She padded up to me and pressed her small head against my leg, purling loudly. After a few moments of petting and purring, while the cat ran its head and arched back under my hands, I said to her that I needed unpack my things. The cat seemed to understand and settled on the corner of the bed, watching me from a curled position.

Finally, I got the old latch open. My shirts bloomed like a sudden spring: coral pinks, powder blues, and Lenten lavenders in pin-stripes, ginghams, and madras. Teddy's bureau was empty—its contents following him to the Arctic—and I dropped my shirts into the floral-papered drawers, then did the same with the pants: Nantucket reds, moss greens, and charcoal greys, all folded and stowed away. The bottles wobbled as I shut the drawers, their liquids sloshing rhythmically. I lifted the cap off one and held it to my nose, inhaling the familiar scent.

From the root of the massive, vine-twined tree where we sat, the canopy was immense and intricate, its appendages swaying like the ribbons of an aurora. One of these times in the greenhouse must have been our last. We must have disentangled and left the tropics, walking back to the deciduous campus at a chaste distance. We must have parted on a brick path, and I must have gone back to the library. Weeks or maybe months later, I must have looked up from the book I was reading and wondered if I had ever really known a Teddy Thwaite and if the scenic walks and muggy greenhouse were real and not lifted into my memory from a book I'd read. But all pretense of fiction vanished when I'd see Ted again, striding through some cloister, and we'd smile and say hello, and I'd remember everything clearly, as if I'd just sampled the astringent flavor of his fragrance earlier that afternoon.

I replaced the cap on its nozzle and joined Wampus, who'd moved to the windowsill and was looking over the garden. Gravel paths divided the yard into green triangles. At the center, lily pads and water chestnuts doilied over a black pond. A turtle teetered on a mossy log before slipping off and disappearing into the ink. A white Adirondack chair reclined next to the water where someone in sunglasses sat reading a book: one of the tenants to be feared and avoided, no doubt.

Jays and orb-like robins circulated standing feeders. Cobalt swifts darted in and out of a cubby bolted to the trunk of a pear blossom. A pair of citrusy parakeets ruffled their feathers and hopped between the spidery branches, having likely escaped the botanical garden at some point. Monarchs clung to rosy milkweed before flitting over the white paths and disappearing into blips of sunlight. I marveled at the backyard Arcadia. The rest of the town had been so grey and lifeless.

A lily swayed in the breeze below. Its long pale stem connected to a shoulder and beside it, a face wearing black sunglasses. I waved back. The flower dipped and cupped the air loosely around her mouth: "Are you Teddy's friend?"

I shouted back that I was.

"Come down. I want to introduce myself."

I rose slowly from the flaking sill, then plunged down the stairs, careening into the narrow walls. I seemed to float over the mischievous rugs that Teddy had described, and I zipped past the shared kitchen without any scalding shot fired my way. I opened the screen door, its two halves filled with light, and stepped into the garden, holding the door for Wampus, who was chasing my heels.

I stepped directly into an outstretched hand, and mine rose to meet it. The hand pumped mine several times chummily.

"I'm Zinnia. Who are you?" she said, her face lost in the light.

"I'm Max," I pulled my other hand over my eyes and saw the black sunglasses again.

"Have you met Peter and Sebastian yet?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh, they're nice. You'll like them." She let go of my hand. "Is Teddy okay, by the way?"

I hesitated. "I don't know," I said. "He left a weird note for me upstairs. But he's always been a strange cat, I guess."

She laughed. "Yeah, I think I know what you mean. Speaking of: Hello, Wampus!" She picked up the cat, which mewled softly as she swaddled it in her arms. "I love this cat. I was hoping Ted would let me have her."

The garden clarified around us, full of white light on green leaves, casting coins of shadow everywhere. The urinous smell of the pear blossoms stung my nose.

"Would you like to join me? I think there's another chair somewhere." She looked around. "It's so nice today."

"Sure."

Zinnia spotted the other chair and dragged it over the white gravel to the pond: a green metal patio chair, cool from its spot in the shade. We settled down and talked, and I began to feel like an eternity had passed since the cold wet morning at my grandmother's house. Teddy's note slipped easily from my mind.

*

Weeks later, I found a postcard on the doormat with the rest of the mail. An image of alpine landscape appeared on the rigid card: white mountains, with black slurries of fir forest running between them. I flipped to the other side, where a few lines of Teddy's handwriting shivered across:

Dear Max,

I really hope you are doing well. My fieldwork is off to a good start, and the landscape here is beautiful. But right now, I am worried about you. I am sorry for the situation I left you in in that terrible house. I am in and out of internet connection as I head north to Tromsø for the end of polar night, but please email me so I know you're alright.

Yours,
Ted

It was dated several weeks ago from Nebesa, Finland. The top corner was loaded with little centime stamps with illustrations of purple lupins and reindeer. I read the postcard again and drafted a response in my head:

I'm sorry, Ted, but I don't understand. I like it here and I've made friends with Zinnia, Peter, and Sebastian. I think they all miss you. The house is nice, and everything works fine as far as I can tell. But I'm worried about you. None of this makes sense. Please write me back when you can.

I placed the rest of the mail on the kitchen counter and slid the postcard into my back pocket. Days felt long and luxurious in the new spring, and the weather grew warmer and more inviting by the day. Zinnia was waiting for me outside, and I went to join her.

Peter—or was it Sebastian, I couldn't tell the twins apart yet—rocked in a red nylon hammock strung between the pear blossoms. The trees were white and fluffy like snowballs, and the hammock looked like a giant red cocoon between them.

"Everything okay?" Zinnia said.

Teddy's postcard burned and bent in my back pocket, as I sat down. I must have said something here, as I tried to think of anything besides Ted. He briefly sledged through my mind in a sealskin parka pulled by a team of malamutes, driving deeper into winter. I tried to focus on the pale blue day, the seventh in a growing streak, on Zinnia sitting across from me, her sandaled foot bobbing rhythmically. I inhaled deeply through my nose, grabbling for the grounding smell of the garden, its ripe flowers and warm earth. But my senses flushed with the cool smell of snow and the blue-scented fragrance sitting upstairs.

Basketball night at the headman’s house, Serberida, Sumatra

Roger Camp

We are honored guests
in the headman’s house
a blue cinder block box
smack in the jungle green,
a cement slab
passing as a porch
lazily evaporating
beneath my bare feet.

Across the red clay track
chattering monkeys
perform alfresco in the palms
as fruit bats darting
in webbed flight
probe the open window
the pink guest-room walls
sweating insecticide
as we crawl into moist beds.

Lying in darkness
nostrils sunk in malarial air
we listen to the villagers
over the throbbing generator
cheer on the Lakers
playing in the room next door.

Practicing With My Father's Walker

Casey Killingsworth

Imagine watching me from outside the window last night
tracing my future bones' slow movements by pushing the old man's walker

around the living room as if one could practice old age–
get better at it, I mean–and hurrying to let go upon his slow return,

standing on my own again, the whole world suddenly smells older,
all those days of *living forever* gone,

replaced by hearing aids that cost too much and news shows that really hurt hard.

Old Highway 99

Casey Killingsworth

We're a bunch of early risers, aren't we, doers who
don't know what we're doing, tearing down
highways and building freeways before our
parents even throw us the keys to the car,
seeding clouds with thoughts to grow something
before we even figure out where rain comes from.

Remember those tin cans we tied together with
string; we envisioned them as the first
mobile phones, and the myth we attached to them
wasn't that we thought the phones would really work,
but that we would grow up knowing everything
the world wanted us to know.

Our secret whispers through that string stretched
tight between us never carried the message of humility
and, well, those cans are buried underneath the desert
now, pieces of polluted rust condemned by the nightly
news–the new tin cans–pointing fingers at anyone
who is not in their place, their time.

Thrift Store

AV RASMUSSEN

The air is thick with your dusty presence, o ghosts
of mine. Grandma, you glide past the cracked Dresden dolls,
their floor length dresses frozen like an old photo.
Sister, in one painting, Jesus bends down from heaven
with your condescending smirk, and he is as distant
and the paint as cold as your touch. Lover,
you would have adored the costume jewelry,
once bright stones dancing on faded silver, and I
would have pinned one on your blouse, careful
to keep the sharp point from biting your skin. Friend,
you wrap yourself in old quilts and your eyes follow me,
troubled. And mother, you lurk in the mundane plates and cups
stacked indifferently on creaky shelves, but I hear them
shatter as you fade away.

Lines Composed in Balesin After Work

LAWDENMARC DECAMORA

There are introductions to this airy
afternoon. After all, my head lies
against the bridge and knows the
lullaby sung long ago from Balesin Island.
But you who sit on the rocks
break my sleep with your tongue
and squirrels. No conceit and not
contrary—I know, I know the real
you with very little time. You are
Agra, my dearest, the deepest song
swallowing the dictionary of winds,
the plum-colored sigh of November
when love becomes the habit of the tides.

The cold amusements of clouds,
some kinds of old and new friends
to populate your mind, to entertain
my apologia for flowers, oak or pine.
But we're friends, you said. Memory
is gentler; it casts a shade for graven images,
the nameless trembling feeling—aye!
The kindness of this long afternoon—
cornucopia of warmth and metaphor
you hamster in your heart.

Agra, no matter how last week’s Toyota
Dealership went, smell the afternoon air
like it’s nobody’s empire.

(Not) Enough

Bad Life

DANA STAMPS II

> “Human life must be some form of mistake.”
> —Arthur Schopenhauer

We are not worth
preserving,
loving like a pet snake, a rattler
that we feed
with rats or guinea pigs
abandoned
like us. I’ve stopped being on our side. Saints,
heroes, lovers are not
enough

to justify vicious existence
of rape, slavery,
and slaughter. Yet, I don’t blame
the victimizer
(I have to eat, too), but the vulnerability of you,
tempting “criminals”
to use you
as they see fit, O this innate weakness,
is where
I find fault. God forbid

when myths, perhaps one of an angel
holding back
a trembling father’s blade
(and all our inky
laws) have, at last, failed to shield us from the hunt,
protect from teeth,

stingers, fangs,
(hypnotic melodramas, please),

and the majestic physic
of a predator's paws, claws, wild hot hard need
—my need.

And while you are thinking,
remember
the calories you burn,
are burning,
and how much fuel your fatty big brain devours
to think about
suffering, the bitch of it,
the deaths
you cause.

The Mighty Oak

Jeff W. Bens

When his sister Arlene called from Boston to say their mother was dead, Oak was in an ice bath halfway through a twelve-pack of beer in the middle of the Texas afternoon trying to concentrate on how he was going to knock Pat McDonald's head in. Outside his apartment, the El Paso sun blazed. Inside, he had the apartment lights off, as he kept them, against the wavering sickness in his head. He hadn't slept again. He hasn't slept much since the headaches that crept in over the summer, his hip and lumbar throbbing in their marrow. His ma wasn't supposed to be dead. When Oak talked to her in July, three months ago, she said she was better, that her cancer was on the run.

Out the team bus window, a cattle truck rattles his head. The El Paso Storm bus rolls north through the Chihuahuan desert on the way to the Albuquerque, New Mexico rink, at the far northern edge of the West Texas Hockey League. Oak sits alone in a seat at the back of the bus with the other veteran players. The boys are playing cards, they're on their phones. The bus smells of sweat, IcyHot, booze breath and beer farts. Oak takes a drink from the roadie he's got between his knees. He's got a seat reserved on a 4:00 a.m. Greyhound back from Albuquerque to El Paso and a ticket for a flight from El Paso to Logan for tomorrow afternoon. For after he knocks Pat "Sandman" McDonald's head off.

Oak examines his right fist. He locates the first knuckle of his right index finger down near the middle of his palm. He works the knuckle toward the base of his finger, sets it more or less back into place. He's got nothing against Pat McDonald. The Albuquerque defenseman is twenty-two, is making a name for himself. Oak understands this. But he's going to do it, he has to do it, even though McDonald tomahawked Ken Grimes's neck with his stick last spring when Oak wasn't even skating, when Oak was collapsed-out in his shitty El Paso apartment with his spinning head and his stitched-up post-surgery lumbar spine.

He kept meaning to get back to Boston. From Texas. From Florida where he was before Texas. He hasn't seen his daughter Kate. He's ashamed that it will take his own mother's funeral for him to see his daughter, to see Kate for the first time in four years. Kate was ten, and now she is fourteen. Oak was ten. And now he is thirty-three. Oak looks back out the bus window at Texas. The sunlight slashes through the gap between his sunglasses and his face. He squeezes his eyes shut again. He hears the blood ringing in his brain. He just needs ice time. To get out of Texas and back up a league. And then another league, up to where he belongs.

Oak gets the plastic pill bottle from the pocket of his sweats. He needs six Oxy 40s a day to get the job done, with Dexy or Adderall. The team doctor cycles him through Vicodin and Tramadol, with Ativan and Ambien. Oak pays for the Oxy and the Dexedrine.

He's always had headaches but last February they had started to mess up his brain. The pills help. He remembers the game when he first really zeroed out. Two years ago in Florida. Nothing really bad had happened. He hadn't even fought. He took a blindside hit from some goon and then it was an hour later and the game was over. Oak was dressing at his locker when he came to. He's had his bell rung too many times to remember, drifted ten minutes here and there on the bench but he always came to. Drank some water. Head-butted the boards to wake himself back up. But that time, in the Florida locker room, when he woke to see his teammates doing their usual shit, laughing so he knew they must have won the game, he remembers the smell of rotting fruit. And then he fell against the dressing room bench and puked on the carpet, the boys giving him shit like he was hungover. He shoved a smile on his face, getting to the toilet stall where he sat for he can't remember how long, steadying his brain in his busted-up hands.

He spaces the Oxy out, eats them in bursts before games. His soft head lead to his busted back. His busted back lead to more pills. He knows it. He's read about it. Addiction. CTE. He's not going down that path, over the Mexican border with a Pringles can of pills. But the team doctor and dentist are scaling him back. So he's paying premium. He no longer gives a shit what he looks like in practices—he knows he just needs to get his body back in order, his head straightened out. He doesn't even want to take the shit anymore, but if he doesn't then he can't sleep, can't think, can't skate.

He tries to remember to park his truck at the back right corner of parking lots. He writes down that he's eaten. He puts his keys and his phone on a table that he moved next to his apartment door so he can always remember to take them.

A semi bursts past the bus window. Oak washes the Oxy down with the beer.

"We're showmen, Oak," their coach Tom Bowie said to him three weeks ago on opening day when Oak fought his first fight since February, his first of six in this season's first ten games, not counting the punch-up last week in the team bar parking lot that their mouthy Long Island–born winger started and Oak had to finish. “No one wants to see you finessing a wrist shot.”

Maybe it’s true, he thinks. On opening day there were posters for him, flashing phones. The El Paso Storm crowd chanted his name. He’s baaaack, the rink PA said, Oak watching himself overhead on the Jumbotron delivering hit after hit, punch after punch: for Texas, before that for Florida, for North Carolina in the ECHL, the crowd and him rising together. He’s fifteen and scoring, he’s twenty and skating, he’s twenty-five and falling, from the AHL to the ECHL, he’s thirty-two and closing his eyes behind his shades on a Texas League bus to Albuquerque.

He turns toward the bus window again, twists an Adderall 20 capsule and sucks the Addy up his nose. In his head, he sees pictures: his dead ma smoking at his games when he was a kid, his sister Arlene step-dancing on a St. Paddy’s float, his father in a black donkey coat standing by the MBTA trains. And there’s Shannon and their baby, Kate, napping in his Providence College hockey house bed. His sister Arlene said Shannon and Kate will be at the funeral on Monday. Kate will be there when they lower his ma into the ground.

The Albuquerque rink is old, steaming with bad air and wet ice. Banners for an MMA fight and a monster truck show hang from the rafters. Oak and his teammates skate on into a fog of boos. The Albuquerque fans pound the glass. They know what’s coming. They want it. They’ve paid for it. Oak skates to the visitor’s bench. He shouts over the boards to his coach Tom Bowie, Major Tom. “You gonna let me skate today, Major?”

Major Tom scratches his mustache, spits into the corner of the bench. His coach, his friend. They fished together. They used their sticks on the back nine in the Franklin Mountains, slapping golf balls out toward Juarez. "Just skate your game, Oak," Major yells back, not meeting Oak's eyes.

The rink lights snap off. Oak steadies himself against the spots that swirl the ice. He swallows hard, jams his teeth together. He's sweating good now, with what's in him, with what he is going to do to Pat McDonald. The spots spin across the ice, the PA growling, "Don't Poke the Bull if You Don't Want the Horns!" as the snorting, flag-waving mascot leads the Albuquerque team onto the ice, steam blasting from the mascot's plastic nose, Metallica's "Enter Sandman" shaking the arena's air.

Oak looks for Pat McDonald. The Jumbotron flashes a montage of the Bulls scoring, hitting, and fighting. Oak opens and closes his gloved fists, shifts his weight from one skate to the other. Up above him, McDonald delivers a massive uppercut to some bender's strapless chin, a halo of sweat exploding from the poor guy's hair. The image freezes. The crowd chants "Sandman" as the rink lights burn back on. A coke sails down from the stands, hits Oak, ice and coke running down his back. The Albuquerque crowd bunches near Pat McDonald, waving Sandman posters, snapping photos of McDonald with their phones. In person, Oak realizes, McDonald is even bigger and dumber than he looks online. His head is like a cement block.

Oak sucks in, blows out, pushes off from the boards. He loops behind their net and smacks his forehead against the corner glass. The fans think he's showboating. He does it again. Grinding his mouthpiece, he skates hard small circles in the visitor's end. Later, he tells his body.

He punches the boards to wake-up his bleeding fists. He drives his knees into the air. I'm still the boss of you, he's telling his body, he's telling his head, he's telling his sick, throbbing blood.

He roars into speed. His teammates grin, stick-slap him as he goes by, Grimesy nodding, Oak squeezing life from every cell he's got. He skates the center line. One of the Albuquerque guys says something to him, about how he's done, about how he should go fuck his Texas boyfriend. Oak loops harder around their end, he's flying now, and he cuts over the center line just as McDonald loops by. Oak grabs the kid and spins him. He's not waiting on the National Anthem, he's not waiting on the puck. He's peaking, in half an hour his body will start its grinding collapse.

"Let's go," Oak says.

"Later, Pops," McDonald says. One of McDonald's front teeth is gone. Up close, Oak can see the baby fat on the kid's face.

"Now." Oak drops his gloves, hurls his helmet so that it smacks against the boards. For a split second, waiting on McDonald to drop, an unfamiliar thought flashes in the rising white roar inside Oak—that he doesn't have to fight. That he's a dog in a pit. In that flash, Oak lets McDonald's ham fist shoot past his right ear, and Oak straightens the kid with three quick blows—chin, nose, temple. McDonald shove hooks the side of Oak's head, Oak flashing into starburst. The blow is like a thrown brick. The crowd roar white- tunnels into nothing, time slowing, as McDonald tries to hook again, the silence spinning as the benches clear around them. Oak ducks, comes back up. McDonald clenches. Oak's been waiting on this. He studied McDonald's clench online. The kid always leaves a gap. Oak shoots a tight uppercut with his right fist into this gap between their two chests. McDonald's head snaps backward as Oak knew it would. McDonald's head floats there in front of Oak, a fat, dumb balloon. Oak draws the punch from his legs to his waist to his shoulder to his fist and smashes it. McDonald falls silently into the whiteness, the guy's head bouncing off the ice.

Oak times the bounce as the noise and color rush back in. He hurls a roundhouse to the side of McDonald's face, the force of his own punch bringing Oak to his knees. McDonald's head bursts into blood spray. The roundhouse sends McDonald sliding, his bleeding face smearing the ice. McDonald balls up. The fights around them freeze. The ref gets in front of Oak and suddenly the ref starts screaming for the rink doctor. Oak hears his own heart and breath. Cups rain from the stands.

"Oak—"

Major Tom runs across the glove-littered rink.

"Oak—"

Oak sees his mother dead on her white-tiled bathroom floor. He sees his daughter, Kate, skating in white snow.

"Oak—"

There's a doctor in red sweats running behind Major Tom. Oak watches them, the doctor slipping on the ice, racing toward McDonald. McDonald lays motionless. Getting closer, Oak sees McDonald's bloodied face. And then he has to look again against what he thinks he is seeing and it's there: McDonald's right eyeball is hanging wet and red from his shattered eye socket to the blood pool on the ice. The quiet explodes. Two Bulls jump Oak from behind, the blows on him like blocks thrown into black water.

Later, in the parking lot, with the delayed game starting, Oak looks up at the black Albuquerque sky. An ambulance took McDonald away. Oak knew better than to try to see him. Oak just walked up the ramp, and even the fans were quiet, he walked through that quiet and got his skates off and his pads and he showered off the fight, his whole body shaking so that he had to sit down in the stall. He is still shaking in the parking lot, standing there shaking, when three guys come over, having left the game.

"There's kids in there," one guy says.

"You sick bastard."

"You may have killed the guy."

When the biggest guy throws a punch, Oak takes it, to the side of his face, and falling as he takes another punch, he lets the guys take their shots, their punches dissolving in the adrenaline that burns cold inside him. Looking up at the night sky from the Albuquerque parking lot, Oak can feel what they've done to his face and ribs, he can see it in the face of the smallest guy as they run—and he is lying on his back on Castle Island in Southie with his girlfriend Shannon, looking at the Boston stars, Kate still in that place for souls before they get ripped into life.

Figures on Top of the Wedding Cake

Mike Wilson

He lifts her off the ground
while tickling her crotch,
both of them barely aware of the spectacle,
the imposition of being so private in public,
lost in their cupidity for each other.

After their splendor in the grass,
as people pass, peek, and look away,
they live in a house of imagination as
property, each of the other, master and slave,
wary of incipient revolt.

They fight over the smallest things,
dancing in and out of striking distance.
But whatever the fight seems to be –
life insurance for the kids or forgotten chores –
owning and being owned is what it’s about.

Logic beats ploughshares into swords,
constructs indictments and alibis shamelessly.
Losing is losing, and winning is losing, too.
Cupidity brought them together, then left them
to figure out love by themselves.

Motherhood

MICHELLE MATTHEES

You buy a folding wooden icon at the Mileševa Monastery. Inside is The White Angel, one wing cocked. *Take you under my wing.* Or maybe like a dog, a lifted ear saying *I might be looking over here, but I am still listening for you.* The White Angel is distracted by the space race, global warming, the civil war in Yemen.

What of her white bundle? Is it to be given away? Is it on its way in or on its way out of that arch? Is it what's not known, but is becoming? Or what was, but is not to be again?

You decide you must decide. *This is your moment* she says, pointing. Is she shielding your eyes with that wing? *The bundle is not for you?* You move forward and you raise it. You bring it home. You take your chances.

One More Mile

CAITLIN THOMSON

When we make our way through the forest,
our kids hug the trees they deem special.

"I love you," they say into the bark
 of a stranger.

I wonder if we will be the first to break
their hearts, as I pin the same

unicorn happy birthday banner
to the wall for another year, and frost

a cake into a rainbow. It feels
like my worst fear, and also inevitable,

that while I'm busy folding clothes and
spraying vinegar on the stove,

I will say the wrong word
or you will look the other way as their

heart goes sailing off
into the waves,

tethering rope frayed
and windblown.

But as I press a kiss into
their collarbone to wake them

I have to hope, that even
if their heart is damaged by mine,

that our love will carry on in them
anyways, like how

your fathers’ ears, grace our
daughters head,

and my toes spread out on
both their feet.

Cape Disappointment

ADAM MATSON

At a few minutes past midnight, Sean stood beside his gently purring car, staring into the smoky haze, at the intersection of U.S. highways 25 and 80, just outside Cheyenne. He had just enough fuel to make it to either Chicago or Seattle. East or west. Either was the end of the road. The air was like an oven mitt shoved into your mouth. He wore a rag over his face, soaked in Gatorade as water was too precious to waste. He'd been standing outside for less than two minutes, his moment at the intersection more ceremonial than speculative. He knew which way he was going.

He got back in the car, turned west along US 80, and headed into a wall of smoke, thinking, I'm going to be with Jax, Mom. She's alone in Seattle.

So I'll have neither of my children with me at the end?

You'll have Dad. Jackie will have no one.

Bring her back if you can.

I will.

We love you, Sean.

Love you, too.

The pointless promise to return with Jackie stung the most. He'd never see his parents again. Chicago was nothing but a sprawl of steel matchsticks, waiting to burn.

He stopped at a Love's outside Cheyenne. The corpses of trucks lay strewn at odd angles in the parking lot. Piles of putrid flesh and dust-blown clothing littered the ground. Inside he found the shelves looted. He used the bathroom. Squatted in the sweltering darkness with his flashlight clenched between his teeth.

Travel was only possible at night. Even with the air conditioning cranked, he sipped water every few seconds. In between fits of tears, he praised himself for his foresight. It had been a miserably hot summer, each week more punishing than the last. Like all tides, the heat waves had started small, weeks in the 90s and 100s. Each Monday, Sean had purchased a case of bottled water from Costco, and a 5-gallon tank full of gas. Stored them in the basement of his condo. Then the temperatures began to skyrocket.

The news had advised everyone to shelter in place, then later to evacuate. Then there was no news. Like everyone, Sean believed the heat would break. He chose to shelter in place until it became clear that if he didn't leave Denver he'd die in Denver. Wildfires consumed everything. The West was cut off. The university closed. Med school was over. The power went out. Hospitals became unventilated morgues. No more TV. No more groceries. No more gas.

The last television images of the West looked like the CT scans he'd been learning to read: cancerous blooms of smoke, engulfing entire states, a stage-4 carcinoma.

Now he passed the rolling desert hills of eastern Wyoming. Here the fires had burned themselves out. They had consumed the plains, the Rockies, the high plateaus. Now they were feasting on California and Oregon and Washington, consuming the Cascades.

The eastbound lanes of the highway were long, dead snakes of stopped cars. Sean could smell the corpses. They'd run out of gas, then water, died of heat stroke, burned to death. Lifeless bundles littered the median. There were no carrion birds to pick at them.

The westbound highway was more of a slalom course. Cars slumped into the ditches, like their drivers had just given up. Sean crept around them. Sometimes he found a few miles of relatively clear road, but he did not speed. A wreck might suddenly appear in the haze, and he wouldn't be able to avoid it. It was late August. Dawn would break around six A.M. By then he needed to be within sight of shelter. Wyoming was long and desolate and empty. He would have to find a town, or maybe an unburned house, where he could hide in the basement. Breathe shallow and sip water. Hope to live to see dusk.

He had driven this route before, Denver to Seattle, three years earlier, to visit his sister. Even then the heat was sweltering. That was his first time seeing the high desert. Wyoming was beautiful, a long sweep of rolling hills, distant blue mountains, mysterious white snowcaps. Now tt was like driving in a black hole.

Silvery light crept into his rearview mirror. He passed a sign: Evanston: 64 miles. The temperature outside was well into the triple digits. The sun materialized out of the haze, a bloodshot eye opening to burn the world. With the light came a little more visibility. He punched the accelerator. He could feel the heat seeping into his car, stinging his arms and neck.

Most of Evanston had burned. In the town center, he found a department store, mostly intact, with an underground parking garage. He drove down one level, parked next to a stairwell. It was pitch dark. The temperature was in the low hundreds. He pulled a foam sleeping pad and a pillow out of his trunk, set them down next to his car. Swallowed a few Ambien, closed his eyes, tried to sleep.

Every evening at 8 PM West Coast time he turned on his phone for exactly three minutes, called his parents, then his sister. His phone had not been charged in three weeks. The battery was down to 28%. Reception was terrible. It took him four tries to reach his parents.

Still alive?

Still alive. Crossed Wyoming. Heading into Utah.

We're camped by the lake. The water is down a thousand feet from shore.

Anything left in the supermarkets?

The trucks have stopped coming. The farms downstate are burning. We're drinking boiled lake water. We're so exhausted.

Two more days, and I should be with Jax.

Good luck, honey. Call tomorrow. We love you.

Love you.

Next, he called his sister.

I'm only three states away.

I've moved south. I'm not in Seattle. I'm at Cape Disappointment now.

Where is that?

Mouth of the Columbia River.

How'd you get there?

A bunch of us pooled our gas and came down in a van. We're camping by the ocean. It's foggy, a little cooler. You can meet us here.

Coming as fast as I can. Love you, Jax.

Love you too.

He'd barely been able to hear his parents, or Jackie. There might be one or two towers left that hadn't yet burned. Soon his cell phone would be useless.He still had three cases of water, but it was almost unpalatable. He had several zip-locked pounds of beef jerky, packages of melted and re-fused hard candy, a few boxes of stale breakfast cereal and crackers. He'd eaten his last bacon and egg breakfast a week ago.

The thought of Jackie kept his foot pressed to the gas pedal. Feeling her arms around his shoulders, like when they were kids, sitting on the beach, watching Lake Michigan in the summer gloaming. Whispering in their own language. The world was vast and unmerciful, full of punishments. But it was bearable if you had your sister beside you.

Sean wiped his eyes, floored the accelerator. Sped past the Great Salt Lake, a shimmering bowl of sand.

He reached Boise just after dawn, parked at a mall by the highway. Another underground parking garage. The access door to the mall had been kicked in or yanked off. He crept into the concrete basement. Swallowed another pile of Ambien.

He awoke in the evening, groggy, hoarse. Spat up smoky globs of phlegm. There was no power in the mall, but he wandered around with his flashlight anyway. All the stores had been looted. He found a few random plastic containers, filled them with water from a bathroom tap.

When he returned to his car, an emaciated family huddled beside it. It took him a moment to realize they were alive. The father raised a shaky finger. "This your car?"

Sean nodded.

"Where you going?"

"West."

"Why?"

"To see my sister."

The mother stepped forward, her thin arms draped over a young boy and girl. "Can you take them with you?" she asked.

The daughter murmured a squeaky objection.

"Please," she said.

Sean looked at the children, their pale hair and leathery skin. Hollow rings beneath their eyes. The girl buried her face in her mother's shirt. The boy looked defiant, like he might throw a punch.

"I can't," Sean said. "I'm sorry. I can't be responsible."

"There's no help coming," the man said.

"You should be together," said Sean. He wanted to leave. This was a bad omen.

He gave them the containers he had filled with water. The water was cold, fresh from the tap. "Take these," he said. "The water's still on in the mall."

They seized the water, guzzled with relish. Sean kept one bottle for himself, took a long swig. The cool liquid charged down his throat, swam in his belly. He stepped quietly over to his car while the family drank.

The father looked up. "Good luck."

"You too."

The radio was gone. Even the emergency stations were static. He was getting closer to Jackie now, could hear her voice in his head.

Stay calm. Small breaths. Drink. Count up to fifty, then back down to zero. You're almost here, Sean. Five hundred miles, four-hundred-fifty. Only four hundred miles to go.

He crossed into Oregon, headed up Route 84 toward the Columbia Gorge. Passed a sign on the highway: entering West Coast time zone. Turned on his phone and dialed his parents. No answer. He dialed Jackie. No answer. Turned off the phone.

In Baker City, he pulled into a rest stop. There was no gas. No food. No people. In the bathroom, he found a working tap, drank stale, coolish water. Felt a little better for about three minutes.

He turned on his phone again.One bar of reception. Dialed his parents five times. Nothing. He hung up, choking back tears. 19% battery power left. He tried his sister. Nothing.

“Fuck you!” he screamed at his phone.

He dialed Jackie again and again. Finally, a little pocket of sound opened up beside his ear.

“Sean?”

“Jax!”

“Low… attery…”

“I’m coming,” Sean said, no confidence she could hear him. “I’ll be there soon.”

He told her he loved her, then realized he was talking to dead air. Good enough. She was still alive.

He remembered the first time he’d come out of the high country in eastern Oregon, outside Pendleton. The highway curved around the crest of a hill, then suddenly the valley opened up below. There was a long, steep descent. You could see for a hundred miles. The Columbia River snaked into view to the northeast.

Now he descended the long decline at a perilous crawl. There was no vista, only smoky darkness. He swerved around sharp switchbacks. Abandoned cars popped out of the gloom. He grazed the trailer of an over-turned Amazon truck, chipping off a chunk of his bumper. The Amazon smile, inverted, looked like a devilish frown. Sean spat a volley of curses at the truck. Screamed until his voice was gone. Choked on his own rage. Pounded his steering wheel, cursing in gibberish, until he realized he couldn’t see, or breathe, and he nearly plowed headlong into a dead Cadillac Escalade.

"Fuck you!" he screamed at the SUV.

Just let it go, you're almost here. His sister's voice in his head.

I can't see anything, Jax! I can't see a fucking thing!

Take a drink. Calm down. You're so close.

He took a drink, wiped his eyes, pressed his foot on the accelerator.

The Columbia Gorge was a wind-tunnel filled with smoke. The river had shrunken well below its watermark. The highway on the Oregon side was an impenetrable mess of abandoned cars. Sean knew he'd never make it through Portland, where a million people had tried to evacuate at once. He crossed the bridge at Biggs Junction, turned onto the relatively-less-traveled Washington state Route 14. He refilled his gas tank. Only two containers left. Dawn was a few hours away. He sipped warm water, his second-to-last case. Threw the empty bottles into the backseat. Gnawed salty beef jerky.

"I just want a pizza," he said. "Jax, let's order pizza. What do you want on it?"

Chicken and pesto, feta cheese. Broccoli.

He picked up his phone, held it to his ear. "Yes, I'd like to order a pizza. Chicken and broccoli, with pesto and- do you have feta cheese? Great. Also, peppers and onions. Bacon, pepperoni. Sausage, ham. Pineapple? Why not. I don't care if there's a dollar charge per item. Pile it on."

And some chicken wings.

"And an order of chicken wings. Deliver it to the beach, at Cape Disappointment."

He dropped his phone into the cup holder.

He felt the heat of the fires before he saw them. The sky an angry inferno. Flecks of trees flitted up into the haze. He tied a tee shirt around his face, poured water into his eyes and hair. The road was clear. Fire smoldered on either side of it.

"Fuck it," Sean said. "It can't get worse than this."

He floored the accelerator.

Dawn broke over Cape Disappointment. He cruised deliriously out of the wall of smoke. The peninsula was still relatively green, the last slice of unburned land. All his gas tanks were empty. His eyes hurt so badly. He stared at road signs uncomprehendingly. How the hell was he supposed to find his sister? "She'd be at a beach," he mumbled. He was afraid to stop the car. He wound his way along quiet country roads, following signs to the beach. The rising sun's punishing eye scanned for fresh victims.

At Waikiki Beach, he parked his car. This was it. If Jackie was more than just a voice in his head, she'd be somewhere nearby. There were a few cars in the parking lot. Tents tucked into the trees. He stepped out of the car.

"Jax!" His voice was almost nothing.

A dog trotted out of the woods, barked weakly. Sean crouched and pet it. "Who's in charge around here?" It licked his palms.

He stood up, dizzy. The gentle pulse of the ocean washed against the beach.

"The pizza should be here any minute," he muttered.

"Sean!"

He looked around. A thin girl with a brown ponytail walked out of the woods. Smiled at him.

Jackie.

They spent the day dozing in the woods. When the heat became unbearable, they ran into the ocean, splashed around for a few minutes, ran back into the trees.

A few dozen survivors roamed the beach. Someone caught fresh salmon from the mouth of the Columbia, and they cooked strips of meat on the sunbaked beach rocks. Sean handed out the rest of his bottled water. The fires were now only about thirty or forty miles away. They could smell the smoke. In a few days, Cape Disappointment would be burned to ash.

When night fell, they retreated to the trees, ling on blankets and towels and sleeping pads. Sean propped his pillow against a tree. Jackie rested her head on his shoulder.

“Mom and Dad are gone,” she said.

“I know.”

“I think we’ll probably die tomorrow.”

Sean said nothing.

“It’s not being dead that bothers me,” she said. “It’s the last few moments. Being too hot to move. Trying to breathe, getting no air. It makes you want to keep sipping water, but every sip you take only puts off the inevitable for another few seconds.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Just be here with you.”

They lay in the dark, listening to the fleeting murmurs of their companions, muffled crying, whispered reassurances, some couple trying to quietly make love. The dog barked once or twice, at whatever. They were too tired to move, too hot to sleep.

“What’s your favorite memory?” she asked.

Sean’s mind was like a bowl of soup left out on the stove. “Our grandparents’ house,” he said. “The lake house.

Remember when it got hot? We'd just jump in the lake."

"I liked how the porch door used to clatter."

"How the wind blew right through the house."

"Thunder storms."

"I used to wake up early, wait for the newspaper. I'd run out and grab it, so I could look at the baseball scores, before Grampa took the Sports page."

They passed a bottle of water between them.

Jackie took a shallow breath. "You remember when Mom and Dad went through that rough phase, when they almost got divorced? We were like twelve and fourteen."

"Yeah."

"They had that stupid idea that one of us would live with Mom, one with Dad." "They sat us down in the living room, like a fucking board meeting, and said: 'If you had to choose....'"

Sean felt a hot tear dry instantly on his cheek.

"And you had those trick handcuffs," Jackie said. "From your magician kit."

"Yeah. The trick was they didn't work. You'd cuff yourself, and there was no way out."

"You handcuffed us together. Mom started crying."

"That's your favorite memory, Jax? That was like the worst day of our lives."

"No, it wasn't. You probably saved the family."

Sean took a hot breath in the dark. Their water bottle was almost empty.

"There was no more divorce talk after that," Jackie said.

At dawn, the smell of smoke was stronger, thicker. Wispy tendrils crept through the trees.

"The wind's turned," Sean whispered.

"Today's it," said Jackie.

They ran into the ocean one more time, dunked each other under the surf, stared back at the hazy green mass of Cape Disappointment. The sun bore down on them like molten steel, dissolving the morning fog, burning through the swirling smoke.

They stumbled back to shore. Sat dripping beneath a tree. Leaned against each other.

Anxieties (Live)

Stephen C. Middleton

Drenched – without notes / have lost a notebook / lost a precarious toehold in the everyday. Cold / stenosis. Damp – muscles cramping. Stenosis or the ALS / MS the specialist mentioned. Off the pace – trace elements only – of momentum / energy. The familiar (same old) audience – we rarely spoke, but now, post pandemic, he smiles, 'Good to see you', (he says) 'we survived'. Ironic – as I await confirmation of the diagnosis. Sinister initials. The saxophonist has been ill too, has new teeth and had had to relearn embouchure. His very playing a relief.

One summer day (2021)

Vanessa Ogle

From my window I see the brilliant red flowers
	blowing in the wind as my own blinds shake,
the view from your side of the bed so different,
	breeze cool in late-spring. I never open my
window (my pillow covers it) as my ankle hangs
	from the bed. Today I thought of death & now
I smell flowers. (Maybe I'll be a mother!)
	The ease of the world has shifted.
Here, leaves blow & shake, air like a promise to us all.
	I keep the lights off so the apartment stays cool.
(I want to call it a house, still.) I find (like everyone)
	desire fades, everything cyclical, even longings.
Tonight we will fall asleep at different times. (Love
	has everything to do with life and nothing.)
I think they are roses or rhododendrons.
	The screen, a thousand little dots make it hard
to tell but they dance, they dance and I (I!) watch.

Three Clowns

LEN KRISAK

Pagliacci / He Who Gets Slapped / Sawdust & Tinsel

1.

The world's first woman duped the world's first man:
That's when all husband-cuckolding began.
Eve led Leoncavallo to his clown,
Whose smile—a phony frown-worn-upside-down—
Was painted on, stark rictus in the powder.
The pain made all the clapping even louder.

He told himself to act; the act must still
Go on: "*Vesti la giubba*. The garish bill
Says 'Come and Laugh!' And what they've paid
For, they will get. Their laughter is a blade,
Their cheering at each tear and comic face
Exacerbation of a fool's disgrace.
Now turn your tears, your poisoned grief, to laughter.
The play will end, and no relief comes after."

So for her faithlessness, he stabs her dead,
And bathing the stage in arterial red,
Dispatches too, the man who is her lover,
Then wheels on us: "The comedy is over!"

2.

A genius cheated, cuckolded, and mocked:
Lon Chaney. Slapped before his learnèd peers,
He falls into a lightless oubliette's
Black degradation, every feeling blocked,
Then joins a Paris circus where the tears
Are tears of laughers at the slaps he gets.
A clown now, Chaney soon becomes a star
By virtue of his blunt humiliation,
Night after night, until . . . revenge: a stabbing
(And his sacrifice to save young lovers)
Heals what his wife had once bequeathed—the scar
From spurning him—all sneerng, laughing, slapping.
Three deaths become his one hope for salvation
From the slap from which no soul recovers.

3.

A cheap-shit circus in the country-side
Rolls, caravan-against-the-sky (John Ford;
The Seventh Seal). All self-respect has died
In degradation: owner, mistress, clown.
The vessel of their faith has come un-moored,
As cheated and abused, they maelstrom down.

A naked wife has swum with soldiers; teasing
Them, she taunts the clown who is her spouse,
Whose name in Swedish (Frost) bespeaks his freezing.
In white-face paint, he shoulders her, his cross,
And trudges through the sawdust, past the cast.
No one counts the non-existent house
(The shabby show's performing at a loss.)
Perhaps the clown's next act will be his last.

Sushi

THOMAS LAVELLE

Sushi bars,
or restaurants,
make perfect break-up places.
Their Asian quiet keeps scenes –
raised voices, loud sobs –
both smaller and fewer.
Miso soup masks
those few tears that leak.
Likewise wasabi
and pickled ginger root
cover the bile rising
in disappointed throats.
Best are sushi pieces
themselves, so much like dreams,
caplets of starch wrapped
in jackets more exotic
more nutritious: salmon,
tofu, tuna, shrimp,
arranged on plates like lives
are arranged, or smaller portions –
long weekends, trips to museums,
walks after work or pubs –
arrangements left on a platter,
picked at or eaten up
on the whims of appetite.

Biographies

Kitty Steffan is a Romanian-born writer whose juvenilia is scattered across elementary, middle school and high school publications.

Dom Fonce has two chapbooks *Here, We Bury the Hearts* and *Dancing in the Cobwebs*. He holds an MFA from the NEOMFA. His poetry appears in *trampset, Gordon Square Review, Rappahannock Review, Delmarva Review, Jenny Magazine*, and elsewhere. Visit: domfoncepoetry.com.

Yuan Changming has a PhD in English. He edits *Poetry Pacific*. Credits include 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 2 for fiction as well as 16 chapbooks and appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008-17), among 2,019 others across 49 countries.

LM Vail (they/them) is a neuroqueer writer and filmmaker whose short film poems have been screened at the Rochester Art Center and Weisman Art Museum. They work as a medical device packaging engineer in St. Paul, Minnesota, where they live with their wife and daughter.

Laura Sobbott Ross has two poetry chapbooks and three poetry books. Her poetry appears in *Verse Daily, Meridian, 32 Poems, Blackbird, Main Street Rag, National Poetry Review*. She was a finalist for the *Art & Letters Poetry Prize* and won the *Southern Humanities Auburn Witness Poetry Prize*.

Alina Zollfrank's essays and poetry have been published in *Bella Grace, The Noisy Water Review*, and *Last Leaves Magazine*. Find more at https://zollizen.medium.com/

Joshua St. Claire's poetry appears in *Mayfly, The Delmarva Review, Eastern Structures, ubu.*, and *The Ghost City Review*, among others. He has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and for Best of the Net.

Sofiul Azam has four poetry collections *Impasse* (2003), *In Love with a Gorgon* (2010), *Safe under Water* (2014), *Persecution* (2021) and edited *Short Stories of Selim Morshed* (2009). His work has appeares in *Prairie Schooner, Pirene's Fountain, North Dakota Quarterly, The Ibis Head Review, The Ghazal Page, Cholla Needles, Poetry Salzburg Review, Orbis, The Cannon's Mouth, Postcolonial Text*, and more.

Marc Janssen appears in *Pinyon, Slant, Cirque Journal, Off the Coast* and *Poetry Salzburg* also in his book *November Reconsidered*. Janssen coordinates the Salem Poetry Project, and was a nominee for Oregon Poet Laureate. Visit: marcjanssenpoet.com.

Christian Cacibauda's work has appeared in *Red Rock Review, Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal*, and *Mantis*.

Bill Howell's sixth poetry collection is *The Way Things Are at the Moment* (Kelsay Books 2024). He has work in *Canadian Literature, Dalhousie Review, Grain, Great Lakes Review, The Orchards Poetry Journal, Queen's Quarterly, Stand*, and *Tokyo Poetry Journal*. Bill was a producer-director at CBC Radio Drama for three decades.

Shanta Acharya is the author of seven poetry collections including *What Survives Is the Singing* (2020) and *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (2017), a doctoral study, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2001) and a novel, *A World Elsewhere* (2015). Founder of Poetry in the House, Visit: www.shanta-acharya.com

Gale Acuff has had hundreds of poems published in a dozen countries and has authored three books of poetry *Buffalo Nickel*, *The Way of the World*, and *The Story of My Lives.*

Liz Femi is a Nigerian-American writer, actor, and a 2024 Pushcart nominated poet. A recipient of Writeability's Right to Write Award, her work has been published in *Michigan Quarterly, Wild Roof Journal, Stone Poetry Quarterly, West Trade Review, Good River Review* and others.

Roger Camp's work has appeared in *Two Thirds North, Rust+Moth, Gulf Coast, Southern Poetry Review* and *Nimrod*.

Casey Killingsworth has published in *The American Journal of Poetry, Better Than Starbucks, The Moth*, and *3rd Wednesday*. His book are *A nest blew down* (2021), and *Freak show* (Fernwood Press).

Lawdenmarc Decamora is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize-nominated poet. Author of several poetry books, most recently *Lady Pat's Chapbook of Manicured Eyebrows for Post-Fordist Vending Machines* (2023) and *Line Affairs* (forthcoming). His literary work appears in many international literary magazines and anthologies.

Dana Stamps, II. is a bi-polar poet and essayist. A Pushcart nominee, poetry chapbooks *For Those Who Will Burn* and *Drape This Chapbook in Blue* (Partisan Press), and *Sandbox Blues* (Evening Street Press).

Mike Wilson's work has appeared in *Amsterdam Quarterly, Mud Season Review, The Pettigru Review, Still: The Journal, The Coachella Review*, and a book, *Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic* (2020), Visit: mikewilsonwriter.com

Caitlin Thomson's work has appeared in *The Penn Review, The Moth, Barrow Street, Wraparound South*, and *Radar Poetry*. Visit www.caitlinthomson.com.

Stephen C. Middleton has published five books, including *A Brave Light* (Stride) and *Worlds of Pain / Shades of Grace* (Poetry Salzburg). His work appears in *Paging Doctor Jazz, From Hepworth's Garden Out* (2010), & *Yesterday's Music Today* (2015).

Vanessa Ogle is a poet, writer, and educator in New York City. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, The Nation, Business Insider and a variety of literary magazines. She is the author of the poetry chapbook Mother of 0.

Michelle Matthees has published two books of poetry, *Complicated Warding* and *Flucht*, Visit: www.michellematthees.com.

E.G. Silverman fiction appears in many journals. His short story collections have been finalists for the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, Snake Nation Press's Serena McDonald Kennedy Award, and Livingston Press's Tartts First Fiction Award. His novels have been finalists for Black Lawrence Press's Big Moose Prize, and DL Jordan Prize for Literary Excellence and Blue Mountain Novel Award. Visit: EGSilverman.com.

Adam Matson is the author of three collections of short fiction, *The Last Three Hours, Sometimes Things Go Horribly Wrong*, and *Watch City*. His fiction has appeared internationally in over thirty publications.

Greg November was a finalist in fiction contests from Fractured Lit and december, as well as the runner-up for the Missouri Review's Miller Audio Prize. His stories appear in *Boulevard, Carve, The Raleigh Review, Hawaii Pacific Review, Epiphany, 34th Parallel,* and *Juked*.

Dick Daniels is a Vietnam vet with nonfiction work appearing in several military magazines. His favorite story, though, is about running a 5K with his grandson. Historical research forms a significant part of his fictional pieces, which can be read in *Alabama Literary Review, Hare's Paw, Wilderness House*, and *Cardinal Sins*.

Jason Zeitler is the author of the novel *The-Half Caste* (Polyphony Press, 2023) and the novella *Like Flesh to the Scalpel* (Running Wild Press, 2018). His short stories and essays have appeared in the *Journal of Experimental Fiction, Midwestern Gothic*, and elsewhere.

Ryan O'Toole has an MA in Writing from the University of Galway. His fiction appears in *the tiny journal* and *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*.

Nicholas Skaldetvind is an Italian-American poet and papermaker.

S. D. Brown is a Jamaican author with a BA in Liberal Arts from The New School for Social Research in New York City and an MS in Literacy from Adelphi University. Her stories appears in *Anthurium*, *The Caribbean Writer*, and *Sargasso: Digital Library of the Caribbean*.

Elena Traina is an Italian author based in the UK. Her debut fantasy novel is *Amarantha* (Kurumuru Books). "A Cultural Exchange" appears in *Tint Journal*. She loves arancini and witches, and regrets not learning Latin growing up; she was too busy trying to please her parents and impress boys. (The latter hardly ever worked.)

Jeff W. Bens is author of the novels *Albert, Himself* and *The Mighty Oak*. His short fiction and essays are published widely. He teaches at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York.

Gavin Holland is a Boston-based agender poet with a BFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Their work appears in *The Sucarnochee Review* and *Mockingheart Review*. They won the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting's Fighting Words Poetry Contest in 2018.

Len Krisak is the author of *Say What You Will*, *The Aeneid, Hackett, The Peristephanon of Prudentius*, *Rilke: New Poems*, *The Carmina of Catullus*, *Afterimage*, *Ovid's Erotic Poems*, *Virgil's Eclogues*, *The Odes of Horace*, *If Anything*, *Even as We Speak*, *Midland*, and *Fugitive Child*. He has won *The Richard Wilbur Prize*, *Robert Frost Prize*, *Robert Penn Warren Prize*, *The Able Muse Poetry Book Award*, and *The New England Poetry Club Book Award*.

AV Rasmussen's poetry has appeared in over seventy journals and anthologies, including *Plainsongs; Veils, Halos, and Shackles; Rabble Review*; and *Impossible Archetype*.

Sean Beckett graduated from Boston University with an MFA in Poetry and is now studying theology at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada.

Lena Hunter is an essayist, journalist and editor based in Copenhagen, with stints in London, Berlin and Accra.

Bobbi Sinha-Morey's poetry has appeared in a wide variety of places. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net Anthology in 2015, 2018, and 2020 as well as The Pushcart Prize in 2020.

Thomas Lavelle teaches creative writing at the Stockholm School of Economics, where his course supports writers working for social changes. His poetry has appeared in a wide range of literary journals in the US, Canada, Ireland, the UK, and Sweden.

Tristan Fernandes is a marketing professional in Mumbai. His first novel is *Collapse of the Hive* (2019). He is part of a writer's group called Blank Point and he runs Letters of War on Instagram that showcases letters written by Indian soldiers taking part in WW1.