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ELLIPSIS AWARD

Judged by David Gewanter

HOMELESS

by C. Dylan Bassett

&

**NOW EVERYWHERE'S ALWAYS A
SHOW PLAYED FOR EASY LAUGHS**

by Monica Berlin and Beth Marzoni

ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS STUDENT POETRY PRIZE

Judged by Martín Espada

CRADLE SONG

by Willy Palomo

&

A POEM FOR A STRANGER

by Leesa McDill

ANNE NEWMAN SUTTON WEEKS STUDENT PROSE CONTEST

Judged by Diane Lefer

RIPPING

by Amanda Corbin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	HUM	1	<i>Lucas Flatt</i>
	GUSTS TO 50 MPH, WITH DIET	10	<i>Bj Buckley</i>
	AFTER UNHANGING THE WALLS...	11	<i>Monica Berlin & Beth Marzoni</i>
	MORNING	12	<i>Taylor Mazer</i>
	ODE TO A TAPEWORM	13	<i>Christopher Todd Anderson</i>
	IN BRIGHT	14	<i>Felicia Zamora</i>
	CRADLE SONG	16	<i>Willy Palomo</i>
	RIPPING	17	<i>Amanda Corbin</i>
	TESTY AS MERCURY THERMOMETERS WE	19	<i>Mary Buchinger</i>
	DEATH VALLEY MEDITATIONS	20	<i>Marjorie Stelmach</i>
	SNAKEBITE	24	<i>Joseph Rathgeber</i>
	RUNNERGIRL	25	<i>Elizabeth Tarver</i>
	A CRAWL SPACE FOR AN ATTIC	36	<i>Jonathan H. Scott</i>
	PAPAL, ALCHEMICAL	38	<i>Alec Hershman</i>
	FOR MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST...	40	<i>Nickole Brown</i>
	MOTHER GINGER	42	<i>Rhonda Lott</i>
	DONNE, THEY SAY	44	<i>John Savoie</i>
	FLYING BISHOP	45	<i>David Pace</i>
	A POEM FOR A STRANGER	57	<i>Leesa McDill</i>
	BUBBLE SELF PORTRAIT	58	<i>Josephine Liu</i>
	THROWN	59	<i>Laurence Levey</i>
	A READING AT KGB	71	<i>Tim Suermondt</i>
	POSTCARDS TO 4TH AVE JAIL	72	<i>DeAnn Emett</i>
	HARD TO HOLD	75	<i>Corinne Nulton</i>
	WAITING IN THE RAIN	82	<i>Talyn Sherer</i>
	Y	83	<i>Changming Yuan</i>
	SCRAMBLIN ³ MAN	84	<i>William Greenway</i>
	RUSSIAN CANDY CANES	85	<i>Rhonda Lott</i>
	AGAIN, RAVENS	88	<i>Bj Buckley</i>
	WITHIN LOTUS WITHIN	90	<i>A. Anupama</i>
	ELP	91	<i>Adam Johns</i>
	LA FINCA	101	<i>Christine DeSimone</i>
	SLEEVE	102	<i>Zarah Moeggenberg</i>
	BUOYANCY	103	<i>Liz Clift</i>
	LOVE POSTCARD	104	<i>C. Dylan Bassett</i>
	WASHINGTON STATE	105	<i>Taylor Mazer</i>
	SPANISH CHOCOLATE	106	<i>Rhonda Lott</i>
	HOMELESS	107	<i>C. Dylan Bassett</i>
	DESERTED PARKING LOTS WITH FADED LINES	108	<i>Sean Thomas Dougherty</i>
	DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST	109	<i>Dmitry Borshch</i>
	FRACTAL VARIATIONS	110	<i>Bj Buckley</i>
	NOW EVERYWHERE'S ALWAYS A SHOW...	112	<i>Monica Berlin & Beth Marzoni</i>
	SWEET BERGMANESQUE	113	<i>Philip Walford</i>
	LOLLIPOP SERIES #2	122	<i>Josephine Liu</i>
	PHENO	123	<i>Nickole Brown</i>

COVER IMAGE: *Crossing Thoughts* By Korana Segetalo-Delic

HUM

Lucas Flatt

SUPER TIM HAS MUSCLES THAT GO RIGHT UP TO HIS EARS. FLEXING UP THERE, *UHH*, LIKE HE COULD BREAK buildings apart. He's always over. Caitlin thinks he's *hot*, but she'd die before she told Jackie Roommate that. He's over now; Caitlin sees his red Focus in the parking lot. She knocks at Homebase Harriet's place below—no answer—and heads up the fire escape to her apartment in the attic. A few blocks away, a fire engine wails.

She'd felt shitty at work, got a migraine from the fryers popping and the smell—grease, burning coffee, cigarette smoke thick as battle. She likes to work with Simile Emily and crack jokes, but Simile Emily hadn't worked tonight because maybe she thinks Caitlin's jokes are dumb, which is sad. Homebase Harriet must not like her anymore either—she's never home—but Caitlin waits around for her most of the time because Homebase Harriet helps her sort her prints and is like Caitlin's new mom here in Norfolk. The silhouettes of old houses are nice at night with a moon. Caitlin has a math midterm to study for—college algebra. Her footsteps up the fire escape clamor like gongs. Midway, she has to cower, use the hand rail. Only vertigo. OK.

She's glad Super Tim is here to protect her from Jackie Roommate's creepy friends. It's hot and dark in the hallway and the carpet smells like morning breath and ear cheese. The door's been left ajar and—*yup*—there's the homeless guy passed-the-fuck-out in the foyer. TV hums the only light. Passed-the-fuck-out's snoring and he snorts. Super Tim and Jackie Roommate are on the couch. Caitlin stamps her foot in the foyer. Throws her hands up and waves at them. Jackie Roommate looks up and tilts back her head like, *huh?* Caitlin opens her eyes as wide as they go and shakes her head and runs her thumb across her throat. Like, fuck you, skank. You're dead.

Jackie Roommate blinks, and her blink transmits a bounce through the whole room like a ripple on a bath. Caitlin's knees buckle; she latches onto a coat hook. The living room goes flat down to two dimensions. Jackie Roommate gets up off Super Tim and strolls toward the kitchen. Super Tim is stretched out on the couch, left there flattened like Jackie Roommate has somehow decimated him.

Things un-squish but start to hum. The apartment's hummed since Jackie Roommate got into blow and junk and blowing for junk when Super Tim's away and blowing-out her junk when he is. Or maybe it's hummed since Homebase Harriet stopped answering her door. Or maybe it hummed before, but less. Jackie Roommate comes back; she still looks like a blond

skank. The hum is not like tinnitus, but like an Indian chant. Growly, choppy.

Caitlin locks herself inside her room and checks the drawer in her desk where she keeps her fat green hum-softeners. The bottle of Abilify is empty and she finds a note reminding herself to refill it when she finishes her midterm portfolio, which was last week. But her midterm was the shit. Her photography professor said her portfolio—a series of nighttime shots of Harborfest with its pirate ships and swirling, dancing crowds—was *brilliant, brilliant*, and she did the Dougie intermittently from the building to her car. And now she's failing math.

Caitlin loves all the little drawers in her desk. They rule. They keep her treasure where it belongs—her kid photo-contest prizes, small prints of her favorite stuff. Postcards and trinkets. Caitlin says, “Study time,” and opens drawers instead. She finds a long-forgotten postcard from her best friend from elementary school, Cee Cee Studabaker, sent from Cee Cee's summer camp, Lake Whogivesashit, the summer after fourth grade. It shows a blue wave cut across a lake and says, “Caitlin smells like farts, love Cee Cee.” There's a crayon-rendered stinky-Caitlin that makes her laugh.

Study. She has to open the book. The title page is very similar to the heavy cover. She's getting nowhere and closes the book. Picks it up and shakes it. Growls at the cover. Out falls a treasure map—neat. It shows a line running around a set of boxes like a very easy maze.

She goes out to tell Super Tim about the map, and he and Jackie Roommate are having sex on the couch. Which is awesome, except it isn't. The homeless guy snores like an audience. Super Tim faces away. Jackie Roommates' white-blond hair and ruddy forehead rise and set over Super Tim's curly locks. Super Tim's arms are flexed like half an X, too wide for a V for Victory. Caitlin knows if she waits long enough, Super Tim will bellow like the last buffalo and give himself a high-five like one hand clapping or a tree falling in the forest. Jackie Roommate told her that he does, before they quit speaking.

She locks her bedroom door and installs the anti-rape chair under the knob. Guesses they're in love out there, must be. Alas. She unfolds the map and looks it over carefully. Follows the dotted trail that runs through all the boxes. The arrangement feels familiar: the boxes are her desk drawers. The map trail leads from one drawer across her desk to another. She opens it and finds a tape. The cassette box has a construction paper insert—pink paper with a white, puffy cut-out cloud. Not a cloud, a sheep—it has four black twig legs, and a cloud head and cross-eyes and a crescent smile and lumpy ears. It's throwing up a green glob and saying, “Baaa-arf!” Caitlin's stereo has a tape deck and she pops the tape in.

Nothing. The tape crackles. Giggles. Weird. On the back of the cassette box it says,

“From: Cee Cee Studabaker. To: Caitlin Simpson,” in purple crayon. Caitlin can't remember getting or listening to the tape. She can remember a squeaky-voiced girl who wore long, starched yellow dresses, and a stupid fight over a doll.

“Did you find the map?” the tape says. Or the voice on the tape—Cee Cee's voice from back in fourth grade.

“This is ridiculous,” Caitlin says.

“You're ridiculous.”

Caitlin turns off the tape. Oh, no. She clicks it on again.

Nothing. Silence. She says, “Do you talk?”

“Do you?”

Caitlin shuts off the tape deck. Turns it on.

“Don't do that. It hurts my ears. Our treasure map is under your mattress. Remember?”

Caitlin can't remember any map. She reaches under the mattress, feels construction paper, and takes out a map of a beach with a dotted line and an X.

Cee Cee says, “You have to find the treasure.”

“This is stupid.”

“You're stupid.”

Caitlin's underarms feel sweaty. She says, “This isn't real.”

Cee Cee says, “Go to the beach.”

Caitlin says, “What beach?”

“Look outside.”

Caitlin peers from her window and sure enough, beyond the parking lot is a beach softly lit by streetlight. It looks like the Bay, down at Oceanview. Which should be across town.

Curious. If Caitlin closes her eyes, the apartment holds the sound of the Bay like a seashell.

She says, “I should ignore you.”

“Not if you want the treasure.”

Now that Caitlin thinks about it, she wouldn't mind some treasure. She says, “Will it make me rich or famous? I'd rather be rich.”

“I don't know. We have to find it first.”

Caitlin sits down on her bed and hugs her knees up to her chest. Time to think this over. She should call her mom in Richmond, but then she'd have to say she quit taking the pills, which Mom still thinks are for an ear infection or something. Mom will be pissed because she only cares about things like appointments and renter's insurance and grades and stovetops—professional grade ranges are the rage. And Mom also sounds flustered whenever Caitlin calls,

like now that she's gone, Mom's busy attending balls and masquerades.

"Get up," Cee Cee says. "Let's go."

Caitlin likes that Cee Cee wants to talk to her. She also likes treasure. She says, "Fuck it, I can study later," and gets up.

Cee Cee says to get the metal detector and a tape player with headphones and the burlap sack to hold the treasure. The last part seems especially practical.

Caitlin says, "Where do I get that stuff this late?"

"Look under your bed."

Caitlin finds the equipment stacked neatly underneath: a metal detector and a burlap sack, and a Walkman that plays tapes with old-school headphones, big and fuzzy. She goes out past everyone snoring and leaves the door cracked because she's being stealthy. She'd ask Homebase Harriet to join her and Cee Cee on the treasure hunt, but Homebase Harriet still isn't home.

At the beach, Caitlin finds coins—nickels, dimes, and quarters, and English pence, and silver dollars. Buffalo nickels. No surprises. Except that, if she takes her headphones off, the beach goes quiet, like hitting mute on a TV. She pulls them on and off until her ears pop. The flaccid waves splash up onto the sand the way they're supposed to. She finds a ruined iPod; take-out dishes; aluminum foil and baking sheets; a yellowed dental retainer jammed with sand; hypodermic needles—Caitlin shrieks when she finds these and reburies them by kicking sand. She finds a ten-pound anchor and lugs it from the sand and leaves it.

"You have to take everything you plunder," Cee Cee says. Caitlin goes back and takes the anchor, hopes it won't tear her bag.

The course is simple and Caitlin knows that the beach curves—this beach curves and the map beach curves—and she curves along for what feels like hours. The metal detector rings from time to time and halts progress. Crabs skitter out from the tide and one bold crab tries to wrest Caitlin's plunder from her as she digs, snags her silver dollar, and she chases it to the water, kicking puffs of sand up as she goes. She pins the crab in the shallows with her bare heel. It reaches back for her toes and it's like a dream—she cannot move to stop it. The silver dollar winks in her flashlight beam, shimmers, and the crab pinches her big toe. She shrieks and lets the crab escape into the bay to be the richest crab in Crabtown. Back on the low dunes, she tries to catch her breath. Her toe hurts; it has four little red marks on it. She's jerked her headphones askew on her head while yanking on her toe, and the bay sounds come through muffled.

Caitlin's purse is ringing. It's Mom. She answers.

"Finally! Thank you, Jesus." Mom sounds pissed. "I've been calling you all week. Are you OK? Are your ears still bothering you? I'll call Dr. Jackson first thing in the morning"

Cee Cee says, "Hang up the phone."

Caitlin hangs up.

Caitlin's half-asleep but trudging forward when Cee Cee says, "Stop." Caitlin sees the bonfire and she's already in its light and there's Loser Logan, the crusty punk. He doesn't seem to notice, stares instead at the flame. He stares like he's fucking the fire with his eyes, mouth open, and he reaches his hand into the fire. His face twitches but there's nothing, no pain, showing in his yellow, mildewed gaze.

"Stop that," Caitlin says. She pulls her headphones down onto her neck.

Loser Logan pulls his hand out of the fire and slides it into sand. His trusty gas can sits beside him. He says, "Caitlin?"

"Did you just burn your hand off?"

Loser Logan looks at his buried hand. He nods to the fire. He says, "Cool, huh?"

Whatever. Loser Logan wears rancid Carhartts with stitched-on patches holding him together like a scarecrow. He's, like, the worst person ever. He's staring. He smells like human fumes. Always smells like gas and has a gas can. Maybe he huffs it or maybe he uses it to start bonfires on the beach. Probably both. Caitlin steps back from the fire. He's got for-real rape-or-kill-you eyes. Your choice, maybe.

"Why are you out so late?" He's smiling at her.

"None of your beeswax, Logan."

Loser Logan stares. He's a champion starrer. He can't not stare. He says, "Wanna smoke a J?"

Caitlin says, "I need to get going." There's a tickle in her throat from the gas fumes. She's nauseated. She's going to barf on Loser Logan. He probably won't notice. She swallows spit.

"Everybody passed out over there?"

"Where?"

"Your place," he says. He stares over her shoulder. Caitlin follows Loser Logan's gaze and sees her street, thinks she can make out the silhouette of her house a few blocks away.

She says, "I guess."

"Cool camera," he says. He nods at her metal detector.

Caitlin says, "See you later." He stares; she bails. She walks up and down the dunes. Tries

not to run. Pulls on her headphones.

“He isn’t following you,” Cee Cee says. “But you have to go home now.”

Caitlin smells the smolder now. The smoking ruins and the gas. She’s standing inside a burning row house and she coughs. Above her, packs of stars cross-hatched by smoking slats hum like squares on an old Simon memory game—like she played with Cee Cee when they were little. She tries to discern the pattern, to remember, and a slat cracks and falls. The game reminds her of the fight—Cee Cee wailing with open hands, tearing out her hair; Rescue Roger pulling Cee Cee off of her; Cee Cee flailing and screaming about a doll she’d lost. Cee Cee thought Caitlin stole her doll and they’d never talked again until tonight. Caitlin stares up and the humming sets of stars and the sifting ash burn her eyes. She runs, weeping ashes, down the steps onto the street. She’s lost her metal detector but has the anchor. There’s a singed baby doll lying on the sidewalk.

Cee Cee says, “My doll!”

“That’s the treasure?”

“I knew you’d find it.”

Caitlin sees the beach and finds her anchor. “Was that the treasure?”

“Go home. You have to save her.”

“I saved your doll, look.” Caitlin holds the doll up to the stars.

“Not her. This isn’t over. Hurry.”

At the edge of the beach are streets in her neighborhood.

It isn’t far to her parking lot, which doesn’t make any sense. Caitlin says, “I’ve been walking all day.”

Cee Cee says, “You aren’t very good at following maps.”

So the stupid map has led her in circles on the beach, but the bay hasn’t moved, hasn’t changed sides, or maybe it could have when she wasn’t looking. Homebase Harriet’s car is here but there’s no time to knock. Caitlin takes the steps by twos up to the attic. The attic door is locked and she doesn’t have her key. She wasn’t told to take it with her. Before Cee Cee can tell her, Caitlin smashes the deadbolt with the anchor. The door swings in. The hallway smells like gas.

The apartment door is open and the TV is on. Someone, Loser Logan, kneels on the floor. He’s on top of Jackie Roommate. Super Tim snores on the couch. Caitlin sneaks up behind Loser Logan and she kicks his gas can by accident and it’s empty so it’s quiet. Loser Logan is trying to hold Jackie Roommate down with his knees and keep his hand over her

mouth and strike a match he holds in his black-match-head-nubs of teeth. Jackie Roommate’s shirt is wet and torn. She slaps at Loser Logan and with her other hand scrapes at the carpet. It sounds like *scrrrr*.

Caitlin says, “Stop.” Loser Logan doesn’t turn or stop. She says, “Stop!”

Super Tim soars through the air like his namesake and crashes into Loser Logan. They roll into the wall, Super Tim on top. Loser Logan keeps trying the match and it strikes. Their shirts flare but Super Tim flattens against Loser Logan. Between them smolders. Cee Cee says, “Help him.” Caitlin runs through the haze and swings the anchor, aims at Loser Logan’s head. Loser Logan lifts his arm and Caitlin lands a glancing blow. Loser Logan slumps over. Caitlin drops the anchor.

Cee Cee says, “Thank your friend. He’s a hero.”

Caitlin says, “Thank you, Super Tim.”

Super Tim turns to Caitlin and looks hurt, says, “What did you call me?” Loser Logan has a pocket knife out and slashes Super Tim’s face. Super Tim shouts and falls over, and Loser Logan runs out of the apartment. Caitlin follows but stops at the attic landing, closes her eyes and grips the rails and listens to him ring down the steps. She yells after him like *rrraahhh* because she’s a hero, too. Super Tim is screaming back inside the apartment and so is Jackie Roommate. Caitlin goes back in. Jackie Roommate is trying to pull Super Tim’s hands from his face and saying, “Please, baby. Come on, baby.”

Super Tim says, “God, it hurts,” and his voice is shuddery.

Cee Cee made her call him that and this is all her fault. Homebase Harriet comes into the apartment. She’s wheezing and she says, “Caitlin, what the hell is going on?” Caitlin tries to hug Homebase Harriet who pushes back and says, “Stop, Caitlin. Who’s hurt?” She goes to Super Tim and Jackie Roommate. “Who’s hurt?” Homebase Harriet kneels over them like a mother bird and Caitlin’s chest is beeping. She doesn’t remember where she left the metal detector but her camera hangs from her neck with the little tripod. This is the first time in forever with only them in the apartment. And now they’re heroes, even Jackie. This deserves commemoration. Caitlin lifts her camera and tries to fit them in a shot. “Hold still,” she says. “I need to take your picture.”

Jackie Roommate grows and eats up the shot. She grabs Caitlin’s shoulder, says, “Take off your fucking headphones, freak.”

Cee Cee says, “Don’t,” but Caitlin slides them down. She says, “I need to take your picture.”

“Your camera’s broken, Caitlin.”

“Is it?” The camera does look smashed.

Jackie Roommate digs her nails into her shoulders. “What the fuck is wrong with you, you freak? We were watching you tonight from the windows. Now you like to take pictures of the sidewalk and talk to yourself. Where’d you fucking go? Why weren’t you here?”

“I went to the beach.” Over Jackie Roommate’s shoulder, Homebase Harriet is helping Tim; she’s coming from the kitchen with a washcloth.

Jackie Roommate says, “You’ve been down there all night, running in and out of alleys.”

Caitlin says, “I stole my friend’s doll in fourth grade because it talked to me. She came back.”

Jackie Roommate is screaming. “He was going to set me on fire, Caitlin!” Jackie Roommate shakes her with both hands and Jackie Roommate’s nose is bleeding and her eyes are wet but she isn’t crying.

Homebase Harriet says, “Stop it, Jackie. She’s sick.” She turns and says, “That’s right,” into her phone. She’s giving the phone an address.

Caitlin doesn’t feel like having anyone else over. She says, “Can I hang out with just you guys for a little while?” Her voice rattles in her head as Jackie shakes her. Jackie slaps her across the face because Jackie doesn’t yet see how brave they all are. How brave she is, too. Caitlin has to make her see it. She says, “Let go. Let me take our picture together.” She tries to pull away from Jackie. In a picture, Jackie could see it. Everyone could.

Jackie lets go of Caitlin’s shoulders and looks down at herself. She’s in her panties and rivulets of gasoline run down her thighs. The fumes shimmer her pale, thick thighs. Jackie says, “Get out.” She lunges. Caitlin puts her arms around Jackie but Jackie pushes Caitlin out into the hallway.

Caitlin’s feet slide across the carpet and she laughs because it’s a funny sound. She says, “Stop. Please, Jackie. I want to stay.”

Jackie shoves her into the hallway and slams the door in her face. The hallway’s hot and dark and she wrestles with the knob, but Jackie’s locked the door. Caitlin calls their real names but Jackie won’t let her in. “Let me help you,” Caitlin says.

Downstairs in Harriet’s bedroom, Caitlin sits against the closet door. Lights strobe through blinds. She sifts prints—some old and gifts to Harriet, others from tonight. She’s sorting out the real ones from the fakes; that’s what a hero’d do. In one series the thieving crab becomes a rat, grows fur and fangs and keeps its claws. They vanish. She’s kicking it gentle as a kiss.

On the bed she pulls down her sock and finds two punctures on her toe. On the beach side of the closet door, Cee Cee bashes like a cannonball. Between the crashes rings a hum. Jackie slips into the room, rises, floats along the ceiling like a kite. She only glowers up there, stormy, sad-faced Jackie. Caitlin pays her no mind, keeps sorting. Hopes for help to hurry. She’s a hero but no Super Tim.

AFTER UNHANGING THE WALLS & UNDRRESSING WINDOWS BENEATH OUR CUPOLA

Monica Berlin & Beth Marzoni

After unhangng the walls & undressing windows beneath our cupola
of sky this dry heat holds & keeps holding the fields burnt then choked

then burning again. This belvedere vantage: if the river beds, if barges,
if this endangered, if this melancholy, if this our delicate

knot of mindfulness, then what isn't dear? Dear margin of flood.
Dear un-tillable acreage. In the back of closets dear things

never ours. So, let's not think margin of error, but another catastrophe
even small boys note, of that other year & this one addressed,

stamped, sent by post to Monument City in the godforsaken
crossroads, in Indiana, where they say the whole town underwater

resurfaced, came up for air, no high water mark, no gauge to
read nothing left, but we're brought low. To our begging knees.

There's a man who remembers fishing from a boat in the river that became that city.
There are others who come back to find doorknob, windowsill.

There'll be us staring from all the way here. Dear Monument City.
Why call anything what we call it? If ghosted, how dear the names? If we can't

call up reservoir, or dam, they say water has perfect memory. No shape
bends the river so long. Dear then, the honor of a brick.

MORNING
Taylor Mazer



ODE TO A TAPEWORM

Christopher Todd Anderson

You could have been the fire lines between the stars,
delimiting constellations: king and swan and bird of prey.

You could have been the white calligraphy that writes
on dark matter the undetectable history of the universe.

You could be the kundalini energy that coils up
and down the spine. You could be God's thin finger,

a cowry necklace, the spiral jetty, or the twine
that tethers visions to the mind like red balloons.

Instead, you snake your way through hidden places,
teaching humility, wedding filth to fecundity.

When movies show heaven, everyone is dressed
like you, in white; everything glistens and shines.

Friend, your dreams are like mine—darkness,
writhing—until coughed through bile and slime

into daylight, you turn brittle as antique fish bones
bleached by the kiss of the parasitic sun.

IN BRIGHT

Felicia Zamora

You smell autumn in June—
scythe at your femur
rust imprints in the shave. You heavy-

bone in morning heat, until
metalliferous eventide
sweats itself; gives dew, brief.

All hot things.

I saw you, comet, haunt
the night. A question
left forming: how the tongue humps back

during grin, speech-stopped. Let
dust gather in the lungs:

ant mound in watch, our eyes
granules stacked in crumble
the dark gulps

the builder back. & detours
are the way of things. Learn
to be in detour.

All short-cuts spent. Look up—

solar eclipse. Our eyes full
of Venus & wonder

why the black drop asks

nothing of us
in crossing fire. We reveal
lenses crafted for our pinky-pricked holes,

a child's vigilant finger
pokes clay. We think we know
how to witness.

To gaze is to be spun
of another's light.

CRADLE SONG

Willy Palomo

Unos inditos somos, hijos de Cuscatlán...

My mother says she used to sing me this lullaby when I was fussy and upset as a baby. I have never heard it elsewhere in my life and she can no longer remember the words, but sometimes, when I can't sleep, I hum this line under my tongue. My mother was never good at singing. Her voice breaks sharp on almost every note, wavering bold and uncertain, always full of a sweet vulnerability lost inside her mouth. For years I watched her hum *himnos* at sacrament meetings, her illiterate eyes darting over the text, stuttering, struggling to read and sing at the same time. It always felt like the pianist was the one interrupting her. The piano was the one that didn't know what a prayer should sound like. My mother holds *La Biblia* the way you hold a truth you cannot express, mouthing words like *hijo* and *Dios*. She can barely sound them out, but she *knows* what they mean. Sometimes those words quake from inside her, a red-eyed truth, a raspberry bruise. I see it when she prays at night, especially when it's for me.



RIPPING

Amanda Corbin

WHEN I was seven, when my mom still painted my nails a peachy pink, she'd hold my small fingers in her plump ones and say, "Mia! You need to stop picking your hangnails!" But she'd paint them anyway with a delicacy I've only seen her use while decorating cakes. She didn't understand. When you're thinking hard, you chew your tongue to get out the bad ideas. Embarrassed or confused, you clench your jaw until you feel your lower canines puncture the folds of your cheek. And when you're anxious as your father's hand smacks your mom's cheek, you can always find a dry triangle of skin poking out next to one of your gnarled nails. Bonus points if it doesn't bleed.

Hands are durable. They don't scar as easily as the other parts of your body. Even at twenty-four, my fingers are free of scar tissue under all the freshly lacerated layers. I assume it is merely the unused swelling of Caroline's absence that has left my fingers strange. I rotate my extended hands and watch as yellow lumps rise over the horizon.

"What are you on, Mia?" My coworker Erik smiles and leans his rickety desk chair back to grab my attention. As the chair's spine snaps back with his recline, I coil my hands into fists and tuck them in my lap. My fingers don't crack quite as much as the neck of his cheap chair.

Picture how to respond when the office prankster calls you out for staring at your wretched hands. He thinks you were using six vacation days for your sister's wedding in Tempe instead of crying and downing two bottles of Old Crow. Try not to remember Caroline's dimples kissing the inside of her mouth. Try not to remember Caroline tossing you into the job the same way she flung back your Pacific Angelfish during the last boating trip you shared.

Remember how much the salt spray bit your cracked skin as Caroline kept insisting, "Isn't this so fun? Aren't you glad we moved here?"

"No, nothing," is all I can say to Erik. The tips of my fingers are cold in my palm and my knuckles feel like opened shells.

I want to turn and work, but I don't want to do that either. My eyes feel stained red from the week and the drinking has made it hard to focus the symbols on my screen. Erik lets out small breaths like little laughs that keep trying to birth what he wants to say. He finally asks how the wedding was and I rehearse the details as though I'm performing at my middle school science fair. I draw from the wedding my sister had three years ago, the one where she reminded me Caroline and I couldn't get married. My left middle finger rubs against a flake

of skin on my ring finger as Erik pretends to care about my mother's cake.

"Did you take a date?" he asks, vying for gossip. Ever since I joined the team six months ago, Erik was the one bouncing between coworkers, talking. There was always laughter. They're great people, Caroline had promised me. I bite the right side of my mouth and look at the glittery silver frame I planted facedown when I came to work. Underneath is a photo of her bundled up on a bridge, tongue sticking out at me, ignoring the rushing water beneath. Her tongue mocks me through the frame and my lips feel cracked.

I look back to Erik. "No, too late notice," I say to drown out the sound of Caroline's voice. Erik's eyes are walnutty like my knuckles. Even with the wide grin on his face now, there isn't a single unsightly wrinkle. My nails are trying to pry my cuticles open, and I worry that too much of me might spill out.

He teases me about going stag. I hold my breath. Then, he begins, "I hope this isn't too forward," and I hit my ankles together like the Newton's cradle on his desk. I bite my thumbnail off.

"It can be rough being new to Newport." He looks at the back of the frame. "I'm here if you need a ride to the bar or a ride back home." I see puckered spots on his chin from a flicker of a frown.

"Thank you," I say with my hands clasped as though in prayer. "I'll be fine."



TESTY AS MERCURY THERMOMETERS WE

Mary Buchinger

testy as mercury thermometers we
shake each other down to get a better

reading more true than ambient
temperature twist the thin glass

of poisonous selves a baton between
eager bony fingers oh we wobble

as in a fever dream our vessels open
and we kiss each cheek presented us

its perfume diffuse its dinner & dessert
napkin'd away so careful we remain kiss

kiss lively silver liquid bubbles we
filled electric skins expand with touch

turn each pink'd cheek away we know too
too much grow wary quiver beg a chill

DEATH VALLEY MEDITATIONS

Marjorie Stelmach

i.
A stranger passes on the gravel walk—
lowered eyes, heavy tread—
as though he bears a weight
 of scruples or
of scars.
In his wake,
the stir and lift-off of a flock
 of dust.
It will need, like me,
long nights of rain
to lay it again
 to any kind of rest.
Behind these cabins,
a stand of salt-cedars
whispers all night
 in an ancient,
dusty tongue,
a sibillance suggesting
Zion Zion Zion.

ii.
A cedar figures, too,
in legends of the Holy Rood
(Book of Adam,
 Book of Enoch):
Adam lies dying
Seth, Adam's son,
sets off for the Garden
 to beg of a God
he has never even met

the healing oils stored
in the Tree of Life.

 But Seth—

Seth is a fallen man,
a man born fallen,
his entry forbidden.

 Outside the shut gates,
a merciful angel
offers him three pips—seeds?
the stones of fallen fruit?—
 to place beneath
his father's tongue.

But it is (as it always is)
too late. Even so,

 in his grief,
Seth tucks the pips beneath
the lifeless root
of Adam's tongue.

 Archangels
carry Adam's flesh
to Paradise, there
to be interred

 in Heaven's... earth?
This must be wrong.
And yet, familiar: third son,
ruined quest, beloved father,
 forever lost?

But these—
Seth and Adam—these
were the first.

The chronicle goes on.
The three pips flower in the silt
of Adam's flesh

and rise into the lives
of Moses, David, Solomon,
Christ. Now they are rods:
in the Wilderness

the bitter waters
sweeten at their touch,
in a young king's dream,
they foretell the Trinity,

in Zion they fuse into
a tree with silver rings—
useless in the building
of the Temple. And so

it comes to pass
the rood-tree is cast into
the dark of Sanctuary dust—
forgotten, until
it's chosen for the Cross.

iii.

On the gravel path, the dust
is down—a loose cloud
hovering

low to the earth.
To this dull suspension,
I lift my cup of waiting.

A scrawny coyote across the lot
laps at a leaking drain,

a rust-colored lizard
seizes an insect, swallows
its blood, flashes back
into the shade.

The cedars keep their silence
through the long afternoon,
only thinly stirred

by these
our makeshift maneuvers.

At sunset, burnished
to a saline glint,
the needles offer
rusty light—
shade of dulled nails,
old blood, stubborn want.

In time, I'll learn
to drink what remains:
the salty dregs, the drought.

In the meantime, the cedars
preach of continuance—
endlessly, endlessly—
sermons for the fallen: How
to drink sorrow.

How to drink thirst.

How to recognize Zion in this
unsettling dust.

SNAKEBITE

Joseph Rathgeber

Daddy was a handler of snakes. Daddy wasn't a snake charmer—
don't call him so. *Snake charmers are Moslems*, he would say.

I never said Daddy was one for education. He was hillfolk and
common. Lived not half-a-mile from a major moonshine still,

and still Daddy never did drink any sort of spirits. *Drunk on the
Holy Spirit*, Daddy said he was. But he did slur like a drunkard—

be it God or not. When he went off saying how he wasn't no
Moslem, it was the right same pronunciation as *mausoleum*. His

tongue was gifted, the congregation agreed. He could heal all
Hell in a heartbeat with Scripture. Sunday service was a circus,

but Daddy said Pentecostal preacher was his profession, not no
lowdown circus freak. His followers—they followed. On foot,

even. To the mosque groundbreaking, one occasion. They had
their protest placards. Daddy made a speech and kept messing up

mosque, saying it like *mocks*. And mocks is all they did when Daddy
died. They said, man's gonna swing around snakes and believe

he won't be bit? He must be asking for it. We kept his obit simple,
vague. No mention of the timber rattler that sank into his femoral

artery like a spoon into Jell-O. Daddy only took four hours to die.

RUNNERGIRL

Elizabeth Tarver

IT WAS TRUE HE WAS CHARMING in a scary cool kind of way girls liked, but she'd always blamed her loss of judgment on the shots of tequila at the bar and the acid they dropped in the parking lot. Not long after, Viper disappeared and she found Amber in his apartment, hanging in the closet with her tongue protruding, her face blue.

She kept Viper's baby and named him Russell after the sweats she used to wear. They called her Runnergirl back when she was an art student at LSU, before she got pregnant. She pierced her nose and dyed her hair pink, but she only wore running shorts or sweats because she'd run track in high school. No one could get her to wear a skirt in those days. At home, in the neighborhood behind Cortana Mall where her parents lived in an ugly brown ranch house, they called her Celeste. People used to say she looked like Molly Ringwald with those pouty lips and sad brown eyes.

She intended to go back to school after Russell started kindergarten but it never happened. She waited tables at Louie's Cafe, right off LSU's campus, and paid a college girl across the hall in her run-down duplex to watch Russell in the evening. Sometimes she'd come back and a different girl would be there because the other one wanted to go barhopping. She was too tired to complain. It seemed like she was continually battling something, especially roaches. She'd open up the door of her apartment and they'd skitter away, under the stained sofa, down the hall, into the kitchen, which was where they liked it best.

Russell didn't have a crib. She kept him in bed with her so the roaches wouldn't crawl on him. No one told her you could roll over and kill a baby. That you could smother it and be sleeping sweetly. She'd seen an *Oprah* show about infant suffocation one day after work when Russell was in first grade, right before the school bus dropped him off. She couldn't believe he'd survived her as a mother. At least she'd stopped drinking and taking drugs. She scooped him up and held him tight when he hopped off the last step of the bus.

When Russell was eight, he started asking about his dad. He surprised her one evening when she was trying to watch the news. President Clinton was insisting he did not have sexual relations with that woman when Russell appeared at her side. "Why can't my dad come to school and read us books like Luke's dad and Josh's dad? And all the dads came to Dads and Doughnuts except mine."

"You don't have a daddy," she said, grabbing the remote and quickly switching off the

television. “You have a superhero mom, so you don’t need a dad. Other kids have normal moms so they’ve got to have a dad.”

Russell didn’t buy that for a second. He huffed and squinted his eyes and curled his lip. There was something about him that made her think of Viper. It wasn’t his appearance. It was less about looks and more about attitude. There was something manipulative and insistent about Russell. But weren’t all eight-year-olds manipulative and insistent?

“I want my dad,” Russell said. The way he said it sounded like an insult, like a fussy customer who doesn’t like his order, like one of those times when she’d have to take the plate back to the kitchen and tell the cook to start over because Mr. Nit-Picky over there with the LSU Alumni t-shirt doesn’t like so many mushrooms in his omelet. In those situations, she’d learned there was nothing you could do but smile and say you’re sorry. So, that’s what she did.

“I’m sorry, Russell,” she said, smiling cheerily, a hand on her hip. Russell stalked off to his room and slammed the door. His teacher said he was volatile sometimes. Maybe he’d grow out of it. What could she do? Wave a wand and create a dad for him? Who the hell knew where Viper was? And who in their right mind would want him back? He was probably in some faraway place with no responsibilities, happy to scrape by on selling drugs, still listening to punk bands in bars. Sometimes she thought she saw him walking around the neighborhood or coming into Louie’s, but it was always someone else. Someone normal. It sometimes crossed her mind that he could be dead. She thought about Amber, hanging in the closet, the toes of her Converse high tops just grazing the carpet, her wavy long blonde hair pulled to one side. Amber had the most beautiful hair she’d ever seen. Botticelli hair, like in that painting they’d studied in Art History, *The Birth of Venus*.

She was to blame. She’d only introduced Amber to Viper because she was tired of him. He’d been following her around on that damn skateboard everywhere she went, telling her how fine she looked, trying to get her back in his dirty apartment again, bragging about what drugs he had stashed in there. “Come on, you scared?”

She’d introduced them in the McDonald’s parking lot at three in the morning. She’d been sitting on the hood of Amber’s Volkswagen Rabbit, smoking, watching for the police. Amber was spray-painting a line of poetry on one of the dumpsters. Something full of angst, probably. She was an English major and was usually depressed about this or that. Viper draped his arm over Amber’s shoulder, caressed that wavy hair, and it wasn’t long before she got in her car and drove off with Viper, the Violent Femmes cranked up on the car stereo. They left her, Runnergirl, Celeste, sitting there on the curb with no ride home. Viper gave her a

limp, baby-like wave from the passenger seat window. That was the last time she saw him. She pressed her cigarette into the curb and got up and walked home alone. She wasn’t sorry. She often suspected he had the mark of the beast like the boy in *The Omen*. When he would pass out on the bed, she’d hunt for it on his pale scalp, running her fingers through his dark straight hair. Now he was Amber’s problem, she thought. Now she could concentrate on school again.

Her parents called her a couple of days later. Had she seen Amber? You know, the girl she’d spent the night with so many times when she was in elementary school. Surely, she remembered Amber. Hadn’t they reconnected at school? That’s what Amber’s parents had said and they were frantic, by the way. Celeste’s mother’s favorite word was “frantic.” Her mother was usually frantic about something. Like having enough money to pay the Maison Blanche department store credit card bill. She was always buying something at the mall. Their house was stuffed with the crap she bought, and she was forever frantic, trying to find a place to stuff more stuff and hide it from Celeste’s father.

“No,” Celeste said. “Haven’t seen her in a few days.” She hung up the phone in her dorm room and went back to sleep for a few minutes until she remembered the McDonald’s parking lot and Viper waving from Amber’s car window. She walked over to his apartment on Carlotta Street, the bottom right unit in a ramshackle old house. If he was home, he was usually on the back porch, trying to teach himself to play guitar. He wasn’t on the back porch so she tried the back door. It wasn’t locked and there was no one inside. No voices. There was only a sick smell like someone hadn’t taken out the garbage. It looked like all of Viper’s things were gone and just the furniture was left so she opened up the closet for a look. And that’s when she’d found Amber. She turned around and left. She never told anyone. At the time, she was scared to get involved. A neighbor found Amber a few days later and the police ruled it a suicide, which it probably was. Viper gave her the drugs though. It was his fault. And her fault for introducing them.

Sometimes she dreamed about Amber and her horse-like laugh, which was mostly a series of snorts—an indelicate noise coming from a delicate Botticelli masterpiece. In her dreams, Amber was alive. It was all a joke, all a mistake, and they would laugh about it. Usually, Amber would go off with someone else, someone faceless and menacing, and Celeste would spend the rest of the dream trying to save her. Celeste searched for Amber in dark corridors and strange secret rooms. On the tops of tall buildings and in the attics of old houses. In closets. She would wake up exhausted because looking for Amber was exhausting work.

...

The professor had been coming to Louie's for years to flirt with Celeste. He always sat at the same table, far away from the windows. He always ordered the Western omelet and water with a lemon slice. He always asked Celeste lots of questions, like whether she was going to enroll in school again. She usually answered in one-word replies. She didn't know his first name or what he taught. But he'd told her many times he was twice divorced and had given up on dating colleagues. Sometimes students would say hello to him. They were very deferential. Hello, Dr. Stoppard, they'd say. Hello there, he'd reply with a wave. Sometimes, he'd say nothing back and give them a salute.

One day he asked, "How's that son of yours, Celeste?"

"Good." She thought about it and added, "Not so good."

The professor looked startled, like he'd made some new academic discovery and his persistence had paid off despite the odds.

"What's wrong?" he said, stroking his goatee. He was still wearing the reading glasses he put on when she handed him the menu. He peered over them at her. She found herself wondering if he could even throw a baseball. What good would he be to her son?

"No dad in the picture, that's all."

"A common problem these days, or so I've been led to believe." He smiled and removed his glasses. He had nice teeth, like he made every six-month dental visit. She realized he was waiting for her to elaborate, for her to say something else, like conversation was a tennis match. A test of the wills.

She couldn't think of anything else to say, except, "Oh well." That was enough.

"Say there, how about I take you and your son to the zoo? I'm an expert, you know. I'm sure I've told you I teach zoology. And I've never met a kid yet who didn't love to go to the zoo."

"For real? You'd do that?"

"Sure. Your boy probably needs a male role model. A buddy, you know. I'm more than happy to do it."

"That'd be great. I mean, if you're sure you want to."

"Sure as sure can be," he said. "You just pack the picnic lunch, Mom."

He was so nerdy she couldn't help but laugh. He laughed too. A deep rich laugh, unlike his tenor voice. It seemed as though his laugh didn't belong to him, like it floated out and hung between them, separate from him. He cleared his throat and it was gone. She wrote her telephone number on the back of his check.

...

Celeste's mother was still obsessed with Amber's death. Every time Celeste brought Russell over for a visit, her mother managed to work it into the conversation.

"I'm bored," Russell said. "There's nothing to do here."

"Go play in the backyard with Pepper," Celeste's mother said. Pepper was an arthritic miniature poodle, seventeen years old. Pepper looked at Celeste's mother with his weepy eyes and shivered. Russell stomped his foot so Celeste turned on the television. He stretched out on the sofa and sucked his thumb. "Russell, you're too old for that," Celeste's mother hollered from the kitchen. Russell removed his thumb and stuck out his tongue. Celeste's mother didn't see. She was pouring coffee into mugs. Celeste's mug said, "#1 Dad."

"Do you remember Amber's mother?"

"Yeah."

"I saw her at the mall the other day, and boy, did that bring back memories. Of course, she turned the other way when she saw me."

"Can't say I blame her."

"I guess she's still grieving after all these years. How many years has it been now? Eight, huh?"

"Yeah." Celeste hated her mother's coffee. It was thick like syrup and so strong she could barely swallow it. She looked at her watch.

"To think that girl was using drugs."

"Uh-huh."

"Did you know she was using drugs? You didn't know, did you?"

"No."

"What was it they found in her system? Angel Puffs?"

"No, Mom. Angel Dust."

"Seems like they should call it Devil Dust."

"Yes. They should."

"What in God's name was Amber doing taking drugs? She was such a little angel. That curly blonde hair. I remember you two playing Barbies in the backyard. Remember how I would sew clothes for your Barbies, and y'all would do fashion shows on the patio? You made a runway out of egg cartons."

"Yeah, we sure did."

"You both had everything going for you. Smart, pretty. I don't understand what happened. Why would Amber hang herself? She had everything to live for." Celeste's mother

paused and smiled. She was looking at Russell. He was asleep on the sofa now, his thumb hanging loosely from his mouth. “Well, the important thing is you’re alive and well. And you have that sweet little boy. What a blessing.” She frowned. “Have you had him tested for that ADD like I told you to?”

The next day the professor honked his horn outside Celeste’s apartment. He was early. She hadn’t even made the sandwiches yet. Russell looked out the window.

“He looks like a doofus.”

“He’s nice. You’ll see.”

“Whatever.”

Russell sat in the back of the professor’s Sebring convertible. He was sulking, his arms crossed tightly on his chest.

“I bet you’d like the top down, wouldn’t you old man?” the professor said.

“My dad isn’t a dork like you,” Russell said.

“Sorry,” Celeste said. The professor said it was okay. He kept the top up.

When he’d telephoned Celeste the week before, he said the Baton Rouge Zoo wouldn’t do since it was small and not very impressive. The New Orleans Zoo would provide a much fuller zoo experience and they would enjoy getting out of town for a day.

The professor brought a book about big cats for Russell to peruse since endangered Amur Leopards were his area of special interest. He’d visited China to see the Amur Leopards. They were cold weather leopards unlike their African cousins. He was even wearing a t-shirt with an Amur Leopard on a mound of snow. It said “Save the Amur Leopard.”

“Have you ever heard of the Amur Leopard, Russ my man? Also known as the Manchurian Leopard?”

“Mom, I told you he’s a doofus.”

...

Back in 1989, there had been a group of them, all in Fine Arts. Celeste was studying photography. She liked the dark room and the chemicals. She was usually disappointed with her work. Telephone poles and shrubbery seemed to be her enemies. They ruined everything, the way they stuck out of people’s heads in her pictures.

After class, they’d go to the *Bayou*, the cool hippy punk alternative bar, and drink draft beer, play pool, maybe listen to the band, if there was one. The Rude was their favorite band because they were awful in a good way and insulted the crowd and there was always a heckler and a beer bottle thrown. Then they’d wander over to McDonald’s and fill up on fries and chicken nuggets. Then over to the Greek Theater to smoke pot. Then back to McDonald’s

because they had the munchies. In the morning, they’d stagger to class and fall asleep in Art History as soon as the lights went off and the slideshow started.

They didn’t mix much with the skatepunk crowd, most of whom weren’t in college and didn’t have plans beyond getting wasted on any given night. Viper was different. He bragged about taking philosophy classes and stumping the professors and claimed he’d grown bored with the whole college scene. He was beyond college. There was nothing they could teach him. He’d leave one day and go on the road, he said. Let the road take him wherever. A conventional life was worthless, he argued. They would end up at the apartment where he squatted and sold drugs, discussing the meaning of things and whether things had any meaning at all. Maybe they’d all move to Austin or Athens, Georgia or some other college town cooler than Baton Rouge. Viper said he’d go if they went and they all agreed they were going. They were going for sure. But they never did. They’d wake up and go to class like nothing happened.

Viper liked Celeste the most. He’d wait outside her dorm and bring her a flower or a chocolate bar or a cookie. Some kind of offering. Then he’d skate alongside her as she walked to class. When she emerged, he’d skate her to the next class. Everyone assumed he was her boyfriend and began to give them space. After a while, she looked around and only Viper was there. He’d staked a claim to her, and all her friends had fallen away. She’d never intended to sleep with him. The first time it happened she’d been out of her mind on acid. Then it became a routine after class—going to Viper’s, taking drugs, having sex, falling asleep. She started to hate herself. Sometimes she didn’t wake up for class in the morning. She tried to tell Viper she was ending it, but he wouldn’t listen.

One afternoon she ran into Amber at the Student Union. *Remember how we spent the night at each other’s houses, they’d said, giggling. Remember how we used to tell each other secrets and who we liked?*

When she told her parents she was pregnant, they wanted to know who the father was. A kid named Viper, she’d said and her father wanted to know what the hell kind of name that was and where could he find this character. He’s gone, she’d said. Gone away. On the road. You’ll never find him. *Who is he, where is he from?* her parents demanded. She had to say she didn’t know. She’d never asked him what his real name was.

“This on top of Amber dying,” her mother said between tearful gasps. “You never heard of such when we were young.”

Celeste said she doubted that very much, especially since her parents had a shotgun wedding. Aunt Janet had told her so. Her father slapped her face and her mother ran to the

bathroom and slammed the door. No one ate dinner that night.

...

The professor said to call him Stan.

As they walked to the zoo entrance, he put his arm around Celeste's shoulders. He leaned in and whispered in her ear. "I'll win him over. Just watch." Celeste glanced at Russell. He was watching them and sneering.

"Nice, Mom," he said.

"Attitude check, please." She frowned her worst frown and Russell laughed. "Seriously, check it or we're going home." He stopped laughing.

"Can I get some candy when we get inside?"

"It's on me, buddy," the professor said.

"Good," Russell said.

They went to the concessions stand first and Russell changed his order three times, frustrating both the professor and the vendor. He came away with popcorn, a coke, a couple of sacks of candy, and nachos. They sat at a picnic table under an umbrella and watched Russell eat.

"You'll be sick," Celeste said.

"I don't care."

"Slow down there, son," the professor said.

"I'm not your son."

"Russell."

"That's okay, Celeste, really. You see, Russ, the word son in that sense is simply an expression. I didn't mean to suggest that you are technically my son. Instead, the intention was to suggest that you are a much younger person and that we, as adults, have a better idea of what quantity of food a younger person can eat and not have a bad reaction, like vomiting. Understand?"

"My name is not Russ."

"Say, buddy, did you know that rats and rabbits and horses can't vomit? I bet you didn't know that."

"Bleh." Russell gagged. "That's disgusting. Why is he talking about vomiting while I'm eating?"

"Oh Russell, finish up."

They wandered around the zoo and paused a long time to gaze at the white tigers.

"They're not albinos," the professor said. "A breeding experiment really. Sad since they

have a shorter life span than the plain old orange tiger. I'd rather be an orange tiger, myself."

"Me, too," Celeste said.

"I'd rather be a man-eating tiger," Russell yelled. "Hey stupid tigers, look at me!"

A man was standing next to them with a chubby wife and two toddlers in tow. He glanced at Russell and laughed. Celeste thought he looked familiar. Something about his eyes, narrow and dark, and the way they crinkled in the corners as he chuckled. She stared and their eyes met. *Was it Viper?* she thought and a rush of prickly heat went through her. She turned and tried to walk away.

"Wait," the professor said. "The lions are just ahead. We have to see the lions."

"I want to see the monkeys," Celeste said firmly. "I want to see them now."

"I want to see the lions," Russell whined.

"Majority wins, huh Russell? Let's go see those lions." The professor tried to pat Russell's head but he ducked.

The man was still staring. "Daddy, want see," the larger toddler said, her arms waving in the air. He picked her up. The smaller one sat in a stroller and sucked a bottle. Celeste could feel the man's eyes following her down the wooden ramp. She didn't look back.

"Lions, oh lions," the professor lamented. "You know, most cats live a solitary existence, but the noble lion is different. Lions live in social groups. Prides."

"Hey, loser lions," Russell hollered. "Want to eat me?" He did a little dance and waved his arms.

"Lions need other lions." The professor placed his hand on Celeste's shoulder. She moved closer to him. The man and his wife and toddlers strolled past and he caught Celeste's eye. He nodded and smiled. Celeste was sure he recognized her. She leaned in close to the professor, put her head on his shoulder. The man pushed the stroller down the ramp and disappeared around the corner. Celeste pushed the professor away. He tried to grasp her hand but she shook loose.

"How about those monkeys now, guys?"

"In my business, we say primates," the professor said. "I bet you didn't know you're a primate, huh sport?" The professor mussed Russell's hair. Russell slapped his hand away and growled like a lion.

"I don't need other lions," Russell said. "I'm a killer lion. I eat other lions for breakfast." He took off running down the ramp where the man had gone. Celeste panicked. She couldn't let him catch up to the man.

"Stop," she screamed.

“It’s okay,” the professor said, holding his ears. “It’s really okay. He’s just a boy. Boys need to run.”

“You don’t understand.” Celeste took off running behind Russell, her heels striking hard against the ground, her body leaning forward, like her high school track coach taught her. It was a race. Russell looked back and squealed with glee. He tripped, his toe catching on a crack in the sidewalk. By the time Celeste caught up, the man was kneeling over him.

“Looks like a scraped knee is all,” the man said. “It’s okay, kid.” Russell was wailing.

Celeste pulled Russell to her. “Get away from my son,” she said.

“Hey, I didn’t hurt him, lady. He was running away from you. You made him fall.”

“That’s right, that’s right. You’re never responsible, are you? You’ve never taken any responsibility for what you’ve done in your entire life.”

“Your wife has lost her mind,” the man said to the professor, who had just jogged up. “I didn’t hurt your kid.”

“Maybe we ought to get some First Aid for that scrape,” the professor said.

“Like you don’t know me,” Celeste said. “Pretending you have no idea who I am. Why am I not surprised?”

“Do you know her?” the man’s wife asked.

“I’ve never seen her in my life,” he replied. Celeste looked into his eyes. They were a dark green. Viper’s had been brown.

“I’m sorry,” Celeste muttered. “I thought you were someone else.” Her face became hot and she felt dizzy. She sat down on the sidewalk and held her head in her hands.

“What’s wrong with her?” the wife asked.

“She’s a nut. That’s all.”

Celeste watched the man rise and grab his daughter by the hand. He did not look back.

“You didn’t lay a hand on that kid,” the wife said. She turned and glared at Celeste. “Some people have no class.”

...

As they merged onto the Interstate, Celeste shivered and rubbed her arms. The professor turned down the air conditioning knob.

“Too cold?” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, assessing her. Celeste knew she was like an unpredictable instinct-driven big cat to him. Who knew what she’d do? When would the same fury he’d seen earlier come rushing forth? She’d scared him.

“Can we have the top down now?” Russell asked. “Pleecease.”

The professor said nothing and hunched over the steering wheel. He kept glancing at

Celeste.

“Stop looking at me,” she said.

“Just making sure you’re okay. Are you okay?” The professor laughed his incongruous deep laugh.

“Stop laughing like that,” Celeste said. “It doesn’t sound like the way you talk. It’s odd.”

“Odd? Oh, alright.” He cleared his throat and hunched further over the steering wheel. He was speeding, rushing to get her home, Celeste guessed.

“You can’t wait to get rid of us.”

“No. Not at all.” He slowed down, merged into the right-hand lane. “We can take it easy all the way home. I only want you to calm down.”

“I am calm.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Can we pleeease have the top down now?”

The top never came down and the professor didn’t get out of the car when they got home.

“Thanks for an enjoyable day,” he said and then rolled up the window and sped off down the street.

“What a jerk,” Russell said. “He never did put down the top. That was my first time in a convertible and the top never got put down.” He picked up a rock in the gravel driveway and threw it in the street. “Let’s not ever do anything with that guy again.”

Inside, Celeste collapsed on the sofa and Russell turned on the television.

“Can we get the Disney Channel or something on this boring TV? Grandma has the Disney Channel. Why can’t we?” Celeste began to cry.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” he said, his hand creeping under hers, fitting inside it like a little ball. She took his hand and laid it flat on top of hers. His fingers were still small, almost doll-like.

“I’m sorry it was a bad day.”

“No way. It was cool. Remember how you yelled at that man at the zoo. He looked all weird when you were screaming at him. He was a loser, wasn’t he?” Russell sat close beside her, nuzzling his head between her arm and chest. “It was fun when you chased me.” His warmth was like a balm and she drifted off into a dreamless sleep as cartoon sounds—boinks and gongs and squeaks and creaks—blared from the television.

A CRAWL SPACE FOR AN ATTIC

Jonathan H. Scott

My left leg lags behind, ahead: my mind
Gazelles—presenting problems: stairs,
Cobblestone, pristine golf-course greens in spikes.
I'm adolescentescque—all thrust, no thought,
Careering limbs. A basement's what I need.
A place to walk without descent,
Provided I do not come up for air,
For light of day. Down-dwelling, in the must,
Book after book: natural selection
And other disregarded novels, one
About backyard songbirds, a hundred more
Concerning governesses. A.T.V.
For zombie films and sit-coms without laugh-tracks.
Provide your own applause, I'll say, if you
Come visit me. Come for my sundry wisdoms,
Come for my television. Stay the night.

A basement's what I need and a crawl-space
For an attic. For my things. My boxes
Of books and boxes of dust. Hands and knees,
Courageous through the spider webs,
A flashlight in my teeth. One leg will lag
But you can't fall from a crawl, not so far
To break a bone or hard enough to crush
Your guts. In fact, it's the perfect distance
To fall. To gather new wisdoms from worms
And roaches: lowliness and other dis-
Regarded heights. During that night, the one
You'll stay to watch T.V., I'll usher you
Through dark, dank, catacombs of rusted tools,
Decapitated dolls, and unused paint.

Just follow me, I'll say, follow my scoot
And drag. Do like me, I'll say—
Kneel, scoot, drag.

PAPAL, ALCHEMICAL

Alec Hershman

Basilica boys glide by

on shiny collar-bones.

Cardinal, carnival, *run along now*.

It is a knowledge of light
that glints are small examples of ravishing

blindness, spectacles
a glass denial of the flesh.

In the vial a pulse turns liquid,
sticky ruby, homeless ailment.

A chancellor drags extraneous
gauntlets through the roses,

struts the campus steps. Scientists
are burrowed in their narrow

combs the chancellor handles
with apiary cool. And so knows better

than to crush the husks
of those he kills, to deliver

sermons to matchsticks—
he claps his softened hands, wishes

oil from a puddle. A cure gets logged
among the brief notations

and the glass by fragments
offers up salt tribute.

FOR MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST, FLYING WITH ME ON A PLANE

Nickole Brown

For if there's nothing then
nothing. And if there's something
then there's something. Say it
again: if there's nothing, then
nothing, and if something,
something. This is ablution:
a curl of a cousin's hand
into a blackened fiddlehead,
the mirror shattered on your
closet door. This is the detritus
left behind: something, something,
nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.
Absolve yourself, say the Lord's
prayer as the wings steady above
the city's capillaries of false light
so crowded last night when I followed
a beautiful woman to the square.
She stepped into the subway stairs
and before disappearing, turned
and said, *Come step into this dark*

hole in the ground with me?

Fanny, I do not mean to be
morbid. I only mean to say
this is how we all go and the Sky
Mall does not comfort me tonight.
What I mean to say is that I loved her
and did not follow. What I mean
to say is I can see death either way:

the velvet black of anesthesia, count back
and you're nine, eight, seven, six, five, gone,
or something better, peacock feathered,
smelling of leather-bound books and baking
bread. Will you wait for me? Will you be
waiting for me, hair piled high and white, or
will I find that other mother, the one who knows
the coward I've become? Will she be cross,
her face a streak of all my nothings,
will she tell me I was a fool not to follow,
and laughing hold up a mirror not yet
broken, showing me I look just like
hell?

MOTHER GINGER

Rhonda Lott

A very tall woman came jerkily in, wearing the most tremendous skirt, like a huge round candy box. Suddenly she lifted one part of her skirt, and out came the tiniest children, who tumbled and tripped about, just like dainty bonbons.

—The Nutcracker and the Mouse King, *E.T.A. Hoffmann*

When I open
my cupid's bow
mouth,

all the clowns spill out
and wriggle across the midnight
rug—parti-colored

larvae, hungry words,
shut away half-formed.
Under my rouge, I blush.

Too late. Too late.
Already they cartwheel
from my clutch.

If only I could dance in a platter
tutu shooting straight
out from my waist,

no hoops, no hidden pulleys—
a dish fit for a fairy feast.
If only I had never pulled

the cord, spread the satin,
wishing for relief,
Now I cannot know

what's left underneath—
that holiness
of hollowness—

before they *bourrée* back inside.
And no matter how I beckon
for her, some singing,

prickling *polichinelle*
always gets left
behind.

DONNE, THEY SAY

John Savoie

Donne, they say, duelled death,
preached his own funeral,
hymned his own requiem,
then slid his sunken corpse
into the clear flowing stream.
So let us breathe our own
elegy, weave our own shroud,
or spread and billow the blanket,
then sneak beneath like laughing
children before it falls,
and there we'll sleep, hand in hand,
as bladed grass beneath the snow.

FLYING BISHOP

David Pace

DURING A REPRIEVE, HE LAY exhausted and sweating back on the bed, his T-shirt twisted at the bottom, sticking to his back. Outside the window is a single dogwood in full blossom, flooded by the high-crime outdoor lights of the hotel. When he got here earlier this afternoon for his layover, the tree caught his eye as he stood at the window and stepped out of his uniform. In the late-afternoon light, the 20-foot tree stood in effulgent, heart-rending white—like an empty wedding gown.

Now, the tree still bathed in light at 1 a.m., Danny begins to suspect that it knows of nothing but this: it is on perpetual display, blooming alternately under sun and street lights outside the window.

Danny takes comfort in this tree. From where he lies, almost the entire window is filled with the dogwood's brilliant self-presentation. It seems almost close enough to touch. But it's behind glass and, as in the airplane cabins where he works as a flight attendant, the windows do not open. This is what he gets tonight, this vision of a flowering tree that could bear white fruit that is sweet and purifying, even holy. Enthralled, he rises from the bed, plants his feet on the floor, stands. He walks to the window and reaches for the tree, but his hand touches only glass. And then he feels the thickening of gastric juices, the contractions, and for a moment he wonders if...suddenly, he is lunging for the toilet again. He heaves into the bowl, his scalp tingling with fierce heat.

He will never eat airport sushi again.

Eighteen years earlier, Danny's mother had reminded him, "Be in the world but not of the world." They were at Salt Lake International before he flew to Los Angeles for initial training. That was the bromide stapled to his forehead like the ruffle on the head of a hotel maid. There were more bromides where that came from: "Remember who you are," and "Change the world, don't let the world change you." He was, after all, a saint—Latter-day Saint, but a saint nonetheless. One of the chosen people. Even after all these years, he still made his bed before he left a hotel room. You never knew when someone might understand that you were one of the chosen.

"Presentation, presentation, presentation," they were told in training, a four-week stint that involved equipment familiarization, evacuation drills, first aid, food and beverage and...Kayla, who asked him every day as they walked across the street from the dorm to the

training center if today was his last day. She was feeling as ambivalent as he about the “safest way to travel,” and both had talked about bolting. But what the heck. The job was a one-year hiatus before graduate school—that’s what Danny told himself. And then it was back to Utah where his life—“the life”—would start in dead (and deadening) earnest.

“Last day for you?” he would say, repeating the question back to her.

“I like the rampies in uniform,” she said on one occasion, eyeing a tug as it rounded the corner of the G.O., its driver in shorts. “Cute asses. I think I’ll stick around for a few more days.” She smiled, the lipstick at the corners of her mouth smudged out, and her eyes disappeared into slits behind her sunglasses. Out of all the other flight attendants in their class, he had become friends with a Long Island Jew the height and weight of a Russian gymnast. Why not the young women from Utah where in 1985 the airline was hiring for their new hub in Salt Lake? Why not the seven other men, most of whom seemed inordinately concerned about using the right shade of bronzer for their appearance checks? Instead it was Kayla the Jewess.

“It’s the persecution complex,” she said, weighing in on the why of their attraction to each other. They were doing evac drills off the 727. “Of course the Jews lost 6 million. You guys have a ways to catch up.” They were standing next in line to take the jump on the door slide, yellow and obscenely tumescent, the group giddy in their jump suits. “Maybe if you started wearing yarmulkes. Something more distinctive than the fact that all of you look like your first name is Bjorn and like none of you have ever had sex.” With that she stepped up to the lip of the 1L door, her arms straight out in front like Olga Korbut, and jumped.

Kayla had been living in Los Angeles long enough to have dated a couple of Mormons. She had even been to the ward once, she explained to Danny, and bought a lace dress and white pumps with tiny white bows for the occasion. Her effort at cultural assimilation.

The night of their graduation, Christian, one of the other trainees, started rubbing Danny’s leg under the table so that he nearly spilled his cranberry juice. Kayla interceded. She pulled Christian’s ear down to her mouth and whispered something so that when he hoisted himself up to go back to the bar he looked suddenly sober, a red smudge on the lower lobe of his ear. Then she told Danny that they were evacuating. “Release seat belts! Get up! Get out!” she giggled, using the commands they had learned during drills. “Leave everything! Good exit! Come this way!”

Back in her room, while she was in the bathroom, he sat on the bed and felt the same curious wave of un-tethered desire move through him that he had felt when Christian had rubbed his leg. A kind of larceny that was free-floating, unattached. Not like the low-grade

buzz of being in a bar—even if he was only drinking juice. This was another first for him. Alone with a woman in her room. And this foray into Gentile ways seemed truly dangerous, but delicious. Danny was a twenty-five-year-old virgin because sex outside of marriage was the sin next to murder. If I can just make it through training, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, Kayla was standing in front of him, a wisp of a woman in an open-throated, oversized dress shirt over something black and fixing an earring that when she dropped her hands, glinted silver behind dark curls. Everyone had been given their domiciles earlier that day. Danny was headed back to Salt Lake and the new hub there. Kayla had elected to stay in LA. “You know you’re the only straight guy in the class,” she said, turning toward a mirror and re-applying lipstick.

Danny answered. “That’s what Christian says. But he thinks every man is gay deep down.”

“Every man’s a man,” said Kayla, turning around. She smiled. “Little Christian may be just one more stewardess trapped in a man’s body, but he is still a man first.” She sat next to him, her perfume stinging the air. The Sunday before, their one day of the week off, Kayla had convinced him to skip services at a nearby ward house and go to Redondo Beach with some of the others where she drank tequila straight and danced to R.E.M. on her walkman. Be in the world. That afternoon Danny told her he was a virgin. But not of the world.

Now, on the night of their graduation, she made her own confession. “When we first got here, I thought I was going to have to bop you,” she told him. Danny wasn’t flattered. He was annoyed to think he was someone Kayla—obviously not a believer—imagined she could simply set her sights on and have. And yet her impulsiveness was what he liked about her. The way she blew out of New York to California with no job prospects just because she fancied herself a surfer, or someone who dated a surfer. The way she danced in the sand at the beach, her arms swaying above her head, her eyes closed, the perpetual red-lipped smile. How her Jewish-ness was about who she was and not what she necessarily did. In Danny’s mind, it was also about what she didn’t do. One of the not-so-chosen people anymore.

He felt a sudden spike of self-righteousness and remembered how on his mission, a two-year proselytizing tour of New England, he had the sense of God’s Kingdom being a mighty ship, steaming steadfastly through the dark ocean of night, moving stolidly toward a glorious and sure destiny. The Kingdom had always been the tacit web he lay suspended in until his mission, when he had felt the spirit and had a conversion experience. But since then, the path had become unclear, or undesirable, which was arguably the same thing for him. Why, he asked himself, didn’t he get married like most everyone else did before he graduated from BYU? If he had married and the children had started to come, everything would still be clear,

but now he was in a dorm room with a beautiful woman who had just told him she wanted to fuck him as some kind of lark.

“But if I can’t have you, Christian can’t either,” she said.

“I’m flattered.”

“Are you? I’ve come to think of you as asexual.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“...and someone who is truly good.”

“I try hard.” As he said this he wondered if it sounded like the sin of false modesty.

She touched his hand. “I’ll miss you, my little Mormon mensch. This place needs you. But don’t forget that maybe you need it.” Danny wasn’t sure what she had meant by “this place.”

“I shouldn’t have to apologize for my standards,” he said, defensively. “Not everyone can just drift around in passing pleasure.” He was starting to sound like his mother. Queen Victoria of the Rockies.

“Always striving, aren’t you?” Kayla sighed. “At least you’re smart. At least I don’t have to worry about you becoming one of these flight attendants who only reads People magazine on the jump seat.” She had called him smart. She had called him asexual. Danny would only remember that Kayla had called him good, truly good.

After a year based in Salt Lake, Danny cut back on his hours and started graduate school, but withdrew soon after. There was something too terminal about it all, as if it were a flight leading into the celestial blue that once on, he would never be able to get off. In 1989 he drifted into a gym one day and spent the next decade transforming his body, adding thirty pounds of muscle to his frame once the airline lifted the weight restrictions for cabin crew.

Every few months Kayla would call him. And on his layovers in Los Angeles she would pick him up at his hotel and drive to Venice Beach where they would dodge the bicycles and in-line skaters, negotiate the indigent. Despite the California sun, Kayla’s skin remained the color of ivory. Even in a light chemise, she had that dressed-up look New Yorkers never seem able to shed. Under her arm she carried a large black bag, rectangular, the handles looped over her shoulder so that it looked like a giant portfolio. And when she stopped to retrieve lipstick, a mint, or one of several paperback books, her eyes would squint as she peered in before she seemed to plunge into its maw, her arms flailing in and out of the vast clutter.

At Muscle Beach, they sat eating frozen yogurt and watching the bodybuilders pound iron on the outdoor weight pad. To Danny, the men were not the freaks that some made them

out to be, but beautiful, exotic animals. What fascinated him was the systematic rotation of myriad parts that were built and shaped by the training. The program of sets and repetitions for the broad plates of the pectorals so close to the source of engorging blood as compared to the dense, stubborn calf muscles at the most distant outpost from the heart. It was the subcutaneous experience of getting a “pump” in your muscles; how it made you feel. It was the sex as much as the science of it. These men were both human but decidedly unreal.

“One squeeze from one of those guys and it would all be over,” said a transfixed Kayla from behind her yogurt.

In his fifteenth year of flying, Danny transferred to New York City to work international rotations and maybe to try once more to go back to school, and maybe to find someone to marry to stop his mother from insinuating to his sisters—all married and with kids—that the airline may not have turned their brother, a former missionary who had taken to wearing muscle shirts, into a homosexual, but it most certainly had led him down the road to apostasy. Marriage, after all, was a requirement for the highest heaven. Danny even started drinking coffee, contraband in the faith along with booze and tobacco, but something he liked to take in a stack of pre-workout supplements everyday before hitting the gym.

“Steve Young isn’t married,” Danny reminded his mother on a trip home. “And he’s the Mormon poster boy.”

“Steve Young plays football for the 49ers and probably sings bass in the ward choir. You’re a flight attendant and a tenor with six sisters and you probably haven’t been to church in a decade.”

This was true. Danny was a tenor, and he hadn’t been to the ward, let alone the temple in nearly nine years. He had even missed the weddings of his two youngest sisters, not because he couldn’t get off work, as he told them, but because he wasn’t able to obtain a temple recommend from his bishop. The truth was he didn’t even know who his bishop was, or what ward he belonged to.

One September morning Danny got a phone call from Kayla. He had spent the previous night trying to beat back a fever, but now he was feeling rested. Kayla had transferred to New York herself six months earlier, but he hadn’t even seen her.

“Last day for you?” said the voice on the other end. He smiled.

“No, I like the asses on these rampies,” he joked. “I think I’m going to stick around for a few more days.” He imagined Kayla walking along in black boots, a smart-aleck smile, cell

phone to her ear, the lipstick in the corners of her mouth rubbed out.

“Byron and I split.”

“I heard. Through the grapevine.”

“Doctors are going through too much of an identity crisis these days. They feel under-appreciated or something. And then they have to pay all that malpractice, anyway. It got old. Of course there was the little thing on the side he had going with Nurse Fucking Ratchett.”

“What are you flying these days?”

“I try to stay out west. Trans-con to LA mostly. You know, Danny, I don’t care if my people are complete pains-in-the asses going from LaGuardia to West Palm all the time. I think a lot of flight attendants are just anti-Semitic.”

“Your dad would be happy to hear you say that, you know. Defending your people.”

“I would never tell him. He’d just take it as a sign that I was going back to temple and giving up prosciutto. I had to prepare the cabin yesterday.”

“You’re shittin’ me?”

“Landing gear wouldn’t go down. I’m standing there in the aisle with this hangover trying to show everyone how to brace, and I feel like I’m going to throw up on top of this man’s head. And he was already wearing a toupée.”

On Kayla’s flight the landing gear had gone down, but the indicator light had malfunctioned. Even so, she said, she would never forget how everyone on that plane suddenly loved her exquisitely for just that ten minutes before they landed safely.

The two of them had lunch and spent the day walking in Riverside Park then sat on a bench and watched the sun set over the Hudson. Kayla had become more and more petite over the years, her upper arms so thin and so white, that he imagined they could break in two with a snap. He often teased her that if Orville Redenbacher’s and TCBY went out of business she would starve to death. At recurrent training the year before, while being tested in automatic door operation of the 757, she had hung onto the wrong handle and gone flying out with the door when it opened with a lurch. Fortunately, the drill was in a mock up, the floor flush with the metal lip of the door.

Next to Kayla, he felt huge and ungainly in his studio physique. It was like when he had layovers in Peru, and he would walk the streets of Lima, his size and shape pressed in hard angles against his thin cotton shirt, and he seemed ludicrous in this world filled with the hardscrabble commerce of men and women whose bodies were the natural consequence of their lives.

“There’s just one thing I can’t figure out,” Kayla said.

“Just one?”

“How do you divorce the father of a child you’ve become the mother of?”

“You really took a shine to Brandon?”

“He needs me. When he came to live with us after that god-awful military school his mother sent him to, it was like he was living in another country and it took a full year to coax him home. And now...” Kayla turned away, in a failed attempt to collect herself. Danny was silent, the contrails of a jet high above them suddenly taking his focus. “And now I know that I need Brandon as much as he ever needed me.” He waited for her to explain.

“I need him so that I can know what I am capable of. What kind of person I can become.”

“Are you still in contact with him?” Danny ventured. He felt as if he were a Mormon bishop who in a confessional had to struggle to appear empathetic, and he thought he could hate himself for that one thing.

“It will never be the same. And you know what? It was a tender event, saying goodbye to Brandy. Sweet really. Not like it was when I left here. Left home. Sometimes I cry when I think of you, Danny, my little Mormon mensch. I used to think you were like this Arab in white—the exotic “other”—riding out of the hot desert, pure and clean. But now I realize I’m just crying for myself. For something I’ve lost. That the world is too much with us, like someone said. Are you still immune from everything, Danny? Like you were in LA? I suppose I’ve idealized you over the years.”

“It’s my pecs, isn’t it?” Always ready with a pithy remark when she talked this way. But it was indicative of what he had come to need. To be thought of as somehow superior, more righteous, more innocent—more muscular for God’s sake—than everyone else, including Kayla.

“I always liked a man’s back more than the chest. Something about that V-thing going on... sends me somewhere. Makes me want to bop him.”

“I’ll remember to keep my shirt on. Wouldn’t want to ruin a good friendship.” In fact, at that moment, he would have risked friendship and more to take Kayla back to his apartment and make love to her as he had sometimes fantasized. But that couldn’t happen. Especially not that week. His desire for her began to pale, and he had the impulse instead to tell her why he loved her. That she embodied something he could never have. The sum of one’s parts. The mystery of self instead of the prescription of self. But he didn’t. To do so would threaten the only spell he felt he could cast on anyone, even on his best friend.

“I am sorry about Brandy,” he said, finally. She leaned against his shoulder, and he slid next to her. This arm must feel, he thought, as hard as alabaster behind her head.

But in Babylon, the term Danny's mother used for New York City, Danny had been learning that it was men, not women who appreciated arms as hard as alabaster. He noticed he had the attention of what seemed like every man when he went running on his off-day from the gym. He remembered it this way. One day he was running in Central Park when he saw a man walking out of the bushes near the great lawn. He was zipping up his pants. Danny finished his run, but the next day, after lunch, he made a short-cut through the park near where he had seen the man. It was late June, already warm and humid, and the trees were fully leafed-in and dense. Through the foliage were trails, and behind a bush, resplendent with honeysuckle, stood a man, and behind a maple, another, smoking, his other hand almost imperceptibly rubbing his crotch. The second man stared blankly at Danny, moved to the tree trunk where he stubbed out his smoke, turned to look at him again, then disappeared down a trail.

Danny followed him, and the old feeling of disjointed desire he had felt from time to time reappeared in him like the dappled sun through treetops, the same response he sometimes had in the locker room at the gym, on the hot summer streets of Manhattan, next to Christian on graduation night from training and in Kayla's dorm room afterwards.

But this time, the object of desire was himself. And once the man he was following knelt in the leaves and savagely took Danny's cock in his mouth, Danny felt as tall as the trees, and as big as Central Park and he found himself taking off his shirt so that the man could worship him unencumbered.

When it was over, Danny felt sick. He knelt in the dirt and vomited. It was the memory of the sound of the man breathing and slurping against his balls, the smell of tobacco. The grip of the man's hands on his chest, the feel of the man's wet head in Danny's hands. But more than feeling sick, he thought of Kayla. How if she only knew what he was capable of now.

He went back to the park again after his next trip. And soon it was every two weeks or so. Each time, at the moment of climax, he became instantly repulsed by the man who had serviced him, and he would stumble to get his shorts pulled up, and be on his way. But every time he returned, it was as if the Mormon Tabernacle Choir were lifting the tops off the trees with the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and he felt strangely at ease in this temple of charged desire.

Once, as he entered his sacred grove, intent on getting off, he came upon a man in a wheelchair. Somehow the man, who was about Danny's age, had pushed his chair off the sidewalk, into the trees, onto the trail and into a stand of saplings where he sat fingering

himself. The man looked up at Danny with an almost hopeless pleading, but Danny, disgusted, fled the scene. Later, he would return to that spot, and finish the great work that burned him from the inside out. The man in the wheelchair was gone, but Danny found someone else, and in the throes of passion he imagined the sound of a wheelchair creaking as he straddled the paraplegic, whose arms made powerful from pushing himself through life, wrapped around Danny's waist. Revulsion at the thought did nothing to keep him out of the woods.

On a layover in Manchester, England, a burning in his urethra began whenever he peed. When Kayla next called, he was still on medication for gonorrhoea. And there were still occasional fevers, and he wondered for the first time, as they sat on the bench overlooking the Hudson at sunset, if what he had done in the park not only prevented him from sleeping with her, but compromised his capacity to minister to her. After all, he was still one of the chosen. And the chosen were to minister to a sin-sick world. If the face he had fronted to her—and arguably to himself—was false, was he unworthy to help? That was Utah-think, he decided. Kayla wouldn't give a shit what he was doing in the park. It wasn't like he was hurting her. Still, the thought of telling her...no, he wouldn't. The park was the one place that he could still feel bigger than life, as if he were being lifted off the ground in a theophany. It was too important to risk condemnation from anyone. He was thirty-eight. The park was the only place where he felt alive, and most importantly, it was the only place where he suspected that he was not as good as Kayla claimed.

Kayla shifted against Danny's arm. "How's your dad?" he asked her. She thought for a moment.

"He told me last week he could live with the fact that I don't even observe the high holidays. And the fact that I refused to marry Jewish. He actually liked Byron."

"And what is it he can't live with?" Danny asked as a jogger went puffing by. For a moment, Danny wondered if the jogger ever found himself in the thick trees of Central Park.

"That I'm anti-Jewish. That I fight it."

"Judaism?"

"One little comment about Sharon's killing the Palestinians and.... Life is a complicated, exasperating thing," she said. "It's not just about taking sides, it's about holding all of what you can of it and then acting anyway, with hope." Suddenly she looked worn-down to Danny. Older. As if her time with Byron had peeled back any semblance of a veneer to reveal the price Kayla was paying to live a life which started with her daring move west and led to becoming a surrogate mother. He wanted to believe that Kayla could be Kayla without what he perceived as negative residue. That, like him, she could traverse the whole world, love and

be loved, then leap unchanged back into her former self.

“Do you have any regrets?” Danny finally asked her. Kayla lifted her head off of his shoulder, and pulled her sweater closer around her. He could tell that tomorrow would be even more beautiful than today by something in the air, a stillness in the city that reminded him of that moment in an airplane, just before it begins its gradual descent, when it seems to dangle at the apex of what is little more than a parabolic arc drawn in the sky—a giant arc from point A to point B.

“No regrets,” she said. “Just wonder.”

“Like when you were a kid?”

“Before I moved back to Long Island, I used to always go on long walks in the morning when I laid over here. I guess it’s sort of a ritual. And now to do it, it’s almost more than I can bear. I’m amazed things work in this world as well as they do. It’s truly a wonder. And to think that I’ve been a participant in all of this.” She looked at him, pursing her lips. “I regret not coming home earlier. This place is my home. It used to be the place that owed me something. But now it’s the place I owe something to. I feel like I need to rescue the world like it has rescued me.”

“The world has rescued you?”

“I loved my husband, Danny. And even though it didn’t work out, and I feel...I am devastated by all of this, I’m glad to be here but glad that I’ve been ‘there.’ To love well has been its own reward.” She was crying now. Sniffing into the breeze. But Danny could only feel himself floating away on it.

“And not sleeping with you,” she added after awhile. “I also regret that. Not the bop. But actually sleeping next to you. There would have been something comforting about lying next to someone like you who still seems to hold to an ideal at any cost.” Danny thought about the cost, the secret disease of it, and then he invited her to spend the night at his place.

As they walked back to his apartment on the west side he said, “I have an early report tomorrow at Newark. Stupid turn is all. But I couldn’t get rid of it.”

“By the time you’re up, I’ll be half way to Battery Park in my new Reeboks,” she said.

At the apartment Danny took his ciprofloxacin then climbed into bed with Kayla where they lay holding each other through the night. Outside, Babylon seemed still, and it *was* still—a fragrant promise of urban canyons to be filled again with sun in the morning. And Kayla smelled like the sweet decay of sorb-apples at the end of an English summer.

When he awoke, she was gone. Danny hurried to dress, then decided to splurge and

call a car service. At Newark, he casually threw his bags on the conveyer belt and nodded to a yawning young man looking at the X-ray screen. Danny remembered the night before and the memory of what he was capable of burned within him. The night before he had had unprotected sex with Kayla. This while he still suffered from the late stages of a sexually transmitted disease. This while he waited for his HIV test to come back.

Sitting on the jump seat, waiting for takeoff, the familiar burning began to subside. In his mind’s eye, it wasn’t Kayla he saw, lying deceived in his bed. It was his chiseled self, asleep, on the edge of a dream. Innocent. Immune. One of the chosen. He could fly.

He stood in the aisle of the 757 and watched the passengers trundle in, displacing with their heat the emptiness of this narrow-bodied world. There was no place for him in this aluminum O. He could only be a facilitator to life, a kind of pastor, a sort of judge—one who serves drinks to those going somewhere, while he himself would always just be en route.

When they landed, the captain’s voice came on the PA and asked for everyone’s attention. He said that all flights had been grounded, and that anyone making a connection would need to talk to a gate agent inside the terminal. Then his voice cracked, and he said, “The nation will never be the same after this September morning.”

Danny wakes. The dogwood outside his window is ablaze in morning light. He looks at the clock radio. Nearly seven. He’s slept four hours and is feeling much better, though his sides ache. The bedspread lies on the floor, crumpled, the smell of vomit still heavy in the air. He lies on his side, his back to the window. He thinks about the tree. He never noticed it six months earlier when he was stuck in the same hotel and, coincidentally, the same room, for four days following the attacks on New York. Of course, the tree wasn’t in bloom in September as it is now, and back then he was fixed on the television like everyone was, watching the city that he lived in on a screen, as if it were being beamed in from another world. He called Kayla’s cell phone seven times, leaving messages. Then he called his answering machine to see if she had left a message. After that, he had called her cell just to hear her voice.

“Hi. I’ve missed you. Please leave a message and I’ll call you back.”

He has three hours before he has to be downstairs for report. Earlier, he thought about calling in sick, but everyone is on doctor’s note because of the massive sick calls during the past six months. He can do it. He can get up, shower, put on his fire-retardant uniform and play his part to keep the industry aloft. Since 9/11 he hasn’t balked about going back to work. In fact he volunteered during the following weeks to work with the trauma counselors

at the New York domicile. Even when his mother pled with him at Christmas to transfer back to Salt Lake, he was resolute in a way he had never been since he was a missionary knocking on New England doors and peddling religion.

“People need me,” he said to his mother and sisters with worrying faces. But really what he meant, but could not say, was, “I need the world.”

“I belong there,” he said, referring to Babylon.

At work now he thinks of crashing all the time, as if aviation has finally called its own bluff and admitted to the Icarian fantasy that flying has always been. On gradual descent, when the engines cut and the nose falls ever-so-slightly, he still knows what the drill is. But he also knows that that this one is failing, like every drill he’s ever put himself through, every belief he’s held. And yet this vibrating tube still holds the world as he has come to know it, and in this world he is its bishop. He feels protective of this clutch of strangers assigned to him, as if his heart will break for their expectations of life. And so, despite the fear of dying, there are molded plastic smiles all around to reassure his charges who, every time there’s a bump, look at him as if they love him exquisitely.

Kayla’s image appears to him from time to time over the beverage cart, standing in the aisle of a busy flight. She is wearing her lace dress and the shoes with tiny bows on them, but she is laughing. “Last day for you?” she asks warmly.

Danny turns toward the hotel window and the dogwood. No wedding dress here. No tree of life. It is just a dogwood, decadent in this brief yellow moment and bruised by the wind. The purging has left him feeling light.

A POEM FOR A STRANGER

Leesa McDill

god tastes of red wine,
bitter and bloodless,
and the dusty smell of an unused room.

he is other people's words
carved into the pale canvas of my skin,
immortalizing them in
all-too washable ink
that bleeds through to my bones.

he is good intentions
and bad results,
no longer hiding in the
delicate, sunlit spots that
fall across a hard wood floor,
or in the still water before a storm.

BUBBLE SELF PORTRAIT

Josephine Liu



THROWN

Laurence Levey

CHEEK PUFF LIKE DIZZY. Irene smoking a joint. Drew getting ready for the hike. Anorexica on her cellphone, metabolizing away, self-digesting. How did my life go so wrong?

Pissed-away year. Self-melodrama at a fever pitch.

Annie over by the window, making me horny, making me hard, making me want to shoot myself. She's a little heavy, wearing a green tank top with a white shawl over it and dungarees, but not so heavy that her hips look bad in the jeans. No, that fleshy, soft butt is just aching to have the two hollows at each side of my abdomen pressing and grinding up against each cheek. And when she leans forward in that tank top, she's all but out of it, and I'm all but out of my tree.

Screaming meanies.

Mania's a funny thing. Haha. I feel it starting to rip. Courage and cowardice equally false, twin masks of sadness. Mania is sadness amplified to deafening proportions.

I don't want to be manic, straddling two worlds: the normal one, silent beneath the loud, lewd claustrophobia of the manic one, from which every straining atom in me seeks to escape. Hence, escapades!

Eye contact with Irene. Her cheeks more normal now. Damn, that girl can smoke. She holds the roach out to me. I take it and put it to my lips.

"Who's coming?" asks Drew. His pack is already strapped to his back, his boots are laced up, he's Jeremiah Fucking Johnson. "Dane? Irene? Anyone else?"

Anorexica keeps yapping but holds up one finger. Annie barely stirs.

"I'm coming," says Irene. "Where are my boots?"

Where are your boobs? I'm thinking. Damn, that girl is flat-chested.

The hit from the roach buzzes and fuzzes me. Makes me think hiking's a good idea. I've got a pair of Gore-Tex boots I've worn once, somewhere around here.

The room spins when I get up; Annie ratchets into my line of vision, mountains in a clear sky out beyond her. My boots are by the sliding door near her seat.

"You coming?" I ask her.

She smiles at me, holds my gaze, turns back to look outside. I linger a few seconds, thinking maybe she's thinking about it, then I realize our interaction is over. I grab my boots and step out onto the deck to put them on.

It's not hot, but the morning's chill has worn off. The mists are gone, too, and the views

in all directions are clear: pine trees, rock and sky both down and up, once you look past the little Zen path that winds into the woods and disappears.

Irene steps out onto the deck and starts doing jumping-jacks, even though she's wearing boots, even though her pack is strapped on. She's tall and blond and skinny, and making quite a ruckus. Her hair flaps up and down, her shorts climb up and expose a lot of skinny but strong-looking thigh. I'd be truly mesmerized but the clunking of her boots on the wooden deck really rubs me the wrong way.

There's skinny and there's skinny, though. Anorexica steps outside and it feels like she's just slipped through a space in the wall. The way she turns away from the sun makes it seem like she's never been in it before and doesn't want to start now.

Drew comes out with water bottles and small bags of gorp for each of us. When he gets to Rexie, she puts the gorp into the chest pocket of her flannel shirt and puts the water bottle down.

"No pack?" he says.

She shakes her head.

Then he looks down at her sneakers.

"No boots?"

"Nope. I probably won't go all the way to the top."

"It's only about an hour up," says Drew.

She shrugs.

"You think Annie will be okay?" Irene asks.

We all look at each other. Nobody answers.

Finally Rexie looks up at Irene and says, "What's okay?"

Irene looks away.

"Why don't we get going?" Drew says after a moment. "Tie your shoes, Dane," he adds.

I look down and my boots are, indeed, untied.

"I was gonna," I say.

It's Irene and Drew out front, Rexie and I bringing up the rear. Annie housesitting. Drew, brown hair, red beard, business major, Type A all the way. Striding long, Irene keeping up, he's a man on a mission. Rexie and I fall farther and farther behind. She really isn't even pretending to hike; wearing long pants, she, with her wasting-away muscles, is just out on a walk, like paying lip-service, leg-service, to some asshole doctor's instructions.

I want to keep up with Drew and Irene, be in on that conversation. It has to be better than anything Rexie and I will come up with to talk about. But I don't want to leave her

alone. I don't even like leaving Annie alone. And I don't want to *be* alone, not exactly.

Inside my head has never been a quiet place, yak yak yak, but these days it gets smelly loud in there when I'm alone. Not voices really, more like just one voice, never shutting up. Taking stock of what I'm doing, what I've done; abstracting, subtracting what I haven't done, have failed to do; adding up to nothing.

See?

Irene and Drew are completely out of sight and the path steepens. Rexie isn't saying anything and I don't want to say anything stupid.

I get a little ahead of her—I can't help it; I can't walk that slow—and so a little above her.

"Steep, huh?" I say, looking back.

She raises her eyebrows, I think in acknowledgement, maybe in derision. I guess derision *is* acknowledgement, Rexie's preferred mode of acknowledgement, in fact.

After a few more minutes, we're in deep woods. It's dark and cool; the trail is wet. I come to a huge fallen trunk completely blocking the path. I have to sit my ass down on top of it, then scissor my legs over. I scrape my knee, my leg gets muddy and my ass wet, but I'm over. I wait to see if Rexie needs or wants help.

Her legs seem like they're barely moving as she languishes towards me, but at last she's close enough to look at me and look at the tree.

"You don't have to wait for me, you know. I'll get there eventually. Probably."

"Do you want me *not* to wait for you?"

She looks at the tree again and leans towards it. She puts both hands on it and lifts her foot as though she could just climb over it.

"Oh, fuck," she says and stops.

She reaches a hand out to me. I take it, scrawny, bony, tiny; I'm horrified but also scared to pull too hard, like I'll crush her hand or pull her shoulder from its socket. I try to reach further up, for her wrist or arm, but that's worse, like picking a dog up by its leg.

Her slack muscles tighten reflexively, dying to pull away from me, but then suddenly, some tide within her turns, and her finger bones clamp around my wrist and I drag her up onto the muddy, mossy trunk. I reach with my other hand for a leg and grasp at her shin, tugging it up and over the top of the trunk. At last she relaxes against my effort and allows me to pull her into a soft slide down my side of the trunk. She lands against me and I hold her to keep us both upright in a kind of hug, quickly relinquished, though I continue to feel where her fingers from both hands pressed against my sides.

I take a swig of water.

“That was easy,” I say.

I catch her smiling for an instant before whatever warring demon is in her forces her face back into its customary expressionless rictus. We resume trudging upwards wordlessly.

Above the tree line, dazzling blue sky. Wispy cloudlines appear and evaporate, like time-lapse photography. It’s cold and warm at the same time, air and sun, and, once I walk and Rexie moseys out of the trees and onto the rock and scree leading to the top, a crisp wind whip-dries the sweat off my neck and turns Rexie’s colorless lips blue.

“You’re getting some color,” I tell her.

A gust, or more like a shot, a reverse vacuum-suck, lifts both edges of her flannel shirt, unbuttoned at the bottom, and for a moment she looks like a butterfly—concentrated, stick-figurey body with wide, plaid wings—or a kite, or a sail, and I picture her launched, soaring from the crag and hurtling down into the thousands of impaling treetops in the piney valley below.

She pulls down the flaps of her shirt and buttons it, hugs herself and keeps traipsing along.

To her credit, she hasn’t complained once, not verbally, though it occurs to me that maybe her shambling gait is a complaint, as well as are her sullenness and silence. Her posture, her refusal or inability to move faster, maybe her whole fucking life is a complaint; her saying to everybody and everything: “Why the fuck are things *this way*?” Her screaming, “This is no good!” or, “You’ve fucked up, so I’m fucking up!”

I can relate.

The path abruptly vanishes, replaced by yellow arrows painted on rocks pointing the way to the top.

I ask Rexie if she wants to go first. She shakes her head.

“It can’t be much farther,” I say.

“Hope not.”

I lean forward into the wind and push myself up on a rock. Immediately I see the cliff face up and to the left. I follow the arrows and soon I’m walking along an edge, cliff above on my left, below on my right. I turn to look back at Rexie. She hasn’t made the ledge yet and is almost crawling to traverse a stretch of boulder.

Why have we brought her out here? And why did she agree to come? What the hell are *we* doing out here?

I’m sick of walking and sick of waiting for Rexie. I pick up my pace and round a narrow

corner and spot Drew and Irene at the peak, sitting, looking out over the valley. A little scrambling, a little striding and I’m with them.

“Took you long enough,” says Irene, but I know she’s just teasing.

“Where’s Anorexica?” Drew asks.

“She’s coming, I think.”

“I’ve waited long enough,” Irene says. “Wanna smoke?”

“Hell, yeah,” I say.

Drew doesn’t bother answering. He stands up and moves sideways over towards the cliff edge.

Irene fires up and hands me the bone.

“Here she comes,” Drew calls.

We turn and there’s Rexie rounding that corner down below. Her hands are in the pockets of her shirt. Seems kind of dangerous to me—I damn sure wanted my hands free—but maybe she’s finding some kind of balance that way, or maybe just keeping her shirt from flying up.

Eagle soar—no, hawk or something—arching through the sky. We all gaze up.

“Turkey vulture,” says Drew, Mr. Authority.

Then it’s gone, diving into the endless bowl of forest below us. We stare after its absence as Rexie joins us.

“So this is it,” she says.

Irene giggles.

“Yup,” says Drew.

I’m busy taking a hit of the joint Irene’s finally passed back to me.

“So where did they actually find him?” Rexie asks.

Drew gestures with his chin.

“Down there somewhere.”

We all creep towards the edge of the rock where Drew stands and look below. A hundred feet down, maybe more, at the bottom of the nearly sheer rockface we’re now standing atop, there’s an enormous pile of rubble: boulders of different sizes, pitched at various lethal angles.

“Fuck,” Rexie says.

Irene looks like she might be crying. Unless maybe the wind is making her eyes tear.

Terry is the one who is missing. The sixth member of our house, the lucky fucker who was porking pretty, sad, Annie every night, he’d fallen, leaped or, hell, maybe got pushed,

to his back-broken, skull-crushed, organs-exploded death from this spot right before the semester started. It's for him that we've made this pilgrimage. Though I don't know what we'd hoped to accomplish.

"Do you think there's still blood and gore and shit down there?" I ask.

"Probably, if you look hard enough," says Drew. Mr. Forensics.

We stare down there as if we might find some trace of him, an indentation in the rubble, a piece of torn clothing recognizable as his, some shimmering alignment of trees or birds or shadows that spells out his name.

But there's nothing down there, nothing. He left nothing behind. Just us four yoyos coming unstrung, perched on a ledge looking out after him as if he'd jumped moments instead of months ago.

What did pilgrims ever find? A new world? God? Justification for their lives and lies? There's none of that here. Just a kind of strangulation, keeping me from breathing, despite all this air.

Irene is definitely crying now. Her shoulders are moving like those of a crying person. Rexie suddenly sits, cross-legged, right where she is, her bony knees extending out over the edge. Is Drew going to hug Irene or pat her on the back or something? Maybe giving comfort isn't Mr. Type A's strong suit? If he's Type A, then I'm Type C, or lower. But I'm the one who's been smoking with her. Maybe I should hug her, or something? Rexie's kind of in the way, between us. It would be awkward. I don't want Irene to think I'm after something cheap. I slide behind Rexie. There's not much room for my feet and I can feel my right foot up against Rexie's ass but she doesn't move, just stays staring blankly out over the valley. I reach out and put my hand on the back of Irene's head. She turns and hugs me around the neck, crying loudly, wetly and sweetly in my ear.

I'm *not* worthless.

In our five-bedroom, two-bathroom house, Terry and Annie had the big double and the other four of us have the four singles. We all lucked into the house through the lottery. The singles share a bathroom; the other bathroom is down the same hallway as the double. One night early in the year, I got back from a party at about two AM, in dire need of the bathroom, and someone—Rexie purging? Irene toking? (though she wouldn't have needed the bathroom for that, so scratch that idea), Drew, what, wanking?—was in there way too long so I went down the other hall and overheard Terry putting it to Annie, his undeserving dick rafting up that slidy river in the rain forest; Annie crying out, a taut muscle plucked, a guttural sound, a no and a yes at the same time, each calling forth and sharpening the other. My fucking God.

Those sounds have stayed with me like a bell ringing and ringing inside, never silent, never silenced.

It all makes sense, really, I hear myself telling myself, though I may be in and out, rational one moment, irrational the next; like an irrational number, even though it sort of doesn't, sort of can't, exist, is still part of the whole mathematics of it all. So when I'm on an irrational plane, it's still a tangent, or *some* function, of reality, even if it seems cockeyed.

What would I be like *without* the Lithium?

Unsalted.

Irene lets go of me and stands facing outwards. I turn, so now we're all facing that way.

"Should we, like, say a prayer or something?" she asks.

"I don't know any," Rexie says from that half-level below our faces.

"If you've got one, I'll listen," Drew says.

"Fuck that," I say, or maybe just think. Probably just think. As though dredging up some words will sanctify it all, cauterize it all. As if some monkey babblings were commensurate with our extremity, to say nothing of Terry's having gone beyond extremity, having slud outside the basepaths.

But then I think, maybe the right words would be just the thing, would *deliver* us.

After a pause, Irene says, "I really wouldn't know what to say. Maybe just, like, a moment of silence or something?"

I guess the seminary isn't in any of our futures.

So we stand up there and have our last hurrah, facing outwards, and the wind kicks up and the sun decides it's had enough of all this and disappears behind a skyful of clouds. I bow my head for a second but a shiver runs through me and I know it's hitting the others at the same time. You can *hear* the weather coming in, swirling into and out of every narrow corner, one kind of air rising up from the valley and another kind damping down into it. The sky is twenty different shades of gray and blue is just a dream. A flocklet of small birds zips out from behind the rockwall off to our left and though they dive soundlessly out of sight into the cloudiness ahead, you can feel them. Or I can feel them. They are felt. Whispers and whistles, air currents and air pockets, games of air play, activity where there is nothing.

The four of us up here, we're just different registers of the same wind, and maybe Terry's the wind. And down below, in the cottage, Annie's a hole not being used. Sprinkles hit my face and at the same instant, Drew says, "Let's get down," and Mr. Fast-Track's got it right for once. We help Rexie to her feet.

"Let's not do this again," she says.

Nobody comments, but it's a pretty safe bet we won't.

Drew takes the lead and we begin following the painted yellow arrows down. Sort of voluntarily, I go last. Rexie's in front of me and I figure it'll soon be just us two again, but she does a pretty good job keeping pace. We're getting wet but it feels less like it's raining and more like the wind is just every now and then driving moisture from the clouds down on us. Once we reach the woods, the loud, living weather gets replaced by a quiet damp gloom inside of which I can hear everybody's footfalls. Insects are buzzing around my head but they don't seem to be biting.

At some point, I become aware that I'm practically stepping on Rexie's heels. When I look up, I realize Drew and Irene are gone. They've lost us again. But this time I don't mind.

"You can pass me if you want," Rexie says.

"No, I'm good."

I reach around and pull the water and gorp from my pack. I dig as much as I can out of the bag and stuff it all into my mouth.

Damn, that stuff tastes good.

"You want some?" I ask Rexie.

She turns around, looks at the stuff in my hands, looks up at my face, her eyes meet mine, probing inside me, not allowing me to probe inside her. She shakes her head, turns back around, plods onward.

I've never known how to deal with the subject of food around her: Encourage her to eat? Exaggerate how good eating is? Tough to exaggerate that, though. Ignore her? Pretend I don't eat, either? Pretend food doesn't exist? It'd be sort of like sex, then.

I try not to ram into her. I try not to step on her heels. I can feel the tension in her, and in me, especially since we're going downhill, as she strains her legs and shoulders to keep from falling forward. I don't have to hang back with her. I could just edge on past. But then where would I be?

We reach the giant downed tree trunk, but this time we're both on the same side. She waits for me in front of it and turns around.

"Here," I say, and kneel down and cup my hands. "Give me your foot."

She lifts her sneaker into my hands and it's muddy and wet and cold. As I straighten up and lift her I feel like I could completely pitch her over to the other side. She probably doesn't weigh half what I weigh. I ease her up gently to the crest of the stump. As her foot leaves my hands I find myself wondering if her fragility, her frailty, is a way of asking, begging, for a delicacy from people, a *finesse* and precision far below, quite other than, the usual crudeness

and gross behavior and overkill that bloat yet impoverish most people's actions. I can't stop trying to figure her out.

She brushes her hair out of her eyes. There's something vaguely erotic about her up there, straddling that tree trunk, thigh muscles clenched...self-absorbed...I picture her sweeping her hair back.

Would I do Rexie? Jeez, I don't know. Would she do me? Somebody please do me.

She slithers down off the stump, though, well before anyone acts on vague erotics in the damp air. With Rexie watching, I hoist myself up and over the stump, this time scraping my left calf on the way down. I imagine her touching my calf, brushing dirt off, maybe pouring cool water on the cut, but she doesn't. She does raise her eyebrows a little and I tell her I'm okay. She nods and turns around and starts walking.

We're quickly out of the woods and can see the way the little path snakes down to the cottage. We hear a car door slam and as we get closer, see Drew loading bags into the back of his SUV. He turns when he hears us.

"Hey, we're thinking of going," he says.

"Looks like you're doing more than thinking about it," I say. The plan had been that we would spend the night.

"We can talk about it if you want," he says, "but we all just figured there's really no reason to stay, and the weather doesn't look too promising, and it's still early enough to get back before dark... or at least close to it."

"Fine with me," I say.

We look at Rexie.

She's already heading inside, pulling her phone from her pocket and thumbing numbers.

"Whatever," she says.

It's unanimous, then. Well, five out of six: Terry's gonna stay.

I'm more than ready. Get me off this stinkin' mountain and away from this cottage. And while we're at it, get me out of our house, too. Get me out of this whole past year.

I pull my boots off at the door to the cottage and try to knock some of the mud off them. The door slides open and Annie steps out. She's put a green sweatshirt on over her green tank top so my lust goes latent. Each tiny move she makes, I feel it, though.

"How was it up there?" she asks.

Her eyes are on me and my eyes go adrift in them. They're so wide open; *she's* so wide open, like the universe expanding. The rest of us, I think, are closed, defended. But she, she's so open she's like hollow. So open I feel like she's coming apart.

“Pretty weird, I guess,” I manage to say.

She smiles. It’s an odd, funny smile. I know, obviously, she isn’t happy. But it’s not a phony smile, either. It’s just wide open, like a gap, like her eyes, like the way she’s standing. I can see her breathing, that’s how motionless she is. Terry has left us all, but he’s vacated her.

“I don’t think you really missed anything, though,” I add.

“No. But maybe I should have gone.”

“Maybe *we* shouldn’t have.”

She chuckles a little, lifts her hand as though to touch my wrist or forearm, but then just lets her hand fall.

“No one really knows what to do,” she says.

Never truer, I think, though always true.

“Except maybe Drew,” she adds.

I laugh. She does touch my wrist this time, then continues out to the car.

Inside, I gather up my stuff—I don’t have much—and toss it in my overnight bag. I could use a shower but there’s no time; we all seem in such a hurry. I change out of my wet hiking clothes and head outside. I throw my bag in the rear hatch with all the others.

Drew’s had his SUV all year but today’s the first time I’ve been in it. Yeah, we’re pretty tight.

We’ve already paid for the cottage, but with each of us chipping in, it’s really not that much. Drew found it for us, of course. There were others, but this was the highest one up and the only one with a path directly to the summit, he’d said.

Rexie’s the last one out. Drew double-checks that the doors are locked. Rexie tosses her things in the back and Drew pushes the hatch door closed.

“Hey, Drewy,” Irene says, and everyone laughs. “Is it okay if we smoke in your car? ‘Cause if not, I want to light up before we get going.”

I love Irene. She is fucking non-stop, man.

“Yeah, it’s okay,” he says. “I hope everybody has everything.”

We pile into the Subaru or Toyota or whatever the hell it is. The girls all cede me the front seat; I don’t even call shotgun. Guys in front. Drew starts it up and Irene, right behind him, still in her shorts, lights up. Annie’s in the middle and her right knee is against the side of my seat, almost touching my elbow.

As Drew pulls out of the gravel driveway, Irene passes the joint up front and to my surprise, maybe everyone’s, Drew takes it. Perhaps I don’t even need to say he doesn’t get high much. At least not that I know of.

When he hands it to me, I pause and take a deep breath, then take myself a whammer-jammer of a hit. I hear someone, Rexie, I think, clap a couple of times. The buzz quickly becomes aural; the smoke in my throat turns into a pulsy hammering in my ears. Someone in back is saying something and Drew’s answering but I can’t make it out.

When I turn around to hand the joint back, Rexie takes it. Irene’s eyes fasten on mine and I can feel her asking me, demanding, “Who are you?” I stare at the microscopic movements of her eyes and forehead, her nostrils and mouth, all at once. There’s something feline about her look, something feral, animal.

Who am I?

I’m still turned around as Rexie hands the joint to Annie and she brings it to her mouth. The girls’ thighs are all bouncing into each other as Drew heads down the bumpy dirt road. Irene’s arm is behind Annie’s shoulders, resting on the seatback. Though she’s not really holding her, it *looks* like she’s holding her. I can’t see Rexie’s face behind my headrest but I see her skeleton fingers resting on her knee. Annie taps Irene’s bare thigh and hands her the joint. Irene takes it with her left hand and as she puts it to her mouth, she leans forward a little and her hair brushes against Annie’s left shoulder.

I could watch the three of them for hours. Forever. The way they’re sitting, the way they’re smiling, the way they’re bumping into each other, unself-consciously, they remind me of little girls playing. Annie coughs and, in the gray light, I notice a small streak of mud on the bottom of Irene’s chin and neck.

The joint comes forward and I turn to face front. Drew takes it, holds it, considers it, Solon deciding, then hands it to me. Probably a good decision; he’s got to drive us down the mountain. I know one more hit and I’m toast, but here goes, I take it, I’m off, juice rushing in, and I see us all, the car, the rain, mud shooting up from gaping potholes we hit in the dirt road down; mud caked on my hands, my elbows; the SUV jolts, we just push forward, through time, each moment, clay forming, hardening, breaking off, dying away. Terry, abridged, abbreviated. Each of us trying to put unrest to rest.

Loose is a shimmer, a shimmy, from lucid; figure and ground co-occupying the same space and night falling. I turn around to hand the shrinking joint back, seatbelt restraining me. Rexie leans forward, her hands clasp mine to take the joint, her face comes briefly into view as she brings the joint to her thin lips barely covering her teeth. Irene’s smiling, even Annie has the faintest Cheshire Cat grin on her face.

I can’t turn away from them. I want to be back there with them, among them, of them, between and beneath them, the three of them surrounding me. It isn’t even really sexual,

at first, but then it *is* sexual, *really* sexual. Rexie, eyes closed, straddling my right leg, losing herself, Annie, sweatshirt up, tank top up and lifted over her head, bra clasp unhooked, heavy breasts pressing into my ribs, Irene facing me, me seeking and finding the galaxy inside her as she keeps lifting herself up and dropping, dripping, on top of me, over and over as we kiss. Hold me down, hold me down. Each of them grabbing the back of my neck, pushing my shoulders, my hand on Rexie's bony ass—there must be some flesh still there—Rexie transported. All of us...



A READING AT KGB

Tim Suermondt

In the room dark as a deserted *dacha* in winter
I sat trying to listen to the featured poet
droning on about missiles, cold rain and apple cider—
or so I thought. I tuned out, thinking about the pictures
of Lenin on the walls—someone whispered Khrushchev
but I didn't see him. I did see Julie Christie's Lara
outlined by my side, her breasts pointed and beautiful, snow
beginning to fall on St. Petersburg, the featured poet
saying "here's a real long one" and the Red Cavalry dashing
from the woods to cut him down at last, sabers gleaming
like pure gold, like the Revolution never was—

POSTCARDS TO 4TH AVE JAIL

DeAnn Emett

Dear Dylan:

You were a stupid emo haircut,
on a worn out hacky sack.
Neither of us believed in God,
but could still agree there was a hell,
a bottle of liquor could solve any problem for an evening,
and our hands were the only weapons
that had never turned against us.
This is the 17th postcard I'll never send.

Dear Dylan:

What does your Mother write?
How can she send you postcards, when I can't?
There is never enough space for what I want to say.
Like the space between our clasped hands
and that bottle of Bacardi 151,
atop a jungle gym on the night of your birthday,
laughing at how much space was between us and the North Star—
now I'll never touch your hand again.

Dear Half Pound of Narcotics:

Were you worth it?
Were his sweaty fingers
around your sparks sultry?
Did you convince him that you loved him?

Dear Dylan:

You were hammer and nails,
shattering innocent wood.
My hands, shot glasses,
bearing your burdens for a night.

If I hadn't had a girlfriend,
I would have let you kiss me.
This postcard is a dead battery
inside a broken pocket watch.

Dear Colt .45:

Was it your smooth handle between his fingers
that made him so steady?
Or was it your voice,
whispering hustle through your trigger?
Did he change his mind
after he tasted the bile of your bullet?

Dear Dead Drug Dealer:

Google said your name was Leovardo Ortiz.
To me, your name is Fault.
Your name is Easy Target.
Your name is Wrong Fate.
I blame you for not being bullet proof.
Could you see his eyes in your last breath,
or was it someone else,
borrowing his face?

August 28th, 2010

Dear "Moment":

Did you smell poisonous,
like cigarette smoke,
yet, somehow irresistible?
Did you seduce his pre-tainted hands
into playing his first power chord?
Or were you just as shocked
as the premature corpse?

I am not the North Star,
but Dylan:
with bulletproof glass between us,
I might as well be in outer space.
This is the 100th shot of liquor,
and you're still 50-to-life years worth of postcards
I'll never send away.
If I had been that man,
holding your stolen drugs,
cowering in front of your gun,
would you have killed me, too?
Can we go back to a night in 2006,
before your hands turned against you?
Help me understand.
I want to blame everything but you.



HARD TO HOLD

Corinne Nulton

A DRAFT DREW HIM from his sleep—the chilled air crawled up between the sheets as she unraveled the blankets and unwrapped his arms. Spencer rolled toward the edge of the bed, hoping to catch her wrist, but she had already shuffled out of reach. Then he heard the pen, rapidly scratching lines against the desk, consuming page after page. He scooped-up the comforter and passed through the yellow light around the seams of the bedroom door, only to find her in her usual spot by the window, shivering and naked except for the socks that she (or he) had forgotten to peel off a few hours before. He crept up behind her, attempting to steal a glance at the page, but when she felt the blanket being wrapped around her shoulders, she threw herself over her work, immediately concealing it.

“It’s late.” His lips made their way down her cheek towards the pink-ribbon of flesh, the scar that wrapped around her throat. That was one of the few forbidden places on her body, which made him crave it all the more, but she gently pushed him away before he could touch it.

Fuck, she mouthed the word, gliding her fingertips around the red wound encircling his eye, the imprint of her fist. He could feel the bruise forming but tried not to flinch at her touch. *I’m sorry.*

He imagined the apology in a Sally Brown/Fergie tone. Both childish and full of longing. But her silence required this sort of voice invention—sometimes he heard high-pitched and honey-sweet words. Other times her conversation seemed rough and whiskey-worn, like Stevie Nicks, but always with an accent. French or Irish. Or both.

“Boyfriend battery is a federal offense, missy. I shall never, ever, ever, ever, forgive you unless,”—he tried to pick her up into his arms—“you come back to bed.”

She playfully resisted, nibbling his neck, pushing him away. When he stopped, she looked at him, then looked at the clock, then back at him, and mouthed, *Just a few more pages.*

“Going somewhere? Your socks are on.”

She went to kiss him. He pushed her away. “That’s not an answer.”

He knew the ritual—first the nightmares, then the writing, then the leaving. The last time she vanished, she was gone for two months.

I’ll—stay—here. She moved her lips slowly so there’d be no misinterpretation, but her eyes shot toward the closet, where she kept her book bag. It was always packed, always ready, always waiting for her.

“Falyn.” He was pleading now. “I wish you’d let me throw that thing out.”

She mouthed something else, but he missed it. Frustrated, she picked up a new sheet of paper and scribbled her reply. *This is the only way I know how to live—with my life packed-up and ready to run when I am—a side effect of foster care, I guess.*

“Just knowing that it’s there—that I’ll look up and you’ll be gone again—it drives me crazy—”

You, crazy? Ha. She gestured to the stack of inked-up paper.

“It’s contagious,” he snapped. Then he added in a softer tone, “If I can’t help you, then there’s no help for either of us. Our next anniversary will be spent in straightjackets.”

She thought about it, wrote something, scribbled it out, and wrote again, *There’s places in memory where even I can’t bear to go. How can I take you?*

“Then I want a backpack next to yours in that closet.”

She held up the paper to imply that he hadn’t been listening, that he’d missed a word somewhere, but he pushed it away, insisting that he understood. She rolled her eyes and started writing again, *What does it matter? I always come back, don’t I?*

But that was his worst fear. He’d seen her lay on the bed for days at a time when she had these bad spells. He’d seen the scars beneath her charm bracelets—the shelves of antidepressants in the medicine cabinet. At least if she was physically close to him, he could run his fingers through her hair and remind her there was a life waiting for her.

It all ran through his mind, but he couldn’t verbalize a single part of it. Too emotionally potent. Five years of this hell, yet he couldn’t let her go.

She noticed his silence, his grappling mind. She sighed sadly and wrote, *I’ll be here tomorrow morning. I promise <3.*

He forced a smile. She forced her lips against his.

...

He woke up to find the desk cleared. The piles of paper had been stuffed into the ceiling tiles with the rest of her unheard words. He pretended not to know about it, but often he wondered just how much paper was stacked above him and if it was considered a fire hazard. Then he made his way to the kitchen where yesterday’s newspaper covered the table. He liked to leaf through the Real Estate. He’d pick out a quaint little house in the country, something she’d like, and leave it near her bowl of cereal hoping she’d long for it the way he did, but his hints went unnoticed. As he picked up the old sections, he stumbled upon the note.

Spencer, I waited until morning so technically I didn’t break the promise. I just feel like I’m drowning, and I need to be alone to sort it all out. I really am sorry I have to go. ~Falyn

“FUCK!” He crinkled it up and threw it against the wall. He should’ve stayed awake. He should’ve tied her down, changed the locks on the door, placed a homing-device in her jacket, something. But now that she was gone, there was nothing to do. No cell phone. No address. Nothing. No one could disappear as easily as she could, and for years she wandered in and out of his life, haunting him, captivating him—then vanishing.

He picked the note back up, flattened it out, and put it on the table. He read it once. Twice. Three times.

...

He liked the sound of her voice on paper. He kept his favorite conversations in a shoebox under the bed for mornings like this. It was a way of keeping her. Even the first scribbles on the back of a *People* magazine were preserved and often relived.

Who are you waiting for? She playfully elbowed him in the lobby, showing him the note on the back cover. They had been exchanging smiles and stares for a good ten minutes.

“Ms. Gates,” he whispered, confused by her scribbled greeting. “The instant-best-seller-literary-success everyone is talking about. I guess it’s selling like kid-crack.”

You don’t think she deserves it?

“There’s no plot, no poetics, it’s just pure escapism.”

Then why are you here? To confront her about her ludicrous work?

“Naw. I work at *The Tribune*. My psycho boss is making me interview her.”

She nodded. *How would you write a children’s book?*

He shrugged. “With lots of death and diminished dreams so they will be easier to enslave. Obviously.”

Like Humpty Dumpty and Hiroshima?

“Precisely. Then *Curly Locks and Chernobyl*. But, if you tell anyone my plan, I’ll have to kill you.”

No worries. Her expression shifted. She moved her scarf to reveal the scar that wrapped around her throat. *Maybe I can write Jack-Not-So-Nibble and the Knife Fight, huh?*

“Haha! Yeah, my accomplice. I’m Spencer.”

I’m that bitch, Falyn. She was trembling and on the verge of laughing. She could hardly grip the pencil. *Gates.*

He started laughing but tried to turn it into a cough—unsure of whether or not he should be laughing, which caused a voiceless-giggle from her. He remembered her taking a notepad from her purse to write more, but that half of the conversation had not been saved. It got thrown away with the entire notebook once it was filled. She kept all the free-writing in

the ceiling but none of the real conversations, and it was those missing gaps that disrupted his recollection.

...

At first it was ideal. They'd run into each other, laugh, meet up again, kiss like awkward friends, giggling and pulling away in between. She'd take off and then come back. Eventually, she started bringing stuff with her when she stayed over, gradually moving in. That's when the nightmares began.

He could hear the dreams coming like a storm in the distance as her breath quickened. But before he could shake her awake, it would strike like a bolt of lightning—surging through her muscles, chilling her blood. He'd try to hold her still, keep her from soaring off the edge of their bed, but she'd violently thrash, knotting herself in the blankets, gasping, silently screaming. She'd look at him but not see him, or worse, she'd see someone else, a demon from the dream.

He'd hold her.

No matter how hard she swung, kicked, and bit. He wouldn't let her fall. He could handle black-eyes and broken bones, but not the way she stared at him, not the terror pulsing through her. He'd drag her into his embrace, forcing her head against his chest and hold her whispering, "You're safe, you're safe, you're safe" until her breathing calmed, until her muscles relaxed, until she looked at him and she *saw* him, which caused her to cling to him all the more fiercely.

Two nights before she left, it had happened. They ended up in the kitchen because she didn't want to risk going back to sleep, and he wouldn't dare go back to bed for fear she'd be gone in the morning. So he threw a pot on the stove and began brewing.

"One nightmare tonic coming up." He pulled out a pot and turned back to her. "No peaking! It's a surprise."

She stuck her tongue out and defiantly turned away, stealing glances over her shoulder every few minutes. He threw in some hot chocolate mix, coffee, cinnamon, peanut butter, Hershey Kisses, a peppermint hardtack, instant vanilla pudding—things she liked. The sickeningly sweet things, like her overly-sugared children's stories, to chase away the fear, to change her disinterested and distracted expression, to bring her back because even as she was standing there he could feel her thoughts crumbling inward, fighting amongst themselves.

"I had a nightmare too, you know," he teased.

She didn't react to his words, so he continued, "I dreamt that all of the level-headed women died in the nuclear winter (with some B-rated scientific explanation), and my boss

was left to rule the world, enslaving all men. She was flying around like a pterodactyl."

Lies. She moved her lips and giggled.

"Just the pterodactyl part. The tonic's almost done. It'll cure you for good. I'm sure of it."

Cause nothing says I love you like "Here's some pills to fix you, babe."

"It's as endearing as your disappearing act, Houdini."

I'm really sorry.

He winked at her. They were just entering their sign-language-phase. He thought the gestures would be easier than the piles of post-its and printer paper. He was wrong. He pointed at her. *You.* Then at his eyes. *Look.* Then he gestured to the lower part of his face. *Beautiful.*

She tilted her head, not following and jotted down, *I look Jewish?*

"Noooooo! Beautiful." He sighed. "I really suck at this, don't I?"

Beautiful. She moved her hand around her *whole* face. She giggled and wrote. *Idk, I never had a guy learn sign language for me before. Why does it matter?*

"Because we've been together for a considerable amount of time. You know? I just thought...if we ever have kids, they're not going to be able to read until they're like seven. Unless we pre-order a smart one off the internet. An iChild. Then maybe by five, but even that's pushing it."

Woah. She dropped her jaw and dropped the pencil. She looked at him as if she was Bambi watching her mother gutted and gnawed on by hungry hunters. *What?*

"Forget it. Dumb idea."

I don't want kids.

"But you'd be great with them! You're a children's author!"

You're the one that wanted to enslave the future generations! And now you want a family?

"What, you can't disappear as often with an infant around? Is that what it is?"

Of course that's what it is!

He turned away and fixed his vision on the pot of sweetness bubbling, unsure of her tone. Was the last remark sarcastic or truthful? He couldn't tell. She should've made some sort of expression. And it frustrated him, not knowing for sure—not knowing anything for sure. The muscles in his hand twitched. He'd love to torment her physically the way she tortured him emotionally. Tie her down and force her to confide in him—kiss the scar-line since she *hated* that. No, that's wrong. It's such a demented fantasy. Had all this anxiety and passion molded him into a monster?

He felt her arms around his neck and tried to shrug them off, but she wouldn't let go. It was her turn to be clingy. He shook his head—shook the rage away.

She forced him to look at her, to see her lips. *I'm trying. Really, I'm trying.*

Spitefully, he poured the pot of sweetness into a mug and shoved it at her. She scrunched up her nose.

“Drink it!”

She took a deep slug, gagged, and then looked at him, hoping for forgiveness. His cold expression burst into a grin, and they both laughed.

...

Now he lay in the bed alone, except for the semi-circle of Falyn's children's books. Three wordless, scribble-less weeks had passed. Since Falyn first started disappearing, he used her books as an escape—fall into Falyn's reality since he couldn't be with Falyn. *Falyn. Fallen.* Was he even pronouncing her name right?

He sighed, staring at the speckles in the ceiling tiles. His emotional numbness had worn off, leaving him agonizing over Falyn and the pink-ribbon-scar around her neck. Had she cut herself? Or had someone silenced her—kept her from screaming, from telling.

He cringed. He tried to brush off that sudden vision, but he couldn't. Whenever he closed his eyes and attempted to sleep, he saw someone dragging a blade across her scar. His stomach clenched. Her pain was obviously contagious, but had her inner terrors crept into him as well? If he dared to sleep would he be the one to wake up screaming? He sat up and tried to rock away his nerves.

And who was the monster that jolted her awake at night, who stole her voice, her sanity? In jail or still out there? Was Falyn still running from him? She'd never tell him anyway. That was like her scar—forbidden. He tried to fall back asleep, but he'd hear a siren in the distance and swear it was her scream—the one that was cut short. He couldn't live like this. He needed to know where she was. Or he'd go crazy, too.

Then a thought occurred. Her pages. The ones that loomed over both them.

He grabbed the kitchen chair and crawled up to her secret stash of spare words. When he moved the first ceiling tile, pages staggered to the ground like misshapen snowflakes. Then he took down the second. The third. The fourth. He caught fragments floating through the air—words like slaughter, hiss, scorch, death. Grotesque pictures sketched in the margins. Piles and piles of pages fluttered to the ground.

He took a deep breath, ready to read her for the first time. To understand. To unravel her soul. So when she finally did come back, he'd know how to make her stay.

But as he moved down from the chair, he heard footsteps in the apartment stairwell—it couldn't be. Then the click of a key shoved into the lock. He tried to scoop up as much of the paper as he possibly could and stuff it back in the ceiling, but in the end, she saw him standing in her storm of secrets.

“Falyn—don't—I—” He couldn't manage to say anything. His thoughts were heaving in the back of his throat, but he could not assign specific words to them. He was choking on his own voice. “Please.”

She stood in the door frame with her backpack slung over her shoulder and a shopping bag at her side. She looked violated. Fully-clothed, yet longing for a towel. Her naked memories scattered in every direction.

“I—I—I...” He hurt her. He swallowed, hoping this cut wouldn't leave the same scar. They could work through it still. If he could just find his voice. If he could just stop tripping on the edges of the words. “The p-pages...the...”

But as she tilted her head her expression changed, no longer hurt but afraid. She was still staring at Spencer but seeing the shadow that crept into her dreams. He moved towards her—thinking that if he could just touch her she'd recognize him. But she backed away—slowly at first, then faster, dropping her shopping bag and darting out before Spencer could reach her.

“NO!” he yelled-sobbed-yelped. A sharp pain surged from his heart through his veins. He barely had the strength to make it to the door. His vision filled with black spots, yellow lines, falling words—but just before he collapsed he saw the black Jansport-backpack in the shopping bag—the one he asked for. He pressed it against his chest and closed his eyes, knowing there'd be no one to wake him from the nightmare now—no fairytale sweet enough to forget Falyn.

WAITING IN THE RAIN

Talyn Sherer



Y

Changming Yuan

You love 'Y', not because it's the first letter
In your family name, but because it's like
A horn, which the water buffalo in your
Native village uses to fight against injustice
Or, because it's like a twig, where a crow
Can come down to perch, a cicada can sing
Towards the setting sun as loud as it wants to
More important, in Egyptian hieroglyphics
It stands for a real reed, something you can
Bend into a whistle or flute; in pronouncing it
You can get all the answers you need, or
You can make it into a heart-felt catapult
And shoot at a snakehead or sparrow, as long
As it is within the range of your boyhood

SCRAMBLIN' MAN

William Greenway

"Lord, I was born a ramblin' man."

—Allman Brothers

If you stuck a broom up Jr.'s ass
he could sweep northeast Ohio
as he scrambles from pillow to post.

As Bill Matthews said,
"The penalty for bigamy
is two wives," and, he might
have added, for adultery too.

What pleasure taken
has been taken up by gripes
and gripes, first by the boredom
of the beamish bride
and then by her envy of
the concupiscent concubine
who envies the boredom
of a wife.

Like eggs laid by chickens
come home to roost,
they're all unhatched
and cracked,
and he left to whisk,
no matter how long,
what will never mix.

RUSSIAN CANDY CANES

Rhonda Lott

Do you remember the exhibit
of Bronze Age jewelry
at that museum in Kiev we
saw on our honeymoon?

One plain choker, one decorated
with six uniform discs,
and one lined with upward-pointing spikes.
Looks like teeth, you said, flashed

yours. I looked down at our locked fingers,
one of yours frolicking
with my ring, still growing accustomed
to fumbling across it.

Before your mother died, she walked me
to her fire escape, said
your father bought it in Soviet
Ukraine when the only

legal designs were Russian—gold vines
curled around amethyst
roses, ruby berries—romantic
oaths, opulent and small

safely hiding prickly histories.
Her ring, now my ring, looks
like a silver lily with gold leaves,
a yellow diamond

for its stigma. (My botanist side
tells me the stigma is
part of the *gynoecium*, Greek
for “woman’s house.”) She said

your father’s first wife wore the ring when
the cops found her hanging
from the bathroom ceiling and called it
a suicide. The day

we all went fishing off Long Island,
he joked under his Grey
Goose breath about killing us, too, just
before beaching the boat

on a sandbar. I dream of your mom
as a priestess-angel
warrior wearing that spiked choker
as teeth. *Looks like candy,*

you said in Moscow. *When Tchaikovsky
wrote that Nutcracker dance
with Russian candy canes, the onion
domes of St. Basil’s must*

be what he remembered. Delicious,
I said, squeezing your hand.
I told you I auditioned to be
a flower as a child

and never got the role, which is true,
but I played a soldier.
I read in the program that in spite
of its nickname, “Russian

Dance,” “Trepak” began as the *tropak*,
a Ukrainian folk
dance played by blind musicians. Before
he wrote *The Nutcracker*,

Tchaikovsky’s marriage fell to pieces.
Beginnings and blindness
must be what he wanted to forget.
Those are the only things

I have never told you.

AGAIN, RAVENS

BJ Buckley

(from CORVIDAE)

Wolf
birds, pack
not flock. Ravaging
the carcass of a doe,
fawn-form
in her belly.
Death's mathematicians,
their abacus:
blood's delicate
beady
slide
down bars
of bone.

Ruin, Raven.
Rune-raven,
tracks
over grass-frost
green
as spring.

Ferocious,
because.
If dark
were a skin
with scars.
Ligament,
the long bones,
muscle's scarlet

thread.
If that voice—
fractured.
Oh, scavengers:
heavy saints tapping
inside
us.
Razor-quick
beak,
the heart.

WITHIN LOTUS WITHIN

A. Anupama

I am in the dark chamber.

I eat the lotus fruit, tender and round
before they harden

The flower will open its petals in the morning.

What am I, and what is this place? The pollen covers my skin
and I'm golden. I'm as light as the pollen.

Will the bee visit the open flower, aum on its wings?

Will I see in flight

the entire world?

Will I be dropped in honey?

ELP

Adam Johns

DISEMBARKING HIS PLANE in Chicago, Ben felt a sting in the air, like ammonia. He paused, trying to catch the scent; people shoved past him, and he was driftwood. Reaching the big screen, he saw his flight to El Paso was cancelled. No problem: he'd just drink his lunch in the airport. His blood rushed at the thought. He'd only been drunk a few times, always secretly, in unfamiliar cities. His parents, recovered alcoholics, had been vigilant until death, and he'd chosen girlfriends like them, whose damp, anxious eyes would cause him not simply to put the third glass down, but to never lift it. He'd never had a girlfriend for more than a year, though he was already thirty. Nobody had ever seen him drunk twice.

His eyes wandered. There it was: the shadowed bar amidst the terminal's bright light. He walked, sat. The bartender was blonde, with sphinx eyes.

"What's your poison?"

"Whatever you like."

"So bad?" She poured more vodka than tonic. No lemon.

He downed it in three long swallows. "Another."

She poured. He faced the crowd. Warmth spread through his coiled belly and down his arms into his fingertips, nimble on the glass-rim. "My grandfather died," he offered, the words chased by guilt. Now she'd think he was drinking out of sorrow, though he'd have taken this opportunity to drink even if he was happy. When he asked for a third she smirked. She knew the truth.

Leaving the bar, his eyes wandered. He looked at every woman under forty: curved and thin, white and black, happy and sad. They all looked good. He was damp with sweat. It's a good thing I don't usually drink, he thought. My parents were right. Look at me. No decency. No self control.

Then he saw her. Five foot ten, give or take an inch. Her raven-dark hair was styled as if for a wedding: shaped, guided, tamed, pinned. Her raven-dark eyes blazed behind her bold nose. If she wore any makeup, it was only a touch: all her effort had gone into her hair. Her rounded belly flowed into strong hips. Her skirt flaunted calves like pillars. Her arms were soft, and her heavy breasts made him flush. He stared. She didn't notice, because she was reading as she walked through the airport's chaos. Her lips moved. She bit her lip as he drew close to her, closing her book on her finger.

He followed. With her book closed, she walked fast. She wore simple, flat shoes. She

liked looking good, but she liked moving quickly, too.

She stopped suddenly at a restaurant. Maybe she hadn't even been looking for one, but now that she was in front of it, her eyes were on the menu. He decided she was studying herself in the glass, which made two of them.

She stepped into the restaurant. He craned after her. There were mirrors within: she could watch him watching her. She turned back; he forced himself to meet her phantasmal smile. She had an old canvas suitcase, festooned with printed flowers. It didn't fit her. Her mother's? Her grandmother's? She must be close with her grandmother, like he was—no, had been—with Grandpa. Then she was in the restaurant.

Behind him, one woman pointed out to another how you don't need to be skinny to be attractive. Did you see *him* checking *her* out? He walked away fast. Desire is only lightning, he thought. Abruptly luminous, suddenly gone.

...

For several years, Grandpa had been his only family. Bad luck and heart disease had weeded out the rest. They'd talked tentatively about Grandpa moving east, or even Ben moving to Prospect. Another year and they'd have been ready. But they didn't have that year: Grandpa had a heart attack instead. Was it best that Grandpa had died suddenly? They hadn't been prepared for the long decline or the dissolved autonomy of care.

They'd camped all over the Southwest when he was a teenager, in those glorious summers when he should have been chasing girls—but the desert was better. His breath hadn't filled his lungs in those summer years: it had roared through his body like a vast cave, a chamber of divine echoes. He might have done more in those summers than he would do for the rest of his life, unless maybe he had his own grandson someday, which seemed unlikely. How was he already thirty?

They rearranged his flight: three hours in Chicago, a flight to Houston, two hours there, El Paso. He'd been anticipating the drive: the mountains, the sand-scoured desolation, the long slow climb, dust to grass to bitter-rooted trees. But he'd see none of it tonight, beginning in shadow, arriving in darkness.

Another bar. Two dyed blondes in cheap suits shared brief intimacy over red wine and airport salads. Pharmaceutical reps, he decided, hustling me-too drugs at five dollars a pill, running margarita brunches and tequila evenings for tired, lonely doctors. He had a quick drink. A slow drink. He was a moody, quiet drunk, growing quieter as he approached the crystalline lake which only embraced him on the fifth drink or the seventh: the silence. Or maybe he was a mean drunk after all. What had those two blondes, laughing now, done to

him?

He left the bar, found his gate, and let his eyes roam, hoping to find her, knowing he shouldn't even look. Shutting his eyes, he remembered Elephant Butte Lake. He was a small child. How stupid, Grandpa said, to build a dam to make a lake in the howling desert, for people to roar in raging circles upon it, their speedboats banishing all silence from the earth. As an adult, dreaming the maddened lake amidst the airport's hum, he understood: those cycles signified all cycles. The rotation of the galaxy and the stars therein, the rotation of the solar system and the worlds therein; the renewal of life by death and of death by life; the carbon cycle and the nitrogen cycle: all were one with the boats' roaring circles on the idiot lake.

...

The loudspeaker interrupted his uneasy daydreams, summoning him to Houston. His head throbbed. He was a lightweight, like he always had been. It was a good thing: it reminded him that, despite the intensity of his desire, he wasn't an experienced drinker.

He shuffled into line. The announcements came in waves, filling the airport. It's a world of disembodied voices, he thought. His head cleared as he boarded the plane. He'd have liked to sleep, or at least to have a cup of coffee, but although his hearing was still too resonant, his vision was bright and clear.

And there she was, on the same plane as him. Ordinary life seemed improbable in her shadow. She seemed bigger sitting down. Heavier. She was reading the same black hardback as before, lips moving in concentration.

She'd been more beautiful moving, but she was very beautiful still. The aisle was almost clear; he'd need to move momentarily. Stupidly, he stooped, trying to look at the book. She glanced up, a smile ghosting across her uneven teeth.

"I compulsively look at books," he said. He hoped he sounded sober. "I'm a librarian."
An Introduction to Metaphysics, by Martin Heidegger. The Nazi philosopher. Yet, now radical philosophers were drawn to him, he thought. Leftists. Deconstructionists. Not that he understood what deconstructionism was.

"Do you know it?" she asked. Her voice was higher than he'd expected.

"I've never read it. I've heard the name, though. How is it?"

Leaning forward—he looked down her shirt, unable to help himself—she tore a page out.

"Tell me what you think when you've read it," she said. The aisle was clear, and people shuffled behind him, so he moved. The page smelled vaguely floral.

At his seat, the alcohol weighed upon him. He was a dozen rows away from her, in the middle seat, hemmed in by suits.

He looked at the page.

“Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” it began. Instead of continuing, he shut his eyes. The airplane hummed and passengers shuffled. Outside there was wind.

Yes. These things *were*. A real wind pushing against a real airplane. Her voice ringing strange and true, nothing like the sultry murmur he’d expected. His irrational urge to drink, though he wanted to live for books. Grandpa’s ashes were real, though he’d loved the yellow willow leaves atop the Black Range in October, and though they’d laughed, hiking through melting hailstones on those same mountaintops in midsummer. A real wind would scatter his ashes among the willows.

Why are there beings instead of nothing?

Groggily, he thought it could be shortened into concision. Into mystery. *“Why is?”* He’d tell her that idea. Maybe she’d brush him off and walk away. Or maybe there’d be more. He flipped the page, eyes drifting, letting the words under his skin. *Why is?*

The question resounds, Heidegger asserts. Even if it rings once only, it rings like a muffled bell. He tried to imagine that sound. The clarity and beauty of the bell’s voice. Stifled. Repressed. Imperfectly silenced. Ignore it, and it’s gone forever. Listen closely to the sound *under* the sound, excavate it, and it will shape you forever.

...

He woke as the landing gear touched pavement. Lacking a comb, he ran his fingers through his hair, hoping for the best. He stood as soon as the plane stopped, though everyone around him remained sitting. She was standing, too. She was the tallest woman near the front, and her hair was the most elaborately done. She was reading again, so he read his own torn page once more.

Why is?

Her row walked. She didn’t turn to look at him. She was gone. He tensed, but there was nowhere to go, nothing to do, except wait for the aisles to clear.

He’d never knowingly been rude on a plane before, but as soon as he had a chance, he pushed ahead. When he could, he ran. Someone cursed him, but the curse was nothing.

The jetway was hot. The entrance into the airport was cool and stank of mold. When he got to the entrance, she was gone. The Houston airport is a world in itself. Would he ever see her again? *Why is?* He ran to the right. It was better to guess than give up.

He passed restaurants, knowing she could be sitting inside. He passed restrooms,

knowing she was within, as likely as not. Every moment, every step, worsened his bad odds. People weren’t watching him. People didn’t care.

Luck. He came to a busy area, people flowing like a river. He looked in a busy bookstore. Not seeing her, he looked over his shoulder, and there she was, walking fast, not trying to read in the crowd. He gasped in relief, then pressed against the flow of the crowd to join her.

“What’s your answer to the question of being?” he asked, falling in beside her.

A pale smile. *“It’s not a question to answer, really. It’s a question to ask. But you know that from the first page, right? What do *you* think?”*

He held the page, already crumpled from his careless grip. *“Perhaps it strikes only once, like the muffled tolling of a bell that resounds into Dasein and gradually fades away,”* he read. Her dark eyes were upon him. She neither smiled nor frowned. They stood perfectly still, the crowd parting around them, like twin stones. She let two seconds pass by. Five. She remained still. Ten seconds. The ghost of a smile again. Here. Gone.

“I came to scatter my grandfather’s ashes,” he said. *“I hear the bell because he’s gone.”*

“It’s a world of nothing,” she said. *“Nothing is like the sea. Being is like waves on the surface. Froth.”* He looked into her eyes. Wells of darkness.

“Can I buy you a coffee?” he asked, wincing at his banality.

She shrugged. Darkness deepened. *“I don’t know. Maybe not.”* She took a step. He reached out his right hand, as if to touch her arm. She stepped sideways, ready to slip into the crowd.

“It’s ringing for me now,” he said, voice hoarse.

She stopped.

“You make me ask the question,” he said. He wanted a drink. He wanted five. He wanted to be gone, and for his grandfather to be alive.

“Heidegger’s father was a septon,” she said, turning. *“In charge of ringing the bell. It’s funny how the personal leaks into philosophy. The bell that represents Being itself rang all through his childhood.”*

“I’m sorry if I’m acting crazy,” he said. *“I’d love to buy you coffee. Maybe something to eat. I know I’m hungry.”*

She nodded. Her smile showed teeth but her eyes stayed dark. *“I like coffee. And how can I not talk about Heidegger in the airport, right? Some opportunities only knock once.”*

Coffee was only a couple hundred feet away. His heart pounded while she ordered black coffee, a banana and an orange. He got black coffee and a donut. He paid. As soon as he sat,

he had to stand again.

“You ok?” she asked, looking up from peeling her orange.

“I need to use the bathroom,” he said, embarrassed. “Don’t go anywhere!” She shook her head, smiling broadly, as he rushed away, then back. She’d eaten most of her orange, and favored him with another smile.

“Ok?”

“I’m fine.” He blushed, biting into his donut.

“Are you sure? You’re acting like something’s wrong.” Again the fleeting smile.

“I’m just infatuated.”

This time her smile lingered.

“I’m not always so honest,” he said, nervous in the face of her silence.

“Desire is funny. We become who we aren’t, or weren’t.” Her eyes were deeply shadowed. Her smile faded. “Maybe the desire itself means something, or maybe not. But it can bring forth meaning eventually. Something *real*.”

“Wanting you is already meaningful.”

She leaned forward slightly. Her eyes seemed bigger. There was a small mole under her right eye. “Is it? What does it mean, exactly?”

He swallowed. Her intense, hollow eyes remained on him.

“It means that I recognize something in you.”

“What, exactly?”

“Beauty. You’re one of the most beautiful people I’ve ever seen.”

She laughed, high and brief, tossing her head back, revealing the flow of her neck. “I was in a bar last week. Which I’m usually not, but whatever. This guy called me a fat cow.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“He was trying to convince his friend not to buy me a drink.”

“So his friend maybe thought like I do.”

“He was drunk.”

He blinked, but didn’t pause. “Maybe that’s what he needed to become who he is.”

“Ok, so I’m beautiful. What else?”

“I saw you in the airport before I saw you on the plane. You were reading while you walked, your lips were moving, and I could tell you were walking in another world, too. Not just this one.”

“Another world,” she mused. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“And that’s before I saw you were reading Heidegger. It’s one of the strangest things

I’ve ever seen, you walking and reading like that. It should just be beautiful, to see someone concerned with more than ... this.” He gestured at the airport, which suddenly seemed like waves in the abyss. “But it was very strange, too. Strange and amazing.”

“Amazing? Watch.” She opened her purse, which was black, and bulkier than he’d have expected. Her hand shook, and she wiped her eyes, removing a silver tube. In silence, she pressed the tube against her finger. A snap. A wince. She looked at the reading, then set the tube down.

“I ...” he started, but she shook her head, pulled out her syringe and bottle, and wiped her dry eyes again. She measured the insulin, checked the needle, pressed it home. “Don’t talk yet,” she reminded him. She pushed her kit into the middle of the table. “Type one diabetes,” she said. “Not type two. The grief people give me, trying to get me to lose weight! My own grandmother. Weight loss isn’t necessarily smart with type one. But it’s impossible to make people understand.”

“Prozac,” she said, presenting a bottle. “Depression, obviously. It’s kind of problematic with diabetes, but it works better for me than anything else. It’s like a maze. Diabetes makes you more likely to be depressed, but then makes the depression harder to treat.”

Another bottle of pills. “Cramps.”

Another. “For migraines, as needed. About once a week.”

An inhaler. “Asthma. It’s not severe, maybe a bad attack every two or three months, but when you need it, you need it.”

More pills. “I shouldn’t even be carrying this. Vicodin. I had a bad root canal like three weeks ago. My teeth are a mess.”

A series of bottles and packages. “I bounce back and forth between constipation and diarrhea. People must think I’m a hypochondriac. Intellectually, it’s an interesting problem. I mean, I’m diabetic and I’ve always struggled with depression. Those are real. But that reality generates a way of thinking: the body as an object of study and therapy. Diabetes and depression make me fixated on controlling my body, so I can’t just let diarrhea be diarrhea or cramps be cramps. I run to pills instead.”

She’d arranged it all tidily. A diabetic’s rituals. Then she swept everything back into her oversized purse.

“That’s me,” she said. “Diabetes and depression. The rest is window dressing. They’re my core. Do you still want me?”

“I thought you were a philosopher.”

She leaned forward so far he felt her breath, sweet from the orange, bitter from the

coffee. “Keep talking,” she said, soft, intense. Angry? Eager?

“Maybe you’re a philosopher because of all that. But you’re the philosopher, not the medicine cabinet.”

“Come closer,” she whispered. He leaned forward into her breath. His whole body tensed. “Do you want me to tell you a secret?”

He nodded.

“My body has a nickname.”

“Tell me.”

“I call her Judas, because she always betrays me.”

She sat back, reached into her purse, and pulled out a pill.

“You wanted to see me naked,” she said, having swallowed it. “Now you do. Just not the way you intended.”

He did see her differently. The darkness under her eyes now signified more pain than passion. Her smile—quick to appear, quick to dissolve—made more sense. He noticed her scattered grey hairs, though she was surely younger than him. Her hands rested on *The Introduction to Metaphysics*. Judas had betrayed and inspired her both.

“You’re more beautiful than before I knew all that.”

“Am I? Why? What’s so beautiful about me?”

“Your hair.”

The ghostly smile again. “There’s a story there. I was going to go to Yale law. I had a 177 on the LSAT. I know that’s bragging, but it’s part of the story. I was seeing a therapist three times a week, the college provided that, or I’d never had been able to afford it, trying different antidepressants, finishing up senior year, and then the night sweats came. Hodgkin’s lymphoma, stage three. So I collected my 4.0, delayed my admission for a year, and went through chemo.”

“That must have been horrible, if you started out depressed already.”

“I wanted to die,” she said, without inflection. “Every dose of chemo, every wave of nausea and diarrhea, I was ready to die. I cried rivers when my hair fell out. I never actually tried to kill myself, but I had a gun ready. I know that’s not how women are supposed to kill themselves, but dad was always a gun nut; he gave it to me when I was eighteen. He wanted me to take it to college, believe it or not, to hide in my dorm room. After I moved home, I’d take it out and hold it at night, when I couldn’t sleep. I stopped once I saw the blessing in the Hodgkin’s disease.”

He must have given her a strange look. For the first time, she let out a trickle of

laughter.

“Yeah, it’s crazy. But holding the gun, feeling my bald scalp, sweating and puking, I knew if I’d gone to law school I would have killed myself after deciding my life had no value. So I decided, holding the gun, that I’d get a Ph.D in philosophy, whatever else I had to give up, and that I’d always have beautiful hair, and that anyone who thought I was self-indulgent or spent too much time or money on it could fuck themselves.”

“Your hair is amazing. How’s the Ph.D?”

“Two more years. I’m really good, but I’m slow. It’ll take me seven years, I think. Without the health problems, I could have done it in five.” Her eyes seemed even more intense now. She was beautiful, brilliant, and strong. She was sick, depressed and tormented. Now she smiled again—with teeth. “I got naked,” she said aloud. “I took it all off. What about you?”

His mouth was dry. Behind her, out of focus but very present, he could see a neon beer sign.

“I can tell there’s something there,” she said, turning Heidegger slowly in her hands. “I showed you mine. Show me yours.”

The airport seemed louder than it had. He thought of his mother, puking into the sink. His father, bringing home moonshine. The year living with Grandpa, when he was taken away from them. The cautious joy when they came back home. Grandpa had always had four or so drinks in an evening, too. He just shrugged off the effects of it.

“Tell me,” she said.

“I’ve never told anyone,” he whispered. “I don’t even know your name.”

“How much do you want me?” she asked, touching her hand to her blouse, pulling down the edge of it, showing him the curve of her breast, but the shadow of her eyes drew him in even more. “Or is it me? Do you want me or Judas?” She tilted her head, cupped it in her hand.

“Both.”

“Whisper your secret,” she leaned forward again. “We won’t betray you.”

His throat was dry and his hands shook. She took his hands in hers. Her skin was dry, her grip strong. He put his mouth to her ear, feeling her hair against his nose.

“I’m a secret drunk,” he said. “I drink when nobody knows. In strange cities. I might be some kind of alcoholic, but nobody knows.”

He touched his tongue to her ear. She let him.

“I know.” She squeezed his hands.

He was Ben. She was Autumn. She, too, was headed to El Paso, as if by fate. Another whole plane ride together. Separate rows. Separate aisles. But together.

After arriving, they'd drive all night; she'd help him scatter his grandfather's ashes from the watchtower on Hillsboro Peak, where they'd hiked so many times. Then they'd drive five hours to Carlsbad, where her mother and grandmother kept the family business, a rundown motel where she'd grown up, and where she'd lived out her cancer year, gun in hand.

In the family motel, she said, they'd take a room. She'd buy a bottle of cheap whiskey and get her copy of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. She'd read aloud while he drank. If she couldn't sleep, she'd sit in the chair beside the bed, reading until dawn.

"You can give me my first insulin shot of the day, right in my stomach. I'll nurse your hangover. Tell me true—isn't that exactly what you've wanted all your life?"

They boarded the plane to El Paso.

LA FINCA

Christine DeSimone

In Poptún we read in hammocks,
listen to parrots shrilling *hola, hola*.
Wild *pajaros*, we're told,
can live eighty years. You say

you do not love me, yet you wipe the mouth
of my dark Moza beer, trot horses
through a field without footprints.
Spring has popped orchids around rusted trucks

and sleeping dogs. In a few days I will watch you
fade to a pinprick on the back of a bumpity bus,
your pale head concealed by Guatemalan dust
and children selling warm soda bottles

atop their shoulders. But right now I ache
when you are inches away and I know
to attach to nothing: not to the friendly strangers
who let us chop up their language,

the strange drinks concocted in the makeshift bar.
I will never spend the same afternoon
drinking the breeze under the comforting crash
of rain. I don't even get used to the moon

which I'd always thought was the same.
Long after us, after our parting has been packed away,
after this farm garden has fallen unclipped,
to think those tiny parrot squalls
will rocket after everyone has forgotten our names.

SLEEVE

Zarah Moeggenberg

I want to know if the birds are flying north
or south. Have wingtips faded from sun,
or rub of body? I want to feel their feathers,
rurr of breath-beats. I want to press
this hand

into hook of birch bark,
ask muscled trunk if she feels.
The crooked house—how many rooms?
I asked her once, why the left arm?
She said that ink

is closest to her heart.
I want to compare the armband
to the width of her sigh, taste the sunrise
I'd place in her sternum. I'd heat
the ink—I'd watch it dry.

BUOYANCY

Liz Clift

You sweep dust, cat hair, and sunset
into piles on the kitchen floor scratched
with memories of other people's lives,
and I want to let words tumble
from my lips and hope you'd catch
them before they shattered on the ground.

Not *I love you*, but

Let's paste our names
to boats built of leaves and wade them
into the currents of the Mississippi, set them sailing
past places we used to live,
watch them catch eddies
and pirouette to stay afloat.

Because here, in your kitchen, which still
smells of dinner's garlic, where the cat skitters
after a fly and through the open window
we can hear the neighbor's TV, it seems possible
that maybe we can balance pressures
without displacing anything too much.

LOVE POSTCARD

C. Dylan Bassett

In Spain, nothing resembles your nipples,
except for the heavy almond trees and plums.

Do not let inertia become your god, you told me,
as if stale bread could fill the eye with motion.

And I said, *2+2=5 is also beautiful.*

When I am alone, the moon mimics the meat dreams
of my body: always hook-hung over a sea of delicate glass.

How do strangers become lovers, and lovers
avoid becoming strangers again? On the train,

I press my face against the window to see
one abandoned garden and then another:

Home is in the going. Anyone floating high
enough will see that Spain is all rain.

That's why I wear a jacket:

I cannot tell where I end and the weather begins.

Outside my motel window: a small child
rubs dark dirt into her cuts.

Doves wash their wings in mud.

Stray dogs survive on pools of rain water
leftover from the previous night's storm.

WASHINGTON STATE

Taylor Mazer



SPANISH CHOCOLATE

Rhonda Lott

Now rest your head with me in this room refined
and light as sugar and just as sickly
sweet, the only bitterness in your eyes,
that boil like two cups of hot Spanish chocolate
thick enough to hold a *churro* upright
like a lean lighthouse marking a treacherous reef
off the Veracruz coast, where caravels
sail down from Andalusia to buy a queen
her cocoa. Ghost children hunt fields, wielding
machetes, hacking pods, yellow and green, from trees—
your eyes' sleepy shimmer now a distant
mirage, chocolate oases for boys and girls,
angelitos draped in silk, eating skulls
of sugar—bright as peyote blossoms—and sheer
candied pumpkin. The girls wear marigold
crowns. The boys chase rabbits made of bread with royal
icing bones, and now *La Calavera*
Catrina salsas. Her green *sombrero* with mauve
rhea feathers waves in the breeze that blows
between her bones. Do not be afraid when she takes
your hand. Just lift it to your lips and kiss
her phalanges, hard and cool as crystals. Charming
boy that you were, she will tango with you
till all blurs together in a watercolor
mist, till all becomes shadow, shadow. Then,
I'll close your eyes for you when you no longer can.

HOMELESS

C. Dylan Bassett

God opens his mouth: lions and eagles and oxen
pour right out! God is a girl
whose square white smile I can hear
like an echo in an empty stadium. Two nights ago,
I dreamt God
fell at the foot of my bed and said: *darkly lit up
with heat spilling out of the body
is the only way to live.*
How can I burn in the Big City which is an infinite
refrigerator? In the Big City which has a way of wanting
to end all beauty? How
will a skinned swan fly again?
Who should answer but no one. God
is somewhere among glass-dark clouds, sewing
wings to the bodies of birds
and throwing them towards the sun.

DESERTED PARKING LOTS WITH FADED LINES

Sean Thomas Dougherty

call and response to Matejka

Down at the Zone where the lesbians pull switchblades if you “stare at my bitch” too long, where Olivera shot that dude point blank in the face coughing stars from a bottle of Nyquil, chugged light the way for anyone, we were an uncharted desire mapped in polyester retro shirts with silhouettes of pool players, and hustlers, colors bright as auras. We wore what we were. We were outlined smeared black mascara and overdoses. The forgotten we weaved. The only sky we charted was overcast. We were the astronomies of black outs and bad trips. We rearranged the shape of strung-out into a lasso and hung ourselves. We’d hang out till dawn. We said fuck you to time and nine to five was an absent signature. We never caught a fire, we were the fired, the fired firing six chambers. Bad homemade haircut head. We shopped at Salvation Army not because we were cool but because if we didn’t we ran naked in the sun, we ran naked in the sun down the beach laughing at outraged parents. We huffed anything in a spray can. We flew on kites and telephone wires where we hung the shoes of our dead. We bagged groceries and bagged bottles of anything and left them out back. We laughed and ran from collectors and never paid our debts. We were debt, the one God owed us. If we died we went down shot for nothing or found alone in parking lots one room flats and back alleys. We ordered 40 sacks at White Castle. We drank forties and invented pouring a little out for the brothers not here. We were deserted parking lots with faded lines. We knew the true sky speaks Spanish and Yoruba, Creole and Farsi. We danced the light into rain and the rain into an ocean of weeping we never drowned in. The sound every city sighs when the streetlights turn on and all our worries wove into a hood we pull up over our heads and bend down to the ground to spin when there is nothing to do but remake the wind and the AM sirens signaling another lost name shrieking an epitaph written all around us in the dialect of the damned.

DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST

Dmitry Borshch



FRACTAL VARIATIONS

BJ Buckley

1.

Salt voice in the whorled shell of my ear, ocean whisper
rising and falling: tide surge, gull call, red chambers filling and emptying:
fish, sand, blood, water, soft pull of the moon, a breath, an echo,
who is it speaking inside the shell beyond the locutions of water?

2.

The skate was dead at the tide margin, winged and rubbery,
its long tail stiffening. A gull had been trying to lift it whole away
from the threat of us, our curiosity—closer, it smelled only as
salt-fish-weedy as anything else cast up on that beach
of smooth stones. The afternoon was falling away and we too
falling back into child-rhythms of swoop and grab, the shells, so many
unbroken, so much treasure: lost houses of the shipwrecked
lost into our pockets, the hems of our garments wet with salt;
sand in our socks, in our shoes, clinging to our skin, and our arms
swinging out, heads dipping, echoing the gulls. The skate's eyes
hadn't been pecked out yet, were bluish, sunken, death-chilled.
I'd seen that same veil pulled over the eyes of deer and rabbits,
my grandmother, my father: not unseeing exactly, but as if vision
had stepped out, or deeper in. Gulls complained above us,
hopped after us on startling orange feet. The skate was once again
the treasure of fat brown birds. There was sand in the hollow
between my breasts, sand against my belly, brown weed wrapped
my ankle-sea-chained, its cold hand—then the skate was sailing
in awkward flight, carried by angels out over the water.

3.

Cleaning the irrigation ditch of the clog of leaves before spring runoff
we find galaxies of tiny snails the size of spiraled quarters

moss green over bonewhorl, cold but living: if you put your smallest
finger in, the slimy pulse of them answers—so we cover them again

*(lick the shell: tastes of tannin, leaf rot, salt) in the ditch bottom
under rags of poplar, under pinestraw, under fallen grass*

because the frosts still to come would kill them, and they are boats
with hearts, waiting for high water.

NOW EVERYWHERE'S ALWAYS A SHOW PLAYED FOR EASY LAUGHS

Monica Berlin & Beth Marzoni

at high speeds, but how slow

once the pratfall, the arc of dust
& so lightsome. Summer, a cul-de-sac:

all of us gathered around no reason but time
that needed, slow overheating barely

dozed away nights, that city's train-tugged
sky, our slowed pulses. We were never

quite young. We were never even close.
So all this looking back? There's nothing

we've never not heard before. No wonder
the papers are folding. No wonder we replay

news reels in old movie houses. After the goings-on
every sudden slowed. All these years called after

our gait even slow-startled down boulevard
turned avenue turned street nearly

alley turned blind. After another Saturday matinee?
We remember buildings stepping out of their velvet

mouths—their skylined walls, those clouds—mouthing
Rivoli, Bijou, The Music Box, Lagoon, our passing

through into afternoon falling all over
itself, its own double feature.



SWEET BERGMANESQUE

Philip Walford

THE NINTENDO sat squat and white on the table like Tupperware. Nathan picked up the wand controller and wondered if this was an appropriate way to greet the news of Ingmar Bergman's death. On the screen, little bobble-headed tennis players bounced about, reaching for impossible shots, leaping like broken-backed dolphins, flapping their racquets in concert with his own waggling hands. The computer had control from the start, its net play overpowering him with punched volleys and supple, flicking smashes that frustrated his naive attempt to dominate from the baseline. The Nintendo's tactical game was simple and overwhelming, using deep diagonal ground strokes to push Nathan farther and farther to the edges of the court, before a neat angled volley at the net sealed another easy point. Despite the occasional passing shot which he pinged with glee into an unreachable corner of the computer's back-court, Nathan decided that working up an embarrassing sweat, knifing the air with the chunky, pinging controller was no way to mark the passing of an auteur. Finally, picked off in his fourth service game, returned to love, each kicking serve screwed back beyond reach, he clicked the Off button on the controller and set it back on the table.

Out in the kitchen Nathan made himself a sandwich, and as he ate he tried to bend his mind towards the great man who had passed away and the problem of what a person might do to show that he understood the significance of that loss. He smiled knowingly to himself as he considered a quite sophisticated truth: that he knew it was not grief he was feeling—he had never met Ingmar Bergman and had not even seen one of his films all the way through. Pretty much everyone knew about white-faced death though, and Nathan had actually seen an exploitation remake of *The Virgin Spring* at a festival a few years ago after the infamously violent and misogynistic film had finally been certified for release. Devoid of inspiration but engulfed by a nagging sensation of impending failure that he wished to escape, he hoped for provocation and turned to the internet. He called up a movie page that had news and discussions on forums filled with obscure nicknames, gross sexual references and unpredictably fierce devotees of film. Already, in response to the site's passionately worded obituary, a string of comments a couple of hundred contributors long had sprung up, full of headlines like 'Bye Ingmar' and 'A new star in heaven'. Their contents varied, but almost uniform among the tributes was a smug self-righteousness that made the authors of each little eulogy appear more vividly than their subject. Nathan read these and felt a twinge of distaste, so he closed the laptop and pushed it back into the middle of the table.

His tribute should not seek to be overly clever, because that would be arrogant—this much was instantly clear to Nathan, bright with natural comprehension. The right thing to do was seek some humble way of marking the passing of the great director without putting himself at the center of it. Nathan didn't think this would be too hard—he had no particular desire to prove his own genius, or even look for it, and was sure that if any reckoning was made, the Swede would be comfortably found a greater man than he. By far the simplest and most respectful thing would be to look towards Bergman's work for inspiration, and so without effort he settled upon the game of chess, and went to look for materials.

If you are prepared to make do with having quite large pieces, it is not difficult to make a chess set out of Lego. Little uniformed men make good pawns, and there are readily available Lego horses in several of the medieval themed sets. All that remained was to construct the rooks out of 4x2 blocks and then set about making a squared board out of black and white bricks. Nathan had plenty of Lego in a big bucket in his living room that sat underneath a table he used solely for the purpose of making models or putting together jigsaw puzzles. He worked swiftly, only stopping when he realized that he was going to run out of white bricks, at which point he made a trip to the Toys R Us in town for more supplies. While there, he learned that Lego already made a chess set with exclusive little chessmen in red and blue livery, but this did not discourage Nathan. The point was not merely to learn the game but to be creative and give of himself in the way that Ingmar gave of himself when he shared his talent with the audiences of his films. Buying a ready-made chess set was something anyone could do and surely there was no point in that. Within an afternoon he had a prototype, a square board about fifteen inches by fifteen inches, two layers deep (he underpinned the alternating black and white segments with a framework of longer and larger red bricks which were plentiful in the bucket) and he was ready to master the game.

The library yielded a stack of guides to chess, some of which were quite popular from the regular stamps on the title page's glued insert. With no one to practice against, Nathan played himself, creating ideal games as he followed textbook openings and textbook responses. The names and the elaborate histories behind the configurations of pieces on the board called out to him from the page, mysterious yet explained, and he wondered for a while if he should attempt some kind of history of the game, drawing up little flash cards detailing all the Sicilian Defenses, the King's Gambits and all the heroic variations by masters (Grand Masters!) like Fischer and Spassky, Lasker and Alekhine (their names were easy to find on the internet). But as he held the books in his hands and scrolled the digital lists of dead

Grand Masters and their countless openings and defenses, he knew this work was already done and that a tribute of sufficient magnitude would require more effort on his part and so he went back to memorizing board positions even though he had not yet played a game, and his humility told him a competent child would still school him in a valid contest.

Clearly, true brilliance at the game required years of study and monk-like devotion to the secrets and subtleties of the sport that Nathan did not have the resources to undertake. He tried for a week to do nothing but chess, setting his alarm to wake him up in the morning as if he were a normal person doing a normal job, showering and eating his breakfast, and then sitting down with the board and his books to study until lunch. In fact, even within a few short days he already began to feel his mind adjusting to the rhythms of the game, as if the previously square and unwieldy breeze-blocks of his brain were being cut down somehow to fit the shapes demanded by the rigorous rules and the endless variations of play. The sensation elated him for a day or two, and he imagined himself zooming on into effortless genius, until a day later the realization arrived that while he had memorized a whole range of tactics, he still didn't really have any instinct for when to introduce them into a game, and he felt like a child again, struggling with a foreign grammar. For an entire weekend this feeling nagged at him, as he wondered if a failure to become fully proficient at all aspects of chess would hinder his act of remembrance. He spent a lot of time on this question, long hours that might have been spent at the board if his crisis of commitment had not caused him to wonder if he was wasting his time. Then, on the Sunday evening, as he interrogated and tortured himself up over his failure for the third time that day, and the chess men sat idly on their bottoms, the announcer on the television gave him an unignorable sign. He hadn't bought the newspaper that day, and so hadn't updated his TV guide for the following week, and had no idea that a documentary detailing the life and work of Bergman was about to begin right before his unsuspecting eyes. The establishing sight of Max von Sydow and Bengt Ekerot playing as the waves broke behind them was all the reminder he needed and by the time the director's name appeared on the title screen in bold white letters, he was already on his knees marshaling the Lego pieces and cracking open his most readable guidebook.

Now secure that his mission was blessed, regardless of whether he would one day number among the giants of the game, Nathan began to struggle with the identity of his opponent. He turned his head every way he could, and sat in every chair in every room of his flat, even perching on the edge of the bath and on top of the toilet seat cover, but still he couldn't settle on an appropriate foe. Death wasn't an option, as Nathan wasn't sure if he actually had a literal personification, or merely a cinematic one—and anyway, he would've

been both obvious and pretentious in a way that didn't feel true to the spirit of his venture. He drew up a list, which he initially separated into those he categorically knew to have a trustworthy understanding of chess and those about whom he was unsure; an approach he quickly discarded when he found that he had scant information about the game playing backgrounds of all but a handful of the listed. Moreover, his list was so short that applying any attempt at formal logic to the few named friends, family and acquaintances struck him as pitiable even at the height of his enthusiasm. So, gradually and unexpectedly, Nathan settled on his father. The choice insisted itself upon him without being gracious enough to provide a coherent validation. Instead, as the image of his father ghosted over him like a mantle, Nathan began to pick out of this recollection previously unseen similarities with the dead director: a domed bald head, a beaky nose and grey, flapping eyebrows. The two old faces tessellated in the space before his half closed eyes and faded with a smile. Nathan knew his decision had been made for him.

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They met at the train station where Nathan had already purchased two tickets and taken advantage of a promotional offer to buy cheaper entrance to their eventual destination. His father saw him straight away as he walked through the automatic doors, spotting Nathan near the newsstand. As he walked over, he acknowledged his son but didn't stop immediately, instead heading over to the racks of papers and buying a *Times* before he sat down. Nathan had been careful to lie when he invited his father out for the day. He hadn't made any mention of Bergman, or chess, or left any clues that might lead to guesses, correct or otherwise. It was not a normal thing for them to spend time together, aside from the occasional postprandial Sunday chat over the newspapers while watching the Grand Prix. So in order to encourage his father to accept his invitation without it seeming suspicious, Nathan had tried to concoct a plausible excuse, a decade of forgotten birthdays and an offer clipped out of the newspaper for cheap rail fares. They passed the time waiting for the train in conversation about Nathan's mother, who had recently recovered from a bout of bronchitis, and they were still discussing the possible impact lung-scarring and shortness of breath would have on her lifestyle—which was rich in errands and outings despite the fact that she enjoyed them very little—as the carriages hissed to a halt and the hydraulic doors beeped open.

While England unfolded on the other side of the train window that Nathan leaned against, he rolled his eyes about until he could see his father on the opposite side of the table, reading one of the tabloid inserts of his newspaper. Soon the effort of keeping his fluttering eyes steady enough to squint made them throb, and he let them sweep back to the speeding

fields and back-sliding trees. Out there, out among the empty hills, he saw ruins, shacks, crumbling stone walls, all the evidence of an age long-since lost. And in time, as the urgent train and the strain on his eyes began to make the scenery blur into streaks, it seemed that the heritage of the country was something he could slip into, as if he was separated from it by nothing more substantial than the loss of focus when he crossed his eyes, and he could no longer be certain that the farmhouses were ruined and that the past was something inaccessible to him. A person needed to be fully at ease with the land, to embody it even, in order to make films as lyrical and ranging as Bergman's, or so it seemed to Nathan. The train marched across the landscape, carrying Nathan and his father in its deep mail pockets, surging confidently along a preordained course towards their destination. As the rails consumed the distance between Nathan and his goal, his excitement grew until it was almost a third presence at the table with them, one he longed to turn to and discuss the imminent unfolding of his plans with babbling enthusiasm. However, among many things his meditations on Bergman had taught him was the importance of pacing, and so he turned back to his window, and the worlds outside.

Finally, folding his paper in two, Nathan's father slouched back a little into his seat and turned to his son. Nathan's secrecy about their eventual destination intrigued him a little but was ultimately concerning, as a gesture like this was uncharacteristic and might still speak of some half-articulated plea that would have to be dealt with. However, he was not prepared to condemn the day yet. Nathan's motives could still prove innocent, and their day could be memorable for reasons that wouldn't provoke him to disappointment and anger. He coughed and asked his son if he'd seen anything interesting on television recently and was surprised by an instantaneous answer, full of praise for a documentary about the dead Swedish film maker, Ingmar Bergman. He listened to Nathan emote and exaggerate in familiar patterns about what he'd seen, before leading them back into silence by interjecting that he'd never managed to get all the way through one of his films and couldn't decide if he had admiration or distrust for anyone that could. Nathan looked more downcast than he'd expected at this verdict on the director, and his father hoped this wouldn't be a sign of the direction of the afternoon.

They passed the remainder of the journey in a familiar silence, as Nathan looked out of the window and ran through various possible arrangements for their game. His father re-read in greater detail some of the more tedious articles he'd skimmed over earlier. A few minutes before the train began to slow down, Nathan spoke up and indicated that they'd almost reached their stop. Along the carriage, a number of families, young parents and young children, began to stand and sway as they pulled bags and coats from the overhead racks.

Nathan looked at his father nervously, though making sure to smile broadly and ceaselessly in as open a fashion as possible, while his father smiled enquiringly back. Nathan allowed his father to go first as they got off the train. So it was he who first spotted the painted station name and below it a large arrow showing the appropriate exit to take for the nearby theme park.

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Inside the park gates, kids scuttled in waves, obeying an invisible tide that pulled them past food stands and costumed attendants, swarming in and out of gift shops. At the entrances to the most popular rides they formed unstable chains which shattered apart under the pressure of enforced stillness, fragmenting back out into the wide paved spaces between worlds, between the brick-slicked loop of the racing track and the looming turrets of the medieval castle. Nathan and his father were like islands in a fast moving stream as the children broke either side of them, flowing towards whichever ride reached out with subtle gravity to work on the weight of their excitable minds. For a minute it seemed as if the constant procession of waist-high bodies would never cease, bus after bus disgorging kids with sandy hair, kids with dark hair, kids with glasses, kids with no friends, until finally the world was exhausted of children, and they were all engaged in shoving or queuing or standing apart looking lost.

They made their way along the central artery of the park, hemmed on all sides by buildings of brick, trees of brick, animatronic men and women of brick, woodsmen and princesses and cowboys. Around them was a kind of secondary wall of sound, nebulous and inescapable, a gloopy coating of machine noise and infantile squealing. A particularly shrill child swung round in a mechanized carousel made to look like it was constructed of Legos; his stroboscoped cries vectored on Nathan's right ear, as sly and penetrating as a stiletto. Nathan's father looked at him, the furrow of confusion that had creased his forehead when they first entered the park now avalanching into open disquiet.

It required most, if not all, of Nathan's willpower to stop himself turning to his father and dropping a hint about what he had planned. More time was needed, he wasn't yet ready. Instead he tried to smile reassuringly while not having anything reassuring to say. Up ahead of them was a branded coffee stand with ridge-backed steel chairs set around small circular tables and costumed employees behind the wide, crumby lip of the serving area. Without any prompting from Nathan, his father tacked slightly, making an unmistakable line towards what must have seemed the sanctuary of the seating area. Without stopping to ask, a cup of tea was purchased for Nathan. As if he were following a perfect set of instructions, his father led them

to a table shaded by a huge plastic palm tree that soared above them, the razor-sharpness of its lofty fronds obvious even from the ground. The realization that his plan was going smoothly caused a violent tremor in Nathan's hands as he lifted the cup of tea towards his lips, aborting the attempt half way through as the hot liquid threatened to slosh over and scald him.

The stretched triangles of shade cast by the PVC tree were a relief from the heat of a clear sky that burned gas-fired blue. Nathan reached for a packet of sugar and concentrated on pouring it in, making the most of the opportunity to return two hands to the cup. Steady this time, he lifted it from the table again. A couple of other adults drifted over to the tables mercifully with only a few tired looking children accompanying them. Nathan knew his father wanted to ask why they had come to a theme park, why he had brought him here. So he looked away, pretending to squint across a lake at a pirate galleon on the other side, pivoting back and forth between great forked arms. The movement of the ship was transfixing, and too quick—or the ride too distant—to decipher the scrolled writing glinting gold at the bow. Fat pink arms shot up towards the apex of the pivot as the boat reached the bottom of its swing, hands waving, tentacled in the warm air, though the screams mingled too freely with the sounds of the rest of the park and could not be isolated.

Not actually knowing whether his father could play chess held Nathan back, strong though his desire was to triumphantly pluck the board from his bag where it jutted through the slouching nylon. In fact, this uncertainty over his father's knowledge of the game—which he knew he had been aware of from the beginning—suddenly began to seem more solid, condensing out of a vague little fog into a brief downpour of doubt. He had no memories of his dad and uncle poised over a game at Christmas, heartening though the image would now be in retrospect. He could recall Scrabble, Pictionary, a game called Taboo that he hated for being made up, Charades which he hated for no other reason than he felt like an idiot whether miming or guessing—but no chess, no smoke of seriousness. To his knowledge his father had never pitted his wits against anyone in the King's Game and remained untested. So instead of blindly rushing into the unfolding of his plan, which would be a risky gambit and might not yield the hoped for dramatic opening, he stared into the bitten lip of his cardboard teacup and tried to visualise the crucial first moments.

His father sat keeping a reasonably straight back. His legs were planted some way apart, and he had already scraped the feet of his chair over the gently ridged concrete floor so that he was an almost regal distance from the little table, taking in everything, including his son. Asking why they were sitting in mid-day heat in a theme park full of glucose-addled children would have been the logical thing to do. But there remained the slight possibility that this

whole journey was an elaborate cry for help, a cry that might be entertained unhelpfully, counterproductively, if it was met on its own terms. So he remained silent and waited for Nathan to explain himself. His son was already catching the sun in a thick native stripe across his nose and his cheekbones, and was quite obviously running through something in his head, his lips moving a little, mercifully murmur-less, so there would be no need to resurrect long-sleeping chastisements. He felt definite regret though, at not having asked harder questions when the trip was mooted, at not having asked harder questions during the past two decades, but it was too late now. Besides, the afternoon wasn't all that unpleasant so far: the sun heating his weathered skin even as it burned his son's, the train journey that had brought them here quiet and reliable, the newspaper having been full of stories worth reading for once. Nathan nudged his foot repeatedly against the backpack sitting at his feet, prodding at a sharp protrusion in the material as if to try and restore its regular shape. As a boy he had always been jittery, foot-tapping, rocking from side to side as he fell asleep, something his mother had longed to curb as the creaking from his bed irritated her for countless reasons, most of which she did not question very deeply. The bulge in the bag refused to recede even though Nathan tapped at it rhythmically. For a while he was so engrossed that he did not realize that as his father watched, it seemed to him that his son was totally oblivious to his presence.

Looking up as he mouthed the word 'Dad,' Nathan noticed his father's eyes were on him with an expression that seemed to have solidified beyond interest into what he recognized as mild boredom or annoyance. This look began to make him sweat, as he did not feel ready. But under the shadow of his father's scowl, he reached down into the bag and drew out the two pieces of the chess board and his bag of Lego men. He laid out his plan before them on the metal table, snapping the board together and arranging the two stubby armies on either side. His father mercifully seemed to need no explanation once the Lego began to take shape, and he leaned back with his arms crossed, gazing with comprehension at the chess set that emerged from his son's bag. Nathan worked quickly, and soon his creation sat complete between them, white pieces whirled round to face his father. The stress of fitting the parts together under observation had begun to make Nathan feel giddy, as if his neck was no longer entirely rigid and his head was bobbing a centimeter or two in all directions. The heat of his tea still warmed his guts, and sweat dripped so copiously from his fringe that for a second he thought he detected cool rain on his forehead. The park flexed around him, and he felt himself momentarily adrift somewhere between left and right. In his head he thought of Bergman: the pictures in the newspapers and on the television, the film footage of an old man smiling. He felt the director standing behind him, a counterweight to his father's heavy glare, and found a

moment of peace.

The pieces were stuck fast in the neat board, and in his ears the sound of children had become the roar of the sea crashing on a monochrome beach. Nathan looked over at his father and could not quite describe what he saw, his eyes cloudy under the onslaught of a light that was now pure white. His father smiled, and with a bony hand, reached for his first pawn.

LOLLIPOP SERIES #2
Josephine Liu



PHENO

Nickole Brown

1.

As in barbital, as in Luminal, as in an injection
gone wrong that wiped out fifty institutionalized children
before the second war. Pheno, as in barbiturate,
designed to depress, to hypnotize a seizure with the static
of its blank screen, pills like snowflakes to slow
the body's quick ticking to a single, white
note that's not happy, exactly,
but too tired to care.

2.

Pheno, as in the quack days when a dentist
found gum disease and convinced her
to have every tooth jerked out of her
pretty face before she hit thirty-six, as in a time
when she douched with Lysol to keep herself
fresh, back when folks died of ptomaine poisoning
from bad Miracle Whip and cigarettes assisted safe delivery,
because everybody knows smoking is a safe way
to keep the baby from being too wide of shoulder
or simply too fat to birth.

Used before the FDA and never
formally cleared, pheno is a renegade drug,
a cowboy hee-hawing outside town, not giving
a good God-damn, so it makes sense
for forty years she popped them
whenever she felt frayed—*Coey, I'm a wreck.*
Could you go get grandma her nerve pills?

3.

Pheno, pronounced Fee-No, a good name
for a horse, a twitchy filly ridden
by an 89-pound jockey in pink and green silks,
a smart little switch in his hand. Watch her
come down the inside line, she's a beauty,
every bit as fast as the boys, she's making a run
for the roses until the mud catches her deep
stride, snaps her femur, and from the stands
you watch them put her down,
a thing gone from majesty
to dog food, right there
on the track.

4.

All bets off, you cross Central from Churchill Downs,
find Granger's Pharmacy, the only place that will still
fill a prescription that went out with Technicolor film.

Behind a bookie board soda fountain is Mr. Granger—
he expects you, he knows why you've come.
He has the yellow bottle waiting and never charges you a dime.

If this is drug running, you don't care: you always do
as she says. Every month, you pick it up, package it,
and mail it priority to her Florida house.

5.

Pheno, because some things he did right—
You can take the medicine, Fanny, he said,
but no wife of mine's getting shocked.

This was when women didn't get depressed or upset,
they had *full-on nervous breakdowns*, and for that, apply
warm gel to both temples and enough voltage

to make a bad thought into a small, wild
canary about to land before—*bye-bye, birdie*—it just
flies off.

6.

Pheno, a drug known to work differently on
the old, making the elderly hyperactive, restless,
unable to sleep, up at three in the morning
wondering who stole her pretty aqua hand towels
and that new yellow bowl, accusing her son
of trying to kill her by bringing home
a clearance picking of culls—grainy tomatoes
and chicken black to the bone—
worrying about me, because if I didn't watch
my reputation real close every man in Louisville
would think me loose as a goose.

Later in the night, she'd grieve the dead—
*You've got to say, Lord, I've done just about all
I can do, and I can't do no more.
You've got to take this from me;
I put it in your hands. You put it on Jesus'
hands, and let him carry it: that's what I told
Robbie to do when his son died, and I told him
now I'm your mama, and you do what I say.*

Then, about four in the morning, she'd say
she was *burning her ass off*, could I turn up the air.

I did, cranking it all the way back to sixty-five,
and she yawned, said, *Well, we might as well
go to bed, I think we've talked about just about
everybody, unless you think there's somebody
we ain't covered?*

7.

Pheno, as in a stash, hundreds of pills
chipmunked away in the bottom dresser drawer
she couldn't bend down to reach any more.

By then she was so sick, she was sucking rock salt
off pretzels and throwing the rest in the trash—
an iron deficiency, someone said. A loss of blood.

I held the bottles in my hand, wondered how many
I could swallow down before I became
the smooth water of her satin quilt.

She woke then and did something she never did;
she said my full name. *Nickole? Nickole? Where are you?*
Well, okay. I was just making sure you didn't go

*outside or nothing. Grandma needs you here; I couldn't see you
down on the floor; I wasn't sure where you was. I put the pills back,
closed the drawer, turned out her bedroom light.*



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SUBMISSION INFORMATION

ellipsis is the annual literary journal published by the students of Westminster College since 1966. We sponsor a yearly poetry contest judged by prominent poets. Past judges include James Galvin, Nance Van Winckel, and Martín Espada. Contributors include well-known writers, up-and-coming writers and never-before-published writers.

We accept submissions in poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, and visual art. Our reading period is August 1 through November 1 for poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction. We accept art submissions from August 1 through February 9.

We pay our contributors \$10 for each poetry or art piece and \$50 for each prose piece, plus two free copies of the issue. If you would prefer copies in lieu of payment, please let us know. Additional copies of the issue in which you appear can be purchased at a discounted price.

Visit westminstercollege.edu/ellipsis for the most up-to-date information about our process and requirements. Submissions will only be accepted through our online submission manager.

Simultaneous submissions are welcome, but please withdraw your submission immediately if your work is accepted elsewhere.

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