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Witness: The Modern Writer as Witness

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Witness

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Magic

Witness

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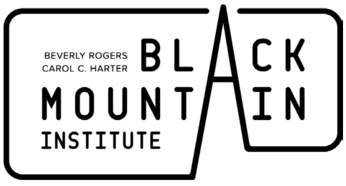

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WITNESS | VOLUME 33 NUMBER 1 | SPRING 2020

Contents

5 Editor's Note

POETRY

6 Eric Tran — *Lectio Divina: Vision, The Vision #1*

14 Pamela Yenser — *Snow Angels*

49 L.A. Johnson — *Hidden River*

77 Day Heisinger-Nixon — *Sestina Re-Sequenced, Serotonin Returned*

NONFICTION

7 Mary Lane Potter — *In Praise of the Disappearing Body*

59 Lara Palmqvist — *Old Tjikko*

79 Miranda Dennis — *Seasonal Weather Patterns*

FICTION

16 Alex Berge — *The Intruder*

24 Nina Sudhakar — *Empires Have Been Destroyed*

36 Andrea Eberly — *It Probably Started With a Cigarette*

51 Mary Kuryla — *Repair*

68 Sarah Helen — *When King Midas Was Born, He Was Adorned in Gold*

73 Andrew Bertaina — *The Arrival of the Sea*

87 David Lerner Schwartz — *The Worst Kind of Faith*

Witness Literary Awards

POETRY
selected by Heather Lang-Cassera

97 Andrew Collard — *Future Ruins*
First Place

100 Emmy Newman — *You Will See It Coming & You Won't Run*
Runner-up

FICTION
selected by Kristen Arnett

103 Emily Greenberg — *Delivery*
First Place

117 Kristina Ten — *The Dramatic Haircut*
Runner-up

NONFICTION
selected by José Roach-Orduña

123 Michele Sharpe — *When a Child Offends*
First Place

130 Anne Liu Kellor — *Ani-la and Anne-la: On Everything I Knew and Didn't Know*
Runner-up

147 Notes on Contributors

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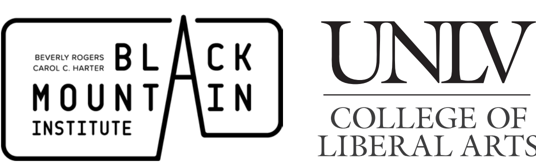

Editor's Note

MAGIC CAN MEAN MANY DIFFERENT things, especially for writers. Magic can be an illusion, a sleight of hand designed to trick onlookers into believing the impossible. Or magic can be a supernatural force in a world of harsh reality, a set of beliefs that sits just outside the realms of organized religion and advanced technology. Wizards and demons, Las Vegas entertainers and *houngans*—they all practice a kind of sorcery. For poets and prose writers, though, magic affords an opportunity for us to stretch the limitations of the physical world in search of new themes, settings, and characters. Magic is a door we eagerly walk through to reach new lands. We at *Witness* have thoroughly enjoyed the process of selecting the themed works we have collected here, mainly because the idea of enchantment is inspiring. There is the possibility of positive charms; there is a chance for dark witchery. And sometimes the spell cast by a character is nebulous, difficult to categorize. It's arguable that we cherish these incantations the most, since they leave us in a state of wonderment bordering on disorientation. Yes, magic can also leave us bewildered and thankful for the bewilderment.

The stories, essays, and verse gathered in our Magic issue will transport you to unusual, unforgettable territories that will linger in your imagination the way a flashbulb leaves a ghostly mark when you close your eyes. We doubt you will be able to shake off the image of Dionysus appearing during the unnamed protagonist's lovemaking session with her boyfriend in Sarah Helen's "When King Midas Was Born, He Was Adorned in Gold." When the Greek god, for unknown reasons, grants her a wish, she demands: "Make me stronger," and receives the golden touch of Midas. As you can imagine, it's both a blessing and a curse, and the simple power of transmutation intriguingly unravels her life, but mainly her relationship with her boyfriend. Then there is the weird, beautifully atmospheric tale, Nina Sudhakar's "Empires Have Been Destroyed," set in Bandra, a coastal suburb in India, in the 1950s, sometime after the prohibition of alcohol. A mother-daughter duo embarks on a *feni*-manufacturing operation that gets them tagged as witches, draws the attention of law enforcement, and results in the women's ghostly legend. Alex Berge's "The Intruder" will ice your blood with the struggle of a heartbroken office drudge to become social again while living in a dull apartment. A man in a black ski mask mysteriously visits now and then to drink coffee, but why? And how is it that these eerie appearances galvanize the drudge to let go of his past? Kristina Ten's "The Dramatic Haircut," plunks the story's main character into a salon chair surrounded by crepuscular birds with bladed wings. Those are just a few of the incredible fictions, but there are essays and verse, too! Inspired by Augustine's *Confessions*, Mary Lane Potter's nonfiction contribution, "In Praise of the Disappearing Body," uses the heightened language of lyric-philosophy to explore the chasm between the vulnerable body and an unknowable, cosmically distant God. Don't skip the poems, especially Andrew Collard's "Future Ruins," a report from a ruined landscape in Michigan—but is the poet describing a post-apocalyptic landscape or an economically devastated Middle America? Every line of this poem pierces the heart.

We are so excited to share these magical works with our subscribers and supporters. If you haven't done it yet, please sign up for more issues via our Submittable page, and send us your own work when you're ready. Magic has no shelf life, and neither do the best expressions of the human imagination. Indeed, we are building a new world, a land of creative enchantment, and we would love for you to join us! *—J.K.*

ERIC TRAN

Lectio Divina: Vision, The Vision #1

To his wife, who is also a synthezoid:
'The pursuit of an unobtainable purpose
by absurd means is the way of freedom;
this is my vision of the future.
Of our future. Do you see?'

...

A bowl is defined
by what it is not, my love,
hollowed by its calling.
What hell to be so full.
Let us be whole again;
let us empty it out.

...

I eased the needle into your creation,
filled quarts with his liver waste
until his delirious smile flattened.
We stared at each other, confused
and sheepish and soft, like two
bedmates waking up sober.

...

A thunderclap announcing
itself, bellowing itself
tantrum-tired:
gorgeous ripping,
internal wrestling
and then relief.

MARY LANE POTTER

In Praise of the Disappearing Body

After Augustine's Confessions

1

CAN ANY PRAISE BE WORTHY of the body? How magnificent this strength! How sphinxlike this wisdom! We are made of you, body, and our instinct is to praise you. The thought of you stirs me so deeply that I cannot be content unless I praise you, because you have made me for yourself, and my heart is restless until it finds itself at home in you.

You are my life, the fount of all the glories of my being, my holy delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can anyone speak truly when they speak of you? Yet woe unto those who are silent about you! For even those gifted with speech cannot find words to comprehend you.

2

HOW SHALL I SPEAK OF the body, when I am body, body is me? To say "I" and "the body" already divides what is one into two, creates a chasm separating self and body. These words we are forced to use—"I," "me," "the body," "my body"—are murderers. They kill the living body, make of it a "thing" separate from our awareness, an object to be observed from afar by the untethered subject, a foreign territory to be colonized by the imperial mind. How to speak *body*? Not speak *of* the body or speak *about* the body, but speak body? How to speak body without falling into Descartes's trap: soul on one side, body on the other, an abyss between? Thinking here, physical movement there? A tiny gland to link them. A bridge called pineal. How to say not *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am, but *I body, therefore I am*? Is there a language that does not divorce me from my body, tear self from body as I speak? Is there a language that can sing this mystery of being body-self? Did I know this song in the womb and, once cast out, forgot it? How can I let it sing through me again?

3

FOR WHERE IS THE BODY? Does this flesh I see, hear, smell, feel, taste contain all of you? Do the maps of the nervous system contain all of you? Does my consciousness contain all of you? You are no *thing*, no object bumping up against other objects, ready to be grasped and used by us. You are *living*. You are us. You are the seen-unseen in which we live and move and have our being.

4

WHAT IS IT THEN, I seek, when I seek you, body? Are you like the landscape we move in? A constant presence that sustains and embraces us but that nevertheless

remains a mystery to us? Shall I say of you what Barry Lopez says of the natural world in which we live? "The physical landscape is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it. It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces—the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal—trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement." (*Arctic Dreams*, xxii-xxiii)

Are you, body, the inescapable intimate landscape that constantly perplexes us, the world that our minds are constantly trying to grasp, constantly trying to find our place within, constantly trying to find a way to cure our disease, our sense of not being at home, so that our restless souls can find rest in you?

I long to be at home with the body, at home with you.

Shall I say of you what Augustine says of the God he worships, the hidden god, *deus absconditus*? "You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present among us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring, and yet we cannot comprehend you." (*Confessions* 1:4)

You are what is most present to me and yet you are hidden from me. The body hidden, *corpus absconditus*. When I try to grasp you, you slip away like a shadow.

5

HOW ARE YOU HIDDEN FROM us? Like an image obscured behind a soot-blackened window? Is it we who have hidden you? Do we need only to cast off our Cartesian habits to dwell with you? Do we need only to open the camera's lens and you will appear?

Or is it you who hide from us?

6

TO WHOM SHALL WE TURN to uncover your hiddenness? To the anatomists who chart your 78 organs, 206 bones, 640 muscles, 100,000 miles of blood vessels, 90,000 miles of nerve paths with their 100 billion neurons, and your omnipresent web of fascia? To the biologists who trace your deep history, ancient of days—from bacteria and fish through apes and *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens sapiens*—and marvel at your limitless power to continually transform yourself? To the neuroscientists who explain how tiny masses of protoplasm give rise to the human condition, how mirror neurons, "Gandhi neurons," enable us to empathize, how the cooperation and altruism of the homeostatic imperative—from bacteria billions of years ago to nerve nets to nervous systems

to emotions to feelings to subjectivity and consciousness—promote ongoing life, a flourishing of life, even into the future? To the painters and sculptors and photographers who revel in the manifold beauty of your forms, the revelations of your flesh? To the poets who declare "The skin is holy! The nose is holy!"; who sing odes to the wonders of "the bent head, the curved neck," to "mighty hips," the "categoric being" of breasts, the liver, that "huge life flyer"; who give thanks for your "unfailing loyalty" and the constancy of your love; who laud this "dream of flesh"? To the rabbis who teach daily thankfulness for the gift of you, your marvelous structure and intricate design of swellings and hollows, *nikavim, nikavim, halulim, halulim*, each one opening and closing in an ever-renewing rhythm—one misstep in this dance and it is impossible for us to exist. All these wonders are you. And yet not all of you.

7

IGNORANT AND TONGUE-TIED AS I am, unable to speak of you without obscuring you, unable to find you in your hiddenness, still I seek you. Not to capture or colonize or enslave you. But to thank you for your inexhaustible gifts, to praise you for the wonder you are. You are, therefore I am.

8

HEAR ME! BODY! HOW MANIFOLD are the ways we alienate ourselves from you! We abuse you, we betray you, we are cruel to you. We destroy you, we poison you, we falsify you, we deny you. We gossip about you, we hate you, we insult you. We jeer at you. We mock you, we neglect you, we oppress you. We pervert you, we quarrel with you, we rebel against you. We steal from you, we transgress against you, we are unkind to you. We are violent to you, we are wicked to you, we are intolerant of you. We yield to evil, we stuff you with substances, we feed you poison, we are zealots for bad diets and exercise regimes and work schedules and habits of holiness. What can we say to you? What can we tell you? In your wisdom you know all that we do. And you are most forgiving. You bear our neglect and abuse in silence, renewing, refreshing us, returning good for evil. The glory of you! The abundant gifts, the daily resurrections that go unacknowledged, invisible to those receiving them, like the care of a mother who nurtures and protects her infant in the womb.

9

WITH WORDS AS WELL AS acts we estrange ourselves from you. "You" are "me," I say, yet in saying this I cast you out from myself. But what then to say? How to speak of you? My body-self? Kin to my mind-self, my heart-self, my spirit-self, yet distinct?

But to say "my" is already to dishonor you, to remove you from my presence, to place you over against myself, to make you, so familiar as to be invisible, strange to me. To say "you" is already to deny you. I cannot speak of you without betraying you, and yet I must speak of you. You are a mystery, but we speak as if we know you. And the moment we begin speaking, we push you away. This is suffering, to push you away when I speak of you, when I want only to draw near to you, your presence, your constancy, your beauty.

10

BUT IS IT WE WHO are pushing you away so we cannot draw near to you? Is it we who do not know how to seek you, we who are hiding from you? Is it the fault of our blindness? A trick of our language? What if it is not we who are obscuring you or not seeking you hard enough, but you who are hiding from us, like the beloved in *Song of Songs? My beloved is like a dove that hides in the cracks of the rock. She hides in the secret places of the cliff. Show me your face. Let me hear your voice. Your voice is very sweet, and your face is lovely.* (2:14)

We distance ourselves from you, yes. But you. You hide from us.

"Nature loves to hide," Heraclitus said (Fragment 123), and we are still working out his meaning. Your greatest defenders today, those who champion embodiment and decry Cartesian dualism, freely admit you, the body, elude us. "The body hides out," the philosopher Mark Johnson declares, summarizing the findings of neuroscience (*The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding,* 3). Why should it seem so obvious to most people, he asks, that mind and body are two, not one? The answer lies with the body itself, with *you*. Our body "hides from our conscious awareness," Johnson says, because of the way we perceive: Our eyes, our ears are always "attending to something else," not calling attention to themselves. We don't hear our ears or see our eyes or taste our taste buds or smell our nasal sensors or touch our nerves." (*The Meaning of the Body*, 4)

Why do they hide? For our own good. So that we may experience the world fluidly.

But there is a cost. The "result of these forms of bodily disappearance is our sense that our thoughts, and even our feelings, go on somehow independently of our bodily processes. Our body-based experience reinforces our belief in disembodied thought." (*The Meaning of the Body*, 6) The neuroscientist Drew Leder underlines the irony of our body giving rise to our experience of a self split between body and mind: "It is the body's own tendency toward self-concealment that allows for the possibility of its neglect or depreciation." (*The Meaning of the Body*, 6)

How to bear this irony? Our betrayal by you? The betrayal by our lived experience, which leads us astray when we seek you, when we speak of you?

Before we speak, you are hiding from us. When we speak, you hide from us. Like the God of the rabbis, you are not a passive hidden thing, a hidden god, *deus absconditus* as the Latin theological tradition has it. You actively conceal yourself, like the god who hides yourself, *El mistateir* אֵל מִסְתַּתֵּר as the Hebrew has it (Isaiah 45:15) from the root for secret—so that the biblical scholar Samuel Terrien, noting this active secreting, calls God "the elusive presence." You are not *corpus absconditus*, a hidden body. You are *ha-guf shemist'tir* הגוף שמסתתר, the body that hides itself, a constant presence that continually eludes us.

11

EVEN NOW I CAN'T FULLY understand what you are. You are me. You are not me. You are ever-present. You are hiding. You are here with me, making it possible for me to see this hand, feel this skin, hear my breathing, smell this hair, taste the salt on my skin. but I cannot see you. When I look for you, you recede. For you are the eyes that are seeing, the fingers and nerves that are touching, the feelings that make meaning. You disappear, conceal yourself in order that I may live freely.

Whither is thy beloved gone? Whither hath thy beloved turned, that we may seek him with thee? (*Song of Songs* 6:1)

Are you like God then? We cannot know you as you are in yourself? You let us see only the back side of your glory passing before us, the way the God of Sinai permitted Moses to see the divine glory when he was so bold to pray "Please show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18-23)? Have you hidden us, like Moses, in a cleft in a rock and covered our eyes with your hand, removing it only to let us catch a glimpse of your back side, all your goodness, all the graciousness and mercy you bestow on us as we pass through life, never your face? Is it only there we must seek you, in the traces of our experiencing, in the grace of our touching, our seeing, our hearing, our feeling, our thinking?

12

THE DISAPPEARING BODY. IF YOU did not disappear from my awareness, I would not be able to live fluently. Yet in disappearing, you sorrow me. For I want to know you, thank you, praise you—you the giver of every good gift—and I can only stammer.

Is that your greatest gift to us, you who are so present, so close, and yet hide yourself from us: that you do your work unseen, you give your gifts in secret, unknown to us? We live by you. All meaning comes from you. And all depends

on our unawareness of you. Impossible then to speak of you when we cannot even be aware of your work in us every moment, the cells cooperating, the nerves forming the body schema, the heart beating, these fingers pressing keys into letters, imaging thoughts on a page.

13

WHY DO YOU HIDE FROM US? So we will seek you? Do you, like the God of the Hasidic tale, lament, "I hide, but no one wants to seek me"?

Do you long for us as we long for you?

14

BUT WHY TORMENT US? WHY leave us seeking, grasping for you as we grasp for a thing, an object, a matter that can be spoken of, spoken about. In speaking of you, about you, we destroy you. Your Thou becomes an It. How then can we be at fault for estranging ourselves from you, if it is you who keep disappearing?

15

HOW CAN I SING YOUR praises if the words I must use keep you far from me?

16

WHY DO YOU MEAN SO much to me? You whom I love?

17

HOW CAN I THEN APPROACH you, you who hide yourself from me? Like the lover's beloved in the *Song of Songs? I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loveth. I sought him, but I found him not.* (3:2) No. Pursuing you only carries me away from you.

Shall I speak to you then in the language of love?

"The god comes when those in love recognize one another." (Euripides, *Helen*, 50c)

Is that the way? When we love you, when we recognize ourselves in you, when we recognize that you are ourselves, it is then that you come to us?

If I speak to you as I speak to my lover, who is me and not me, the two of us one in love, will that save me from pushing you away as I reach for you?

I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.

My beloved, you are most holy to me. I do not worship you and yet you are sacred to me.

I long for the name by which you are called.

Do not hide your face from me.

18

HAVE I SPOKEN OF YOU or uttered your praise in any worthy way? No. I have done nothing more than desire to speak; and if I have said anything, it is not what I desired to say. How do I know this, except from the fact that the body

is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. Therefore the body is not even to be called "unspeakable," because to say even this is to speak of the body. Thus arises a contradiction: if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. Better to avoid this cruel opposition of words with silence than try to explain it away by speech.

And yet the body, although nothing worthy of its greatness can be said of it, demands our praise and thanks; it desires—with the deep power of homeostasis that pulls all organisms, large and small, toward flourishing, even into the future, of the individual or species—that we rejoice in it, love it, and care for it.

O body, what can anyone say that is worthy of you?

Yet woe to the one who says nothing!

PAMELA YENSER

Snow Angels

—For my brothers and sisters

It is our father who harries us

along that old game of fox and geese.

Our spokes creating an enormous

sign of peace

until we are chased until we fall down

to make hourglass waves of skinny arms

and spraddled legs becoming frigid

snow angels.

Decades later in a cold study

I turn the flood lights on new snow

alighting and arising like a memory

pillow fight:

crow's-nest flakes fall from the umbrella

of night emptying their star-pierced

shapes strained through a colander of light

manna bright

forming this illusion that I have

traveled state to state and flake by flake

backward through memory to myself

conceived back

then and there in a dormitory

meant for students in a Midwest mining

town where the military marriage

of a nurse

and her captain came undone and I

vanished inside—becoming nothing

more than desire in her lover's eyes

for a girl.

ALEX BERGE

The Intruder

THE FIRST TIME THE INTRUDER appeared, all he did was wash his hands. It had been a nameless night in which I'd been lying on my couch in a hypnotic loop of SportsCenter replays. In through the front door, the intruder entered my darkened living room as if I wasn't there. I'd been leaving the front door open for weeks, swept up in a groundless hope that Gwen would return. I didn't want her to feel unwelcome. Though with the intruder in my house that night, moving toward the kitchen, I didn't think of Gwen or much of anything else. Stunned, I said nothing, remained still—unsure if we were really there.

The intruder found the kitchen's light. I crept to the threshold and peeked around the corner. At the sink I saw the intruder hunched down dressed in all black with a ski mask covering his narrow head, pumping the hand soap and scrubbing between his thin fingers.

I watched droplets spatter the tiled floor as he wrung dry his hands.

Soon he approached me. Face to face, he cleared his throat and shook his head from side to side slowly, mournfully. His body, like a former Olympian's, was taut but marred by time. He handed me the towel. He grinned through his knit mask.

"Excuse me," he said. I didn't recognize his voice. I didn't feel as unsafe as I felt helpless. The intruder slid out the front door and into the voiceless night. He moved with an incredible softness that left me full of a scream I did nothing with.

...

OF COURSE THE POLICE OFFICER asked the obvious questions, and I answered honestly. He was stocky and stern and spoke at me suspiciously, glancing around my kitchen.

"And this *intruder*," he said, "he broke into your home, stole nothing of value, delivered no physical threat, washed his hands, and left. Is that correct?"

“He didn’t break in so much as he walked in.” Then I added, “I keep the place dark, so maybe he thought the house was empty.”

“So the intruder entered through an unlocked door,” the officer said.

“Someone might return,” I said, straightening up in my kitchen chair. “I am waiting.”

“How many days, would you estimate, have you been leaving your house exposed?” the officer asked.

I laughed. “I’m not some dip who leaves the door unlocked all the time,” I said. “Only when I’m home is the front door unlocked.”

“This person you’re expecting—he or she doesn’t have keys or your phone number?” he asked.

I said, “What are the next steps in the investigation, officer?”

The officer looked away and I knew he’d laugh about me later. “Our next step is you keeping your doors locked, unless you *want* intruders.” He smirked and began walking out. “If anything else like this happens,” he said, “don’t hesitate to call us back.”

If the intruder returned I wouldn’t be able to face this officer, or any officer, again. I wouldn’t be able to admit that an intruder visited me, damaged nothing, and then left me as I had been before, fractured and alone. It seemed that, in the eyes of the authorities, violation of personal space and property was an unviable reason for panic. For the rest of the weekend, I kept the door locked and slept terribly.

...

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, I went to work every morning after locking all the doors, and at night I whispered apologies to Gwen as I locked the front door before sitting in a bath of my TV’s silver haze. In the days after the intruder’s visit, I spent hours at work writing Gwen an email with instructions regarding her return. Should she come back, I wrote, she’d need to call me to let her in. She’d since changed her phone number, and in the email I told her it made sense, that we were moving on and that a fresh start is a fresh start. I wrote out my cell and landline numbers, punctuating them with a tiny smiley face, in case she’d forgotten them. Her keys were still where she’d left them on the kitchen table after she and a nominal moving crew finished hauling her things to their truck and away to her new apartment. I didn’t explain what had happened with the intruder because I didn’t want her to worry that if she moved back we’d be in any danger. If I mentioned that, I’d then have to convince her that

other than the sense of violation and eeriness, the intruder's presence hadn't seemed aggressive or in pursuit of anything valuable. I didn't want to muddle the message too badly.

Checked my inbox incessantly for a reply, but nothing ever came. The intruder's visit began to fade from my mind, but never disappeared completely. Even with the door locked all night, my eyes bounced from my TV to the doorknob often, even at the slightest sound. I continued living in the darkness I'd become accustomed to, surrounded by silent shadows, finding myself wondering if he'd ever come back.

On a Tuesday in the fall, around three in the morning, I woke to the coffee machine sputtering and hissing. It's a single-serving pod machine, a gift I'd received from the realty company that had sold us the house. The cacophonic whir tricked me into thinking it was those first days in the house with Gwen. The moon was dimming, giving way to the day's new sun. In a daze, I rolled from my bed and followed the trail of light and aroma to the kitchen where I found the intruder sitting at the table.

"Go back to sleep," he said. The ceiling light crackled and my eyes danced into focus. He was dressed in black. He slurped his coffee.

"Why are you here?" I said, gently panicking. "Leave."

"Your bagels are moldy," said the intruder. He was gloved this time, and he gripped the coffee mug close to his chest. He blew to cool its contents. "It's always so dark in here."

I didn't respond and in one deep gulp, he finished the drink and stood slowly. Setting the mug in the sink, he thanked me for the coffee and walked toward me. Closing my eyes, waiting for impact, I felt his hands grab each of my shoulders and squeeze lightly. I shook from the middle out. I'd never fight back. I thought: if he is going to kill me, I must remember to think of Gwen before I take my final breath. My nose began to run and my throat welled into a quick cough that might precede a full-blown weep, something I hadn't experienced in years—maybe decades.

He'd been holding my shoulders for a matter of seconds before I sensed something inside me wake—an urgency to grab him, to hurt him, to hug him, to never cede anything ever again. I reached my arms out and opened my eyes. The intruder was gone. The house was dreamily lit. I whispered, "Where'd you go?"

By the front door, the one I had locked hours before, I found the intruder with one gloved hand on the knob, the other in a fist at his side. I stared at him. He smiled. We were alone and only one of us knew what the other looked like.

“What did you take?” I asked. I steadied my body. “I think that’s what this is all about. You want something of mine. I don’t have anything for you.”

He raised his hands, spreading his fingers. Nothing fell.

His arms dropped and he was out the door. I dashed outside after him, hoping to see which way he ran. He disappeared around the curve leading into the heart of the neighborhood.

Inside, I locked the door and washed the mug he’d drunk from and went to take a shower. It was a little before 4 a.m.

I got dressed and drove to work. In my rearview mirror the day was firing up, on the verge of explosion.

...

I REPLAYED HIS MOST RECENT visit each night as I lay in bed, listening for the wriggle of the door or the jingle of keys or the desperate knocks. She never called. My life continued, but I remembered how his hands had felt on my shoulders. I couldn’t help but think that he would return.

...

A MONTH LATER, AFTER ATTENDING a New Year’s Eve party thrown by my boss, I slid into a new routine, something I’d resisted for months. I found a balance that afforded me time alone in my house, shrouded in lazy moonlight, waiting for the intruder’s return, while also letting some of the outside seep back in.

I began to feel OK. I joined the company kickball team, mainly keeping score and handing out cold beers after each game. I drank at happy hours and complained about management. Colleagues became work friends and every so often, group conversations veered toward finding me someone to spend my time with outside of work. Someone special, some would say. I was quiet and polite during these talks. But immediately after, I’d check my inbox for anything from Gwen. At home, I’d inspect my door for any signs of breaking and entering.

The conversations about my personal life spiked when a new woman from Wisconsin began working in our department. The daily pressure to ask her out increased. I’d get cornered by coworkers in the bathroom or stairwell, each pushing me to take some action, as if my success with the encounter—whatever that might be—would translate into their victory. The new coworker’s name was Kendra and she spoke with a deeply curled Midwestern

accent. She was pleasant and liked making fun of herself for listening to Christmas music year-round, and she prided herself on drinking gin at happy hour. But the hushed pep talks turned me hasty before I had any real friendly footing with her. At their urging, I found the words to ask her out for pizza. She said yes, standing with her back to our break room's refrigerator. When I got back to my desk, an email from Kendra was waiting in my work inbox, the details of which stated, briefly, that she just wasn't sure she was ready to move on after her divorce and in her new life in the big city.

The continued conversations about me moving on, finding someone new, soon became too wearisome. After RSVPing *no* to most barbecues, baseball games and movies, the invites dried up. Work, and everything else, became familiar again.

And I stayed up late and alone, thinking of the intruder. I quit using the chain lock at night, but there was no sign of him.

As my birthday came and went, as I cleaned up the leftover Chinese food on Thanksgiving, as I dropped a set of notebooks into a gift bag for my Secret Santa, I realized something peculiar, something I wasn't sure how to admit, or to whom: I clearly wasn't happy. But what was odd was that I was ready to be. Maybe it was time to move. Maybe it was time to travel. Maybe it was time to forget.

...

THE DAYS BEGAN ACCELERATING. MY time at work was now spent scouring job postings and rental properties on each coast and, for some reason, Colorado. I drank three beers each night, which helped nothing except for temporarily soothing my fitful sleeps. The lights stayed low, but now, I recognized the darkness as a propulsion to next mornings, each signifying one day closer to leaving for good.

On my second beer one night in late spring, I was ripped out of a West Coast fantasy by a flash of light through my front window. Through the pane, I saw only the dim streetlight on my tree-dotted lawn fizzing a rosy glow, awash in gnats. Then a police car sped by, without its red and blue emergency lights, only its side-mirror searchlight illuminating the front yards and faces of the houses across the street before disappearing into the neighborhood. I turned the TV off and as it ticked itself cool, I stood in the dark stillness of my house wondering what they were chasing. Another unlit police cruiser rushed past. And another. I felt a pull in my chest.

I left into the night to pursue the police pursuit. I thought of the intruder and where he might be.

After I locked the door, another police car zipped past, no sirens, no lights—becoming a phantom as it made the turn. I heard the tires scream and I, too, felt like screaming. *Is he out there?*

Hurrying along the sidewalk toward the deep, webbed center of the neighborhood, I realized I'd never really seen these houses. My trot fell into a limp, breathless walk. I looked into houses, each lit from within, full of husbands and wives standing in kitchens, cooking for their families or speaking with their hands. In some, I could see the bobbly heads on couches, staring into TVs, sitting vigil together in the cool neon light. I saw lights flick on as often as I watched rooms go dark. In those darkened rooms, I didn't imagine loneliness or terror or need, but rather long sleeps and wild dreams. I walked and walked. Soon, the houses all got darker. It seemed that I was extinguishing each house as I passed.

I came upon a clearing lined by arthritic trees and saw on its own expanded plot of land a single house sitting in the glow of a tower light in its backyard. The house didn't look like the others—it had tall windows and tiles instead of shingles. From where I stood I could see an elaborate swing set in the backyard lit by the single light; the rest of the house was cold and lifeless. I realized I had lost the police; they were off protecting and serving and speaking to the perpetrators coldly but fairly. I stood there looking into the dark house and wondered if the intruder had been stopped, or if I had had something to do with him leaving me and the rest of this neighborhood alone. I laughed and rubbed my eyes. When I looked back up, the light behind the house had clunked off. I was staring into the night.

I didn't feel like going home. I wanted something else. I thought of the intruder's first appearance in my house. How unearthly it had felt to be standing in the presence of a stranger who wanted nothing at all from me other than a sink to wash his hands. I felt a shiver rifle up my spine. I had no reason to be walking around. The darkness was warm at home, and if I was lucky, I would soon be anywhere else.

As I walked home, I asked myself impossible questions to pass the time—a habit I had been using for months to get to sleep. *In what year will the last original melody be written? What was the first pet peeve ever experienced by a human? Will I be alive in five years?*

I turned onto my street, surprised at how effortlessly I'd made it back. Some sort of autopilot kicked in, bringing me home from the dark, dark night.

Within the last quarter mile, something radiated in the air ahead. The light was like a star in a void. My neighbor's house is on fire, I thought, I need to get home to call for help. In such quietness, I never considered what an actual tragedy meant. But the strange glow was coming from my house and finally, I could be released once and for all.

I ran the rest of the way, sweating into the cold. When I made it home, there were no flames, no smoke. The front door was wide open and light spilled out. Gwen had taken all the curtains when she left, and from where I stood, I was sure that orbiting astronauts could spot this house with their naked eyes. Whoever was in there, or had been in there, must have turned on every light. I panicked. As quickly as the urge to run away flooded me, it left. The house wasn't on fire which meant there were still answers—somewhere. I crouched and hurried around back. In the tiny backyard, on a concrete slab we'd only ever used for grilling Boca Burgers on the portable Weber, I peered into the master bedroom. From that viewpoint, I saw the depth of the illumination inside—ceiling lights and floor lamps ablaze, hallways aglow. The house looked like it was alive.

I circled around the other side, looking into each window until I came upon the tessellated bathroom one, cracked open. From outside, all I could see was that the light was on and that someone was showering. Steam danced out, bringing the scent of bodywash.

Knowing this person was trapped, I ran to the front, dipped inside, and shut the door softly. The shower was still going. I squinted in the lights yet somehow glided through the house, shutting off each light—one by one. First the living room, then the kitchen, then the hallway and the bedrooms. Light and steam continued pouring from under the closed bathroom door and I stood on the opposite side of the hallway, in the master bedroom's doorway. I figured that whomever emerged would suddenly see the darkness and feel caught. Staying in the shadows would give me the advantage in a confrontation. If it was Gwen, I thought, we'd kiss in the hallway, forgiving one another, pledging new chances, with the weak bathroom light our only ambience.

The water shut off so I began inching down the hallway toward the bathroom, listening closely to how the showered person dried off—maybe it'd be the discerning detail that I needed. Everyone has a specific way of toweling themselves, a unique series of wipes and dabs, in an order that cannot easily be changed. I admitted to myself that I wasn't familiar with this person's drying. Surely a year wouldn't have changed Gwen that much?

When the door opened, the bathroom light went out and the whole house went dark. I cemented my legs to avoid making any noise.

"Gwen?" My voice cracked. "Gwen, is that you?"

I heard no voice but rather heavy footsteps tapering away. My other senses signified nothing. Thirty seconds passed. Then more. I walked slowly past the bathroom and into the kitchen. I didn't turn on any lights because it seemed reasonable that, at this point, it wasn't Gwen in the house and I'd need to use the darkness to my advantage. My eyes began adjusting, grasping at any ion of light they could. The only flare I could make out was from the house's front door, the knob splashing back some moonlight that had dripped in from the window.

The TV clicked on. The blue light burst throughout my living room, seeping into the kitchen. Frozen in the familiar circumstances, I heard the SportsCenter host introducing that night's Top Ten plays. From the couch the intruder's voice filled my house. "Remember Kenny Mayne? Does he still do anything?"

I didn't answer. I also didn't feel like confronting him or running away. I turned on the kitchen's overhead light. I brought two beers into the living room. The intruder, fully dressed after the shower, lounged on my couch. I smirked. When I handed him his beer, I looked into his eyes and felt a distant recognition, as if the months prior had kept me afloat not by a driving desire for newness, but for any avowal in anything at all. He thanked me and stretched out. I didn't care who this man was, or why he was there. I felt something in my chest soften. I was finally able to give an answer to someone, a stranger nonetheless, like a gift. I dropped into the papasan chair and leaned forward, stretching as far as I could to grab the remote. I turned down the volume so I could speak without interruption.

NINA SUDHAKAR

Empires Have Been Destroyed

I.

If THE RIGHT STREET IN Bandra had been whispered to you, it is said, a street named after a canonized Catholic whose very name you could hold in your mouth like a prayer to a patron saint, you could take a rickshaw to the area and have it drop you a safe distance away, perhaps outside one of the civil servants' squat two-story bungalows, because people who lived in those houses had no need to go wandering the quarter on foot after work, pretending not to be lost and refusing to ask for directions, having instead the luxury of the right connections and moreover the benefit of gothic-crowned windows and porched second-story balconies on which they could safely imbibe.

It would take some effort to find the correct nondescript apartment building, though after the day you'd had, you might not mind the searching. Eventually you'd come across a pav bhaji or boiled eggs vendor, parked in an unassuming residential side street, who'd recognize that particular questing look about you. And he'd nod and incline his head toward one of the street-facing windows, expecting, correctly, that you'd stop at his cart on your way out of that building in return for this unspoken guidance.

Up three flights of stairs you'd finally find Ana's place, though when she opened the door a crack to answer you'd call her *aunty*. The apartment would be even smaller than you imagined on seeing it from the outside, only the one window for the living room and in the unseen inner depths probably a kitchen and one narrow bedroom. Someone — for the living room would be full already, as if you were late to a gathering in progress — would pull you up a plastic chair, or a stool, or a crate to sit on, and you would perch by the dingy floral-patterned curtains pulled shut and join their conversation, groups of mostly men but also a few women, college students or intellectuals or jobless down-on-their-lucks or shopkeepers or accountants. Depending on the crowd, you'd debate the virtues of politicians like Nehru versus Bose, or directors like Satyajit Ray and his realist films versus Bollywood's Mehboob Khan and his fateful pairing of actors Raj Kapoor and Nargis. Or, when Ana brought you the glass of what you'd asked for — neat — snake juice or white lightning or, if

you ditch the euphemisms, just plain toddy or moonshine or feni, you'd talk to her instead, ask her how business had been of late, get some advice for your troubles or maybe even a suggestion about a girl of marriageable age from a good family you should meet. If it was extra busy, her daughter Mari would also be flitting around, carrying trays of drinks for patrons, but under Ana's watchful eye any conversations with Mari could be only cursory, a few snippets tossed in passing.

Six years in to prohibition, this situation could be expected, even this division of labor: mother, often widowed, brews and tends bar; adult daughter, often longing for a different life, reluctantly helps out. The tide of independence, while washing out foreign rule, had pulled in with it a temperance movement that deemed liquor a serious defect. In certain communities, where perhaps this view was not as deep-seated, where perhaps one's relatives had been toddy-tappers or where one's family had been guarding a special kaju feni recipe for hundreds of years, this situation could also be viewed as an opportunity. Even before the enactment of the law in '49, those in the building already knew Ana brewed the best feni in the neighborhood, stopping by more often than she would have liked for a sip from her storeroom cache. When her husband died a few years after the law's passage, killed in a road accident, Ana had few options to feed herself and her daughter other than to capitalize on her existing renown.

Some said her husband drank too much, that so many years as a seafaring merchant had made him wary of land, eager to replicate the sensation of the ground always shifting beneath his feet. That this was why the lorry he was driving had veered off a well-lit road into a ditch marked by a sprawling banyan tree. If you became a regular patron, you knew never to mention the man to Ana or Mari, never to question the decisions they'd made to provide for themselves. After all, you yourself would be sitting on a stool in an unknown woman's apartment, beneath a wooden cross from an unfamiliar faith, peering at unfamiliar faces in the dim lighting of thick curtains paired with sparsely-placed lamps, knowing nevertheless that dark was falling outside, and soon you'd have to leave and go back to your own home, undoubtedly somewhere distant. When you left, you'd stop first for pav bhaji from the vendor outside to whom you'd implicitly promised your business, and the whole journey home you'd hope the smell of raw onions would mask not only the reek of alcohol but also any little lies you'd have to tell — to your spouse, your partner, the rickshaw driver, a ran-into acquaintance, a policeman, or a passing stranger — about where you'd just come from, a place that was not supposed to exist.

II.

IF YOU ASKED A NEIGHBOR when Ana had moved into her place, it would seem to them that she had always been there. But really it had only been a couple of decades, from the time just after she'd gotten married in a little church in Candolim, wearing a long, lacy white dress and with her skinny arms lined with the colorful glass bangles she'd later have to break over her husband's coffin. The day following her wedding she'd worn the customary red sari and set off with her husband for Bombay. Though her husband had grown up the next town over from her, he'd been living in Bombay for a year and already kept a rented flat there, which was ostensibly now for the two of them though really mostly for her. They lived in Bombay for its proximity to the port, where Ana would see her husband off every few weeks for another of his postings at sea.

Their leaving was the first time Ana had been outside Candolim, and when she arrived in the city, with its trams and noise and lack of swaying palms and sheer *density*, it seemed an impossible place. But she took comfort in the enclave of Bandra, which faced the same waters she'd grown up with — the Arabian Sea — and where so many fellow Goans lived it was possible to close one's eyes and hear the waves and the Konkoni and imagine one's self back, for a moment, in a formative place.

Though her husband was rarely home those initial few years, Ana managed, eventually, to get pregnant, though just the once, which she told herself and her family was more than enough. With the help of a few community midwives, while her husband was rounding Cape Comorin en route to Sri Lanka, Ana delivered a healthy baby girl she named Mari, because that name was a variant of Mary/Maria that was said to mean *beloved*.

The neighbors who saw Ana and Mari out together — and it was usually just the two of them, from the beginning — thought the name was fitting, for the girl was undoubtedly loved. Ana pushed her daughter around the quarter in a black pram given to her by a neighbor whose children were now all school-aged. She was often observed stopping to jiggle the metal push-handle, urging the sticky wheels to resume their track. The girl never protested during these walks, not a cry or a peep, and later, when she grew old enough to explore the neighborhood on her own two feet, she remained thoughtful and quiet, keeping hold of her mother's hand while they made the same afternoon circuit around the shaded, leafy streets. As the neighbors watched her age, it became obvious that Mari would become the spitting image of her mother — short with thick curly hair and a round, open face that seemed to invite the spilling of confidences.

Though neighbors often commented that the girl was too introverted, Ana brushed off the matter of Mari's childhood silence, knowing it actually masked a whirring brain that was constantly cataloguing and questioning its observations. During the long days alone in the apartment, Ana would struggle to find ways to entertain her daughter, new activities to replace the ones Mari had already mastered and tired of. The daily walks persisted because Mari approached them like a spot-the-difference game: amidst the usual paths and routines, she would look for what was out of the ordinary — a tree that had begun to flower, a stray dog with a new back paw limp, a colorful rangoli freshly painted outside the gates of one of the bungalows.

It is said that this is how the feni brewing began: a difference, born out of Ana's desire to occupy the slow-passing hours, as much for Mari as for herself. After Mari began going to school, dressed in her pressed blue pinafore uniform and carefully pinned-up plaits, walking anticlimactically out the door following the morning's getting-ready whirlwind, Ana found wading through the sluggish middle of the day suddenly untenable, shaped as it had previously been entirely around the girl's presence. One day Mari came home from school and the kitchen floor was covered by a plastic tarp. Laid on top was a layer of flat rocks, on top of which was a pile of what appeared to be small, plump red peppers. This was Mari's first introduction to cashew apples, which the two of them then proceeded to crush underfoot gleefully, Mari letting go for once of her meticulousness, and Ana relishing the squelching between her toes, a feeling she had never forgotten but hadn't dared hope to replicate.

Fermenting was achieved through a complicated setup of pipes and copper pots in the storeroom off the kitchen. Ana tinkered with the mechanics for months before perfecting its timing and arrangement. The contraption was not built for scale, so later it was useful that Ana had built up years of bottles — (despite what she'd thought was an unfailing generosity of pouring with her neighbors) — before she ever had a need to sell the liquor. Ana thought it lucky that the storeroom had a tiny window overlooking the gully behind the apartment building, for she worried a bit about harboring heady vapors in the kitchen and the apartment. No one who didn't live in the building ventured into the gully, and even so, the faint sweet-&-slightly-sickly aroma that could sometimes be caught back there was untraceable to any specific one of the array of tiny windows, all of which the building's residents kept open for ventilation and cross-breeze.

The neighbors liked to note, amongst themselves and sometimes to Ana, that Mari grew up like the feni-making process, in three stages. The first press

produced a mild alcohol called arrack, the second, cazulo, a bit stronger, and the third and final press resulted in feni, which, with its nearly fifty-percent alcohol volume, was liable to knock you out. Mari's meekness in childhood gave way to a slight edge once she started school, one that might catch you if you said something stupid or that could be interpreted as insulting. By the time she reached adulthood — by which time her father had come back from the sea ill-adjusted to land, and soon after made her mother a widow who ran a clandestine bar out of their living room — she was noticeably hardened. Some said she sharpened herself as a means of protecting Ana, that this was a role she felt duty-bound now to play. But what didn't change about Mari was that she revealed her true self only to her mother — she dreamt of moving out of the city, away from the dreaded sea, inland to a small, quiet place where she could be a grade-school teacher, maybe or maybe not getting married. She said she would do all this if there were enough money to do so, which she knew there wouldn't be. So the other conditions precedent to the dream thankfully didn't have to be mentioned: that Mari was reluctant to do any of this unless her mother was no longer living, and that Ana wanted her daughter to be able to control, as far as possible, the course of her own life, but this required Mari to first stay close and cultivate a potent mixture of desire, pragmatism and skill.

III.

IF YOU FREQUENTED ANA'S PLACE, you'd understand quickly that she brewed more than just kaju feni; she could craft liquor from nearly any fruit or vegetable, fresh or gone a bit rotten, from its flesh, its pith, its peels. The same alcoholic bite remained, but the taste might be laced with the slightest hint of tomatoes or coconut or beets or jackfruit or carrots or papaya, or whatever caught her eye at the market. She perused roadside stalls like a magpie, alighting without fail on whichever fruits a seller had taken the time beforehand to polish to a bright sheen. Her experimentation would reach its peak around the Christmas holidays, when you could often find mulled wine on offer, crafted not from grapes but perhaps from pineapple, and spiced with ginger and cloves and cinnamon, and served with fried flower-shaped kalkals, leaving the mouth feeling festive enough to match the more-jovial-than-usual atmosphere in the cramped living room.

It is said Ana's cache dwindled faster than she imagined, that she hadn't envisioned prohibition lasting as long as it did. She'd thought a country so accustomed to spirits would soon come to its senses, realizing the detriment of driving business to a black market. The neighbors and patrons chatted

often of raids they'd heard about, men climbing out of windows and students fleeing through back gullies, policemen kicking down doors only to find their colleagues calmly sipping drinks inside, aunties who showed up at jails as pretend relatives to bail out their own patrons. Ana was keenly aware of the danger, this was well known — as any given night wore on she'd start to wring her hands, shushing any increase in volume, wanting nothing more than to kick everyone out of her house though the patrons, understanding their position as guests in someone's home, remained unfailingly well-mannered. Mari took advantage of the fact that she was readily welcomed into any ongoing conversation due to her status as Ana's daughter; she quietly memorized all the overheard troubles and secrets, filing them away for future leverage in case anyone had a change of heart, a sudden urge to report the goings-on to the police.

Once a week, Ana and Mari would count the remaining bottles and plan what they'd produce the following week. Ana was amazed that one law and a few strokes of a pen had caused demand to suddenly reach a height that would continue, no matter her output, to outmatch her possible supply. It was inevitable that there came an accounting in which the bottles — which had once been stored all over the apartment, in closets and cabinets and under the bed — numbered only five, enough for only a few nights more of patrons, perhaps more if she diluted the liquor or served it only with soda, hoping no one would notice save for remarking on a less vicious hangover the day after.

On becoming a patron of Ana's, you also became privy to a whole new stream of gossip, like stumbling upon a moss-hidden cave that sheathed a long, snaking underground river. You'd hear about all the illicit stills in the city, all the living room bars, all the means by which liquor was spirited in and around the city: false-bottom milk cans, bicycle tires, hot water bottles, manholes covering barrels of fermenting mash, hiding spots in presumed-to-be-haunted swamps, lepers whom the police were loathe to search and whom it was said could not be fingerprinted anyway. This was the vast and secret system that Ana and Mari were certainly conscious of but refused to consider themselves a part of, at least until the day the liquor almost ran out.

It is said that it was Mari who first suggested the plan, who volunteered herself to procure some mash they might quick-ferment with ammonium chloride, which she'd heard some aunties were using to speed up the process. The mash would be cheap enough, maybe five rupees a gallon for the type of slop a pig might eat, potato peels and molasses waste and mostly-brown or rotten fruits. If they rearranged the shelves in the kitchen a bit, gave away some clothes and moved some steel vessels to the bedroom almirahs, the space

could easily accommodate a few extra drums for fermentation. And it was Mari who would need to go, because her plan was to conceal the several-gallon jug of mash beneath a loose and flowing top, so that any person or policeman she might pass would assume her an innocent pregnant woman.

The solution was sound, but it took a few days, as you might understand, to convince Ana of it. She worried about embroiling her daughter further in these activities, to take what she'd circumscribed to the safe space of the home — a respectful and genteel gathering it was easy enough to pretend was a dinner party of friends — out into the world, that vast, seedy network of secretive and deceptive dealings. But the rent came due, the groceries needed buying, the gas for the stove needed replacing. Eventually Ana agreed to send Mari for the mash, but only if she'd take a patron with her, one of Mari's choice, someone who could serve as a male escort but moreover as a bodyguard of sorts.

Mari was friendly with many of the patrons but not friends with any of them in particular, given that she kept everyone but Ana at a polite but cold distance. She didn't choose any of the many men who were obviously sweet on her or any of the ones who ignored her completely. It is said she settled on Dinesh, a watchman from a neighboring building, because of his occupation, and because of his lean but muscular form; he seemed like someone who might be able to protect her if the need arose, or at least to have an elevated eye and ear for danger. He agreed even before Ana offered him a few rupees for his trouble, which Mari thought boded well for their mission.

In the bottom of their almirah, Ana found an old beige cotton salwar kameez she'd meant to give away long ago, one she'd worn when she was pregnant during the summer months with Mari and could barely stand the touch of fabric on her skin. From an already-torn silk sari Ana ripped several strands and braided them together into two ropes that would not chafe against her daughter's skin. She used these to tie a large earthenware jug around Mari's belly, high as if she were carrying a girl, so that any nosy aunties who saw her would cluck in pity and leave her alone. The effect must have been powerful when they both looked at Mari in the mirror, her cheeks flushed and her posture extra straight in compensation for the new weight. Neighbors who knew Ana imagined she must have brushed away a tear before Mari could see it, for that would have revealed the wish Ana hadn't even known she'd made until she saw this vision of her proud and pregnant daughter.

Mari knew from the neighborhood gossip that Dinesh had kept his job for so many years because he was prompt, without fail, where others in similar local positions frequently arrived hours late or not at all. At noon exactly, as

arranged, Dinesh knocked at Ana's door and he, too, was struck by the glowing and determined girl who answered. Chalo, Mari said to Dinesh, already walking past him into the hallway. We have a long way to go and not much time.

IV.

IF YOU REGULARLY STOPPED BY Ana's or even another aunty's place, you'd likely have guessed where Mari was headed for the mash, some morass of a hiding place, the nearest lowland. And indeed Mari and Dinesh took a rickshaw across the city-island close to where it came to its end like an open crab claw, past the Mithi River and down to the mudflats near Sewri Fort, around where the flocks of flamingos would congregate if it were winter, standing unmoving in the shallow marsh, their washed-out pink making them look like marble statues abandoned to the swamp tides. There Mari and Dinesh left their chappals on a stretch of dry sand and rolled up their pant and salwar legs, wading ankle to knee deep and searching the thicket of mangroves until they found a root tied with a half-submerged yellow ribbon. They waited by the root until eventually a man — really, a boy — who had been loitering in the area came splashing over, understanding why they'd come. Mari gave the boy the money he demanded, more than she'd hoped but less than she'd expected. The boy pointed to another root nearby, where they now noticed a rope that extended beneath the surface and which, Dinesh and the boy straining together, eventually pulled up a drum of mash that freed itself from the swamp's hold with a sickening sucking sound.

The boy left them, then, to fill on their own the jug Mari had brought, and it is said that this is when the incident happened — after the boy returned to his post on the dry sand and Mari moved deeper into the root-tunnel to pull up the edge of her top so she could undo the ropes holding the jug in place. Ana had thought, of course, about making the knots extra secure, but she'd forgotten about making them easy to untie. Mari struggled to reach a fat knot sitting against her sacrum, where her arms could barely bend back around to manipulate the rope, and eventually she called Dinesh over to help. But: his fingers lingered too long in the undoing, stroked the sides of her bare waist as he worked, resisted releasing her for a long moment as she pushed away from him, turning to hand him the empty jug. She looked at him with disgust and betrayal in her eyes, which Dinesh did not acknowledge. Instead, he arranged his face to look indignant, as if what she'd felt was accidental, incidental, enough to make Mari wonder if she'd imagined what had happened, but not enough to doubt her own instincts, honed from years in crowded buses and trams and packed stations and sadly not having to imagine.

When the jug was filled Mari retied the knots herself, facing them now forward, and the two returned to Ana's, Mari leaving as much space between her and Dinesh as was possible in the rickshaw and keeping her gaze fixed ahead but unfocused at some point in the distance. They reached just after five when the living room was already near-full with patrons. Dinesh melted into the crowd and Mari retreated to the bedroom, telling her mother she was tired from the journey and wanted to lay down. Days passed and the fresh mash fermented in the kitchen's new drums. By the following weekend the crowd had peaked again and it included Dinesh, who posted himself in a prime position in the corner by the windows, from where one could observe the entire room.

Ana enlisted Mari to help serve everyone, hoping her new concoction would be to the patrons' tastes. She and Mari drank nearly none of what they brewed themselves, except on holidays or special occasions. At one point Ana could not resist peeking into the living room from her post in the kitchen, wanting to watch the reactions to the latest batch of liquor. What she saw, instead, was the wide berth Mari was keeping around Dinesh, how she left his drinks on the table next to him rather than let him take them from the tray in her hands, how she made no acknowledgement of any words he spoke to her, refusing even to make eye contact. Later, she confronted her daughter about this behavior, knowing something was amiss, and in Mari's hesitance to reveal what had happened, her reluctance to explain, she understood immediately what Dinesh had done and was overcome with the desire to kill him. But she settled for promising Mari that Dinesh would no longer be welcome at their place, and the next time he arrived he would be told so and removed forcibly if necessary.

Weeks passed, though, and Dinesh did not return. Ana felt this was a bit of luck, as she was slightly concerned that he might react violently to a confrontation and notification of his permanent barring. But a month later he did show up, and there was not even time for Ana to raise the issue she wanted to because he barged into the full living room screaming and cursing until a few of the upstairs neighbors came down to see what was happening.

That *witch* Ana poisoned me, he yelled, refusing to move farther than the doorway, where he had the attention of everyone in the room as well as the outside hallway. I nearly died! She'll pay for this, I'm calling the police here, you'll see.

A group of students who were all fond of Mari saw her face go pale as she watched this scene; it is said that seeing this spurred them to action. Refraining from loud and boorish behavior at Ana's was an unspoken rule, because doing so obviously drew attention to the gathering and put everyone in the apartment

at risk. The students grabbed Dinesh's elbows and dragged him down the stairs to the street, where they quieted him and sent him away. Ana's apartment, meanwhile — after the threat of possible police involvement — had mostly cleared itself by the time the students came back upstairs.

They told Ana and Mari what they had been able to piece together from Dinesh's incoherent ramblings: he had apparently fallen deathly ill after his last visit to Ana's, had been bedridden with crippling stomach pains that had only just dissipated. Someone had apparently once told Dinesh of an exorcist near Candolim, and he had connected this in his mind with Ana, believing her capable of witchcraft or some devious treachery that enabled her to poison him deliberately. He hadn't proposed any motive for Ana's alleged poisoning, though, which the group (some of whom were law students) said they found suspicious. This is how what Dinesh had done to Mari came to be known — in the silence following the students' summary, as Ana was looking at her daughter questioningly, wondering if she should reveal what the two of them knew of Dinesh's character, Mari simply burst out with it.

No one was sure whether it was the witch rumor or the impending police visit that was keeping patrons away, but in any event the next few days at Ana's were slow ones and the living room remained an empty sitting place, never transforming upon a coded knock on the door into a lively neighborhood pub. The neighbors speculated about Ana, wondering whether she did possess an interest in the occult, whether there was something more to all the ingredients she kept lying around, all the brewing she did in her kitchen. Some said they'd once seen the cross on the wall of Ana's living room hanging upside down, that the clocks in there were all stopped, that there were witches who could eat an entire apple without touching the skin, who knew all the ways to kill a man without leaving a mark. Some said, more quietly, that regardless of whether or not Ana had done it, Dinesh had deserved that poisoning.

The quiet ended on a Monday evening, close the witching hour, when the police presumed the inhabitants of the building would be sleeping and thus unprepared. They kicked in Ana's door, which brought her and Mari out of the bedroom immediately, dressed in long nightgowns and rubbing their eyes against the three flashlight beams aimed at their faces.

Go ahead, search, Ana told them, and she and Mari returned to the bedroom where they perched on their beds, listening to the men's crashing and trampling progress through the apartment. The policemen opened every cabinet, checked within, below and behind each item of furniture, and rapped on every inch of wall and floor to see if there were false panels located anywhere. In the kitchen

they found only a few copper pots for washing, and some root vegetables piled in the storeroom. One of the men held a knife over Ana and Mari's thin mattresses, about to begin ripping them open, when the constable stopped him.

There's nothing here, the constable said. Pick up that mattress, do you think anything of note to us can possibly be hidden in there?

The officer let the mattress drop to the floor, looking chastened.

Sorry for disturbing you, madam, the constable added, to Ana. We'll be on our way now.

Ana saw the policemen to the door, shutting it firmly and quickly behind them. As she had not acknowledged the crowd of neighbors that had gathered in the hallway, eager to learn the latest news, they murmured for several minutes about how this reticence was out of character.

V.

IF YOU KNEW ANA SOLELY from her place, you probably would not have been invited to her funeral. But you might have heard that it was held in the same little church in Candolim where she'd gotten married, that it was surprisingly well-attended, with quite a few strange faces milling about whom none of the relatives recognized, men in ill-fitting dark suits they wore like uniforms so they could not be distinguished or recognized, who came with-well wishes but left before their relationship to Ana could be probed any further. Mari, of course, would have been there, on leave from her job at an English medium school in Pune. She'd come to Candolim near the end to care for her mother, who herself had returned to the place of her birth when she'd felt the first twinges of her ripe old age, an unfortunately incurable ailment.

And if you knew Ana from her place because you were the one who had smashed into it and searched it one night many years earlier, you certainly would not have been invited to her funeral. But being a well-connected local commissioner now, you would have heard through the grapevine of its occurrence. Ana's name had dogged you for a few years after the search, some believing it impossible you'd found nothing incriminating at her place, that either you or your colleagues must have yourselves been patrons willing to turn a blind eye, or else been bewitched or charmed against your will to do so.

In light of that, you'd never told anyone about the bottle that had been delivered to you at the police station a few weeks after the search, placed on your desk by someone during a lunch hour when the place was empty and it was possible to slip in and out unnoticed. It was the best kaju feni you'd ever tasted, so good you could not bear to drink it all, having no hope of procuring anything

as perfect ever again. You'd been glad, in fact, that you'd saved it, because this allowed you to pour yourself a glass and toast its presumed maker on the day you heard of Ana's death.

Until the funeral — and despite the previous brief wave of suspicion — no one had mentioned her name to you in a very long time. Not since prohibition had been lifted in the '60s, too late to stop or control the large and sprawling underworld that had taken over the business of bootlegging and adapted that underground network for a range of increasingly violent criminal activities. In light of the arrests you'd made in the past few decades, you could almost laugh at your near-bust of a young widow and her daughter. They'd showed no fear whatsoever when you and your team had barged in. You'd been thinking of this when you opened every cabinet yourself and found nothing, when you bid them farewell, when you went downstairs to find the rest of your men eating hot pav bhaji from the vendor parked outside. Even and especially when you'd gone back to their place after receiving the bottle and found no sign of Ana or Mari there. All you'd seen was the movement of curtains in neighboring apartments as you walked away down the street, the briefest flash of faces you knew had just been pressed against the windows there.

ANDREA EBERLY

It Probably Started With a Cigarette

I'M SCANNING THE LOCAL SECTION of the Herald when I see a grainy black and white image of an ex-boyfriend's senior yearbook photo. The lunch rush is over and by midday there are usually several picked-over newspapers left lying around the coffee shop where I work. My skin puckers into goosebumps as I brush my fingers over the image. I hate the feel of newsprint; it's like nails on a chalkboard and it stains my fingertips like soot. Next to the headshot there is another photo of an idyllic stretch of road lined with a herd of black cows. Apparently, he'd been driving too fast through cattle country late at night. Who knows if he died on impact, but he was very dead by time the medics showed up.

It isn't the first time a guy I had dated died in a weird way. The other drowned a couple months ago in a stream. They found him with an eel sticking out of his mouth.

…

THESE DAYS I TAKE LAMICTAL and a little bit of Abilify because I've been having some trouble with my head. A "hero" called 911 when they saw me on a bridge standing barefoot taking shears to my hair and throwing handfuls of black tresses into the river. A seventy-two hour hold and a well-meaning social worker got me hooked up with the mental health establishment.

With the first shrink I got to the meat, to the juicy part, right away. Mom is dead. Cancer. Very sad. Bald head, protruding cheek bones, glass eye shiny and terrible. He said he was sorry and chewed on his lip as he made some notes on the computer. After a few weeks I realized he never looked up from that fucking computer and I fired him.

I told the next one, a woman this time, that Mom went to the store one morning and never came home. Ran away. She expressed her sorrow and chewed her lip as she typed away on her computer. She could have been instant messaging for all I know.

What story will I tell the third?

I sit in his office. The only things personalizing the room are his degrees

hanging on the wall. He graduated in molecular biology, same as me. His laptop is closed and he is looking at me, waiting for me to talk.

I'm afraid to tell him that Mom is just off to the side, like how you see far away stars better from the corner of your eye. You turn to take a direct look, and they fade away. And it isn't like I can tell him about the boyfriends. I mean, he'll learn I had boyfriends, but I'm talking about how they died, how the cow that the second one hit was missing an eye. He'd up my dosage for sure if I told him my theory. I'm not stupid.

So I tell him this.

Imagine if you had an embryo in a dish, and split it into two. Now imagine one was frozen for twenty or thirty years while the other one grew up. That is how much I look like my mother, like a twin separated by decades.

Psychiatrist Three doesn't take notes while I'm speaking. He is a shiny, new doctor in the middle of his psych residency, probably only a few years older than me. His brown eyes are big and clear, like a dog's. My nervousness unzips me and I surprise myself by continuing to talk.

Did you know that there are parasitic wasps and lizards and worms that reproduce without the fertilization of an egg? Parthenogenesis. Literally, virgin birth. When I was in middle school I went to the library to seek evidence of this phenomenon occurring in humans and found an old article from the 1950s. On microfiche. The article described a Mrs Alpha. Mrs Alpha and her daughter had the same blood type, same color eyes, and apparently were identical in several other genetically determined traits. However, when they grafted some of the daughter's skin onto Mrs Alpha, it was rejected.

There is no such thing as a human virgin birth and we all have a father.

...

I'VE BEEN WORKING AT THIS coffee shop, a little place on the first floor of an old brick walk-up, for the past year. My hair covers my ears now. I didn't mean to stay here this long.

It's closing time and I've already locked the front door. We're across the street from an arthouse movie theater and we shut down just after last showtime—9:30. The other barista left early sick and the coffee-grinder acted up during the evening rush—I'm ready to call it a day. I'm trying to flick open a trash bag so I can line the fifth and final garbage can. Irritation bordering on fury bubbles up and I can't control the cursing that tumbles from my lips. With a violent motion, the bag snaps open. I glance up, but the only customer left in the cafe

has earbuds in, so he didn't hear me lose control. I hope. Mom was like that when I was a girl—anger like a stun grenade—sudden and quickly extinguished. Rarely pointed at me, but tremendous nevertheless.

I check that I've unplugged the panini press. Again. The last customer is a guy working on his laptop. For the past couple of weeks he's been here all the time. He's what I call ugly/sexy. You know, men with scars or men with ripped bodies but bald, like Vin Diesel. That sort of thing. I want to talk to him, but he is always too involved in whatever he's working on.

Mom once gave me some advice growing up about men: find one a little less attractive than you. I don't know where she got the idea—I never knew her to date anyone. We moved around a lot, but she made it less hard, because she wrapped me up so tight in hot soup, pancakes, braided hair, and kissed booboos. She never missed a choir concert and made sure I had paint and chalk though I had little talent. Even in high school, I would still sometimes climb into her bed when I was sad. The pillows smelled like her hair. I wish I could remember what brand of shampoo she used.

I wipe the last smudges off the espresso machine. I flip a switch on the blender and nothing happens. Good, I didn't forget to unplug it. I'm terrified of fires. When I turn the lights on and off, the guy looks up, pulls his earbuds out, and quickly packs his bag. Since he's been here till closing before, he already knows to unlatch the front door to let himself out. As he's unlocking his bike, he waves through the glass as I turn the lock.

...

IT PROBABLY STARTED WITH A cigarette, how she met my father. Mom loved to smoke. She was in her first month working as a health unit coordinator at the regional hospital. Fancy way of saying secretary. She answered calls and paged specialists for the emergency room docs. She wore her black hair down, brushed over the right side of her face, to obscure her glass eye.

He came over and asked her to print him a patient sticker. He had big hands and a square jaw. As she handed him the sticker, she would have noticed the smoke clinging to him. Not to mention he still wore BDUs just like during his combat medic days. She would have sensed the phantoms of fallen men and recognized something in him. Something that lurked in her too. All of it would have worked like a love potion to draw her in.

...

A COUPLE DAYS LATER, I'M counting out Ugly/Sexy's change when my fingers slip and the money falls on the painted-concrete floor in an explosion of coins and dollar bills. As I bend over to pick it up I say, I've talked to the owner about smarter pricing so lattes and espressos come out to even amounts like three twenty-five, after tax, but either I haven't made myself clear or she's really dense, because she just nods her head and asks me if I want to work on Sunday. I don't, but I always pick up the extra shifts because being busy is easier than not and the tips from slinging espresso drinks really add up.

My face gets hot—I talk too much when I'm nervous. As I hand him his four dollars and sixty-seven cents, the change from a drip coffee and a fritter, his fingers brush mine, which are red and black around the nails from paint that won't scrub off. The warmth of his hand travels into my belly. I cannot help the dumb smile that opens up on my face, but that's okay because he smiles back.

No, no, I get it, he says.

I don't know what he gets, but he's definitely being nice. He puts the change, all of it, including the bills, into the tip jar and smiles again before going over to his table.

My eyes keep landing on him as he works. He chews on the corners of his thumbs, lost in thought, and if the light hits him right, he's almost handsome. An hour before closing he stands up and puts on his coat. Damn, I'd hoped to catch him after closing. As he's stuffing a stack of papers into a messenger bag, a couple of cards fall out. I run over and pick them up. They all say the same thing: Calvin Lawlor, B.S. M.Sc. PhD Candidate in Molecular and Cellular Biology. I hand them to him and we touch.

It feels like a sign. I'd just finished my undergrad in molecular biology when Mom died. I'd been staying with her, taking a breather before my next step. Maybe a PhD. Maybe med school. Something.

I know I shouldn't leave the counter unattended but every Romeo and Juliet story has to start somewhere and why not over a dropped business card?

...

MOM WOULD HAVE WATCHED THE combat medic for a while before finally making a move. Probably got one of the techs to give her a longer break so she could follow him through the ambulance bay doors to the place around the corner where the smokers go.

I forgot my cigarettes. Can you lend me one of yours?

You plan to give it back?

He'd snort as he handed her one. A Camel Turkish Gold. They flicked away the ash as they asked each other questions, circling like two animals, sniffing at the air. This would happen a couple more times before she finally asked him out.

Do you know why I'm telling you this? I ask Psychiatrist Three. I've been telling him stories for the past couple sessions. I haven't said anything about cows and eels.

Is it because you want to understand where you come from?

No, I want to understand my mother's rage. She never liked anyone I dated.

It sounds like she was possessive.

No, she was right, the guys I dated were assholes.

He laughs, as if on cue, and I laugh too.

Do you think the dead can be tied to you? And don't just tell me that they'll always be in our hearts.

You've never told me how she died.

Not this week, doc. Not this week.

...

I'M LEAVING THE CAFE THROUGH the back after a short early-morning shift. Calvin and I have been seeing each other for a couple of weeks. We're going to go hiking, and he's parked in the load-zone. The car is an old Volvo. I bet the car used to belong to his folks, and I bet they are nice educated people. Maybe one is a professor and the other works as an engineer or an artist. I don't know. I haven't asked and he hasn't offered and I don't want to have to dodge questions about my own upbringing so I'm happy to sit on the mystery for a bit.

Something white moves in the corner of my vision. For the past couple weeks there's been a big dog skulking around the back of the cafe. It has a heavy presence, but I never get a good look at it. Something is wrong with its face. It looks dangerous, especially when it tears into the garbage bags to steal half-eaten sandwiches and old pastries that didn't sell. Crows caw and squawk as they eye the trash the dog throws around. They don't land until the dog has its fill.

I glance to my left and sure enough, it's that dog trotting around the dumpster. It leaves a wake of cold air that pulls at the skin of my arm. Goosebumps. I hug my arms to me. When I get into Calvin's car, I'm glad air-conditioning isn't on.

He drives us to a trail outside of town that follows a stream until it becomes switchbacks scaling a small mountain. It is early fall and this high up, the air is crisp and cold. When we reach the stone-topped peak, Calvin pulls a thermos from his backpack. I ask him if it's Irish coffee and he presses his lips together and shrugs, embarrassed-like.

Sorry, it's just home-made chai. I didn't think about bringing whiskey.

He cares enough about what I want that he's sorry he brought me something he made himself and this makes me a little sad. I kiss his cheek and whisper, I love chai.

But what I'm really thinking is I'm glad I don't have to get drunk to get close to someone. Those other two boyfriends both began with lots of empty bottles and sour breath and ended with me burying my head into Mom's shoulder, breathing in her perfume and smoke and the scent of warm skin. She had this refrain, this thing she said to me from the time I was small to make me feel better.

They don't recognize you.

Calvin is holding his hand up to his face, like he can't believe my lips were just there and I want so badly to tell Mom I met someone. Someone nice. Someone ugly/sexy, just like she said I should. In the distance a black wave of birds wells up and swerves and pulses and I point at the sky and show Calvin what I see. Something in their pattern reminds me of how blood flows through a four-chambered heart.

Recognition is beautiful.

...

MOM OCCASIONALLY SPENT THE NIGHT at the former medic's place. He didn't like war movies so they watched comedies together, the dumber the better because he didn't need films to take him back to those dark places. He had a kid from a former relationship who came over on the weekends. The kid thought it was funny that Mom fed peanuts to the crows.

The former medic didn't ask her about her glass eye and she didn't ask him about the scar on his abdomen. She liked to lick it during sex even as it made him grimace. He didn't wear a condom because he believed her when she said she was on the pill.

...

I TELL CALVIN LOTS OF things, especially when we're in bed. I want to go back to school. I want to open my own cafe. I want to feed people food that I've crafted and formed so it will become part of them, leave a trace. I tell him the reason I drink French mineral water is because France used to be under the sea and isn't it a beautiful thought that the dissolved shells of ancient sea creatures can become the lattice of your bones?

Why don't you tell me something about your childhood, he asks.

Calvin doesn't know Mom is gone. We're still in that phase where we are actively trying to get to know each other and just about anything we say to one another is like a hit of an intoxicant. I feel like I've been carrying around a hot stone in my stomach for the past month and I know I'll have to tell him, soon, but not tonight. I take a sip of wine. It is cheap and tastes of yeast, acid and wood.

Okay, so when I was ten, I tell him, Mom rented this trailer on a decent-sized lot. Eggs were one of my favorite foods so she got some chickens to save money. One day I came home from school and the chickens were all in the coop clucking and looking cramped. They'd be happier running around, I thought, so I let them out. What I didn't know was that Mom had just spent like forty minutes putting them into the coop. She was working this bakery job, one of the many shitty jobs she's had over the years. Anyway, she comes out of the screen door—I know it was a screen door because I remember how it squeaked on its hinge and then made this banging sound when it closed. That was all the warning I had before she was running at me, yelling about the goddamn chickens. She tried to kick me, she was so mad. I ran really fast and she couldn't catch me. I finally put enough distance between me and her to risk turning around. You should have seen her face. Her eye got real big and her hair was wild and crazy. And then you know what I did? I stuck my tongue out.

My Dad would've whooped me, if I ever stuck my tongue out at him. What did your mom do?

She turned around and went inside.

Wait, you got away with it?

No, she got me back by putting eggshells in my sheets. Lots of them.

...

THE THING ABOUT WORKING SOMEWHERE like a hospital where people don't have regular schedules, is that it would have taken a while to know someone

was gone, that they hadn't just switched weekends, or been working opposing days. But eventually the combat medic would have figured it out.

Did Mom wait until she was showing to disappear or was she gone long before that?

...

CALVIN MEETS ME AT THE cafe at the end of my shift. He's wearing a sport coat with arm patches.

So, you're practicing the professor look?

We had a department poster session today.

Someone puked in the restroom today. I got to clean it up.

There was a keg at the poster session, I hope it wasn't one of the other grad students.

I laugh because when I'm with Calvin I don't feel too shitty about just making coffee and not applying to schools, while he's doing gene therapy. I was wrong about his parents. His dad worked at a soda-filling plant before he died of cirrhosis and his mom is a home health aide. The Volvo isn't his, but his roommate's. One night not long after I'd revealed that Mom was gone, I told him that her life before me is like a gaping blackness. He says he feels the same about his dad. When you're little you don't ask questions because your parents surround you and are without limit. Then when you're old enough to start to see the edges, you don't know how to form the questions. He understands how it feels to just now be learning how to ask, but in their deaths, our parents have robbed us of the answers.

...

PSYCHIATRIST THREE IS GENTLE, LIKE I imagine you have to be if you're someone who breaks horses or if you work at a kill shelter. Animals know. I think of that white dog from the alley behind the cafe and wonder if that might be where it ends up. I don't say any of that, but when the thought makes my eyes water, he hands me a box of Kleenex and doesn't ask me what's wrong. See what I mean? He's gentle.

Three weeks ago we began to taper my meds. Sometimes I'm not sure I want the chemical veil lifted, because everything is still too bright and sharp but I trust him. In his expert opinion, I'm just very sad, not delusional.

...

I'M SITTING IN THE FRONT row of a big auditorium for Calvin's thesis talk. My period is late and I cannot stop thinking about it. Even though I can't really know, I know. A thrill runs through me, both sides sharp and almost painful: love and terror.

After the talk, Calvin is going out to drink with his friends and classmates. I tell him I have a headache because that seems easier than having to explain why I don't want to drink on his big night. As he walks away from me and out of the auditorium, I hope he turns around to wave, to share a look, something. He doesn't.

My heart is pounding and heat floods my head. I'm pissed that Calvin is leaving without me, even though I told him to. What an asshole. In that moment, just to the side, there is a flash of long black hair, but when I look, there is no one there. How strange because just a moment before, the room had been so full of people. A thought creeps into my head—Calvin, please don't run into any animals tonight.

...

MAYBE I HAD IT ALL wrong. Maybe the former medic was one who left and it was Mom who came to that slow realization after a couple weeks, after picking up extra weekend shifts and finally going to one of the other techs and making small talk. Did he find a new job?

The woman who existed before me is mysterious and feral. I can imagine her running through the forest barefoot, wild hair loose and tangled, with her swelling abdomen pressing against her t-shirt. A goddess. And somehow this goddess became Mom, who washed black licorice down with drip coffee. No matter where we lived, she always had a jar of licorice and a coffee maker.

...

THE NEXT COUPLE OF WEEKS I'm foggy and tired and my back aches when I work. During slow moments at the cafe, I stare at my phone and scroll through photos of houses for sale. Some of the staged homes have a room set up as a nursery: crib and changing table, floppy-eared plush-animal with soft eyes, initials on the wall, all crafted to tempt potential buyers with the promise of a good life, a life on the cusp of unfolding and leading to ever greater happiness and fulfillment.

...

I TELL THE PSYCHIATRIST THAT I might be pregnant.

How does that make you feel? He asks.

I'm glad I'm off the medications.

Is there a father?

I look at him. Is he making a joke? I say, of course there is.

He smiles and I realize he *is* making a joke. Well, in part. And that is why I like him. Shrink Number Two would have just told me to stay on my meds, offered me a big dose of folic acid, and said she wasn't worried about birth defects.

But I am. I remember the stories Mom used to tell to scare me when I was in elementary school—mythological tales of goddesses and warriors and three-headed monsters. Images I still see when I close my eyes, images I try to capture on canvas. I worry about growing a baby with three hearts, each filled with a serpent who will grow up to eat the world.

...

IT'S BEEN A FEW WEEKS since Calvin's thesis talk. I'm at work when he texts and asks to meet at the end of my shift. Writes that he *has* to see me. Whatever that means. He's been busy a lot recently with phone interviews and meetings and we haven't seen each other much the last week. I keep picking up extra shifts, while I can. I tell the other barista I have to go to the bathroom. I always thought that this peeing business was a late pregnancy thing, but it turns out my growing womb sits low during the first trimester and pushes on the bladder. In the stall, I scroll through more real estate nurseries. What does he want to talk about?

After Calvin shows up, we go out the back of the cafe. He looks down at his feet and asks me if I'm mad at him. I shake my head.

You've been acting weird. Distant. You didn't want to celebrate with me after my defense. What's wrong?

You're the one who didn't look at me.

What are you talking about? As he says this, his eyebrows arc like two question marks. A cool breeze brushes over my arms and I shiver. I think of cows and eels and suddenly I'm so afraid.

Across the alley, that dog is there futzing with the trash, like usual. But today it seems to grow bigger, towering over the dumpster, standing as high as a street lamp. The dog growls so low that I feel it vibrating my bones. For the first time I get a good look at its face—one side is so scarred the eye looks sewed up.

The dog lowers its head. A quick lunge and it clamps down on Calvin's shoulder. I scream. It doesn't really feel like screaming, more like channeling. Rage and fear and confusion and so much wraps up on itself and tumbles out of my lips. The dog stops and looks at me, all dripping and frothing and tight like a spring, teeth red with dark blood. Calvin makes a sound like an animal and his eyes roll back in his head. Everyone has a layer of fat under the skin, and that fat is bright yellow.

I grab the dog's neck. It writhes and squirms and becomes all manner of vicious things—a giant scorpion, an endless wasp, a great reptile. It gets so hot it burns my hands and still I don't let go. I know that smell of charred skin, and nausea wraps around my throat. I close my eyes and squeeze my hands. Something cracks like breaking wood, and when I open eyes I see the dog again, but now its body is limp and I have no idea why. Then I see its hind leg almost turned inside out and Calvin is standing next to me with a chunky piece of concrete in his good hand, something he found in the alley. It clatters as it hits the asphalt.

I thought it could kill you, he says, and with his uninjured arm pulls my body into his.

On three legs the dog stutters away. I swear it looks back at me with its good eye and winks.

...

THAT NIGHT I DREAM THAT Mom is sitting at the kitchen table. She is tremendously aged. Her hair is white and the skin on her face hangs like silk curtains. That white hair is brushed over her glass eye.

Do you know me?

Of course I do.

A yawning ache opens in me and I reach out, desperate to feel her arms, smell her smell, but instead of rising to meet me, Mom motions to the plaster cast on her leg as a way of explanation. Outside the kitchen window there is a long road. A wave of crows rise up above a herd of black cattle.

Good, I'm glad you recognize me.

I ask her where she's been, but when she opens her mouth, an eel swims out.

...

PSYCHIATRIST THREE ASKS ME ABOUT the scar on my arm. I don't know how he knows.

I scraped it off with a razor, I tell him. See, when I answered the phone that day, I couldn't take my eyes of that stupid mole.

Why did you scrape it off?

Maybe in destroying it, I'd excise the memories of what came next. Anyway, aren't you the one who is supposed to be analyzing me?

What came next? His voice is very small, just the right size.

I swallow and say, there was a doctor on the phone. She told me my mother had been in an accident at home. A fire. She wouldn't be transferred to a bigger hospital because of some sort of burn score. Too high. Not survivable. Better come fast.

The way she looked…grey skin, taut skin, dry skin. Her beautiful black hair mostly gone but for a patch singed up to her scalp. Her glass eye had fallen further into the socket and her other eye was red and glazed. They'd given her something for cyanide poisoning that made her eye red, that's what the nurse told me. The smoke was poisonous. The worst was the smell. Burned hair and melted plastic and charcoal. She moaned a little in between doses of morphine and I wanted to hold her hand but was afraid I'd hurt her.

In the psychiatrist's office the air feels too thick and I slump off the couch. My body is water falling over stones and the linoleum is so cold as I kneel down and cry. The psychiatrist gets out of his chair and sits down on the floor across from me.

I tug on my hair and say, I washed my hair three times to erase the smell.

The psychiatrist swallows and grabs a tissue. Not for me, but for himself and somehow this strikes me as the most selfless thing he could do.

My voice is phlegmy as I say, I gave up and cut it all off and threw it into the river, where it flowed away from me in big, black crescents. It looked like birds in the air.

People fall asleep smoking all the time, and trailers burn up pretty fast. That's what the fire investigator said. It probably started with a cigarette.

…

A WEEK LATER, CALVIN STIRS and groans and I watch him from my side of the bed. I ask after his shoulder and he smiles crookedly and says, Who knew a good date could involve rabies shots?

I tell him I'm pregnant and his lip trembles. I realize he's scared so I tell him I'm scared too. He asks how far along. A couple months, I say.

His hand is hot and sweaty when he lifts my shirt and touches me below the navel. It's hard to believe there's really something inside, he says. I tell him I've got an appointment for an ultrasound later that week.

At the clinic, we both gape as the technician pushes an ultrasound wand into my belly. The way Calvin stares at the screen, his ugly/sexy face full of wonder and awe, I know he's not an asshole, not even a little bit. I grab his hand and we watch that tiny little fish with a single, fluttering heart.

What I'll never say to anyone, not Calvin, not the psychiatrist, nobody, is this: I'm haunted by big white dogs, cool gusts of air, cows and eels. A boy who crosses me will find himself at the bottom of the water with a cold, white hand stuffing an eel into his throat. My mother's rage is vertical and that's the thing about making a child—your character is spun into theirs. It is the private exposed, the worst sides of you, and some of the best, all of it let loose, taking shape outside of you, running around and sticking its tongue out in a flash of white milk teeth.

L.A. JOHNSON

Hidden River

The river slow
a hillside's injury
we tumble over
between dark meadows
his hands loosen
on the flashlight
goldenrod leaves fall
across hidden water
like sutures spiked
across my pelvic
bone the flashlight
casts gold light
on mosquitos wild
boundary of goldenrod
threats thrust in
cold water like
days-later police shining
doubt like flashlights
cold questions unfold
my dress gold
like sutures covering
my injury-body the
dress almost off
under flashlight glare
flashlight a detective
between my thighs
dress pulled up
over thighs meadow
with memory buried
goldenrod pressed
below my wet thighs
the flashlight vision
gold like god's

on wild boundary
with goldenrod smashed
pelvic bone meadow
gold before and
after the questions
I can’t answer
yes the meadow
with goldenrod *no*
memory of river
no way out

MARY KURYLA

Repair

YOU STINK. A PUTRID STINK you cannot get rid of. You, stinker, are in high white risk of culling. Your classmates pinch their pert noses, so they won't smell you. Not one will look at you. If not for your stink, you might not exist. Gray meatloaf fades on your plate. Your carton of milk weeps the surface of your lunch tray. Before you a blasé wall of pastel blouses. How will you survive if barred from the lunchroom round table? You must think, and quickly. Better yet, do not think, sniff. Yes, but deeper. Inhale. That's it, inhale, inhale, you're good at sniffing things out. Is it your blouse? The chartreuse two percent polyester long sleeve blouse with the clown collar that your mother bought you, is this what stinks? Today you wear the blouse, anyway, pleased in a closeted sort of way with its tones of duckweed and pond moss and how the outrage of color and clownish collar disturbs the subdued hues and kittenish collars of the blouses worn by your classmates. But it is not the blouse. Do not blame the blouse for the stink. Your blouse is only a pretext. Wake up! Just days ago, those same girls clung to each other in pews, wincing at you across your father's coffin. It is the decay of death that causes the girls of the round table to pinch their noses. Your father's dying somehow got on you.

Perhaps comprehending that you are the unfathered wobbling impala sacrificed so the silly herd survives requires an older self.

I am that. You, at 52. Hello!

Can you hear me?

...

IT WAS PROMISED TO ME. That you would hear me, in time even see me. Or would the better word be envision? Whatever the word, it isn't happening. Yet. Only the common talk of eleven-year-olds fills your earholes. Take for example this thin number mincing toward you. This is Willa and Willa's tenancy at the round table is also flimsy. She hovers before where you now sit solo.

"You stink," Willa says, "is the thing." Irises behind Willa's tinted eyeglasses blacking in the slick unbraided head.

The smell is repellant but, now that you inhale, really not so bad. You wonder if the smell shuffled like a somnambulant under the chartreuse threads of your blouse all along. Each inhalation blooms the sacks of your lungs that have so collapsed around your heart.

You don't watch Willa mince off. Your eyes are only for the girls of the round table now skirting the dessert table. You spot an opening in the blouses, picture the wild dash back into the fold, hone the icebreaker that will chop up their cruel nonsense. But there is no wild dash in you. You contemplate your meatloaf.

Sad, child?

"No, you fuck," you say, forking up meatloaf, "not sad."

You hear me! You *do* hear me. You even look over at me. Do you see me, too? Here, in the chair beside you?

Your eyes look through me. You pick your nose. That is why you turned your head toward me. Not because you can see me, but so that no one would see you. You study the hot bitter snot on your nail.

Okay, you do not see me, yet, but you register my voice beneath the scent of cut grass spinning from the tractor that squares the hockey field outside the window. How can one hear a voice beneath a scent, one might ask, but you do not. For you have the gift of clear smelling, your nose is used to sniffing-out the truth that the eyes refuse to see. The lunchroom empties. You are deaf to the retreat of your classmates' feet. Too overcome with the green sound of my voice. You listen-in like a sleeper, roused by her master's voice but not awakened. You could be the somnambulant Cesare in the silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. You do not know the film, of course. But you will when you are I, your 52-year-old self, a professor at the local JC unspooling movies to business majors lagooned in your film studies class. As much as I long to do good, to seed images soaked in shadows under their eyelids, each time I project a print of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the gate scratches the negative, disturbing the surface. In wanting to do good, I do damage. In wanting to do good for you, sad child, will I do damage?

No, I do not accept it.

...

MOTHER WILL LEAVE ME — us — a trunk made of evergreen in her last will and testament. A trunk the shape of Dr. Caligari's cabinet.

You shift in your chair, wincing. You don't want to think of our mother's death, do you? Still stink-deep in coping with Father's. You too could go mad

at the thought of now losing your mother. But you do not go mad. You are too curious.

...

YOU, THE YOUNGEST OF FIVE, ten years old at your father's death, and a hundredfold dope to count on a mother to take your hand and guide you along the path of grieving. Instead she weaves you through the aisles of the local department store to the sales rack to select a blouse to wear for your father's funeral. Black blouses hang hopefully from the picked-over rack, but your mother does not go for black. She offers you a choice of short sleeve or long sleeve in chartreuse, all with an outsized collar.

"Can't I wear this?" you ask, fingering the sleeve of a black silk, thinking how hard you will be to make out from the other mourners. Your classmates will never spot you.

"Black is not practical. Better a color you can wear again with your uniform." She chose the long sleeve. "The nuns make the rules, not me."

When you got home, you hid the chartreuse blouse deep beneath the skinny belts in your mother's trunk (did your clairalient nose detect the algae that would eventually scent the threads?) Then you, too, hid in the trunk.

To wait for the sound of your mother's voice to plead with you to come out.

Sunlight spilled beneath the lid of the trunk until it wet your nose. The trunk ebbed into night. At each tick of a bedside clock, so tight, so dark, you longed to leap out, but you stayed folded up in the trunk, a tight fit even then, an ear always out for your mother's pleas. Come morning, the bedside clock ticked time to go to the funeral. Siblings ransacked the house in search of you. They located you in the trunk, hauled you out, plugged your arms into the chartreuse sleeves of the blouse. You spat back like a heated cat.

Never to hear the coax of your mother's voice on the other side of the trunk. Even Cesare got to hear Dr. Caligari commanding him to rise up and do his evil will.

Now, at 52, you'd think that time hidden in your mother's trunk would prepare you for the only item your mother will leave to you in her will. But nothing could prepare you for this trunk.

Your siblings, who will inherit like bandits, paid a sum to have the trunk delivered to you. No hard feelings. The trunk is old, hand painted, from Germany. Gates to the underworld decorate the lid. The gates guarded by white and black Airedales in repose.

...

I ASSURE YOU, CHILD, THAT when I opened the lid of the trunk, I expected only that breeding ball of Mother's skinny belts to be inside. But the trunk was empty, except for a set of instructions written in Mother's hand: *The trunk was handed down to me by my mother, and I planned to hand it down to you. But I needed a place to put my skinny belts. I don't need skinny belts where I'm going. The trunk's all yours.*

Mother had written this note on a yellowed envelope, the print scratched and afterthoughtish. Inside the envelope was a second note.

Daughter,

At the right time and for the right reason, this trunk may be used to puncture time. If there was one of my children who will need to travel back and repair damage, it is likely you. Besides, only you inherited the family gift of clear smelling, which is how the trunk happens to travel, along the transparent particles of scent.

To puncture time, daughter, follow these instructions:

Stand the trunk upright.

Step inside (trunk expands).

Close the lid (takes guts).

Allow the sole smell that most insists.

PRETTY SPOOKY STUFF, I CAN tell you. How could I follow such instructions? Absurd to even consider it. On the other hand, I could not deny a keen need to fix this thing I call my life. I mean, no one can clear the faculty lounge at the JC quite like yours truly. I've tried applying lavender oils and rose oil under my arms. My friendlessness has made me reckless. I'd been thinking of doing myself in. Could I use the trunk to repair the original point of my expulsion from the roundtable? Would that stop the wheel of expulsion I could not seem to get off at 52? The smell of pond water insisted, wearing down my resistance. I stood the trunk upright and folded inside, prepared to leap, even as the trunk expanded to accommodate me, and quickly. I drew the lid down onto myself, which is guts, and lay against the pungent darkness of evergreen, the trunk's former skinny inhabitants writhing faintly beneath me. I panicked. How, exactly, was I going to help my younger self repair the damage? Would I command her to take bold, even immoral action? I'd soon find out because there was no stopping now. Already —

The sound of a voice.

Was Mother poised at last outside the trunk like Dr. Caligari, the fiendish

hypnotist? She intoned:

Smell. Fill your nose.

Inhale.

Inhale.

Airedales! Fold back your gates. Let in the lady.

The stink that fills your nose now is the stink that filled my nose inside the trunk at 52. The trunk spun, but I remained fixed, as if sitting solo in the faculty lounge, where I watched the wind stir the yellow leaves of a black walnut outside the window, thinking how when I was your age, ten going on eleven, the world and time stood still. Only my doings ticked time forward. But now at 52, I am the one who is still. Time ticks past me now. Film is time.

Remember how Mother told us that at any point in a film anything could happen? Arrive early or late, no matter, we still took a seat in the theater, the magic lantern burning behind our heads.

The yellow leaves of the black walnut outside the window color the mossy blouse worn by a girl I once was. The girl clenching a tray of meatloaf outside a round lunchroom table of other girls in restrained pastel blouses, knitted together in thought and opinion, pert noses pinched tight against the chartreuse, against the girl whose sock lost elastic, whose hair spurts a nest. Whose stink insists.

...

SEEING YOU, MY YOUNG SELF, like this, I reconsider why I have come to this point in time. Perhaps it is not the selfish act I imagined, an attempt to repair a mistake that might now ease my life. Perhaps I have come to offer you succor. How can solace do damage?

...

YOU, SITTING NOW SOLO IN the lunchroom. A couple dishwashers stare out at you from the window where your classmates kindly dump their cutlery and run. A worker circles your feet with a mop. You don't see the dishwashers or the worker with the mop any more than you see me. But you will see me eventually. But in your own way, through scent or sound, if not exactly sight.

The worker's mop stops. She leans in, sniffs you. Covers her nose. Cuts a noisy gag. She backs out of the lunchroom, slowly, placatingly, as if you might blow.

She will be back. With nuns.

You look right at me now.

But your face shows no recognition of your older self, seated right beside you. Your uneasy brow creases. Is there not enough familiar about the voice, the friendless lavender of the older you?

You listen, and quietly, to my explanation of how I used the trunk to puncture time and appear before you now. Of Mother's prescient facilitation of this miracle. Of how the trunk traveled on the memory of stink particles. You smile at that last bit. You even nod with interest at the trunk, which you now see resting on the lunchroom floor beside me, which I can't help but compare to Dr. Caligari's cabinet. Your eyes glint as I tell of Caligari commanding the somnambulant Cesare to rise up and commit atrocious acts.

Think of my voice as the voice of Mother, the sound of solace that you sorely need.

"But you're not Mother," you say. "You're worse. You're nothing but my older me come back to make me feel better, solaced, whatever. I don't need solace. No, I just need to fix things with Willa. Now."

You startle up from your chair as if from sleep and bolt from the lunchroom.

Your vacated chair settles. Drip drip dripping onto the silent linoleum. Water puddles beneath the seat. You have gone but, curiously, the stink has not. It is this puddle that stinks of pond. Of moss and duckweed.

Hold up! Don't do anything rash! But it's stupid to try. I cannot change the past, and anyway, you do not look back. For you have already done something rash, haven't you? Dripping wet and stinking of pond all along. No wonder your classmates barred you from the round table.

Nothing to do but step back into the trunk and try again (stupid as it is to try, there must be something I can do. Why else would Mother give the gift of puncturing time?)

An hour before this point in time. When anything can still happen, like in those movies that your mother will soon take you to. Yes, much to your surprise in the coming weeks, your mother will drop your siblings off at the school curb, but she won't drop you. She will keep you for the movies. The two of you will watch several in a day, stepping into the evergreen darkness of the movie theater, too early and too late, your mother getting found in the time where your father was lost. Time stops for you and your mother in the movies. Lulled by the stink of corn syrup and cum, pungent as pond water. Until the day your mother drops you back at school again. Though you will plea for just one more movie, she will blink as if waking from a dream, puncture another hole in her skinny belt

and say, I have stopped movies. But you will not stop movies. You will keep watching one after another, down to the most pungent images in onliest films that repel even your colleagues, the same colleagues who will bolt up from the faculty lounge table the moment you reach for a seat. Only your mother beside you in the evergreen darkness, whispering in your ear.

Draw the lid shut and the trunk spins.

...

THE SUN IS HIGHER IN the sky, the final period before lunch. Your classmates tumble onto the field, the clack of hockey sticks already echoing across the green.

You are allowed to retrieve the ball. Not to play, not to cheer, not even to sit out Phys Ed in the library. You pointedly ignore me, here once again beside you. One quick and rabid scrimmage, and the ball whisks high off the field. Your eyes trace the arc of the ball. Already your feet are in a dead run after the ball straight down the low meadow to the chartreuse-colored pond. But there is Willa. Equally shunned by your classmates, she keeps pace with you, now zooms ahead after the ball. You pick up speed. It must be you who returns the ball to the girls in kilts on the field. How else will they forgive, even a little, the sin of your father's ill-timed demise?

Willa is quick for a four-eyed. She belts around the yellow hedge that borders the pond. When you round the hedge, plotting to punt Willa off the path of the ball, Willa is not there. Only the pond is (strange, I recall it much bigger). Algae prim and stinky, the smooth reflective surface is repellant with concentric rings ripping out from the middle. Now a bubble scratches the surface and bursts.

Is it Willa, gulping below the surface? She must have plunged in for the ball. Willa is drowning. You step into the pond. In the squelch, your foot dislodges the ball from where it caught in the shoreline ferns. You pick up the ball. Inhale it in wonder. You look up. Another bubble gulps at the surface. Is that a hand spouting from the reeds? You hear the dear sound of hockey girls cursing on the other side of the hedge. How pleased they will be to have their ball. To get on with the game. The nuns are such nuisances to only allow them one. You ease your foot out of the muck. Though the suck scent is strong. You step toward the hockey girls.

Stop! Turn back. You must go into the water. Not to pull Willa out. Oh no, on the contrary, to ensure she stays under. Making sure that Willa drowns is an atrocious act, to be sure, but one that will induce terror in your classmates.

If not love, then awe.

You hear me. It's in your face. You glare at the ball, resigned to do my evil will. Then you pitch the ball straight at me. Bad throw. The ball bumps along the meadow as you puncture the water. So, all that was just pretense? You never intended to obey my commands? Apparently not. You slap through algae, trailing moss, to sink into the pond, flailing under the muck to rescue Willa. Intent on doing the decent thing, all along.

You rise up from the depths, bedecked in duckweed and throwing off moss. You have not brought up Willa. Silt films your mad red orbs. You spit, gutsy, at the hockey girls who wince at you from the hedge.

Truth is Willa isn't in the pond, never was. But you didn't know and so had to go into the pond, I cannot change the past, and anyway going in was the right thing to do. So was trying to save Willa. I see that now. What's more, I sense possibilities I did not pick up on then. Though no girl will utter it, they all fear you have tried to take your own life. You can smell the fear on the hockey girls. Or you might have smelled it if your nose had not been stuffed with pond water. And maybe even in this I am wrong. Maybe, you did register the girls' fear of you in that moment and you converted the fear into awe. Yes, I see that now because after that you stopped trying to get a seat at the round table, no matter how much the girls begged you to sit amongst them. After all, it had never been your stink that barred you from the round table but your wildness.

I had forgotten that. It's good to remember. Maybe I can even use it in the faculty lounge.

Your clumsy intrusion mired the perfect surface of the pond that day. In trying to do good, you do damage. But maybe damage is okay. Maybe damage is the point, what must be risked, damage after damage, the film through the gate, again and again, viewing upon viewing, from different points in time, at different vantage points.

After all, it's I who needs repair, not you. You made repair that day, didn't you, when you went looking for Willa, further down in the meadow, who keeps looking for the ball.

LARA PALMQVIST

Old Tjikko

IN A GLASS SIDEBOARD IN my aunt's St. Paul home, nestled among silver framed portraits of my stern-faced ancestors, sits a red velvet satchel containing a few handfuls of coarse-grained sand. The satchel is sewn shut to serve as a pincushion—something neat and domestic, a tool for mending. The sand within was snatched from the coast of Malmö nearly 150 years ago by my great-great-grandmother, Augusta, just before she and her husband boarded a ship that would bring them to America. The sand is contained now, kept within cloth within cabinet, no longer part of a beach but part of a family narrative. Or perhaps it is part of both, for even in stillness the crumbled, sea-churned rock evokes its origins: the cry of seabirds, the shush of stones drawn out from shallows, the crash of white-lipped waves rushing up to touch two thin shoes about to embark on an unfathomable journey.

You can cling to sand, but still the ocean will pull it away. Perhaps this is what Augusta thought over a century ago as she stooped and gripped the wet, shifting rock in her fist. Perhaps she found it unbearable that in such a moment her home could be reduced to what she could hold in her hand. Or perhaps she found it liberating, a cold wind whipping at her eyes, making them stream or giving an excuse for the streaming. Perhaps she looked at the interminable ocean and believed the coast of Malmö might extend all the way to America—might in fact be the very same shore.

In truth Augusta's sand, her piece of home, already held attachments to many elsewheres. Who can say where each grain originated before settling upon Sweden's shores? What volcanic eruption, mudslide, ice age, or shuddering whims of the earth first set the larger rocks in motion and ground them down? What barnacled sea creatures once brushed against the same silicate fragments? What other animals—ancient, unknowable—once touched the very grains Augusta happened to grasp? This history and prehistory, this great genealogy, she also held in her hand. It still resides in the pincushion: a velvet satchel, an uncommon seed.

...

LAND ICE FOR MILES, GROOVED into waves by the wind. Sinuous snow depositions texture the valley, dented and glistening. Rugged mountains hunch

along the distant horizon. Cantilevered ice shelves collapse and reach skyward, forming cathedrals of rock and rime. Clouds hover above the landscape, first white wisps, later vanishing; they return curdled with snow. Hard drifts heap up, tall enough to conceal monolithic stone. Ice spreads until the edges of the oceans sink and still. Glaciers build and grind past, carving cliffs and dropping house-sized boulders; their erratic movement pulverizes deep rock to dust, filling a thousand-acre expanse with the sounds of timpani and thunder. No interruption, only swells of snow pushing ever-outward, white folds filled with jagged ice and crenulated stone. Flakes fall from the sky, softening the glassy ground. Winter's dark lid descends; the ice turns purple and smooth-skinned. Summer arrives, thousands of times: cold, dizzyingly white, and secretive. The sun shines all the way to the edge of the world.

...

MORE THAN A CENTURY AFTER Augusta completed her journey to America, I boarded a plane and charted a far more forgiving course to Sweden, uncertain of whether I was leaving home or returning to one—a place of ancestral origin, where I'd never been before, but from which I'd undeniably come. I was traveling to Sweden to attend a yearlong graduate program at Uppsala University on full scholarship, the opportunity of education made all the more meaningful by the chance to live in a country with significant family heritage. Although Uppsala is situated farther north from where Augusta lived, it's likely that other relatives once resided in the city. My uncle, a historian, was using his recent retirement to trace family history and genealogy. Sometimes the discoveries he shared washed over me, failing to hold gravitas, just names and lives so far removed from my own it was difficult to grasp their reality. The portraits were of a taxing existence: a bear attack, war enlistments, the remarriage of a distant ancestor whose first wife drowned in a river. According to my uncle, this first wife had been washing clothes along the riverbank when her young son wandered into strong currents and was swept away; in trying to save his life, she also lost her own. This, at last, held my attention. I couldn't help but consider the consequences of the incident, how an entire limb of my family tree branched outward from the ensuing second marriage, now outlined in my mind by the ghost of what almost wasn't—had that child not fallen into fierce rapids, had that first wife not drowned, I myself would never have been born.

Perhaps the boy slipped on a moss-slick rock. Perhaps the furious movement of the fateful river had, over time, broken down that selfsame stone. Perhaps one of the stone's fragments contributed a grain to the handful of sand that

now resides in the pincushion in my aunt's St. Paul home. Perhaps that small boy, that broken branch, there and elsewhere lives on.

...

A TRICKLE. A TINY STREAM. Then more: frigid rivers tumbling and multiplying, cutting through steep banks of snow. Icicles drip tears, slow at first, then with building urgency. The sun draws a bead on the ice and fractures its slick surface, letting more pewter water flow free. By day, melt streams open yet more seams in the surface of glaciers; bandaged by night's coolness, they later seal shut again, healing. Avalanche chutes rumble in the mountains, forming blue, sluicing channels. Icefall leads to thaw. Another page turns in Earth's book, introducing new characters. Martins, minks, and long-tailed weasels dash past on unknowable missions. A glint of green unfolds beneath a fringe of ice. Crusts of snow recede and diminish. New slipperiness, new speed. Torrents of water pour forth from a glacial toe. The sound of sloshing resounds for centuries.

...

IN UPPSALA I ADOPTED A slower pace of thinking and living, a rhythm that matched the Fyris River that purled through the center of the city, decorated with squat houseboats and majestic ferries that charted a course to Lake Mälaren, Stockholm, and the Baltic Sea beyond. With its cobblestone streets and soaring cathedral, its neat storefronts and riding paths and cafés lit by lamps, Uppsala invited my mind to wander into the past. The University itself seemed to exist outside the usual clamor of modernity, its stone-columned buildings and 19th century Carolina Rediviva Library wrapped in a studious hush.

Although Uppsala has a population of only 170,000, it is the fourth largest city in Sweden, a country in which 97 percent of the land remains uninhabited. This situation encouraged my feeling that Uppsala's parks and public forests were not so much within the city, but that the city was instead a small island within one great and nameless forest that belied any notion of boundaries, rolling uninterrupted all the way up to Swedish Lapland and the Arctic Circle. My one room student apartment was a red-sided, white-trimmed fleck within this vast expanse, my backyard quite literally limitless—under Sweden's Everyman's Right, any concept of trespassing is diminished; so long as a traveler leaves wide the gate that was open, securely fastens that which was shut, and respectfully minds personal property, law dictates they are allowed to stay on any parcel of land for

up to 24-hours. Yet I hardly wanted to stay; I walked for miles, wandering new landscapes in both consciousness and place, my physical movements limited only by my ability to map my position in my mind.

Student orientation at the university included troubling accounts of individuals who had lost their lives to the forest, some by unwittingly sampling poisonous mushrooms, others by trusting cellphone GPS to help them navigate only to have their batteries die among dense groves of Scots pine, silver birch, and briery undergrowth. This was a forest that demanded respect. It did not subscribe to the notion that human ease should be prioritized; it would make no adjustments on my behalf. Every trip into such wilderness was tinged by awe and startled humility, my sense of self at last wrought small beneath the towering trees.

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A BULL MOOSE STALKS PAST, leaving prints in the snow that are later swallowed by the sun's embrace. Tight knots of ice loosen and dissolve, drip and sigh, softening. Eider ducks form a jagged line against the white sky, tracing magnetic flight paths. Purple saxifrage bloom millennia before they are assigned a human name. Great forests now grace the valley, curvaceous and quiet, their drooping needles like blue-green smoke. In the proper season, raw cones appear: ripening, swelling, browning. Plummeting to ground. A turn in the cycle, another revolution, and a lone seed lands among a cluster of lichen-dusted boulders. The mossy ground hums with pleasure. New roots push downward as if driven by pistons. A leggy hare, intent on the barely-there sprout of wintergreen sweetness, is chased away at the last moment by the musky rush of a molten-eyed fox. Wind rearranges the batting of clouds. The sun spreads shattered light. Tended by slick kettle ponds scoured out by ancient glaciers, a single green sapling bursts forth in quiet ceremony.

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THE FORESTS IN SWEDEN FELT timeless. Time folded and bent backward as I walked along the compactly wooded trails, rarely seeing another human being, though occasionally spotting hoof and paw prints pressed into the soft ground that would later freeze overnight, coming to resemble chocolate moulds decorated with bright red lingon berries. In the absence of human noise a hush arose, soft and momentous—a quiet murmuring that seemed a chorus of cyclical movement: the gentle straining of sentinel pines accepting

sunlight that broke through dense cloud cover, old stumps joyfully crumbling inward, a spray of delicate lavender flowers appearing one spring day among moldering leaves left in winter's wake.

When walking the streets of any city, I like to imagine what the land might have looked like 200 years ago, or 500—a time before the tidal force of industry and asphalt coated the terrain, cranking up the temperature of the world. Yet when I performed this same exercise of imagination in the forest surrounding Uppsala, I envisaged nearly the same scene I was already viewing. As long as I didn't glance down at my scotchlight-brightened running shoes, my surroundings might as well have been the same or similar to what my ancestors once viewed—only they would have read the world differently, with the deeper intimacy that surely comes from depending upon knowledge of the land to survive.

The spruce and pine trees of the forest stretched toward vaulted sky, their gnarled bodies achingly old, having stood at attention through several centuries of world history. Long-rooted to their particular plots, they were already well-established and diligently growing at the moment of my arrival on earth. They had been there in the same instant Augusta stooped low and buried her hands in the sand before she departed for America. They were there throughout her childhood in Kristianstad, there in the moment she uttered her vows to John Lindstrom in March 1882 in Malmö. They were there when Augusta first understood her body contained blood, when she took her first steps, when she spoke her first word, when she was born, when her mother was born. They were already tall, alive and quick-growing, when that first wife dove into the river to save her small boy and both drowned among the silver-bright rapids. Writes Ralph Waldo Emerson in his poem, "The River": *I feel as if I were welcome to these trees / after long months of weary wandering. / Side by side, they were coeval with my ancestors, / adorned with them my country's primitive times, / and soon may give my dust their funeral shade.*

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THE BUGLES OF ELK RUSH across scraggy terrain. Storms pitch through the sky above the valley, receding and returning in improbable rhythm. The aurora borealis unfolds her green wings and hovers over a small sapling, the tree growing tall and then taller, its thin trunk kinked, branches extending like capillaries. Wind scrapes at the surrounding boulders long enough to wear them down. Earth's mantle shifts imperceptibly as the planet spins laps around the sun. Clinging fast, the tree reaches up and deep, drinking light, drinking glacial

water. Visitors arrive. A three-and-a-half ounce tern rests on one of the tree's feathered branches, having dropped from a circumpolar flightpath 20,000 feet above. Snow falls, then slinks away. Ponds deepen. A young girl with wind-burned cheeks and an elk-skin jacket approaches and glances shyly at the tree, as though glimpsing its secrets. A reindeer with protruding ribs later nibbles at its bitter green boughs. Winter eases past. Summer is a blaze of light. One afternoon a scientist with a spade and core sampler summits the nearest hill, chest heaving with exertion from his hike, eyes sweeping the open horizon. The spindly tree stands alone, guarded by a ring of boulders. The scientist feels a nudge of curiosity and unpacks his silver tools, reaches deep to read this map. Later he returns, results from the lab loud in his mind, the collar of his blue windbreaker turned up against a harsh wind. He falls to his knees, humbled. He grasps the rocky earth in his hands, gazing at this adamantine being, this ancient tree, in wonder.

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ONE OF THE OLDEST KNOWN living organisms in the world is a 16-foot Norway spruce located in Sweden's central Dalarna province. Called "Old Tjikko," the base of this clonal tree is estimated to be 9,550 years old—the product of a seed that took root at the end of the last ice age. At the time of the tree's first unfurling, the British Isles were still connected to Europe by an ice bridge and the Quaternary Extinction Event was just reaching its calamitous end, precipitating the disappearance of many of the Pleistocene megafauna: the wooly rhinoceros, the cave bear, the Irish elk, and the last of the saber-toothed cats. In this context, a single seed slipped beneath cold ground and clung fast, calling it home.

Trees have deep memory. Their exteriors bear scars that archive ancient wildfires while their interiors contain different colored bands that illustrate long-ago climatic conditions. The rings of trees can seem to ripple ever-outward, commenting on the larger world, the narrative held in one corroborated by the body of another. Such interconnectivity also extends belowground, where scientists now know root networks are intricately entwined, chemical warnings and resource stores relayed between individuals through symbiotic relationships with fungi. If a branch breaks in a forest, the surrounding trees feel the impact. It is difficult to accurately say where one tree ends and another begins.

Walking among the old-growths in Sweden, I newly registered myself as secondary to the vast organism of the forest surrounding me—not in a self-pitying or diminishing way, but in a manner that expanded my concept of identity beyond the individual, to a level of connection Emerson called "the

soul of the whole." For centuries the arterial, slow-growing trees had stood, unfolding abundant ropes of roots, expanding upward to swallow sunlight with their yawning stomata, sounding out a symphony of splitting buds and leaves colored by fluctuating chlorophyll. To think of all that the looming trees had lived through—the very topography of the land altering around them while they stood steadfast—was to be humbled in the etymological sense of the word: Humus, meaning "of the Earth." In this view, I became just another animal in a low-lit clearing, saturated with simple pleasure, drawing in mouthfuls of cold mist and earthen musk until I was filled with the forest, until I saw myself as part of it, responsible for its wellbeing as it in turn took care of me.

I came to understand that the forest, too, was my heritage and home, my own cells and bones woven into the same tapestry as its pincushion cones and emerald needles, both of us alive, both of us breathing. Yet to appreciate the intricacy of the forest was also to comprehend its vulnerability—one crucial pollinator run extinct by pollution, one blight of disease perpetuated by human-induced climate change, one flicked match, one migratory corridor deforested, and the whole masterpiece could crumple, the network falling dark. There among the deep trees, I finally grasped the full urgency of what it means that all beings are inextricably bound.

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THE PRESS OF HEAT CLAMPS down on all sides, spreading. Blades of sun quickly erase winter's important work. New buds emerge in spring, ripe and hungry. Lice dart through the rough fibers of a moose's hide. More visitors, lanky and respectful, now come often and turn wide eyes on the profile of the old tree. Lingering snow clings to every branch, insular and comforting; unseasonable temperatures snatch it away too quickly. The earth trembles in shock. Ivory birds fly in jagged arcs overhead, their dependable patterns slipping, the thickening air thrumming with the vibrations of their wings. Glaciers kneel down beneath human burden. The flanks of the seas rise with exertion while rivers swell, glinting and violent. An acrid tinge, carried from cities by persistent winds, touches upon the tree's soft needle boughs. Photographers come and crouch low, turning empty black lenses upon the tree's rugged figure. An old woman, hair the color of cloud-swept sky, places a gnarled hand on the time-scarred bark and weeps.

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ON MY LAST DAY IN Uppsala, twelve months after I'd arrived, I climbed a ridge overlooking the Fyris River, thinking again of Emerson's poem: *Here the*

blue river, / the same blue wonder that my infant eye, / admired. It was summer, the days rolling out like long green pastures when only months before they'd been encased in snow and syrupy night. I'd watched this landscape change through the full turn of a year, newly aware of how life could forever alter in a short span of time; in apprenticing myself to the forest, my own perceptions had shifted in parallel with its seasonal changes. I'd come to Uppsala for an education, not anticipating that the most impactful lessons would be delivered by moss and frost, water and coniferous trees.

Leaning against the wooden railing that edged the overlook, nothing but the everything of an open horizon ahead of me, I felt grateful to have spent extended time among Sweden's true wooded depths. Each day I'd traversed a sliver of the country's 83,000 square miles of arboreal land until the soles of my tennis shoes wore thin, until I had a sense of the land of my ancestors, until I had a sense of land as ancestor, until the forest taught me to broaden my definitions of home and history and belonging. Now the Fyris River extended below me as though a threshold I would soon cross back into my old life, an opalescent ribbon connecting out to the Atlantic, distributing silt from Sweden's shores within the same global water cycle that also contained the lake near my house in Minnesota.

An unseasonably warm wind ran its fingers through the forest behind me, kicking up the pulse of flapping leaves, shifting through wizened spruce as though in echo of Emerson's poem: *Oh, call not Nature dumb / These trees and stones are audible to me, / These idle flowers, that tremble in the wind…hath a sound more eloquent than speech*. I was leaving but would remain part of it all, alive and at once a decomposing leaf, no bigger or better than the enamel-shelled snail moving across that incredible swath of land, its whole body a foot; no less rooted and entwined than the old-growth trees. To recognize my small part within such a vast community engendered awe alongside responsibility.

Approximately 9,550 years after Old Tjikko took seed on a craggy expanse not yet claimed by any country, and about a month before defending my thesis at Uppsala University, I came across a picture of a starving polar boar circulating on the Internet. The animal's shoulder blades and hip bones were accusatory in their sharpness, the black ocean surrounding the ice floe upon which the bear stood at once burdened by human pollution and rising due to an influx of meltwater. I saw the dying bear and thought of Old Tjikko, located only four latitudinal degrees south of the Arctic Circle, its ancient roots straining toward ten millennia of existence amidst the shockwaves of the Anthropocene. The impacts of climate change are most dramatic near the poles, where the ecosystem is especially fragile and three quarters of the world's fresh water is held in glaciers and sea ice we're currently on-track to halve in two decades or

faster—an irreversible loss. It's easy to forget that what happens in the Arctic has repercussions all over the world. One slip from the stone, one irrevocable mistake, and the life and landscapes known to us are altered forever.

How quick we are to celebrate progress. How quick we are—too rushed to look back and take notice of all that's transpired before us, to see the past swimming up to shape the future. Too distracted to observe how individual actions and inactions hold sway in our collective world, as Emerson once summarized with a striking image that now reads as a caution: *The drop is a small ocean*. The essential lesson of any ecosystem is that one small change impacts the intricate interplay of our entire web of existence. This is also the story of any family, no matter how broadly familial belonging might be defined. Invisible threads tie us to untold others, some of those lines frayed, others beautifully braided, all tracing a map of mutual responsibility—telling a story of shared fate.

Without the first wife who sought to save her son, without the small boy who struggled to surface among the rapids, without the mother's love that made her dive into dangerous water, I and my more immediate relatives would not be. We the living honor them. We the living honor the lives from which we are made, and we are responsible to the future lives that will outlast us.

130 years after Augusta set sail across the Atlantic, my aunt traveled from her St. Paul home to the same beach in Malmö from which Augusta once departed. In her hand my aunt grasped a small bottle of extra sand that Augusta had set aside while sewing her pincushion. My aunt sprinkled this crushed rock, this particle history, back onto the beach. It was symbolic, she said. A way of signifying a return to our roots.

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THE OLD TREE STANDS, STARK and jagged against the open landscape. Dead limbs droop in copper brooms near its base even as its upper boughs gleam, sinuous and greenly defiant. A warm wind exhales, threading through the tree's contorted branches, causing its slim trunk to bend and flex. Hoary lichen adorns the battered armor of the tree's bark. Deep within, heartwood cells divide and die—another ring is completed. Below, ancient roots braid beneath thawed permafrost, soft shale, and loose-grained sand, each deposition marking a distinct temporal chapter. Scalloped clouds caress the corrugated faces of distant mountains. Unnamed rivers spill through fluted channels in the rock, running toward the sea. The water departs, and the water returns. In the air is the scent of rain.

SARAH HELEN

When King Midas Was Born, He Was Adorned in Gold

SOME WOMEN SWING THEIR ARMS back and forth when they walk. As if they own the world or are not afraid of it. She does not. She keeps her shoulders tucked, her head down, and her arms close to her stomach. She is quiet, nervous. She picks and pulls at herself often. Her boyfriend is different. Friendly, sturdy, corn-fed blond, from somewhere small where boys like him have heaps of potential. Where boys like him have unblemished white skin and dimples. He grew up with a football and a dog named Boomer. She grew up in a small apartment with a mom who worked long hours. They met in a restaurant. She is a server. He is a patron. She is a small bird. He is the world open.

The night it all begins is a night like many nights before. A night like many nights with her boyfriend. Dinner and television. Bed. Before sleep, sex. Not that they do it on a schedule. Not that it is mechanical. It is the sex of a couple who've been coupling for years. Practiced.

That night the room is dark and there is a rectangle of street lamp light coming in through the window. It shines on the floor. Her boyfriend is above her. His body is inside of hers. That familiar warmth. His fingers like petals above her head entwined with hers. Her heart a sinew. His back a shelter.

Then, out of nothing, comes a feeling that she's never felt before. A new alarm. The panicked certainty that the next thing she touches will wither, or crumble, or somehow come to harm.

"Wait," she says. At first, more to the feeling than to her boyfriend. Though she does try to untie her fingers from his.

He won't let her.

"Stop," she says to her boyfriend. This time, she is positive, to him. "Stop," she says again.

"But you're so close," he says.

She's not close. Not at all. But somehow, when he says it, she suddenly is. She is close to something that feels like it might be a climax or an eruption of

sorts. As if in saying it, her boyfriend has performed it. As if he has willed it into her.

She almost says stop again because he has not stopped and that troubles her, but that is when she notices the snagged, sharp sound of something ripping open. That is when the room begins to wobble, and they are transported.

Her boyfriend does not notice. At least she assumes this, as he is still above her, still going like a miner. He does not seem to see one world emerging while another recoils. He does not appear to mind as the bedroom drifts and disappears. No more curtain. No more street lamp. Only sky, or maybe it is water. Dark and blue and endless. Not beautiful. Only vast, incompressible.

Behind her is a figure. Bright, but visible only on the fringes of her vision.

"Do you smell that?" she asks her boyfriend. A smell of grapes and flowers rotten. "Do you see it?" she asks him.

Perhaps he doesn't hear her. Perhaps his senses are filled with other things. He is busy kissing her chest, flicking his tongue over her nipples, brushing his lips along her collarbone. His only response is to tighten his fingers around her own.

"I am Dionysus," the figure behind her whispers. "Tell me what you wish, and maybe I will grant it."

"Make me stronger," she says without thinking. "Make me stronger," she begs without knowing why or even what she means.

"You've got it," her boyfriend says, still oblivious to the change.

A feeling like a river rushes up inside of her. It reminds her of what it feels like to fall in a dream. It reminds her of all the times she's scratched an itch until it bled. She arches her back and thrusts her arms out gasping, finally freeing herself of her boyfriend's grasp. She knocks the lamp off the nightstand. There is something when she touches it. Something different. Something pleasant. A tingling in her fingertips. The lamp lands on the floor with a thud.

"See, I told you," her boyfriend says.

She sits up without warning and bangs her head against his. They are back in the bedroom. She is back in the bed. There is no Dionysus. There is no vast blue endless. There is only her and her boyfriend. He is sitting in front of her, rubbing his forehead, and looking wounded.

"What?" he asks, his voice defensive. As if she's scalded him.

His shock, his indignation: these go untended for the moment. She is staring at the lamp. The lamp that was on the nightstand. It landed with a thud. It landed in the rectangle of street light coming in from the window. It has turned to gold.

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AT FIRST, HER BOYFRIEND WON'T even look at the lamp or her. He's disappointed to have the sex interrupted before he could finish. He pouts and refuses to see what is right in front of him. He clings to some other reasonable explanation that remains nameless. In an attempt to win back his affection, she begins touching everything she can. The more items she turns to gold, the more he comes around, and even as the seriousness of the situation sinks in her, he makes a game of it. Sitting on their bedroom floor, he hands her item after item, takes them through a series of tests. Nitric Acid, which it turns out they can buy at Walmart. Liquid foundation, which she already has. He weighs the items in his hands, assesses out loud what each might be worth. He asks her to touch them with her various parts: fingers, toes, knees, her tongue. He wraps items in clothing, saran wrap, foil. He prods her with sheets of paper, a wedge of cheese, the novel she has only half finished.

Her gift is uncontrollable. It comes and goes like a flickering light bulb. She can touch an item, for example a bouquet of roses, a put-together puzzle, a poker chip again and again, and nothing will happen. The item will remain as it has always been. Then she may try to take a bite from her already half-eaten apple, may try to change the television channel, and suddenly she has an item preserved forever in golden splendor.

It is important, he says, that she tells no one. It is necessary that she no longer leave the apartment. It's best to keep a secret like hers as a gift and a gift like her as a secret. It's best she keep herself quiet. If anyone found out, he'd surely wake up one morning to find her kidnapped.

She is the golden goose. He is her giant.

She and her boyfriend grow temporarily closer. They revel in their new wealth. It seems that anything can be sold. The silverware, the napkins, the ketchup bottle, the succulent in the kitchen window, the Drumstick ice cream cones, countless pens, her reading glasses, her tampons, her favorite sneakers: these can all be melted down and reconstructed into blocks, or coins, or shapeless lumps. But their joy does not last long. They find that the gold cannot be sold fast enough. The buyers' blind eyes will turn only so far. And they discover that some items are not so simply solved. A desk chair, the bedroom door, the right car tire, twice the mattress, once his pillow, and then her own: these are heavy and cumbersome.

They come to have so much gold that it fills their counters and closets and cabinets and covers the floor.

Her boyfriend's excitement wanes and grows dark, as his list of annoyances lengthens. For one thing, he keeps needing to replace the remote control, and he wishes she would ask if she wants to change the channel. Sex has become impossible. As has touch, in general. To say it dead level, her boyfriend realizes he too is susceptible, that he too might turn to gold. He won't sleep with her, or stand too close, or even let her pet Boomer the Third.

Her own trajectory is opposite. There is in her at first resentment, then acceptance, something like a confidence, and finally she comes to cherish her bright golden talent. The feeling of it grows only more pleasurable. Like a hunger finally satiated. Though she is trapped and isolated in their small apartment, no longer able to talk to anyone besides her boyfriend, she passes the time by turning what she can—though he has asked her not to—and she builds models of rivers and skyscrapers from the golden garbage. She calls it her city of monuments. Her shrine to her stuff. A world that belongs to her.

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THEN COMES THE DEATH OF her boyfriend's mother. An event, he says, that rips him open. He speaks of his grief like an anger, and it boils inside of him.

For the funeral, they fly from Oregon to Pennsylvania. Her boyfriend talks first of not bringing her and then, in a sudden change of heart, insists that she come. For the flight, he bundles her in layers. He clutches his seat after takeoff. He won't let her move, or eat, or use the bathroom, even when the urge becomes urgent.

"Learn to control it," he tells her.

In the coffin, his mother looks placid, content, bloodless. "Touch her," her boyfriend whispers.

But she does not want to. She thinks that buried as a body his mother may rot and root and grow. There is something in her that churns at the thought of making a dead woman golden, a woman frozen, an entombed preservation.

At first, she outright refuses, expressing her reluctance, something to which her boyfriend is unaccustomed. He drags her to the restroom and spends most of the funeral begging, pleading, threatening, and finally crying until she gives in and, while everyone else exits, presses her fingers into the cool, soft, bruised, fruit flesh of her boyfriend's dead mother, over and over, until the funeral director approaches. Nothing happens.

In the hotel room, later that night, she and her boyfriend fight. He calls her selfish, heartless, and crazy. His words fasten and marble inside of her. He says she is unable to give to him when he most needs.

He sleeps in the bathroom and wakes her at dawn. He has a plan, he tells her. They travel through the rolling green, along the river, past towns with main streets. "Here," her boyfriend says, finally parking. "We'll pray and wash your gold away."

They step out along the Delaware. The water is bloated, stagnant, and looks the color of urine in the morning sun. Her boyfriend has her kneel on the river's edge amidst broken bottles and empty cigarette packages. She closes her eyes, folds one hand over the other, and thinks back to the night when the room was dark. Underneath her, rocks turn golden.

"Now get in," her boyfriend says.

She lets the water climb past her shoulders then past her chin. It is cold and tastes of soured apples. Her dress collects around her waist and then around her stomach. She looks back to her boyfriend. He gives her a thumbs up. She goes down butt first, blowing out her air and using her hands like propellers, until she can feel the riverbed. A Coke can hovers in front of her. Beside her is an empty jar of peanut butter.

"Is it done?" her boyfriend calls from the shore, when she rises.

"The water is too dirty," she tells him, but then, even as she says it, as if it is activated by the opening of her mouth or the sound of her words, the gold begins to leak out of her. It comes like sweat, in rivulets, out of her pores.

Her boyfriend sees, and he claps and whoops and hollers. His delight is palpable to her from the middle of the river. He dances while the gold seeps out of her like the air from a punctured tire. Though she's come along with him willingly, his celebration enrages her. She thinks of their apartment and her small golden city—nothing but garbage, really—still, she wonders what it might mean if her world were larger. The question tumbles through her, and she finally understands it is a desire.

"Stop," she says to him, but it is the gold that pauses and listens. The gold floats like oil on water. It waits for her. She again submerges. This time, head first. She sinks until the water's surface is at her feet, and she speaks to the river.

"Make me stronger," she tells it, and this time she knows why she says it. Her voice bubbles to the surface, and what is almost done reverses. Slowly, and then faster. The gold floods back inside of her. It folds around her heart like the wings of a bird.

From the shore, her boyfriend yells to her, but she cannot hear him, and she does not rise to listen. The need for air beckons, but she lingers under the water. She keeps her mouth pointed toward the riverbed. She drags her fingers through the sediment.

ANDREW BERTAINA

The Arrival of the Sea

THE INLAND SEA WAS NOT always there. Neither did we always live on the slopes of these mountains. Ours was a relatively arid country, bone dry for much of the summer, which means that for as long as anyone could remember the depression between the two mountain ranges was made up of cracked clay, scrub brush, a century plant or the occasional purple flower, rising up like a snake from a collection of stones and dust. Now we are often awake at dawn, contemplating the light on the water, the gulls skimming the air. We have grown used to the sight of rigging and sails as if they were the century plants and flowers of our youth.

The village we used to live in was a few miles from what is now the center of the sea. Sometimes, late at night, I'll think that I can see the tops of the houses, or the steeple of the church. In truth, some mornings a bit of wreckage will come ashore, a foot stool, or a plank from an old cabinet, and we'll gather round and try and discover who it had once belonged to. Usually, we can't remember, and we leave the wreckage behind to get on with our new days, our new lives.

The village was mostly wooden houses, small, homely places centered around a hearth, where the family could gather in the evenings and listen to grandfathers tell stories of misspent youths. The land was honeycombed with wells that we dug in search of water. We lived recognizable lives in our village—drinking late into the evening with our neighbors, talking loudly of our classmates or aging parents and swatting flies away from the rim of our glasses with dried bread as the sky turned purple then faded to black. We were untouched by greatness, and content, in so far as anyone is content, with the hard scrabble life we'd carved out in the valley between the mountains.

The sea came into existence shortly after one of the endless campaigns lead by Alexander the Great across Asia. The great man himself stayed in our most prosperous inn, where it was reported that the goblet he drank from turned to gold. He went upstairs early, his hand grazing the wooden rail, leaving, according to legend, his fingerprints imprinted on the wood. And I sometimes still search among the wreckage which comes ashore, hoping to find proof of his legend.

That night, after Alexander had gone to bed, we gathered to discuss our lives and our talk shifted. We suddenly saw how faint our dreams had been, how

petty. We understood that we had not lived the lives that we had intended to, and we could see it clearly now beneath the great light that Alexander shone upon us.

Alexander's men's tents were spread across the valley, and the sight of their camp fires was like that of wondrous fireflies spread out against a tableau of darkness. By all accounts Alexander slept well and left early the next morning, when the shadows of the mountains still lay over the valley. His troops started to cross, elephants trumpeting, and horses screaming—the air was golden with dust and overhead vultures clipped the sky with their dark wings. Alexander, his mind already turning towards the next battle, stopped and with a hand over his eyes, gazed at the surrounding mountains. He asked a general of his and a guide, one of our locals, to join him in a brief consultation. He pointed at the two mountain ranges on either side of the valley and said that he couldn't imagine, given what he'd learned from Aristotle, why a lake of some size didn't lie between these two great mountain ranges that encircled our valley. For he knew, according to observations in cities he'd conquered and turned to ash that water flowed downhill and should have made a great body in our valley. He could not see why, given the rainfall over nearby regions that water did not exist. This perplexed him, and he asked our guide again if there hadn't once been a lake where his men now stood, in shards of reddish light, banner glistening, waiting for his next command.

Years passed in our small village after Alexander left. Our lives changed in the ways they do, wives and husbands were acquired and we began having children, minding them quietly, forgetting that brief time he'd been among us. We saw our dreams being realized, or, given what happened later, perhaps extinguished like the fires in the valley that morning, whose smoke stayed for days before disappearing out over the mountains. The world as we knew it continued to spin a familiar tapestry: birth, marriage, children, and death. And then our lives began to change in a way that we could not understand at first.

In Babylon, the city where his great dreams came to rest, Alexander called map makers together to crowd around his ornate bed, capped with dragon heads carved in gold, to help remind him of his campaigns before he'd fallen ill. And when it came to our valley, Alexander, in his wisdom, had his map makers draw a large inland sea between our mountain ranges. After his death and elaborate funeral, the map made its way to our village through some gift or another, and we put it up on the wall of the inn where Alexander had stayed all those years ago.

The presence of the map delighted us at first, and we nudged one another into tales of when Alexander had been there, when we'd all been much younger and

perhaps happier, laughing now as the living still can, at the map he'd constructed from his false memory, even the mighty had fallen. We smiled at the obscenity of the large inland sea pressing up against the mountain ranges like a body to a lover.

We did not understand then, the immense power of that great man, content as we were to drink and laugh late into the night. It was the children who discovered it first, when they returned to our village with the hems of their clothes muddied. The children told us wild tales of water bubbling up from the center of the valley, trickling among the rocks. We couldn't make sense of their story, in fact, knew it to be false, and we blamed them instead for playing among the wells, which we relied upon for our drinking water and we beat the children quietly or sent them to bed without eating and listened for hours to their faint cries like the sound of gulls from a far away sky.

A month or so passed in this way, the children, now sullen, or sneaking away at odd hours to visit the center of the valley. We tended to our crops, yelled occasionally at our husbands and wives and tended to things like normal. Since it was spring, a group of us went into the mountains in search of wild blackberries, thick, and ripe. We climbed further up into the mountains, following a thin ribbon of trail that we'd cut in prior years, nearing the summit where a large patch of berries lay. By midday, our baskets were full, our fingers bleeding, but we decided to make the last descent beyond the tree line, so we could marvel at our village below. When we reached the rocky summit, we gazed back and saw the familiar sight of our village, the rows of houses and stripes of farmland. But, beyond that, beneath the wings of gliding birds, we saw what we thought must have been a mirage, a small body of water, shimmering in the distance, catching and refracting light. We stood there, arguing about the water until every one of us agreed that what we were seeing was water, though no one remembered it raining. On the way down, we talked initially of the crops, of the ways we could divert the water to make our lives easier. And underneath that, like a subterranean river, our thoughts moved to the dark contours of the map on the inn's wall, the water hovering over the place where our village lay.

For a while, we didn't share our findings with our wives and husbands but we soon found that we could not hide it from them. We told them about the water, apologized to the children and kept up our planning to irrigate the crops. But something within us had changed. Now we gathered at the inn in glum moods. Over strong drinks, which we often now had beginning at noon, we recalled the dreams that we'd had when Alexander rode through. We began to see that they had not come true, or only in fragments, which did not satisfy us. Our

children had left us, or turned lazy, our husbands and wives loved others or had gotten fat and uninteresting. We had never gone to far away cities and remade our lives, nor built anything significant. We were common people engaged in a common struggle. We looked uneasily and hopefully at the horizon as if a ship, sails billowing, was about to appear.

And then we waited. One late morning, when we'd been up all night brooding, the birds suddenly went silent. And we walked outside into green tinged light, children tucked on our hips, eyes lifted. But we were looking the wrong way we realized as we felt the water on the soles of our shoes, saw it rising from the ground as if Moses himself had called it forth. Some of us started to run to the town center, others, listened closely. In the distance, we could hear the slow wash of water approaching us. An idea occurred to some of us, who ran to the inn and burned the map, hoping that this act could change everything back to the way it had been before. The wisest among us started packing things up, clothes, shoes, odds and ends—things that helped us identify who we were.

The water claimed the village in a matter of days. Some of us lost everything, others, managed to cobble together a semblance of their life in carts that they carried up the mountain trails. Strangely, it seemed like no one brought enough to really remember who they had once been. It was in the years that followed that we discovered who we truly were—many wives left long time husbands and moved in with men they'd loved, or they moved into a shelter and lived alone and happily. Our children lost faith in us after the arrival and started moving into the magnificent cities to the east. Others moved into the great inland sea on ships and plied the waters far from everyone they'd known before, waking before daylight to fish or search for shrimp, and returning their catch to fishing villages that sprang up all around the sea.

In the years that followed I wondered if the sea, like our true selves, hadn't been there all along, waiting for the right moment to reveal itself when Alexander finally had it drawn on the map. Last week, over drinks with my new wife, a quiet woman from across the desert, we watched the sea gently lapping at the base of the mountain. Soon enough, she and her children went to bed, and I sat all night, looking out at the sea, quiet and dark, while I contemplated all I'd lost. I listened to the mournful cry of the gulls screaming until sunrise, when the sea revealed itself anew, shimmering like the back of a great serpent, tempting me to move yet again.

DAY HEISINGER-NIXON

Sestina Re-Sequenced, Serotonin Returned

All this to say, to be (a them) is to be with (them & them & them & them).
Today the color of my Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors matches
my earrings my toenails some of my veins, some pretty some pearly some peeling.
Today the colors of the skin around my throat bloom with their blotchy field red—
dresses among the to-be bouquets—the to-be bouquets all sugar & sweat
under the gum trees. As all bees & birds know, flight is mostly about maintenance.

In one field, the boy made of grass plays with a mountain of all the town's matches.
In another, the boy made of wet storm spits a loogie into the pile & hides them
in the places where phosphorous cannot speak. In this one, he keeps peeling
the muddy clothes from his back & from those he loves. One red
sock & another. One wrinkled sleeve & another. Sometimes, maintenance
is just learning to get dry, is just wringing the storm from the sweat.

There comes a time in everyone's life when someone living in a screen matches
with your screen-being & you are thusly paired. Mine has not come yet. No sweat.
I started working on this thing before screen-love was popular. Phone maintenance
is a tool of latent capitalism, I'm sure. Updates & buffering time & storage space & red
lights–all to keep Marx & Engels in their ghosty graves, to keep us from peeling
back the curtain. iPhones are the new opiate-religion & here I am in love inside them.

To be a living thing living in these living united states is to occupy every last big red
verb. Last week, a man lit himself aflame with a gas can & a pair of matches
& took a tour of the White House lawn, skin bursting open its petals & peeling
back its curtain. The next big red day, business as usual, a maintenance
person trimmed the long, singed grass with a John Deere lawn mower, usual sweat
pooling under a wide-brimmed hat, every burnt blade coughing as he cut them.

Work in this land of sunflowers & clearcuts is simply a matter of maintenance.
To keep gathering the flesh-based body's membrane of daily daily sweat
is, by all means, to keep eating, is to keep possessing & peddling & peeling—
a piece of gum, a Taco Bell burrito wrapper, a clementine. All in a day's red
work. I know: Production (of plastic/of politic/of poetry/of poetry) is amongst them—
the slicing things of lurid competition—but I flail through all my prescribed matches.

& then there are the days when all I can do is watch a glass of water sweat
into the silken tablecloth below it. Hydrocartography never matches
the barren landscape it is given. Tabletop maps never quite stop peeling
the colony from the carnage. In this one, USA USA USA is the biggest nation of them
all. Underneath, the redwood surface soaks osmotic until it is redwoodredwood red
& it should be clear by now that I know nothing of furniture care or maintenance.

All this to say, the maintenance of a healthy home might be in its arson. In one dream,
matches. In another, cyborgs, them all—all wired red. The chemistry and the cooking
classes say oil and sweat do not mix. But the peeling the peeling O the peeling.

MIRANDA DENNIS

Seasonal Weather Patterns

I MISS ALABAMA IN THE SPRINGTIME, when March begins brooding like a hen, dragging its temperamental clouds any which way so long as it defies one's linear expectations. The skyscrapers here in New York obscure my sense of direction; I look up and only see the sun waking up in the unblinking panes of residences and businesses alike. Spring in the city still threatens snow, so the sun is a welcome relief, a reminder of what's to come— city sweltering in tunnels thick with the rattle of cranky, rusted subways. But it's not the syrupy springtime I know best; I have to look hard to find flora that draws me in, drags me into a laziness, a splendor, a vomit of color. I have to, usually, go to a botanic garden and pay a fee to walk around feeling shocked.

Most years my grandmother would buy a disposable camera from Rite-Aid and walk circles in her neighborhood, photographing other people's bright bursts of azaleas. She wasn't as interested in dogwood, that long heralded macabre symbol of Christian redemption. She cared not for the brief glimmering of wisteria, its pale lavender or creamy white hanging as delicately as a ladies' handkerchief in the onslaught of humidity, though she admired it— her sole focus seemed to be these azalea bushes. Squat, fat bushes which become a brocade of intense color, every spring. Fuchsia, magenta, shocking pink. The developed 5x7s hardly did the springtime any justice; too glossy, too busy, the photos were stacked uselessly on each other, an annual project only my grandmother seemed to be able to manage with any sense of finality. You take the picture, you get it developed at the same place where you bought the disposable camera, and then you show your reluctant teen grand-daughter the fine work of Alabama.

Montgomery is pretty, as is Alabama as a general rule— the stretch of mountain to ocean, old small towns disrupting verdant rural spaces, and cities balancing crumbling infrastructure with painful and important histories lining the streets. Anywhere you go, you could find something to admire, if not entirely respect. So, Montgomery is pretty. The spring aggressively highlights that, usually against a backdrop of lightning. The smell precedes the color, a thick heavy soil rising up to meet the air, and soon you're covered in fat drops of rain as you rush to your car parked nearby. There is always your car parked nearby, in a parking lot turning by degrees oilier and slicker, the drivers within manic.

I don't tend to romanticize the South except when it comes to this landscape, which is probably no different, really, than anywhere else where enough heat and rain mix. So, it's Easter, and you've hidden a bright pink egg in the folds of an azalea bush, hoping to trick even the most clever children. So what? But then, consider this: one child, almost too old to hunt eggs, has for so long trained her eyes to differentiate between such colors, she has no trouble locating what you think you can disguise. And one day when she grows up, living amongst dark brick buildings in one of New York City's less glamorous boroughs, she will walk around having flashbacks as if spit out from a long ago war.

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GRANDMOTHERS DIE. THIS IS TRUE. Even mine. I'm not so nostalgic that I wish I had access to one of her photos, except I do, if only to deconstruct what it was she was looking for— permanence? What would Susan Sontag, who now also is dead, have to say about that? "...one can't possess the present but one can possess the past," she might say as she said in *On Photography*, but her opinions about our relationships with photography changed, as any dynamic thinker's might. Is there a heaven where Susan Sontag turns to my grandmother and says, "Ellane, really, what was with all the pictures of azaleas?"

And would my grandmother, with her knowing smile and dry wit, simply reply, "Oh, the azaleas were quite lovely that year."

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THINGS THAT ARE BLOOMING IN New York City in the spring: saucer magnolia, my own suppressed nostalgia.

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THINGS THAT ARE BLOOMING IN the South in the spring: cancer on my sister's cervix, everything all at once.

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I SHOULD MENTION NOW THAT my sister is named Spring, born in April, that particular problem month for poets.

...

WE HAVE ARRIVED LIKE THE calvary near Clearwater, Florida to pick my sister up and transport her to Tennessee where my mother currently lives. Her feet are swollen, "like a Cabbage patch doll's" she informs me. And laughs. She's on Percocet, so everything is funny, even her own discomfort as she hobbles up and down hallways, trying to work out the edema from her body. My sister is weak and drugged but still herself, and it is with some nervousness, almost apologetic, she asks me to help wash her hair. She has never had to ask me to help with much of anything before.

Night falls, and she's asking me to walk the hallways with her. Her newly installed nephrostomy bags drain her kidneys and weigh on her, but an overlarge sweatshirt hides them neatly as she shuffles the hall. I feel like we are in "The Yellow Wallpaper," all this sludging along the perimeters, but instead of mad from patriarchy, she is simply sick from a mass so large it presses against her kidney's ureters, obstructing the flow. I wonder how I can blame patriarchy for this. If I try hard enough, I can. HPV, after all, a common virus, barely vaccinated in men, is to blame here. Cervical cancer, a women's disease, long ignored by her first few doctors. If I try, if I try, I can.

Her pace as creaking as a ghost's, we try to ignore the watchful stares of other hotel guests, but one couple in particular stands at attention. The man is nondescript, his wife in the short-haired androgyny of middle age, a chosen air of sexlessness, the antithesis to our culture's clinging desperately to artifice, the fantasy of an aging beauty queen who keeps it together just long enough to die. It's a wise and obvious choice, to embrace the short mousy hair, the wire rimmed glasses, the ill-fitting khaki shorts. Freedom from the constraints of beauty, the obvious kind that blossoms and then withers under fluorescent lights. My sister, nearly 40 but hovering around her early 30s when people guess her age, has maintained a level of beauty impossible to uphold: lean and muscular, long thick blonde hair, tan skin, and sharp green eyes.

"Excuse me, but the way you're walking makes me think that maybe you're in pain," the woman says to my sister, coming up to us straight-backed and confident, as if she has done this many times. "Are you? In pain?"

I sigh, annoyed.

"Yeah, it's my kidneys," my sister replies, obviously trying to skirt bringing up the issue of the cervical cancer, cervix almost too intimate for public discourse. "Walking helps with the swelling."

"I see," the woman replies, perking up. "Would you like me to pray for you?"

"We have people praying for her already," I snap.

The second you return to a state below the Mason-Dixon line, someone is always praying for you. My spider bite, the time our house got broken into and my computer stolen, how I grew up unbaptized, my brief foray into Wicca in seventh grade— all those things were things not just your more religious aunts might pray over but even your classmates who belong to megachurches. Nevermind cancer, a body breaking down— that is the most basic fodder for even total strangers to speak practically in tongues.

Do not trust it.

As a small child my sister had been kidnapped by a cult for four years, long before I was born, and her disappearance from my family fractured us further, made us strange and unknowable, parties to a particular grief so specific one can only pray to understand it. Some of the family grew increasingly more religious, while my mother held tight to a Bible she would never carry into a church. I played with different religions the way teenagers do, only to settle on something far more New Age and sometimes embarrassing— collecting crystals and eyeing them with suspicion as I place them along my windowsill, or believing so fervently in our spirits everlasting, if still annoyed and sometimes pissed off in the afterlife. My sister, too, believes in these things, in the "hey, why not" aspect of how grand the universe is, that it could contain many gods united by a common energetic core.

So, no, we don't always want strange moms swooping in to pray for us.

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MY GRANDMOTHER USED TO TAKE me to Church of the Ascension in Montgomery, an Episcopalian church that has all the trademarks of a good Episcopalian church: nice gray stones, bright red doors, and people's ashes somewhere out back in a neat courtyard used to store the dead and for quiet reflection by the living. I used to sit by the koi pond, meditative and deeply unsure of the Japanese's fish in their connection to Christ. And when I walked by the dead, I averted my eyes, something I wouldn't think to do now.

At Easter, Ascension filled with the alien smell of lilies, imported from the local florist, filling the pews with the cloying smell of sweetness mixed with the heavy scent of triple the usual church-going bodies. A rabbit in a basket passed around, to remind children of the living, breathing entity that brings them their appropriated pagan narratives, ripe with hollow chocolates and the crunchy coating of a preferred red jellybean. If you have to go to a Christian

church for a holiday, skip Christmas; the real weirdness is Easter, the seeming impossibility of resurrection, more heart-stopping than a virgin birth, more the thing we carry with us like barbed hope.

Resurrection is always the end goal.

...

"OH CHRIST, OUR LORD, I invite you here into this hallway, into this hotel. Oh Lord Christ, in your loving peace, I ask that you heal this woman's cancer, the cells dividing, the tumor as it presses against the kidneys, Oh Christ our Lord I ask this of you."

A pastor at a faith-healing church in Reading, California, this woman claims she's from a town which is cancer-free. Maybe she means her church only. Deep in the bones of so many people there's that cellular potential to divide endlessly at the slightest virus, toxin, wayward gene. I think of the Todd Haynes film *Safe*, starring Julianne Moore, where Moore's character suffers from (vaguely at first, then more specifically) the toxins in her environment in the San Fernando Valley, which she eventually flees from to a community of alleged wellness. I decide not to interrupt the prayer and draw this comparison, though for months afterwards I will ask people, "Have you seen Safe starring Julianne Moore?"

The pastor, eyes closed still, chin lowered as if in a yogic neck lock, asks, "Can you feel him? Can you feel Jesus?"

"I can," my sister says. "I felt it when you asked."

My mother stands in the hallway now, eyes watering and a broad grin plastered on her face. I feel like the devil.

When the woman is done, she turns to me, cautious, and asks if I would like a prayer, too.

"Nah, I'm good," I say, my instincts flashing red at her request.

It's not that I am against prayer or the possibility of faith-healing. In fact, I very much believe in these things, in a sort of Jungian way. Maybe our collective energies shift hurricanes away from our doomed cities (but then to other doomed cities); maybe our collective energies bring us wealth (or poverty to others); maybe our collective energies save one life (or take that life away). Who knows the full mystery of the universe unfolding in its taking and gifting to those who deserve and don't deserve equally?

Later I will look up the ministry this woman belongs to. They are controversial figures in the Christian community, allegedly breaking curses, healing the sick, providing a spiritual reversal for autism— any church that purports to do the

kind of things Jesus might have done will prove itself to be as divisive as the cells it claims to mend. And, of course, to the non-believers, this seems ludicrous, the exact fodder for mocking on a show narrated by a popular scientist full of hot air. But, to their credit, Christ said that the kingdom of God was within all of us, so why not?

The fact is I just have a bad feeling, which will not leave my side for the next four months, and in this bad feeling I choose my own intuition over another's. And my own intuition says: here is a doomed city, a body that is bent and broken, the sky green before a funnel cloud forms over an unsuspecting home.

...

I HAD FLOWN INTO TENNESSEE where my mom lives now to go drive down with her to Florida to pick up my sister. The idea was my mother, a nurse, would take care of my sister, and then once cleared of cancer, she would be released back to the wilds of Clearwater, her chosen home of sand, surf, and Scientologists floating merrily along rivers of their own misdirected wealth. My sister and I are different in that I care about chilly mountain landscapes, and she cares about warm beaches. We are different in that she jogs five miles a day, and I walk many miles around my clogged city, daydreaming of somehow getting enough money to land a house in a chilly mountain landscape. She tans, and I simply freckle or burn. I wither in humidity, my hair frizzing out, and hers, straight and long, remains unruffled, silky. She simply blasts the a/c, cruises around in her car while I take subways covered in a light dusting of other people's DNA. She actually chose a military career that led her to the fierce heat of Afghanistan watching the landscape shimmer through waves of heat rolling off both the hot rocks and the medical waste burning furiously in pits nearby. I chose air-conditioning.

We stayed one night in Montgomery, a blip on the radar, before heading straight down to Florida. It was only enough time to say hello to the heat, and then goodbye. Now here somewhere between Clearwater and Tampa I stand outside the Holiday Inn, waiting for my cab to take me to the airport. Back to New York, to the flooded curbs of Manhattan, to the cold rain's disruption of subway signals and our own layered clothes as we struggle in and out of strangely heated buildings, neither warm nor chilly but always both, all at once. My sister and mother have already checked out, gently loaded my sister's bloated feet into my mother's whale of a pickup truck for what will be a long, uncomfortable ride back to the rural grip of Murfreesboro. The humidity fogs my sunglasses,

the wind shakes pear blossoms from the trees. None of the trees around me seem to be native species but planted there because some landscaper deemed them pretty enough to grow there, in these conditions, no matter the damage to the soil or what was safe to grow instead.

...

MY MOTHER WAS MARRIED FOR a few years when I was between the ages of 5 and 7. As a wayward teenager my sister didn't get along with him, but I liked him. He would shoot copperheads down from the waxy magnolia tree in our front lawn, to keep our family safe. I knew the gazebo out back had a fan you could turn on to cool down while swinging in the hammock strung across the gazebo, that the swings he built me worked especially well when my sister pushed me on them, that if my sister invited boys to drink beer in our patio's jacuzzi I had to swear on the Bible I would tell no one, that the Bible was not a common factor in our household's decisions, that the my step-father's cocker spaniel would bite, that the pet capuchin he kept in a cage out back would jealously pull my mother's hair, and that sirens would never fail to go off to herald in any unwelcome tornado. That I could be terrified. But if weather came too close for comfort, someone would shield me, shivering in a hallway, as lightning cracked down weaker branches. I knew how slick a gravel driveway could become under the sub-tropics of Alabama, how to dig a hole and fill it with mud, how to call the earth soup, how to be the chef behind it all, playing god with hands too small, a will half-formed by my own developmental milestones and limitations.

I knew weather systems were also people, the dangerous configuration of different energies shoved into a tiny home.

But it wasn't until I moved far into the North— first New England, then New York— that I realized the springtime could be snow thawing, a slow spread of warmth, which required patience in waiting for things to bloom, and not just the terror of pent up energy bursting forth in the form of ham-fisted thunderstorms, of a litany of destruction uttered like a shrieking train. And the shock of flowers blooming in February, March, April, then turning to yellow-brown death in the summer sun.

...

CAN A SYMBOLIC NAME BE disentangled from its symbolism?

If a sister named Spring dies in the summer, does every landmark of the season

and the person become inter-connected? Or does one sweaty day in summer stagnant with death obliterate the obvious symbolism? Can we re-write it? Can I take the subway to Spring Street every week for yoga and not think of my sister? And when the summer gives up the ghost, allows fall to come in and pat down our sweaty bangs, cooling us from our fevered thickening of cramped hallways and humid subway platforms, will I be free from the symbolism of the heat, of the blooming things? Or will I be confronted by all the boring old tropes of death in the crippled leaves of autumn?

It's almost too much to bear.

Language gives you everything, denies you nothing, and still leaves you speechless.

So, let's say I am still in a hotel room with my sister, brushing back her silken hair under a hair dryer's sharp heat, and she is laughing, high off Percocet, lamenting her Cabbage Patch doll feet, how swollen she looks, as if shoved full of salt water and left to float aimlessly. Let's say I am still in that room, the a/c at my back, unprayed for, unanswered for by God or the community.

Let's say we are as endless as time that has not been constructed or carved by language.

Let's say only, oh, but the azaleas were beautiful that spring.

DAVID LERNER SCHWARTZ

The Worst Kind of Faith

WHEN I ARRIVED AT THE hospital, Emily was raised up high in one of those robotic beds, which in the fluorescent light looked like the stucco crib of baby Jesus. She'd been there for what felt like years, but it had only been six months. I measured time based on the posts I wrote—one on the winter solstice, the Druid convention in Nevada, Mercury's retrograde. Emily told me she wanted a telegram.

"A telegram? Can't we just text, or email?"

"No," she said. "I'm tired. I want telegrams."

I said, "I don't care," but took it back. "Okay, whatever you want."

The television blared with a reality show about twenty-somethings who party too hard in Siesta Key. Emily loved these types of shows. She always had. It's what originally drew us together, back in grade school, in the cafeteria, talking about the previous night's episode. Ever since Emily got sick, I can't stomach them anymore.

She unwrapped a ginger candy.

"How do I send one?"

"I don't know. Try Googling."

"Okay, I will. Okay?" My instinct was to put a hand on her forehead, to test its heat. The nurses at the main desk of her ward said I was not to touch my best friend. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, which, of course, meant no. The rest of us graduated from college and got jobs. Emily got something called ALL, and it was supposed to be gone quickly. It was supposed to be easy enough, for cancer, but six months later, it was still there.

Emily's room was in the southwest part of the hospital. If she craned her neck she could watch the sun set, but she said she sleeps so much she rarely sees it. I'd visited twice before. To get to her, I took a bus from Ditmas, then an hour-long subway ride, a twenty-minute walk, and three elevators. "I wish I lived closer," I said.

"Will it get here okay, you think?"

"What?"

"The telegram," she said. "Because of the address. The room number—all that."

I told her it'd be fine.

I wanted to put a hand on her leg, or do something fatherly, or brotherly, knowing she had neither, but I remembered what the nurse said about Emily's immune system, their killing it without killing her, and instead I studied the gaunt blue beneath her eyes, the bruised port on her clavicle, scars I now superimpose over memories of her swimming in our neighborhood pool when we were kids.

"I promise I'll send you one." I hoped I might grant just this wish of hers. She nodded, but she was tired, and I hated that I couldn't think of a single other thing to say. I wanted to give her advice but knew nothing. Instead, I watched her watch TV. On it, two muscular blondes made out. Her eyes glazed over, and her lids finally closed. I looked for evenness of breath. I wanted to pause her like that, in comfort, finally, but instead was quick to leave the hospital and Emily behind.

...

WHEN SHE TOLD ME SHE was sick, I was working. I had just started writing for the blog of a tarot card company called Illumina, posting articles online about horoscopes and mysticism. In college, I'd been a comparative religions major. I was fascinated with the preoccupations of those who believed they could believe; they had rites where I had emptiness. I left the article up on my laptop and as she told me she had cancer, I kept rereading what I'd written—Chiron in Pisces—but in my head, it sounded like Chiron in pieces.

I left my desk and went outside when she cried into the receiver. It was fall, and on my walk she detailed her story, her climbing up stairs, her windedness, the subway to urgent care—the flu, or a fever, or anything but leukemia, and then the ambulance, and then bed, the hospital, which she wouldn't leave for eight months straight.

"I'm going to visit," I said over the phone. "I'm going to be there for you," I kept telling her.

I returned to the front door of my walk-up, hoping she'd reconcile our place in the universe. I only felt the heat of my sweat against the slick face of my phone. The worst thing that could happen had happened to my best friend, and in the spaces in between Emily's dry sobs I thought of articles to be written, days spent working, all our lesser sicknesses.

...

I SPENT THE REST OF the week after my visit researching telegram services and history instead of writing. I was supposed to be working on a longer piece about kabbalah for the company's self-proclaimed Jewish Month. I was profiling a grassroots organization that had just opened up a community center downtown. But the pleasure of belief was suddenly ludicrous to me. I was sardonic where I needed to be objective. It wasn't until I read about ayin—nothingness, the void—that I stopped mocking it all.

I sunk some cash trying out sites like Telegram4U and FastGram. They boasted iPhone app derivatives and certified patented technologies, but none was an actual telegram. I logged fake hours writing from home in my studio when I was really studying telegraphy. I changed deadlines. I tried to pitch other topics to my boss—like the Christian concept of good and evil colonized in war-torn nations. Or astronomers writing proofs for people's birth charts. Imams on deathbed visits. I wanted something real.

The words of a telegram must be translated into Morse code: every letter is converted to a series of dots and dashes with a device that moves needles that point to letters of the alphabet like a Ouija board. Then, an operator key is depressed to complete a circuit that sends a current to the receiver at the other end. The message moves across miles of cable—even beneath the ocean—in the form of electronic signals. Once, operators translated Morse code by sight. Then they found listening was easier. With ammonium nitrate and potassium ferrocyanide, the telegrams were marked automatically upon receipt. With the spinning type wheel, telegrams were translated automatically. Then, delivery was automated, too.

The shortest telegram in history is a tie between "!" and "?".

Previously: smoke signals, semaphore, carrier pigeons.

Suddenly: news could outrun you.

The first and last telegrams ever sent enclosed a passage from Numbers: "WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT."

From there: the pantelegraph and facsimile and Hertzian wave radio and hypertext transfer protocol and store-and-forward email and multimedia message service.

Emily received hers three weeks later. She was so excited. She sent me a GIF of a woman jumping off a cliff and turning into a butterfly followed by a picture of the telegram. It looked like it was just a print-out of a Word document set in Courier New. But we let it be a telegram, and we started talking in telegrams.

"Tell me everything, stop," I said, when she finally answered my call, a week after in the middle of the afternoon. "Where will you go first for vacation? Stop. Do you add 'stop' when you have a question mark? Stop. Is the planet getting warmer, or am I just getting sweatier? Stop."

"Stop… stop."

I sent her a picture of where I was—inside a mirrored and candle-lit room waiting for the Kabbalah teacher to arrive. The other students were lithe and rosy. They shed light scarves and glowed behind tendrils of smoking incense.

"Remember to kill me if I enjoy this," I texted her. "Illumina loves this new-age meditation shit. Namaste."

Emily sent me a picture of her IV. "Wish this were vodka."

In college, she taught at a yoga studio for beer money. She'd planned to pick up more hours after graduating.

I tucked my phone into the pocket of the bag I'd placed in the corner of the lacquered room. The teacher arrived, and for a moment I wanted him to reveal God to me so I could tell Emily. Instead, he asked us to reduce ourselves, to ignore the world. I practiced being nothing for us both.

…

EMILY GOT A BONE MARROW transplant two months later. She told me about a mask they made for her out of mesh. It curled over her eyes and forehead and down her face. This time, the nurse told me to stand eight feet away, specifically. I had to wear gloves and a mask myself. Emily's young body looked something like a ewe swollen from a close shear. I kept mistaking the room's beeping for bleating. Around us, there were balloons and birthday cards.

"What's all this?" I said.

"They call a transplant your second birthday," she said. "It's like starting over."

I set down a box of the ginger lollipops she liked, along with some dried mango strips. She read the back of the package to see if she could eat them. I pointed out our telegram hanging to the left of the large window where she rarely saw the sun set.

"I like telegrams because they're letters but with more to say between the sentences," she said.

I tried to tell her how worried I was, how brave she was, but she kept pushing the conversation back on me. I wanted to dote on her and make her feel special, but not for the reason everyone had sent her cards and balloons.

She said, "I just sit here and watch TV all day. I don't want to think about it anymore." Above us played the show about divorcées who compete for their Second Soulmate, the prize being hundreds of thousands of dollars and side-by-side grave plots.

I told her about a mediocre date I went on. I told her about the whackjobs I met for interviews at neighborhood bars. I told her how boring my life was, how I'd just keep living it until I was old. Every place I'd tried to find meaning had turned out to be a scam.

Before her transplant, Emily was intubated in a week-long coma. She said she had nightmares the whole time, hallucinations.

"Nothing will be that scary."

Now, there was a peace to her, in her bloating and her nausea.

"Are you okay?" I gestured to the flowers on the sill and the banner hanging from the ceiling. She'd told me not to bring anything.

"Everyone is freaking out. I just want them to calm down."

"People love you—"

"I'm sick. That's all."

She was quiet, so I pulled out my phone, and then remembered where I was, who I was with, and slipped it back into my pocket. She didn't have to say what she knew we all knew. I recalled it every time I left her in what I wished I'd said instead. Before the transplant, she told me to keep writing, even if it was about bullshit, because eventually the work would win.

"I just want to have an easy life," she said, spreading the blankets so that their thinness covered her. "I keep wanting to know where it came from, you know? Like, a cigarette? Asbestos? Like, if I could make sense of it, it would be less unfair."

I told her about a piece I was working on for Illumina's Hebrew language week about tzimtzum. It's this paradox in Kabbalah where, in order for God to exist, he had to contract for there to be room for anything else. All the matters of our lives and the universe could then be where he had been. There was light when God said there should be, but it wasn't until he separated it from darkness that there was space. Before, there'd been too much God.

My other friends roll their eyes when I talk like this. Emily just moves on. "Everyone else is doing their thing," she said, adjusting the settings on her bed. "And I'm still here."

"You were sick. You had a transplant. Now, you're okay—"

"I have to worry about it forever."

"It's not going to come back."

"You don't know."

She asked me to shut off the TV. Its silence was a relief. I fast-forwarded to her leaving, to her moving back in with her roommates in Bushwick, to her working, to our friends' parties and weddings and children. She always said she never wanted kids, but she'd sob when the test results say her eggs are fried. Her cancer will be gone, it will be over, but it'll always be there, too. It will be the worst kind of faith, the kind you don't get to choose to believe in.

...

I OPENED UP A TELEGRAM from Emily's home address in Bushwick on a Saturday, thinking she'd sent me a letter, looking at it like a letter, but then I realized it was a telegram, because it had STOP and it had Emily.

WHAT'S UP STOP, it began. LET'S BE PEN PALS STOP.

I couldn't bring myself to type out a reply. I'd been writing about divination merchandise all week. My boss kept telling me to include certain phrases for search engine optimization, or to rewrite sections based on our website analytics.

When Emily got out of the hospital, I got a tattoo of The Hermit on my calf. It's the ninth card in tarot's Major Arcana, and it's not so much about being lonely as it's about the power of knowing yourself. I had to remind myself each time I saw it why it was there.

I gave Emily a call.

"Hey," she said. She answered her phone even less since she'd been out. Her voicemail was always full.

"I got your 'gram."

She laughed.

"I loved it."

Two weeks had gone by without me checking in. I felt guilty. I'd expected to see her more after the transplant. But she was tired, and the real world was complicated. I wished the scrying bowls I profiled actually worked so I could pretend to know what to do for her. Over the phone, I silently vowed to visit her, even when she screened my calls or texted me saying she'd had a rough week and needed to be alone.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. She ignored the question. The nurse said you're supposed to ask about feeling, not health, because the former can come and go without the same consequences. I wanted to ask her if she'd thought about getting into yoga again, or what shows she'd seen. Or how her mom's visit was, but I knew she'd just deflect. Instead, I vamped, wherein I made up

my future: I told her I would quit Illumina; I told her I'd quit writing and get a real job. I both made up and decided on how my life would be simply because I was too scared to let the line fall dead.

"Can we finally catch up in person now?" I said. "Like, in a place that's not a hospital?"

"I'm so tired."

"I know. But I miss hanging out like we used to."

"That's why I sent you the telegram," she said. "They're like texts on muscle relaxants."

I thought about us in grade school, growing up, burping over milkshakes in the front seats of my stick shift. Then, years later, Emily quivering in crow pose, with long hair, bald, a bob.

"Do you want to go back to work?" I said.

"I'm gonna give it three months and see if I get crazy bored, or if I'm less tired. The doctor told me to take some time. I just—I'm just adjusting still. I'm getting used to being back."

"Yeah," I said. "Three months sounds good. It'll be spring then. You'll feel better."

In the telegram she sent me, Emily said the only way she made it through was by convincing herself she wouldn't make it. I couldn't wrap my head around it, let alone bring it up over the phone. But I wanted to know what it was like, what she had learned. I couldn't imagine dying like she had to, being born again.

...

ONE YEAR AFTER, WE STILL talked about her exhaustion. Two years later, we agree it's still okay for her to cry. But we pretend it has only been three months, like we let our letters be telegrams.

"I don't know why I'd be sad on my transplant-iversary," she tells me. We're at the counter of a bar down the street from her apartment. We're supposed to be celebrating.

"Of course," I say, because these things don't make sense until they happen, until the wires cross and the result is revealed. That morning, she received my last telegram, not because she dies but because we forget about them after this. It said, GOD HATH WROUGHT U. When we move to the patio, the vitamin E on the scars from her port glistening in the sun, she tells me, "I didn't get the joke."

"I guess I don't either," I say. I look down and find my tattoo, which I remember

is a part of me. I realize I simply have no idea what I was thinking about, after all this time, after all this life. I haven't even quit Illumina after I augured it to Emily. The only thing I do know is that we are in a place together that's not a hospital, and maybe it's the truest form of magic.

She tells me about a series she and her mom have been watching where the entire lives of regular people are videotaped. Online, they have extended footage, in real time, of every bit of living. I tell her it sounds both boring and riveting, and she agrees. It's almost enough to convince me to start watching those types of shows again.

Emily asks me what I've been writing about, and I tell her it doesn't matter, because it doesn't. Not yet. Instead, we clink our beers together. We spill some froth on the picnic table between us. She's there, and so am I, and in our cloudy amber glasses, I read our future.

Witness Literary Awards

Witness Literary Awards

Poetry

selected by Heather Lang-Cassera

First Place

"Future Ruins" by Andrew Collard

Runner-up

"You Will See It Coming & You Won't Run" by Emmy Newman

ANDREW COLLARD

Future Ruins

Even the scrapyard's upscale now,

with its flag-spangled marquee, the husks of junked cars
barred off like a gated community
or the White House—
huddling before the newly-christened *Innovation District's*
clutch of corporate offices, and Jet's Pizza.
Lately, M-59 and I

pass each other like strangers, hundred-thousand dollar
monuments and signage posing
in the median like thirsty police
or a billboard sequence, rapt in praise of a mattress no one
is permitted to sleep on.

\\

Beside my Honda, cut scenes

of a hundred films wake suddenly into speech: here, the empty lot
where once my father's favorite bakery
slung rolls fraught
with cigarette smoke and cinnamon, nothing left now but a brand
name calling out from the aisles
of wholesale clubs and groceries,

and here, the Coney Island where my child used to cede our quarters
to prize pods every other month
in exchange for rubber dinosaurs
and sticky hands, which lately has renounced its heritage
to become another faceless Bar & Grill.

\\

Lately, I can't stop making lists,

as though exhaustive cataloging might explain, somehow,
what it means that I am from here
but can't afford a home here,
in the capital city of *controlled entrance*. Because to name
a thing can be a way to claim it,
I take as much as I can carry

and run, until the catalogue overwhelms my capacity to shape
or make sense of the narrative:
Dawn Donuts, *debris,* Rock-a-Billy's,
debris, Farmer Jack, *debris*. Only Trinity Lutheran still persists,
the final vestige of old Hall Rd—

\\

The thirty-five foot tall golden halo,

steel frame coated in aluminum, is wedged before Michigan's deadliest
intersection. It has no history,
pyrite glare obscuring border patrol
headquarters, Lakeside Mall, and a thousand offices that don't care
what populates them
any more than wrapping paper. Roadside,

two men with shovels maneuver a struck raccoon into a garbage bag
as cars approach, and swerve.
Whatever was here before
Target doesn’t care. The drive trains of one hundred thousand
vehicles per day don’t care.

\\

At the food court Magic Wok,

my son, fidgeting, knocks his cup of milk across the takeout box
I’ve bought for us to share.
While I dry the table, he goes to work
sopping up soaked rice and chicken, asks me *how much can we save*?
It’s fifty years since Neil Armstrong
set foot on the moon, one hundred

since the advent of the assembly line, and a dozen mall birds
root under tables for garbage
meant for nests up in the skylights,
a shoot of grass stands through the cracked tile of the fountain
drained of water, and all of its lucky pennies.

EMMY NEWMAN

You Will See It Coming & You Won't Run

In the first year of certain apocalypse we were told to settle down with the reality of an earthquake,
and soon! the geologists told us with a certain glee. I tried to remember to worry about *Total Rip 9.0*

along with aneurysms, tax audits, how my mother once got a blood clot in her leg, and maybe
I never did pay my credit card bill last month I just *hope* that I did—when I watch movies

where a woman runs across an airport to fling herself around her lover, I worry
about where she has left her luggage, unattended—

Inevitable was a popular word the year my family began to prepare for The Big One,
stashed a few gallons of water in the basement, started the discussion of our Disaster Meet-Up Spot:

when our house is hopelessly broken, the phone lines down, the cell towers collapsed, lacerated spleens
about to burst, giardia, dysentery, and cholera imminent.

We started the discussion again and again, never really believing but when I remembered
I had forgotten to worry about why my father stopped speaking to his younger brother six years ago,

I carried a lump in my stomach like an undigested stone of chewing gum.
My nails were sheared nubs, paced routes worn into my bedroom carpet

and for Hanukah my mother bought me a yellow wooden box filled with Worry Dolls—
yarn scraps wrapped around twigs with red mouths and black eyes. The card inside read

tell us your worries! and every night I lined them up on my bedside table
until I started dreaming about paper dolls. We all worried about that

but we bought a few more cans of beans, another rechargeable flashlight. In the End,
what's there to believe in? My father reads an editorial: disaster is the world making good

on old promises: the sinking of islands, the receding of glaciers, don't build pulpits
on fault lines. We'll be sitting in the backyard and the lilac trees

will be heavy and sweet—the neighbor's Chihuahua throwing its tiny body against the fence
like always—we'll be sharing slices of rhubarb pie on our favorite blue-edged plates and the next day

Witness Literary Awards

Fiction

selected by Kristen Arnett

First Place

"Delivery" by Emily Greenberg

Runner-up

"The Dramatic Haircut" by Kristina Ten

EMILY GREENBERG

Delivery

WE'RE GETTING READY FOR ANOTHER sixteen hour work day when we hear Cactus Dan's death rattle: a soft ripping followed by a loud crash and then a shrill beeping. That is, the rotted-out cactus arm splits off and collides with the glass table lamp. That is, the Roomba attempts to ingest the glass shards and amputated cactus limbs before deciding not to bother and going back to sleep.

"You watered him again, didn't you?" my husband mumbles. He is only half-dressed, his thinning hair sticking up in the back and his cheeks gray with stubble. He has never been what you'd call a morning person. Lately, he's not been an afternoon person or even an evening person. To be honest, I'm no longer sure what kind of person he is.

I tell him I'll clean it up, and he sighs, shaking his head. "Today of all days."

In the living room, I find Dan sprawled flat on the floor behind the white leather couch, the base of his trunk gooey and puke yellow with rot. A few feet away, beneath the stainless steel coffee table, the amputated cactus arm lies tangled in the glass lamp shards. I bend over my felled cactus progeny, lovingly stroking his spikes with the tip of my finger. How could I not water Dan? I remember when he was first Delivered with his gray parachute, how determined my husband and I both were to take good care of him after our long line of other animal and vegetable casualties. We had followed the guides precisely. We had set Dan on automatic water timer. We had even named him after my father for good luck: before he and Mom kicked the bucket, they were both really into gardening, could nurse any poor plant back to life. This was the problem. Whenever I passed through the living room, whenever Dan looked especially sad or thirsty, I would think of my father gardening in the summer. Tearing dandelions and white clovers from the earth. Plunging his arthritic hands deep into the ground and wiping his fingers on a small white cloth. How could I resist sticking a finger in Dan's silver metal pot, feeling the dry soil, and dumping in a little vitamin-enhanced water? How could I resist caring, even when a part of me knew this would harm Dan?

I grab a broom from the closet and sweep up the glass. Using oven mitts, I carry Dan's corpse to the kitchen and gently lower him into the trash. He's too

tall for the bin. His head hangs over the side, glaring at me as I exit the room. Such a guilt trip. I walk back and deliver a quick little eulogy, simpler than the one I gave Dad—he was a great plant, the greatest plant, the best plant a gal could ever ask for, green and spiky and everything—and then I leave him to his eternal rest, an ominous feeling in my gut.

Back in the bedroom, I dress in the company uniform: beige slacks, a pale blue dress shirt with silver buttons, off-white canvas shoes without laces. On my wrist, a platinum band that tracks my heartbeat, steps taken, calories consumed. In the bathroom, I brush my teeth while my husband lathers his face with shaving cream. When we first married, I found this hilarious, the sumptuous Santa Claus beard set against his jet-black hair and smooth cheeks. Now, finally, the old man's beard is starting to match the wispy gray hairs and the gleaming, dome-like forehead. With a straight razor, he shaves in quick, smooth strokes, obliterating every last hair follicle. When he's done, he dries off and stares into the stainless steel mirror, his slate-gray eyes darting across every waxy pore.

"Shit," he mutters, finally breaking his silence.

On his right cheek, just below the nostril, a tiny drop of crimson.

...

ON THE WAY TO THE company bus stop, I watch the Monday morning baby Deliveries. The newborns float lazily in the breeze, their colorful parachutes billowing overhead and shielding them from the gray clouds. On the colorless horizon, bits of canary yellow, avocado green, shimmering violet. Careful to avoid trees and hedges, the babies sway gently in the wind, their strapped-in bodies rocking back and forth before descending to outdoor cradles stuffed with fluffy pillows and fleece blankets. One lands on our street, and a few more scatter down the block. High above, the tiny drones begin their journeys home. Mission accomplished.

My husband places a warm hand on my shoulder, his voice gentler than it was earlier. "I thought we agreed we weren't going to watch?"

"That's right," I say, dropping my gaze and trying to make my voice sound a little brighter than I feel. "Bad luck."

We pass a few houses with the standard gray parachutes and then a cradle draped in peacock blue. The new parents are still in the front yard, their faces not exactly glowing but relieved because they have escaped the dreaded retirement centers for childless seniors. They are both in their early fifties, the standard

age, and have the unmistakable I-just-dodged-a-bullet looks. I cannot recall their names, even though we have lived here for almost two years now.

"Congratulations," my husband shouts from the sidewalk. "We didn't realize you were expecting."

The new parents wave back, shouting something about the birthday party this evening. Because we are childless and because nasty rumors have spread about how we kill everything we touch, my husband and I are considered neighborhood pariahs. We are only invited to these birthday parties out of obligation, and we only attend to avoid raising eyebrows. After my husband assures them we'll be there—oh, we wouldn't miss it for the world—the new parents return to the task at hand. The mother hugs the parachute-swaddled newborn to her chest, its face hidden from sight, and the father puzzles over the Swedish instruction manual. He digs through the tote that accompanies each baby, filled with the necessary tools: diapers, pacifiers, little jars of organic apple sauce, vials of oxytocin to promote parent-child bonding, digital activity trackers to ensure the parents aren't negligent.

"I don't understand these little diagrams," the father says, turning to his wife as we board the driverless bus. "Do you think we can get these, like, automated?"

With a soft groan, the bus accelerates. I stare out the window, watching as the neighbors recede into the fog. I still remember a time before, when everyone told their kids the same colorful stories of animals my parents had once told me. The stork. The birds and the bees. All those nights they lovingly read me fairy tales and myths from dog-eared books with watercolor illustrations and cracked spines. Now we tell the kids the truth. You were conceived in test tubes, grown in artificial wombs, and delivered by drone. You are each perfect, intentional, and desired. Not always for the right reasons.

The bus turns down another residential street, and my husband reaches into his pocket for a small plastic bag of Cokelyte. He taps me on the elbow, and I see it as a peace offering, a sign that he has put the morning's catastrophe behind him. I pinch a little white powder into my hand and inhale deeply, the numbness spreading from my nostrils to the back of my throat like a slow, pleasant paralysis. This is my favorite part of the day. I pass him back the bag, and he does a bump too. Around us, others are pulling out their own bags.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"It's okay. Not as good as the previous batch."

He leans in, lowers his voice. "No, about the meeting."

We are meeting with HR today to discuss our third and final application to access the Womb benefit. Originally, we had signed up for the Womb to show

our superiors we weren't going to have kids at peak work age so we would be promoted. Now, we were applying to use the Womb so we could retire early with full benefits and avoid the horrible retirement centers.

The company tries to hide the statistics, but we've seen the reports and heard the rumors. Everyone has. Life expectancy has actually declined dramatically for those suckers who don't retire early to raise children. Those first few years of the kid crying and keeping you up at night are apparently nothing compared to another twenty to thirty years of Cokelyte and sixteen-hour work days. The childless usually work themselves to death well before reaching retirement age, and the lucky few who reach the awful retirement homes spend their remaining years completely miserable, hooked up to oxygen tanks and the like. Because the non-compete clauses made it impossible to switch jobs and try with another company, this was our last chance. Funny thing is, neither of us can stand small children. I hate the noise and the snot and the stink, their little grimy hands and the way you have to bend down to speak to them. He hates how their heads are too big for their bodies and the way they bounce around without breaking any bones. It freaks him out.

"A little nervous," I admit. "But confident, hopeful."

"That's good," he says, but I can hear the uncertainty in his voice.

For the rest of the ride, we both stare out the window, not speaking but holding hands. Soon enough, we exit the highway, traverse the crowded downtown, and arrive at our glittering urban factory. Sixteen skyscrapers with glass elevators, all clustered around a stainless steel parachute sculpture. Here is where we part for the day, my husband to Air Traffic Control and me to Missing Packages.

...

AS SOON AS I WALK into my division, I know something is wrong. My team is huddled around the chrome-plated plasma screen on the main wall, phones and tablets abandoned at their desks. "What's going on?" I ask.

One of my subordinates turns around, lips twitching into a faint smile. "Some idiot tried to steal a baby Delivery."

Years ago, a stolen Delivery was nothing out of the ordinary, but the surveillance is too advanced now. Everyone is caught eventually. Only the deranged or suicidal still try.

On the screen, cops are escorting one of these sorry souls into a vehicle with blinking red lights. Her arms are twisted behind her, the cuffs gleaming on her bony wrists. Just before she enters the car, she turns around and stares directly

into the camera. I can't tell whether she's having a psychotic break or is simply drunk. Her eyes are bloodshot and rimmed with bags, her white T-shirt splattered with mud and an indecipherable mustard-colored stain. Long, greasy knots of violet-streaked hair wind down her back. She is young, maybe only in her late 20s. From her clothes and the lack of tracker bands on her wrists, I can tell she is lower class, that she does not work for one of the big tech companies.

The rest of the morning is routine but busy. Around 0830, I receive a call about a flyaway drone caught in a tree. Firemen pulled it down, opened the unmarked package, and of course it was another blow-up sex doll. I tell the firemen to hold their proverbial and/or real horses while I dispatch another drone to collect it, and then I do this, checking it off my little spreadsheet. After that, a customer calls claiming a botched Delivery—radar at the wrong frequency—caused her beloved German Shepherd to have a heart attack. I offer some insincere condolences and direct her to Legal so she can get a new dog by the end of the day. Another customer calls complaining his package is late. As we talk on the phone, it arrives—only one minute after its scheduled time. All Deliveries are guaranteed thirty minutes or less after you place the order or your money back. Per company policy, I apologize and issue a refund. On and on it goes with the gray parachute problems until I finally receive the call from HR around 1300.

They ask if my husband and I can stop by in five minutes, and I tell them of course we can. After hanging up, I do another weak bump of Cokelyte and check my appearance in a compact mirror. By now, I am high as a kite. As the kids say, I'm *delivered*. My graying curls pulled into an efficient bun, my eyes red and swollen from lack of sleep. I only look a decade older than my age, which will not make a good impression on upper management. Luckily, I have a trick. I smear some dark eye-shadow under my eyes and am ready to go.

...

AT 1305, MY HUSBAND AND I ascend the glass elevator to HR. A receptionist speaks in soothing tones over the elevator jazz in the background. We give him our names and take seats in the waiting room breathing in the lemon-scented disinfectant and admiring PR's latest inspirational wall posters. In one, a beaming middle-aged gay couple pose with their chubby, ethnically ambiguous baby. The fathers are conventionally attractive, dressed in matching white button-down shirts and sprawled across an impossibly green lawn, the dutiful golden retriever at their feet. *WAIT AS LONG AS YOU NEED TO START YOUR FAMILY,* the poster declares. In another, a racially diverse group of four young people hold

up various forms of Cokelyte. *PILL, POWDER, OR INJECTION: GET THE OD-PROOF, COMPANY SUBSIDIZED PRESCRIPTION THAT'S BEST FOR YOU!* A third poster features the company logo, the parachute in black silhouette, a tiny rectangular package suspended from its cords, and the company slogan stamped across the domed canopy in white: *DELIVERY GUARANTEED.*

After I grow bored with the posters, I flip through the glossy brochures fanned across the glass coffee table. *HOW TO SLEEP FOUR HOURS A NIGHT AND FEEL GREAT! HOW TO PICK THE BEST SPERM AND EGG DONOR FOR YOUR CHILD! HOW TO RAISE PRODUCTIVE WORKERS!* I begin reading a brochure about the Womb. On the first page, a pink-orange cartoon fetus rests in a fluid-filled bag connected to colorful tubes.

What is the artificial Womb?
The artificial Womb is the biggest reproductive technology advancement in the last twenty years and a standard component of your health benefits. Thanks to the artificial Womb, you're not bound by any biological clock. Grow your family on a timeline that's right for you without skipping a beat at work!

How does the Womb work?
The Womb works just like a biological womb minus nine months of inconvenience! Our doctors will closely monitor the growing fetus and send the parents-to-be periodic text and video updates. No morning sickness required!

How do I take care of my newborn baby?
Toss out those old parenting books! Each newborn baby arrives fully equipped with all the tools and instructions you'll need to be the best parent ever. As you parent, we'll track your progress and let you know where you can improve!

How do I retire early with my benefits and healthcare?
We like to think of our company as a welcoming environment for families. Employees who have worked for thirty years may retire early with full benefits to raise children. For those without children, the mandatory retirement age remains 80.

I close the brochure and toss it back on the coffee table. After a few more minutes, the receptionist calls our names and says the HR manager will see us now.

At last. My heart beating rapidly from nerves and Cokelyte, I push through the heavy aluminum door, and my husband follows. A woman wearing an

impeccable powder-blue suit greets us from behind a massive glass desk, a generous view of the city's towering skyscrapers rising behind her. Same elevator music in the background, same lemon disinfectant smell. The office is minimally decorated. Nothing but bare white walls, asphalt floor, and a few etched plaques and abstract metal sculptures on the spotless glass shelves. No family photos. This is normal, I remind myself. She is senior management, a company woman through and through.

I take a seat beside my husband. The hard plastic presses into my back, and I try to relax my posture. HR Lady points to a silver tray with white powder and several straws. "Can I offer you both a line?"

I nod because it's the polite thing to do, wishing I hadn't just done a bump. I take a straw and inhale, letting the numbness settle in my nostrils. This is it, I think, our whole future rests on this meeting. The Cokelyte makes me feel confident and energetic, like I have these meetings with upper management HR all the time. When I'm done, my husband takes his turn, and then he hands the tray back, and HR Lady does a bump herself.

"Ah," HR Lady inhales deeply. "Now that's better. That's the good stuff right there. Top of the line."

She places the tray back on her desk and holds up a sheet of paper. The type is too small for me to read. "So. Let's get right into it then. Your application." She twists her face into something resembling sympathy, all angled eyebrows and pursed lips like a puffer fish. My heart feels like it skips a beat. "I wish I had better news, dears, I really wish I did."

My stomach flutters and sinks at the same time. Then the euphoric Cokelyte feeling melts into acute anxiety. I breathe in short little gasps, and my husband grips the chair until his knuckles turn white.

"You see, HR takes it very seriously when we think employees will waste our health benefits."

She cuts me off before I can explain. "I know, I know. They were all accidents, right? The dog ran in front of the car, the parakeet escaped through a broken window. I'm not sure how your hamster managed to hang itself while you were out of town, but I *believe* you when you say it was an accident. I read the whole extenuating circumstances section. Saw that you were granted the provisional status after not killing the, um, cactus."

"For a full year," my husband brags, leaving out this morning's tragedy.

"Yes. It's, um, very impressive," HR Lady says, not looking impressed. "Anyway, I made your case to the insurance reps, said you were two of our most productive workers, but they weren't buying it. Said it was policy not to

get involved in these cases. It's like when someone needs a new liver. Do you give the liver to someone with a history of alcoholism, even if they promise to change, or do you give the liver to someone who's never abused a drop of alcohol in their life?"

Without looking at my husband, I can tell he's given up, and it's all on me now. Do or die time. Even though I don't have a single maternal bone in my body, I summon up my best schmaltz and wax poetic about the joys of motherhood, how I have felt incomplete my whole life, how I want to devote myself to the care of another, how she has to try again with the insurance people. An Oscar-winning performance if I do say so myself. Tears and everything. Even my husband looks convinced.

HR Lady hands me a box of tissues embossed with little parachutes. "Don't cry! Don't cry! We don't do tears here. What's our company motto? This Is a Happy Place: All Deliveries Guaranteed! I'm afraid the insurance rep's answer was final, but you have some other options, you know? We want to help you, you know? Let's talk about what those options are. Option 1, you can buy one of the Wombs on your own, without the company insurance."

My husband shakes his head. "Like anyone can afford that."

HR Lady nods, clicks her teeth together. "Option 2, you could go the natural route..."

This time, I shake my head. "I'm going to be 57 next month. And you know, all that Cokelyte..."

HR Lady coughs into her hand. "Well, there's always the third option. As you know, we have a luxurious retirement community with state-of-the-art amenities and full-time aides. I know it's disappointing to not reproduce, but our company always takes good care of the childless, those who have devoted their whole lives to their work. We like to think the work we do is *just as meaningful* as raising offspring, maybe even more so. Just make sure you hit your quotas, and you'll be rewarded accordingly."

She hands me a glossy brochure. On the cover, a tanned elderly couple grin ear to ear in front of a majestic purple sunset. The graphic designer has airbrushed away their wrinkles, and they both wear over-sized sunglasses to hide their eyes, undoubtedly long damaged from squinting at bright LED screens. Flipping through the pages, I see more pictures of seniors lounging on immaculate beaches and beside glowing pools, fruity drinks in their hands, fake smiles stretched across their decaying faces like plastic wrap over rotting meat. Nausea wells in my stomach, and my head feels light.

"We'll take care of you both when you're old. If one of you gets sick and

passes first. You shouldn't worry about that. And trust me, our trained aides will take better care of you than your own offspring could!"

I resist pointing out that the whole brochure is a lie and that those few who make it to the retirement centers certainly aren't in any condition to lounge around the beach sipping fruity drinks. "That's, um, very generous." I dab at my nose, and the tissue reddens with blood. "It's very tempting."

"When I was younger, there was so much pressure for women to reproduce, you know, and it was even worse for us minority women. We had to do *everything*. I would have *killed* to be in your position. To not have to worry about any of this. To be able to focus on my career. Now don't get me wrong, I did alright for myself, but think of how much more I could have accomplished." HR Lady gazes longingly out her impressive window at the glass buildings slashing through the fog and the white-capped mountains in the distance. The elevator jazz switches to a new track, something more mellow, fewer instruments. The room begins to spin. When she speaks again, her voice sounds distant and garbled, like I'm hearing it under water. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off, think it over?"

There's nothing to think over, but her offer to leave early is so rare and unexpected that she repeats it. "Seriously."

...

BACK AT HOME, MY HUSBAND deflates like a week-old birthday balloon. He doesn't even hang his coat up, just lets it fall to the kitchen floor, puddling around his shoes. I sit beside him and stare around me at all the clean silver and white surfaces and blinking red lights. The coffee maker that knows when we wake up. The fridge that orders more groceries when we run out. The plates that weigh our food and beep when we've taken extra helpings. And then I think of the small house in the quiet rural town. My childhood home. Even after all this time, I can still see the rectangular oak table and the bowl of plastic fruit, the old gas burners and plastic laminate counter-tops and scuffed leather boots in the doorway, dirt caked into the soles. Even after all this time, I can smell the cumin and thyme, the Windex and human sweat. Even after all this time, I can hear my mother dipping a wooden spoon into a pot of stew, muttering to herself that it just needs a pinch of salt, maybe a little more basil.

My husband's back is rising and falling with deep breaths, his fists clenched at his sides. I know we are thinking the same things. We are screwed. We are so fucking screwed. We are going to work sixteen hour days from now until we die.

“Oh no,” he groans, spinning around. “We have to go to that birthday party later. The neighbors’ kid.”

“Can’t we skip it?” I ask, knowing we can’t. “I’m not feeling well.”

His eyes soften with concern, and for a moment, he’s the man I first fell in love with. The man with the confident brown eyes and gentle heart. The man who used to write me terrible love songs and scatter the lyrics around the house. For years, I would find the crumpled slips of paper stuffed in cereal boxes or taped to light switches and know that I was loved. “Here,” he holds up a plastic bag of white powder and reaches for the tray on the counter. “The new stuff just came in.”

We snort and wipe the residual blood from our noses. The new batch is much better than the old stuff, and I soon feel better. We head to the bedroom, turn out the lights, and lay on the faded bedspread all tangled together, my head on his chest and his fingers idly twirling one of my curls. It’s just like old times, back when I knew what kind of person he was. What kind of person I was. I close my eyes and am immediately transported back to our first apartment, the one with the broken window AC and the faded towels strapped to the windows as curtains, the one where we would hear the mice dying inside the flimsy walls and hold each other tighter, swearing we would never let the outside world penetrate our sacred cocoon, whispering so late it became morning, our voices lost to the clank and whoosh of a garbage truck’s diesel engine, the screech of the steel compactor, the light banter of the men lifting the slate gray bins with callused palms. If only we’d gotten the kid and retired, we could have rediscovered each other, grown old in each others’ arms.

But here we are. His heart pounds against my ear, and I glance at his tracker: 162 beats per minute. Too fast. Above, the steel fan blades slice through the air like tiny airplane propellers. Below, the Roomba purrs across the floor inhaling dust and dead skin cells. After a long silence, he speaks. “We don’t even like kids. You know, maybe it’s for the best.”

He’s giving up again, just like earlier. Without thinking, I lean over and slap his face. A blood-purple flower blossoms on his cheek, and he touches it with the pads of his fingers. There’s a hurt in his eyes but more than that, a surprise. A realization that the neighborhood and the work have changed me too. Made me ruthless, made me hurt everything I love because love is neither efficient nor predictable. It doesn’t belong in this rationalized world of maximized utility. There’s nowhere for it to go that doesn’t hurt someone.

“I’m sorry,” I lie. “I don’t know what came over me. It’s all the Cokelyte.”

We both sit up. Our dilated eyes meet, and I know what he’s thinking because

I'm thinking the same thing: I don't know who you are. He drops his hand and slowly stands up from the bed. "We should get going," he says, reaching for the keys.

...

AFTER THE SHORT TREK ACROSS the street, we follow another couple to the backyard where a small crowd of neighbors has already gathered. They are mostly middle managers with a few engineers and one or two customer service reps, new neighborhood arrivals putting in social dues while they care for pets and plants and await Womb approval. A few lounge by the pool, toes dipped in the water, chilled drinks in their hands. Others recline in tilted plastic lawn-chairs. Mostly they ignore us because of the rumors. Near the hedges, white balloons with congratulatory messages strain against their anchors. Syrupy pop music bleeds from overhead Bluetooth speakers. The parents and their new baby are nowhere to be seen.

We duck our heads and make for the refreshment table. Cokelyte and alcohol do not mix well so the drinks are mostly non-alcoholic: assorted flavored waters and sodas, all vitamin-infused, a few bottles of champagne for those feeling adventurous. A small, wicker basket offers protein bars, meal replacement pills, and Soylent shakes for those who are hungry. We grab flavored waters and head for a cluster of deck chairs, where a woman with a lime-green side shave is gossiping in animated tones. I don't recall her name, but I recognize her. She is about my age and company rank.

As soon as we take our seats, Lime Green turns to me like we're old friends. There's always one in the group who fakes politeness towards us, tries to make us feel included if only so they can feel superior. "I'm assuming you saw the news today? The stolen baby Delivery attempt?"

My husband shakes his head, and I tell Lime Green I just caught part of the news story. "So she was having some sort of mental break then?"

To my surprise, Lime Green shakes her head. "No, she was totally lucid when the cops questioned her. Said her neighbors were heartless scumbags and she didn't want them to ruin this kid's life. She knew exactly what she was doing and the likelihood that she would get caught. Can you imagine? Trying to raise a child in poverty and at peak work age? She was too young to retire."

I shake my head and study the drink in my hand. I can't imagine sacrificing myself for someone else when I feel so helpless myself. Something catches in the back of my throat. I cough.

Lime Green continues, "Such a shame really. They were saying she tried to have her own baby the natural way first, and her employer had to eventually talk her into getting her tubes tied. Told her the baby would be born with genetic defects. I say all for the better. How could a child with such inferior biology ever *compete* in today's economy? We could eliminate poverty and gender and racial inequality if it weren't for people like *that*. Did she really think people wouldn't notice a stolen Delivery, that they wouldn't suspect a woman of her position with a genetically modified baby?"

The arrival of the parents and newborn saves me from having to respond. What a change from this morning. Ear to ear smiles, extra springs in their steps after only a day away from the office and the Cokelyte. Everyone abandons their drinks and huddles around to get a better look. The baby is chubby with dark glowing skin, one blue eye and one brown, and a shock of very straight, flaming orange hair. He has ten fingers, ten toes, and a contagious smile. Not what I expected but charming all the same. Charming and yes, I'll admit it, beautiful.

"Sorry we had to keep you all waiting," announces the father, glancing down at the baby drinking from a bottle in his wife's arms. "*Somebody* had to be changed. But isn't he handsome? Black gingers with complete heterochromia, they're going to be all the rage."

"It's really the only strategy," the mother adds, removing the bottle from the baby's lips. "When everyone's already so perfect, you have to distinguish yourself. Our kid, he's got the most superior genes, *and* he's one of a kind." She turns to her husband. "Oh, dear, did you mark the diaper change on the chart?"

The father slaps himself lightly on the forehead, removes the small screen from his back pocket, and furiously taps at it. "There, there we go. Everything's up to date now," he says, returning the tracker to his back pocket. "So much to keep track of!"

"Well, you'll get used to it," my husband says. "Have you been expecting long?"

"No, not really. Decided only last week. This was a rush Delivery. He's actually got a twin sister on the way, but we didn't want to pay the extra shipping on both."

"How nice," I lie, the Cokelyte making me feel falsely cheerful.

"Oh, we can't wait," the mother says, removing the bottle from the baby's lips. "We didn't think we'd be so into being parents, but you can't imagine. It's given our lives such meaning already. We have these matching plaid outfits all picked out for the twins. Here, let me get them. You'll all just *die* when you see."

She turns to her husband. “Dear, can you burp him while I run in for a minute?” She places the baby in his arms and disappears before he can respond.

“Burp. Hmmm…” The father squints at the baby like he’s studying a confusing map. He smiles sheepishly, and the baby giggles. “Now if I could only remember what the instruction book said!”

The Cokelyte surges through my veins, and my confidence levels spike. “Here, it’s not hard,” I say, putting my drink down. “I saw this once on TV. Let me show you.”

“Do you think that’s really the best idea? You’re real delivered right now,” my husband whispers, but the father doesn’t hear him and places the baby in my arms. He is heavier than he looks, his skin soft and warm as clothes straight from the dryer. Before anyone can stop me, I drape a napkin over my left shoulder and support the little guy’s weight with my left arm. Behind me, I hear a collective intake of breath and hushed whispers, but I ignore those jokers and the father ignores them too, as oblivious to my pariah status as he is to everything else.

“Just like this,” I say, gently patting the baby’s back with the palm of my right hand. His curly orange hair tickles my chin, and he smiles at me with bright, pink gums. It’s possible I could have raised a child like this, I think to myself. One who doesn’t cry or stink. One who doesn’t make too many demands, just lets me enjoy my retirement in peace. I look up and see the fear has evaporated from my husband’s face. He must be having the same daydream as me, the one where we get the Womb and the kid and escape the daily grind. He walks over and drapes an arm around my shoulders. I can tell he’s still a little freaked out by the kid’s massive head—you don’t just get over these things—but he looks more at ease than I’ve seen him in years, the lines in his forehead relaxing at last. From a distance, we must look almost like one of those happy families whose hamsters don’t hang themselves.

My husband gives my shoulder another squeeze and tells me he’s going to grab another drink. I shift the baby’s weight, and he giggles at me.

“Well look at that,” the father says, “you’re a real natural.”

I hug the little guy tighter, and then of course he has to go and ruin everything. He closes his eyes and tosses a tiny fist in the air. Howls like there’s no tomorrow, and maybe there isn’t. For a moment, I allow myself to imagine his whole sad, sorry future. The stupid, plaid outfits followed by the tracker wrist bands, the laceless canvas shoes, the sixteen hour work days, the Cokelyte addiction, the false corporate cheeriness and mind-numbing jazz music, the semblance of choices, the move to another soulless suburb with a stranger he once loved but now only recognizes in brief flashes. The company and neighborhood will beat

everything good out of this kid, will redirect his most human impulses towards violence. Already I can see him leaning into the black rolling desk chair, red-streaked eyes glued to the retina display computer monitor and nostrils caked with dried blood, whispering insincere condolences to another faceless woman with another dead dog. The same awful part of me that slapped my husband's face earlier can't help thinking it would be a kindness if this kid were never born. A kindness if he were spared this terrible fate.

"There, there," I pat the baby's back and rock him a little, but he just keeps going. Thick, mucus-coated sobs, ugliest noise in the world. Barely alive and already suffering. I still don't like kids, still don't want this one, but it hurts to see him like this. Hurts to imagine what they'll do to him.

Almost on command, the mother reappears with the stupid matching outfits. When she sees me holding her crying child, all the color drains from her face. She hugs the matching outfits to her chest protectively like she's shielding them from something dangerous, a man-eating lion or lunatic with a gun. My stomach does a couple halfway decent backflips off the high board and then bellyflops hard. So she's heard about the dog and maybe the poor hamster. "Dear, could you come here for a second?" she calls to her husband, smiling big and even laughing a little like there's no problem, nothing wrong at all. He trots over like a little lap dog, and she pulls him in by the elbow, whispers something in his ear. His mouth falls open for a moment, but he corrects himself. Beams a fake smile so bright you can see it from Mars.

"I'm so sorry, friends," he announces to the little crowd gathered. "As my lovely wife just reminded me, the little guy needs a bath. Silly me to forget something like that." He approaches slowly, grinning and laughing like we're old friends. Without thinking, I back away from him and step closer to the pool. I scan the crowd for my husband, hoping he will intervene and give me time to stall, but I don't see him anywhere. I take another step back, my heel digging into the tile. There's nowhere for us to go, and I feel the violence welling up inside of me. By now, the syrupy pop music has faded to static. The drink cooler is empty, the sun low. Behind us, the other party-goers are talking quietly among themselves, but I am not listening. Instead, I am thinking of the woman on the television this morning and how she knew what she was doing. Instead, I am looking into the kid's blue and brown eyes and wondering whether I should dash his head against the pool tile to save him from his miserable future. A drop of blood falls from my nose on the kid's right cheek now, just below the nostril.

"If you don't mind," the father says. He takes a step closer and holds his hands out for the child, waiting.

KRISTINA TEN

The Dramatic Haircut

HAVING JUST HAD HER HEART broken, the girl decides to get a dramatic haircut. She has heard this about dramatic haircuts: that they can help with the pain. That if you can look in the mirror and see a new person, maybe you can believe a new person is on the way.

This new person will have the same past, of course, but will experience it differently—as someone lazily flipping through an album of images—and only occasionally, when she remembers it's there.

Also, the girl tells herself, with dramatic haircuts, you are being *decisive*. You are being the kind of person capable of making *decisions,* for yourself, for change. You are taking *action*. You are not lying prone on a bed without sheets or pillows, encircled in the colorless haze of your pain.

The girl's second decision: she has found a salon. It opened recently in an up-and-coming part of town, very hip and exclusive. She's surprised she can get an appointment so soon. It's expensive but she decides—another decision!—it will be worth it.

At this salon, birds do the cutting. Snip, snip. Big birds, small birds, she doesn't know. A lot about the salon is hush-hush. She imagines kind-faced blue songbirds maneuvering tiny gold scissors with their claws.

The girl has read the fairy tales. She believes things can be good someday, and knows the opposite to be true as well.

Her mother always said people carry their heartache in their hair, and to get it all gone, you have to shave down to the skin. And when that doesn't work, you have to pull up by the roots. She yanked her own hair out in fistfuls, bleeding at the scalp, collecting scabs under her fingernails. When it came back in, it was thin and dry, as if growing halfheartedly, knowing it was not long for this world.

When the girl was little, her mother styled her hair for school in braids and clips and bright elastics. But the girl was not allowed to touch her mother's hair in return. "You'll feel *everything*," her mother said, pushing the girl's hands away, and to quell any tears, pulled a shiny metallic tube from her purse. "Here, do my lips instead."

This is another thing that attracted the girl to the birds. Surely they, better than human stylists, will be equipped to handle her pain. Something about cross-species transmission, she thinks, means they'll feel it less acutely.

The boy.

The boy made her feel good.

The boy turned his whole body toward her. He smiled with his whole face at her.

The boy noticed things about her that she had never noticed about herself. He said she was beautiful and that was the least appealing thing about her.

When it comes to the dramatic haircut, the girl doesn't care how it turns out. In particular, she doesn't care if it looks good. But she selects pictures from magazines anyway, celebrities with the haircut she's thinking of, and clips them out to bring to the salon, because this is something the salon asks clients to do.

The celebrities look perfect, not a strand out of place. She reminds herself that celebrities are people. Have mothers, fathers.

The girl's father started using hair-growth creams even before her mother's diagnosis. If asked, he'll say it was the stress of it all—the separation, the disorder, the treatment centers, one after the other—that caused his hair loss in the first place.

But the girl has a distinct memory: she is eight years old. She walks into her parents' bathroom to find her father, balding as long as she's known him, taking photos with their old digital camera. Every angle, the top of his head, the back, the sides. Later, she finds the camera in a dresser drawer and clicks through them all. In each, a crescent of hair wrapped around the glistening dome of his skull. So many progress photos, her thumb cramps over the "next" button. Hundreds, thousands with the same subject, slight changes in light.

There has been other hair. The blonde curls of a childhood dog, clinging to various surfaces around the house long after its death. The girl's mother hired a deep-cleaning service to be rid of them. After that, the hairs showed up only once in a while, and in strange places. Wedged between the bristles of the girl's toothbrush. Drifting in the leftover milk in her cereal bowl.

The boy.

What was the boy's hair like? The girl cannot for the life of her remember.

The boy asked important questions. About her dreams and her insecurities, her favorite things and her least favorite things and how she felt about the future. About her childhood and her mother who wanted no hair, and her father who wanted more.

So the girl told the boy things she had not told anyone. Things that, before, had caused people to shift uncomfortably in their seats, or cough a soft blanket over the prickliness of her words, or change the subject, or walk out of the room.

But the boy, he did not flinch. He said he wanted to know all of her, promised he would not be scared away.

The birds at the salon, they are easily scared away. They're not much different from other birds, really, just more dexterous and capable of working from reference photos. That's why the salon has rules.

The rules of the salon are this:

It has no name or signage. Still, you must find it.

When you get inside, take off your shoes, leave them on the mat, be quiet.

There will be a registration desk, unmanned. Behind the desk will be a wall of hair products, shampoos and gels in bottles the color of candy. You will want them, but don't bother: every bottle will be empty.

There will be a bowl of mints, from which you may take one, so long as you suck gently and do not bite down. Or just swallow right away if you don't care about the taste.

Then go to the salon chair. There will only be one. Wait patiently and do not jostle your legs. The birds are timid and skittish, but they are professionals. They will have seen the appointment book and know that you're there.

The girl has always had the same hairstyle: long, long, long, like in the fairy tales. She has not, till now, felt the urge to change it. She liked that she could use it to cover her face when she felt like hiding, or pile it high on top of her head when she felt like being taller. It helped her take up less space, or more. It kept her warm in the winter.

She knows her hair better than she knows most parts of herself. She knows how to tilt her head for pictures, what to do about her cowlicks, exactly how much brighter it gets under the sun.

Only suddenly, the girl isn't so sure. She worries she might not know anything, might have been wrong all along. Any attachment she once felt to her hair is now gone.

The boy promised he would not be scared away.

The boy promised.

The boy.

People disappear like hair grows: so gradually, you don't notice as it's happening. Only notice it later, after you've spent time examining the slow progress over hundreds and thousands of individual moments.

And people disappear like hair is cut: twin blades gliding effortlessly through a curtain, all at once, ruthless, with no regard for how long it took to get here.

When the girl arrives at the salon, she follows all the rules. She waits in the lone chair, looking at the magazine clippings she has unfolded quietly on her lap. The celebrities smile up at her, stylish and carefree beneath their matching asymmetrical bobs.

A new person is on the way.

When the birds come, it's nothing like the girl expected. For one thing, they don't carry scissors. For another, they are not blue.

In the mirror, she sees them. They are grotesque, the color of old, half-picked scabs: pale yellow in blotches and otherwise black, red, brown, a section of fresh pink on one side. They are all different sizes and as they hover, they stir the air and make it hot. Some are missing parts of their toes, and the strands of hair that cut off the blood flow remain tightly wound around the amputation points.

The birds sing no songs. In fact, they make no sound at all, aside from the hollow whipping of their wings, which is like canvas on a clothesline in a violent storm.

Their wings. The girl understands now why they didn't bring scissors. Their wings are themselves sharp, each one a blade, not feathery or downy but designed to cut.

And they do. Her hair, at first.

She shows the birds her celebrities and they work with efficiency. As her hair falls in clumps around the base of the chair, already the girl notices new things about herself: how her cheeks are maybe not as full as she thought, her chin maybe more pronounced. How her shoulders, now exposed, reach toward her ears as if shrugging or cold.

The first time the birds catch flesh, she yelps in surprise. A red line opens at the top of her left ear, then drips. Then it's one cheek, then the other. Her forehead, twice. Her neck.

"What are you doing!" she shouts at the team of hairstylists, but is drowned out by the now-deafening churning of air. She tries again, louder. "You're hurting me!" But the birds are birds, and they cannot understand her.

Still, she thinks she sees them look at each other knowingly. She swears she hears a voice from somewhere say: "What? You're the one who wanted a dramatic haircut."

The boy asked difficult questions. The boy wanted her to share all of herself with him. The boy took parts of her and put them in his mouth.

The boy believed in radical honesty. The boy believed in *radical* honesty. That's what he said at the end. That he was just being honest. And didn't she want that.

The birds don't stop at the area around her head. They keep pruning away, her stomach, her legs. Her clothes fall away in shreds. The birds whittle her down.

The girl is making a decision. She is feeling everything.

The blood runs thick and searing down the center of her back, and it reminds

her of a game she and her mother never played. Because by the time the girl learned the game at another girl's sleepover, her mother was away, and supervised by a guard during their visits, and not allowed to touch her daughter's hair. The words were: *under no circumstances.*

The game went: *Crack an egg on your head, let the yolk drip down*. The egg was the tap of a closed fist on the skull, the yolk the slithering of fingers from there on down. Tickle, tickle.

Yolk drip down.

It was guaranteed to give you the chills. At least, that was the point. If that didn't work, there was the next verse: *Stab a knife in your back, let the blood drip down*.

The girl is aware, only mildly, of the beating of wings. The indifference of birds.

Won't be scared away.

You're *hurting* me!

Blood drip down, blood drip down.

You'll feel *everything*.

Everyone is unflinching until they flinch.

Crack.

...

WHEN THE GIRL SNAPS BACK to the world, she is sitting with her back against a wall, slick tile under her feet. Familiar things: her floor, her apartment. Her favorite pajamas, patterned with planets, so old they're too short in the legs. Her hair dried stiff, long as ever.

And blood. Everywhere, big and small cuts.

It's dark outside, and the girl catches her reflection in the glass of a nearby window. Her hands are midair, level with her shoulders, shaking like from the effort of being suspended in flight. In each hand, a pair of kitchen shears.

She doesn't recognize herself.

Curious, she leans forward, so more of her reflection appears on the glass. She remembers the shears. A single image from her past. They're the ones she has used to split chicken, because they're heavy-duty and, for cleaning, come apart.

But the person, that person there. No, she's sure now, that's not her at all.

And that's enough, the girl thinks, to begin.

Witness Literary Awards

Nonfiction

selected by José Roach-Orduña

First Place

"When a Child Offends" by Michele Sharpe

Runner-up

"Ani-la and Anne-la: On Everything I Knew and Didn't Know"
by Anne Liu Kellor

MICHELE SHARPE

When a Child Offends

"How can you defend someone you know is guilty?" That question was leveled at me too many times when I was a public defender. My answer was usually that I was helping to even up the odds, since all the criminal justice system's machinery was arrayed against defendants. But sometimes I countered the question with one of my own: What do you mean by "defend"? What do you mean by "guilty"? What do you mean by "someone"?

Rayanne was someone, the eldest child of four, a good girl who liked helping at home. She wore her hair in tight braids when I first met her, but by the time she killed her seven-year-old neighbor, she was thirteen and had gone over to a medium-length Afro. Her mother, Donut, was my friend. A white woman of size, Donut moved as if weighed down by more than her girth. What she lost in physical speed, though, was more than made up for by the swiftness of her thought and speech. She could use language like a flower or a flamethrower to keep her children and her husband Everett in line, to navigate labyrinths of medical services, to get her car fixed almost for free.

Donut drove a 1970 Buick sedan, a metal beast big enough for her and Everett and the four kids. Something was always wrong with it. The day she showed up at my shotgun apartment with the four kids in tow, the muffler was dragging on the ground, setting off sparks. She and Everett had argued, and she was looking for a place to crash with the kids until he came to his senses. I had room for them.

The kids were all little then; Rayanne couldn't have been more than ten, her hair still braided tightly. I fixed them all peanut butter sandwiches and sent them out into the living room at the front of the apartment while Donut and I sat at my Formica kitchen table, drinking burnt coffee and smoking Marlboros. We talked about how men sucked for a while, and then about her future.

It was the early 1980's, and I was a childless woman in law school. Donut never tired of asking me what law school was like. We both knew she had an analytical mind that was made for legal reasoning. Education was much cheaper than now, but in her late twenties, with four kids and no college degree, law school seemed out of reach for her. Maybe when the kids were grown, we said, and fell silent.

When I picked up the phone to call my upstairs neighbor to borrow some pillows and blankets, I heard a commotion in the living room. Everett had knocked on my door, Rayanne had let him in, and the children were swarming him.

He walked through to the kitchen, a handsome black man wearing worn jeans and a light gray t-shirt that pulled tight across his chest, making him look strong and reliable. Donut twisted around to look at him and flipped her long, honey-colored hair over one shoulder. She pushed up out of her chair and he was beside her in an instant, lifting and wrapping his arms around her. The kids stood in the doorway and when she lay her head on his chest and hugged him back, they all cuddled around their parents. I was glad, for them and for me. I'd not looked forward to waking up to four kids.

The city we lived in curled around a harbor that stank at low tide. A has-been place, leftover from the Industrial Revolution, it was stocked with empty brick factory buildings and enough poverty and drugs to keep most everyone subdued most of the time. Once I graduated and passed the bar, I started taking public defender assignments in our city's District Court.

I sometimes saw Donut in court when she was helping friends who were either mystified by the court's legalese or intimidated by its Brutalist architecture. Soon, she started volunteering for a nonprofit mental health organization that would later hire her as a program director. Meanwhile, I was building a reputation for myself as what one judge called "a fierce little lawyer."

When Donut called me the day Rayanne killed the neighbor boy, she was sobbing but still coherent. She and Everett had been out, and Rayanne had taken Donut's keys to the Buick, gone outside to where the car was parked at the curb, started it up, and put it in gear. She was thirteen years old. She didn't know how to drive, and the car had bucked, jumped the curb, caught the bike-riding seven-year-old neighbor boy under its wheels, and crushed him to death. Rayanne hadn't got more than forty feet from her front door before killing him.

The next day, Rayanne appeared in court with her parents, charged with unauthorized use of a motor vehicle and manslaughter. I got the clerk to appoint me to her case. Rayanne cried during the entire ten-minute arraignment hearing, whispering "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry" like a mantra. What everyone wanted to know was why she'd tried to drive the car. She said she wanted to move it to a spot directly in front of her house, which sat on street of small, older homes wedged closely together without driveways. Arguments erupted in the neighborhood over parking spot territories. Her story didn't make sense to me, but it was true that Rayanne was a girl who liked to smooth conflicts.

The boy's parents were not present at the arraignment. The prosecutor wanted Rayanne held on bail; I countered that throwing Rayanne in a holding pen wouldn't cure this tragic accident. She had no criminal record and neither did her parents. She posed no threat to anyone and should be allowed to go home pending resolution of the case. It didn't hurt that the judge liked me and that I was able to vouch for Rayanne's character personally. I'd known her and her family since she was in first grade. Rayanne was released to her parents. Donut had already set her daughter up with a counselor and would home-school her for the time being.

There was no point in arguing the facts of the case. Donut and I agreed that scheduling a plea hearing as soon as possible was best. Once the court case was over, Rayanne's focus could shift to working through the trauma of having killed a little boy. But, because she'd killed a little boy, the prosecutor wanted her imprisoned. I wanted her put on probation.

Before our next court date arrived, I gossiped about the case with the clerks and court officers, playing up the doubly cruel nature of the tragedy, how the boy's young, innocent life had been snuffed out, and how Rayanne's young, innocent life had been forever changed. "The poor girl is inconsolable," I'd say. "She'll have to live with the weight of her guilt for the rest of her life." It was true.

By the time Rayanne appeared in court again, a protective community of sympathy surrounded her. The court personnel – bailiffs, clerks, probation officers – all treated her and her family with respect. The clerk sent the case to the judge of my choosing first thing that morning, a judge who understood moral ambiguity and complexity. Though nothing was certain, I felt confident in arguing for probation while acknowledging Rayanne's guilt. A seven-year-old boy had died, and the city mourned him. There would be no question about that.

My brief statement to the judge went like this: Rayanne was a good girl who helped out at home and did well in school. She'd made a terrible, irrevocable mistake in trying to move her parents' car. She was already being punished by the guilt and remorse she felt, and she'd carry those feelings with her for the rest of her life. She came from a solid family that was supporting her through this nightmare. She was seeing a psychologist who'd prepared a report for the court, and I passed the report up to the judge. She was not a risk for future delinquency. Probation with significant community service hours, I said, was the most appropriate sentence for Rayanne given all the circumstances of this horrific accident. We couldn't bring the seven-year-old child back, but we could

give Rayanne, another child, a second chance. The judge nodded at the end of every sentence I uttered. If asked to predict the outcome, I would have said we'd prevail.

What I couldn't have predicted though, was the testimony of the dead boy's mother. The prosecutor put her on the stand, asked her to speak about her son's death, and then stepped back, giving her a free rein. He must have expected her to be a sympathetic witness.

The boy's mother was short and slight, with feathered-back blond hair. She wore snug jeans and a fitted vest over a button-down shirt. "My son is gone forever. That girl should be locked up for the rest of her life," she said, pointing at Rayanne. Then she gripped the railing of the witness box with reddened knuckles, looking as if she was holding back tears, and turned on Donut and Everett.

"Just look at them," she said. "You can see what kind of people they are by just looking at them. They're not a good family at all." I wondered if she was race-baiting, trying to attack them for being a biracial family. She took a deep breath.

"And they're slobs. Car parts all over their back yard, trash cans overflowing every week." She took a deep breath. "Just look at her!" she said, raising her voice and pointing at Donut. "She goes out of the house in her nightgown."

Was this a jab at Donut's fatness? I knew Donut usually wore big, blowsy muumuu dresses that straddled the line between nightclothes and daywear. Finding clothes that fit was next to impossible for her, and she'd done her best that day to tame her flesh in stretch pants and a stretched-out cardigan.

"And their dog," the woman went on, "barking from morning 'til night. All the neighbors complain, but they don't lift a goddamned finger to keep that dog in line."

I glanced back at Donut and Everett, who sat behind me in the first row of the courtroom with their heads bowed as if in prayer or in deep shame. Rayanne, sitting beside me at the defense table, also had her head bowed. The woman's voice continued to rise. The prosecutor shifted in his seat as if about to stand up, but he slumped back. He must have figured the woman couldn't be stopped at that point.

The judge kept a slight, sympathetic smile plastered to his face, even as the woman's rage continued to stab at Donut and Everett, but I could see his gaze hardening, and then glassing over. I was torn between the glee I usually felt when an opponent's witness went out of control, and the urgency of wanting the bereaved mother to stop shaming herself with all that hate. When she finally

ran out of vitriol, the judge told her he understood her sorrow and her anger. Then he sentenced Rayanne to probation until her seventeenth birthday.

Rayanne could go home. It was a victory, but there was no celebration. How could there be, when another child had died?

I'd never asked Rayanne how she thought she should be punished for killing the little boy. Our first conversation centered on why she'd started the car in the first place. She'd always been a quiet kid, but the shock of killing the little boy rendered her nearly silent. I couldn't get her to talk to me, so whenever we met, I'd outline the process of pleading guilty and give her my assurances that I'd do everything in my power to keep her out of the juvenile detention system, without bothering to tell her why.

Horror stories about those places were common. Guards abused the kids, and the kids abused each other. Juvenile convictions were supposed to be sealed, as if they could be forgotten by everyone, but any kid who did time was stamped with that experience and stigmatized.

Donut and I knew that staying out of the juvenile lockups, staying with her family, and staying on track with school would give Rayanne a chance to grow into a woman who could pay the debt she owed her community. Neither of us asked for Rayanne's thoughts on that strategy. We were convinced we knew what was best.

But as Rayanne stumbled through her teenage years, her life took a turn no one had foreseen, although it came to make perfect sense to me. She'd not been punished for the little boy's death, and so she punished herself through the self-destruction of bad men and alcohol and drugs. I second-guessed my belief then that kids, no matter what they'd done, shouldn't be incarcerated. Maybe if Rayanne had been punished, I thought, she'd not feel compelled to punish herself.

Ten years after Rayanne's case, I quit practicing law, turned to the happier work of teaching, and moved away. Donut and I lost touch, but every so often I wondered if we should have asked Rayanne how she thought she should be punished, instead of relying on our own instincts to do whatever it took to keep her from being locked up. She was, after all, guilty. Like all of us.

It's been a hard lesson, but the children in my own family taught me Donut and I were right. I've never been a mother, and my nieces and nephews are a generation older than Rayanne. They became teenagers and young adults at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when mass incarceration and the war on drugs gave law enforcement unspeakable power over people, mostly people of color, but also poor whites.

Even before that, though, addiction had spread through our family like knotweed, rising up generation after generation, fed by alcohol, crack cocaine, meth, and opioids. Two of my nephews are in state prison now; both were first locked up as teenagers in 2009, when the U.S. prison population hit its historic high. Neither of them re-integrated into society when they were last released.

Not long ago, I looked Rayanne up online. The first thing I found was Donut's obituary page, where Rayanne had written a tribute to her mother's care and concern for her. From there, I found Rayanne's professional profile. She'd earned an associate degree at a community college, and she'd gone on from that to a decent job. Because she had a decent job, she could afford to earn a bachelor's degree, and then a master's degree. Because of those college degrees, she got a very good job. She had kids of her own, maybe because she had a mother who'd loved her and defended her.

What does it mean to defend someone who is guilty? Nearly thirty years have passed since I tried a case, but my old answer to that question still rings true for me. It means trying to even up the odds. I try to do that in my work and in my family life. I usually fail, and that's my guilty not-so-secret. In spite of my experience as a public defender, I've never been able to keep my family members free, or even out of court.

I write to my nephews in prison. I send them books when they ask for them. They write back, sometimes daring to hope. "My lifestyle isn't an avenue to virtue, but my mentality isn't a fortress of pessimism either," one says. He hangs on to his delight in making words sing with each other. Soon, he'll be released, but what will he do? His face and neck swarm with prison tattoos. He doesn't want to work or go to school or get into a program. Locked up almost continuously from fourteen to twenty-four, most of what he knows is prison life. His sisters fear he is institutionalized. They pray for him. When despair smothers me, I push it away by writing and volunteering.

In 2018, I spent an afternoon defending the guilty by knocking on doors for Second Chances Florida, which ran a successful campaign to restore voting rights to most Florida citizens convicted of felonies. Some of those doors were opened by people who thought anyone with a criminal record didn't deserve to vote. After decades in the happy profession of teaching, I was surprised at how vehement they were, how much they favored harsh and permanent punishment, and how much they sounded like the angry mother of that seven-year-old boy Rayanne killed. Their voices came from a hollow place echoing with lies about how heaping blame on others makes one more worthy. They sounded like children picking a fight.

Perhaps the impulse to punish is a childish one. Perhaps our legislative, justice, and law enforcement systems are made up of a mob of flailing toddlers, enraged at their impotence and ashamed of their own guilty secrets. Often, those systems seem irrational, doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. Too often, those systems make cataclysmic mistakes. Too often, they lash out and scar a whole life.

I also have a niece who served time in prison. As a child, she was nothing like Rayanne, who was easy to defend. No one ever described my niece as a good girl who helped at home and did well in school; her trouble began in kindergarten, when she became someone who was permanently banned from the school bus for being out of control. Then she became someone on school-ordered medication, in psychiatric hospitals, in foster care, in juvenile prisons, then someone in state prison. Now she's thirty years old, and she's been out of prison and unmedicated – by doctors or herself -- for six years. She's someone working as a mentor for troubled kids.

What does it mean to defend someone who's guilty? My niece is not a different person now. She's the same soul she was as a kid. Like Rayanne, like anyone, she's always been someone worthy of defending. My love and my letters might have soothed her pain at times, but they didn't save her. She found some faith in herself, and she found a community, a whole group of people who defended her, even though she was guilty. Like Rayanne, someone gave her another chance.

ANNE LIU KELLOR

Ani-la and Anne-la: On Everything I Knew and Didn't Know

Planning vs. Intuition

I COME FROM A FAMILY OF planners. Of rational, let's examine all the possible things that could go wrong, double-lock the doors, and worry about the future kind of people. Skeptical, atheist, or agnostic people. Although my dad was raised Catholic, he didn't adopt the faith himself. My mom was raised without religion, unless you count the mash-up of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ideas that inform much of traditional Chinese culture. But church was for simple, less intellectual people—or at least that was the unspoken message I inferred from my childhood. Faith in general was not to be trusted, whether in God or in a trip that had no itinerary or plan.

"Anne's parents have lost control over her!" My cousin told me the relatives were saying when I decided to drop out of school and travel through China after my sophomore year. We laughed, knowing too well how Chinese parents do in fact feel like they have the right to control your life and choices. And indeed, I had been the good girl thus far—the good student who got into a good college, who knew how to be deferent and polite to her elders. Inside of course, I'd rebelled: whether sneaking out and partying in high school, experimenting with pot and mushrooms, or writing about my anxiety and anger in my journals that I'd kept since I was in kindergarten. I was quiet on the surface, yet I was filled with so many judgments, secrets, and longing. In college, I started studying Buddhism, recognizing the way that my mind was constantly thinking—ruminating on the past or worrying about the future, always in a state of high alert, worried about what others thought of me or that what came out of my mouth would sound stupid. What would it be like to truly live from the present? To trust enough in the spontaneity of my mind and intuition to feel free and expressive with others, beyond the close friendships that I cherished. What would it be like if for once I could open my mouth in public without worrying about how I was judged?

Eating psychedelic mushrooms a couple times briefly opened a window in my consciousness, allowing me to experience a state of being where my strong

sense of ego began to dissolve. Who was I? I looked in the mirror at my image in my dorm room one evening and laughed. Who was, "Anne Kellor?" She wasn't all of me, she wasn't the true inner me, the me that was far more expansive than this image I allowed others to see. On mushrooms all of my senses became receptive and alive, soaking in the amazing vibrancy of the natural world and the people around me. We are all so much more than these shells of personality and history. We are the cosmos, incarnate. We were as brilliantly ego-less and interconnected and whole as any other life form on this planet—if only we could quiet our minds and open up to all of our senses.

Of course, the morning after a drug-induced revelatory state was usually depressing, as I realized the gap between what I intuited I possessed inside and what I actually embodied at present, when in my normal state of mind. I sensed that whatever I'd felt those few times I ate mushrooms was available without drugs, and that the path to this liberation could be found through meditation and spiritual growth. But I knew that I wasn't going to find this path if I stayed at my mostly white, private college in Minnesota. I wasn't going to break free from the years of social conditioning that plagued me, nor become a new person if I still had to conform to this familiar role of being a good, obedient student. A quiet privileged Asian girl. Too shy to express her inner winged creature. Inspired by some of my friends who were dropping out of school and traveling in other countries, I was frustrated that my school didn't offer Ethnic Studies or Chinese, both of which I wanted to study. Although I was able to take Chinese at a sister university, I was stuck in the beginning class because I couldn't write characters, even though my spoken Chinese was light years beyond my classmates.

So, at age twenty-one, I left college and returned to Seattle to save up money to travel to China. I would start in Taiwan, where my mom grew up, and go on to spend most of my time in the sparsely populated Tibetan areas of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai province in western China. You'd think my mother would have been grateful I was connecting to my roots, her roots, but instead she worried for my safety. She was born in Sichuan province, then moved to Hong Kong, and later Taiwan when she was eight, and her childhood was filled with the fear of being slaughtered by the Communists; the mainland would always carry a negative connotation. But more than this, she worried about how my choices might affect the trajectory of my life. And her worries became my own. Now, my choices were deviating from a safe, logical plan. I needed to carve my own path, far away from my parents' reaching influence. I needed to name an ache inside that I couldn't rationally place.

Choice vs. Fate

ANI MEANS NUN IN TIBETAN. A few months into my first trip to China, after I'd started to explore the Tibetan regions in the western provinces, I started to tell people my name was Ani. Somehow the flat 'eh' sound of Anne felt awkward for the Chinese and Tibetans to pronounce, yet *Ke Yi'an,* my Chinese name, felt too linked to my familial past. So one day, I introduced myself to a local as Ani and it stuck. Ani seemed like the perfect hybrid between my old American identity and my newly emerging, wandering self. I took pleasure in the way the eyes of the Tibetans lit up when I introduced myself. *No, I was not a nun*, I shook my head, but I enjoyed the hint of association.

One afternoon near the end of my six months of travel—after I had grown accustomed to spending most days alone and even whole weeks without seeing another foreigner; after I had grown accustomed to not showering or looking in a mirror for days; after I had grown accustomed to speaking and even dreaming in Chinese again; shedding so many of old layers and making so friends from all over the world, even kissing or sleeping with a few, without any regrets—I found myself wandering through yet another remote Tibetan monastery one day, feeling increasingly lonely. I'd spent the last couple months exclusively in Tibetan areas, as I felt a strong pull toward their people and culture. But I was getting tired and starting to question my place here. That day, after engaging in a couple of the usual *hello, where are you from* conversations with a few monks, I sat down against a low crumbling earthen wall and took out my journal. I can't remember what I wrote, but I know I felt as displaced here as I once had back in my dorm room back in Minnesota. "Why are you so sad?" a Tibetan monk asked me in rough Mandarin Chinese when he saw me sitting alone. I shook my head, unable to explain. "She is sad," he said to another monk who soon approached our side. The other monk asked too, "Why are you sad?" and tears filled my eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the first monk said. "I shouldn't have told him you were sad." I shook my head, it's *okay,* but I still couldn't explain—*maybe because of this, because of what you have that I want, a sense of belonging to one place and culture*. I took out my journal and showed him my scrawls, then pointed to my head, as if he'd understand—*look at all this, the constant swirl of thoughts and questions*. He looked confused, then asked if I wanted to talk to the lama, the head spiritual teacher in residence. I hesitated and shook my head. I knew it was not some blessing from a lama that I needed. I didn't even fully believe in all that, as much as a part of me wondered if someday I could.

What I wanted was to be able to share my longing, not just with myself in my journal or with a couple trusted friends, but with people like my parents or

others of a similar skeptical Western mindset—others who might poke holes or challenge me to prove myself. I wanted to share freely, without feeling like I had to hide, rationalize, or defend what I believed. I wanted a life's path that was grand and worthwhile, yet I felt so young and weak. My journals were filled with impassioned philosophical treatises gleaned from Eastern philosophies, alongside letters to my version of God, but I could barely bring myself to say a word in class. I was so quiet that often when I'd say "hi" to others on the street, they wouldn't even realize I had spoken. I wanted to live more fully, more compassionately, more vocally, more bravely. I wanted to somehow *give* with my life and to give back to these Chinese and Tibetan people who'd shown me so much kindness and taken me into their homes, but I didn't know how to do any of this.

I did know, however, that it was nearing time for me to go. To face my old self within my old life and see how much I'd changed.

Back in America, I became Anne again, quickly restored to my old American identity. Back in my childhood home—listening each morning to the footsteps of my parents overhead, fielding their questions about my plans, hearing my voice tinged with old defensiveness, reminded of all the ways in which I had not changed. I knew that living in my parents' basement was only temporary, and that before long I'd transfer to another college, an hour and a half drive away, but for now it felt like I'd slipped backwards. I'd experienced something transcendent while traveling, tasted the edges of my surface shell melting into something more generous, but none of that seemed to matter now because here I was again, reporting my daily whereabouts to my parents, responding to their reminders to lock the door and get serious about my future, and worse of all—all too aware of how I depended on them still for money, food, and shelter.

Most days during this transition, I stole away to a café or forested park to write. I smoked pot almost every day, seeking to dull the edge of sharp disconnect that I felt between where I was a few weeks ago and where I was now. But one thing remained constant: since traveling, writing had become my refuge again. Although I'd long kept a journal, I'd drifted from it during my first year in college when the presence of a watchful roommate made me afraid to write down anything vulnerable. While traveling, however, I'd taken up daily writing again with fervor. And when I stumbled upon a copy of *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind* by Natalie Goldberg, an advocate of freewriting practice filtered through a Zen Buddhist lens, her books confirmed for me that this was my path. Goldberg likened writing to a practice, like meditation, only instead of noticing and then trying to let go of the train of one's thoughts, we learned to follow

them. Like meditation, writing practice was also interested in the nature of the mind, only our aim was not silence, but articulation.

That winter, I moved into my first apartment with an old friend who was also transferring to the same college. My friend was also an emerging Buddhist seeker, and together we fed each other's spark of awakening. She kept an altar in her room and sometimes meditated, inspiring me to create my first altar of my own. Just a few rocks and shells that I'd collected on hikes, next to a few candles and incense placed on a shelf. Nothing ornate, but nevertheless something physical—and exposed—that spoke to the direction I felt my life opening.

That quarter I was too late to sign up for a full load, so I only took one class: a multi-genre writing program called "Writing from Life" that was designed for adults coming back to get their degrees. Soon I began filling a spiral notebook a month, giving myself prompts like "I remember..." or "I don't remember..," or rolling over first thing each morning, putting on my glasses and writing three "morning pages." In this way, I began to capture my dreams. Some were reoccurring, like the one where I was in a car, driving a stick shift (which I can't do in real life), going up and down high mountain passes without any brakes. Others felt located in China and Tibet, like one where I pushed a wheelbarrow through a field of tall swaying grasses, a field reminiscent of a Tibetan area I'd traveled through—only in the dream I was gathering bones of the dead. I felt like I was tapping into a memory of sorrow, of past lives. Or maybe these were hints at my future, a future somehow linked to China and Tibet. I didn't like to speak much about such concepts though. I never wanted to claim what I didn't rationally know.

Solitude vs. Community

A LOVER ONCE SAID I was too serious, like I was carrying the weight of the world, shortly before he ghosted me. This was during my phase of reading book after book about genocides and the Holocaust. China's Great Leap Forward alone killed 36 million people. Their shared history with Tibet was filled with unmarked graves, untold stories, hungry ghosts. The scope of human cruelty throughout history was enormous and my appetite was brand new. How did I not know all this before? I needed to bear witness, to make up for my great ignorance, to somehow respond with my life. I cried gasping tears when alone in my room, wanting to know what to do.

When I heard about the newly formed Students for Free Tibet on campus, it seemed like the next obvious step—to engage on a political level, to do more than mourn on my own. I attended a few meetings with a handful of others,

then volunteered to "table" during lunchtime in the commons where I set up a display of photos from my travels, alongside pamphlets and petitions. A few people stopped by, mostly curious about my photos, but I never said much to try to recruit them to my cause, nor felt convinced that petitions and letter writing campaigns did much good. Instead I wanted to find a way that we could come together and grieve and pray. I tried to start a prayer flag project, where I invited folks to donate fabric and create their own prayer flags which we'd string in the commons, but it didn't take off, or rather, I let it go for I wasn't ready to be a leader. I wanted what many people go to church to find, but I distrusted the dogma of belief systems. Yes, Buddhism emphasizes doing one's own questioning and thinking, but it was still informed by so many beliefs like karma and reincarnation and enlightenment, ideas which all seemed perfectly plausible, but who was I to say I knew they were 'true'? So I read all I could, but held back from joining any groups. I was still too self-conscious, too stuck in fear, in feeling like I had to know exactly what I believed before I dared to go public with my affinity.

Then, one afternoon, while on one of my daily long walks, this time taking me through downtown Olympia, I saw a flyer for a peace march for Tibet. The march would come through town in April. They would be walking 350 miles in all, from Portland, Oregon, to Vancouver, B.C., giving presentations along the way. And I knew: this was it. There was no way that I could ignore such a sign.

In the weeks leading up to the march, I practiced walking further distances each day. This was easy for me because I already spent most of my time alone, especially since my roommate Amy now had a girlfriend. I went to writing classes but I had few friends, and this was the time before cell phones and social media so when I was alone, I was really alone. Soon I found a professor to sponsor me for a quarter of independent study, where I outlined how I would walk 200 miles with the group from Olympia to Vancouver, write about my experiences, and read books on non-violent action by teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and Gandhi. Then, I began attending meetings organized by a local Buddhist sangha (community) who had gotten wind of the march. They were kind and well-intentioned, acknowledging that it was only right that if they adopted Tibetan Buddhism as a religion that they also support the political and humanitarian movement for Tibet. But they were all older than me, white, and in a different stage of life. They smiled and nodded encouragingly when I shared that I planned to walk on the march myself, and invited me to join their weekly meditations. I went once or twice but felt out of place, slipping away before anyone could ask me too many questions.

At home my altar had expanded into a whole table; now it didn't just hold candles and objects from nature, but also a postcard of the Dalai Lama's smiling image. Alone, I experimented with bowing or sitting cross-legged and meditating before it, but I was self-conscious about what those acts meant. I didn't worship the Dalai Lama as some God-King in the way that Tibetans did; his image was more symbolic. But I also could not deny a growing reverence that I felt for him and his teachings. Yes, I did believe that he was holy; yes, a reincarnated being—in the same way that I was starting to believe that we had all lived past lives; it made sense to me, how nothing ever really dies or ends… But I still couldn't easily talk about this with others.

After the marchers arrived in Olympia, I met them for the first time when they gave their scheduled presentation at my college that I'd helped arrange, but I didn't join them in their lodgings until their last night in town. Wanting to enjoy the comfort of my own bed and space as long as possible, I was nervous about being thrown into a group of strangers who'd already had weeks to bond. And once again I was nervous about exposing myself and having to explain why I was here.

The first night I spent with the marchers, they were camped out on the floor of an empty house owned by the Unitarian church in Olympia. Lakpa, one of the few Tibetans with the group, suggested that I share the one private room with Ani-la, who as a Tibetan nun, was the only one who slept apart from the others. I gladly accepted, grateful for the seclusion, wondering if he could tell that I was especially shy or why they made that special allowance. From that night on, I continued to sleep next to her in a separate room. Perhaps the group sensed that we appreciated each other's company. Evenings we chatted for a few minutes in broken English or Chinese, before we settled into a comfortable silence.

Ani-la was born in Lhasa, but now lived in Dharamsala, India, home of the Dalai Lama and a large Tibetan exile community. She did not speak much English, but I could hear her presence: the soft fold in which she held her hands, the gentle way she looked at me. She was thirty-two, but had the face of a child, flushed plump cheeks, dark olive skin, and a round shaven head. She wore burgundy robes wrapped around thick layers of sweatshirts and Western clothes. Her eyes were warm and unguarded.

While Ani means "nun" in Tibetan, *la* is added on for respect, and so she called me "Anne-la." Evenings, after we helped do dishes, the two of us retreated while the others continued to socialize. I watched as Ani-la unwrapped from a silk, fuchsia cloth, rectangular sheets of thin parchment paper printed on both

sides with prayers. Cross-legged, she leaned over and quietly recited them. Sometimes she played a recording of Chinese Buddhist chanting that someone gave her in Olympia. I lay on my sleeping bag and wrote in my journal, or tried to just breathe and process the day. The others in the group were friendly, but I felt distanced from their jokes and constant chatter. I was relieved that I could retreat with Ani-la, acknowledging each other with a glance or a smile, yet free of the need to say more.

The first few days on the march we walked for ten to fifteen miles, taking lunch breaks in parking lots with sandwiches packed the night before, and piling into our big white van at the end of the day to head to our temporary home base. On our third night, based at a church in Tacoma, Ani-la and I sat on our blow-up mattresses atop the sawdust-covered floor of an empty corner room. I flipped through a recent issue of *People* that was making its rounds, with pictures of Hollywood's finest decked out in see-through Oscar gowns on the cover. Inside, an article about the Dalai Lama covered the recent publicity surrounding Tibet and Hollywood supporters like Oliver Stone, Brad Pitt, Richard Gere, and Harrison Ford. It also showed the Dalai Lama beaming from his home in Dharamsala.

"Ani-la, come look," I called.

Her eyes lit up as she examined each photo of the Dalai Lama: one in his private quarters, one giving a public address, and another blessing a long line of Tibetans who had risked their lives crossing the Himalayas to see him. Her eyebrows furrowed as she studied one of the Dalai Lama on an exercise bike, laughing at something out of the camera's view.

"What that?"

"Bicycle? To exercise? Yundong?" I tried both English and Chinese. She nodded, but still seemed confused, then slowly turned to the next page. That's when I noticed the prayer beads on Ani-la's wrist, hanging beneath the sleeve of her sweatshirt. They were small and round, a strand of shiny caramel brown spotted seeds with three translucent emerald green beads. I touched them to get a closer look, and she unwound them and held them out. *No, no*, I put up my hands in protest, but she extended them further, encouraging me with her eyes.

"I have," she said, and stood to fetch another strand from her bag. "See?" She wrapped the strand I admired around my wrist, then smiled and sat back down on her mattress.

I was honored to wear her beads, but I also felt like a greedy American child who reached out carelessly, asking, wanting. I wanted a strand of mala beads,

and she could tell. Mala beads reminded me of the pilgrims I'd met in China. Old Tibetan women with brown leathery skin and long graying braids fingering each bead beneath their thumb pads while whispering *om mani padme hum* over and over, a mantra for compassion. Now, wearing Ani-la's beads, my affinity toward Buddhism was more outwardly pronounced. So much of Buddhism spoke to me with its clarity in examining the way humans suffer through our mind's neurotic churning, as well as with its' messages about cultivating compassion, both for others and for ourselves. But the mystical Tibetan stuff—all the gods and goddesses and tales of oracles and reincarnation—still felt too out there for me, and I didn't want to be one of those "spiritual dabblers" who borrowed the parts of other religions that they fancied and ignored the rest. I worried that without joining a sangha or finding a teacher it would be hard to go very deep on my own. Maybe after the march I'd try some out again, but for now I'd resisted my old desire to belong to a group for belonging's sake: that was the old me, that was high school and my first years in college. Since then, I was trying to learn how to be okay on my own.

Each morning, I woke to the soft hum of Ani-la's prayers. I envied her lack of spiritual self-consciousness and the way her practice was so seamlessly integrated into her identity, not something hidden or only practiced alone. And I envied how her choice to dedicate her life to the cultivation of her heart's wisdom was seen and supported by her culture as an admiral path, anything but escapist or selfish.

Could I give away all my possessions, shave my head, wear robes, take formal vows? There was an appeal to the notion, the idea that with one fell swoop I could somehow devote my life to an act of peace. And yet, I doubted that I would ever go to those extremes.

My path felt tied to a nun's pursuits, yet different.

Silence vs. Speech

WE ENTERED MY HOMETOWN OF Seattle through the industrial district, then down Martin Luther King Jr. Way. It was strange to come into the city on foot, to pass through neighborhoods—poor neighborhoods, Black neighborhoods—neighborhoods I'd barely driven through, much less walked. Here, I became acutely aware of how our group looked to outsiders: a rag-tag bunch of mostly white Americans and a few Tibetans carrying flags and signs. As we walked by the low-income housing on Yesler Avenue yelling, "Free Tibet!," I heard a Black woman mutter from her porch, "Free *America*." Yes, why were we out here protesting about far-away China and Tibet and not the racism and poverty in

our own country? For me, I had a personal connection, both from my ancestry and travels. But what about the others who were not Chinese or Tibetan? Why were so many white people drawn to this cause, as opposed to dedicating time to the healing of their own country's roots in genocide and slavery? Granted, there was no Black Lives Matter then, no large organized to align with and declare one's affinity to racial healing in America, but still I could not escape the awareness that Tibet had become "in" with everyone from the Beastie Boys to Harrison Ford slinging for the cause. Was I just a part of a trend? No, I resisted. And even if I was, I did believe that there was something important about this narrative. The Dalai Lama's message of nonviolence and compassion for his oppressors felt crucial for our times. How could we learn to see how no one escapes suffering and violence? And that no one is all "good" or "evil," that everybody is responding to their circumstances, to what they have learned from generations past, or perhaps to their karma and fate. Could we learn to have compassion for the perpetrators, for the historical and psychological forces that culminated within their inherited bodies and times that allowed them to now act in such brutal ways? Of course, no one wants to compare the suffering of a murderer to the suffering of their victims. But the Dalai Lama and his followers professed this kind of empathy, the kind that valued *every single precious human life*. Whether living in exile or in jail, wishing peace upon everyone—even their captors—helped many Tibetans not to harden nor turn towards hatred and despair.

And yet now, as I walked through one of Seattle's poorer neighborhoods, I wondered what purpose did this serve for us to be here, yelling to no one in particular? Who were we reaching? Yes, there was the occasional person moved to tears who wrote us or pulled over on the side of the road. But I knew this was a huge privilege in its own right for me to be here for a month, fed and given shelter via the donations of others, and getting school credit to boot. I didn't feel like I needed to be thanked. In fact, later, as we headed down the hill through the International District and Chinatown yelling "China Out!" I cringed as I imagined what we must sound like to the storeowners.

The few times I was referenced in the media that trailed us, I became known as the "Chinese-American" representative—as in, look, even a member of the "oppressor group" supports Tibetan rights! It didn't matter that my dad was white or that when I was in Tibet no one saw me as "Chinese." Mostly I just thought of myself as the quiet one.

In Seattle, a lot more people walked with us each day and our schedule became much busier. And on my home turf, I felt a growing pressure to speak. Usually

the same few people spoke at our presentations: Julie, our group's de facto leader from Indianapolis (since the Dalai Lama's brother, who usually organized and led the march each year, was ill); Altanbat and Tuksar, a journalist father and son pair from Inner Mongolia; Lakpa, from New York via Dharamsala; and Ani-la, whose words were always the most heart-felt, as she recounted the devastation that befell her family when the Chinese took over Lhasa. Afterwards, the rest of us, mostly in our twenties, stood behind a table full of literature, Tibetan paraphernalia, and petitions. "Would you like to sign this?" I might ask, but even one on one I still had trouble launching into quick sound bites to further sell the cause.

If I could've found the words, I might have said that I was tired of the slogans and the 30-second picture we paint of "good spiritual Tibetans and evil conquering Chinese." Yes, the treatment of the Tibetans by Mao's army was especially cruel, but never in our presentations did we mention the fact that the Tibetans *and* Chinese had been subjected to the same mass collectivization and absurd agricultural policies which led to a famine of catastrophic proportions. When we always painted a sweeping stereotype of the "evil Chinese," we failed to honor how much the ordinary Chinese people had also been traumatized by this era.

While I said little, Ani-la learned to tell her story often. Twice a week she stood on a stage, looked out into an audience, and spoke into a mic about her country's monasteries ravished; monks and nuns imprisoned, raped, tortured. The story of watching her grandmother get her ears cut off and teeth knocked out. A story she learned to tell in five or ten minutes, pausing after each sentence for the English translation.

Ani-la was born in 1964, just before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, a time of some of the greatest atrocities under Chinese Communist rule. In Tibet, the Communists launched a campaign against traditional beliefs and practices, demolishing monasteries, forbidding religious worship, and all but destroying Tibet's identity as a separate culture. "They are trying to make it like Tibet never existed," Ani-la said. "Tibetans have become a minority in their own land."

During the Cultural Revolution, Tibetans were forced to cut off their long hair, but many elders saved theirs in boxes hidden away. They weren't allowed to speak or sing songs in Tibetan. In Chinese schools, Ani-la was taught Communist songs and dances. She remembered going home and singing them in front of her parents. They had tears in their eyes as they listened. "Why are you crying?" she asked them, and they could only answer, "You are very unfortunate children."

Sometimes Ani-la described specific acts of violence, but other times she just

said, "The stories are so cruel, you would not believe them." Two of her uncles were high lamas, or religious priests. Both were sent to prison for 17 years. They cooked leather off the bottom of their shoes and stole food from the pigs to survive, for the animals were fed more than the humans. "There was never enough to eat," she said. Her family cooked hay to make soup. Everything was taxed, even a single egg. All land now belonged to the government, and people weren't allowed to plant seeds on their own. Widespread starvation began, people turned into beggars overnight.

By 1978, the chaos and fervor of the Cultural Revolution had ended, and the Chinese government began to allow for a certain amount of what they called religious freedom in Tibet. People were allowed to pray again in public and to begin rebuilding a few of the monasteries that had not been completely destroyed. Yet much of this freedom remained superficial, as "proof" to the world that China was not abusing human rights. The truth was, most of the important teachers had been killed or had escaped, and the monasteries were tightly controlled and monitored.

In 1982, when Ani-la was eighteen, she decided to become a nun. The influence of her two religious uncles and the suffering she had witnessed solidified her resolve. Her parents tried to discourage her, fearing that the surface relaxations could not be trusted, but Ani-la was determined. "I will be a nun until the day I die," she said. In 1985, at the age of 21, Ani-la tried to escape from Tibet by walking across the Himalayas to Nepal and into India, a journey that many continue to risk each year. After walking for several weeks, she was captured by Chinese soldiers near the border of Nepal and taken back to Tibet. Months later, she tried again, and this time she made it to Dharamsala, India.

During her first three years in India, Ani-la lived in a nunnery. Yet she wanted to go even deeper in her meditation, so for the last ten years she had lived alone in a small stone house in the hills above town. Here, she spent three months a year in solitary meditation, seeing others only when she drew water. The other nine months, she walked down to the nunnery to receive daily teachings and otherwise stayed home to practice. When I asked Ani-la if she missed Dharamsala, she said no, because she knew she could always return.

The only time Ani-la ever broke down in the middle of a speech was when she spoke of how the Tibetan people were not allowed to own pictures of the Dalai Lama. Those who did were terrorized and tortured. "The saddest part of a Tibetan's life is when they are forced to curse the Dalai Lama," she said. "Many will never forgive themselves."

To most Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is more than just an enlightened person,

but a living Buddha, the bodhisattva of compassion, a symbol of their lost country and their faith. But the Dalai Lama calls himself an "ordinary monk" and criticizes blind faith. Kindness is greater than faith, he once reasoned, for even animals can respond to and show kindness. "My religion is kindness," he has also said, and while some might argue that his religion is in fact a complex philosophical weave of ideas and meditation practice, he understands that that is not what most of us need. Some Tibetans in exile have also criticized the Dalai Lama for not doing enough, for being too passive in his call for nonviolence, for encouraging this passivity in his people, and even the Dalai Lama has questioned whether he has taken the right actions at times. Yet no matter how one perceives his choices, everyone agrees that without him, Tibet would have long ago faded from the public eye.

How much political action makes you a "real" activist? How much meditation makes you a "real" Buddhist? I was so caught up in the names and definitions, what I was, what I believed, and how to present myself to anyone who might judge my choices or make me prove myself with facts, display the logic of my feelings. In other words, the way I anticipated my parents' reactions. Increasingly I felt Buddhist; all of the teachings around interdependence, interconnection, around the mind and kindness and compassion—all of this resonated deeply. But could I be a 'real Buddhist' if I didn't join a group or have a teacher? In the constant presence of many who seemed so confident in their paths, I felt increasingly young, meek, and voiceless. I watched the Buddhist practitioners amongst our group carefully, on one hand admiring their guilelessness when it came to being "out" with their spirituality, and on the other hand secretly judging them for being so loud and opinionated, so full of ego and "non-Buddhist," even if I was not being especially "Buddhist" in the way I quietly judged everyone myself. Still, when Lakpa later told me that Ani-la said I "was not like the others," that I was "quieter, more Asian," I felt redeemed.

The further we moved away from the city the more my spirits lightened. Back to walking, long lapses of silence, breathing in and out. The landscape more rural, grassy fields dotted with old barns, mossy stumps, goats, and llamas. Sometimes we collected garbage or sang as we walked. Often Ani-la would grab my hand, reminding me of people I'd met in China who had a warmth and ease of touch, harder to come by in America with our defined personal space and boundaries. I felt like giving her huge hugs, but I knew the others enjoyed her presence, too, so I was careful not to always be at her side. Since the Dalai Lama's brother was ill and not with us on this march, Ani-la had become our grounding presence, the one who kept us rooted in our heart space.

"Do you sing to yourself when you are alone?" I asked.
Lakpa translated.

"She's laughing because she's embarrassed. She says that's all she does when she is alone. She is always in prayer."

Engagement vs. Retreat

AS WE DREW CLOSER TO our final destination in Vancouver, and as our group size dwindled again to its core, Ani-la encouraged us to recite a mantra as we walked, which is what they did on peace marches in India. I was grateful that she was with us once again, infusing our actions with a more grounded awareness. Our walking became more quiet, the feeling amidst us more serious. One day, we fasted in solidarity with four Tibetan hunger strikers in Delhi who were rapidly growing weaker. Another day we were invited onto the Lummi Indian Reservation, fed a meal in their new longhouse and invited to join them in a traditional dance, arms joined, snaking through the room to the sound of a slow beating drum. At the end, Ani-la presented one of their woman elders with a kata, a ceremonial silk scarf, draping it over her neck. When the woman hugged her, Ani-la broke down and sobbed like I hadn't seen her before, like a child. The woman looked like she could have been her grandmother.

I wanted to trust that the days we just walked were every bit as important as the days we gave presentations; that every action, every thought, every literal imprint of our soles had an effect on the world. Yet who amongst us really believed that all of the energy we put into the world, that every action *and* every prayer *mattered*, even if no one was there to witness it? I wanted very much to believe this, but I also distrusted my own hesitance to be political or vocal.

In Bellingham, near the end of the walk, I sat in a metal folding chair in a school cafeteria, listening to members of Chaksampa, a Tibetan opera troupe from San Francisco, relieved to be in the audience that night instead of a part of the show. Two men and a woman sang traditional folk songs before a crowd of attentive Westerners. One plucked a long-necked stringed instrument, while the other two sang. Their voices carried through the crowded rows of people with the soft lull of the countryside. It was music I could imagine sung in high remote places, as you walked to fetch water or baskets of dung, pausing to turn your head towards the wind, tall grasses rippling in waves. I closed my eyes, letting the song seep inward. I'd been thinking so much about politics and death that I had forgotten about the music. My tears spilled, salty on my lips. I took off my glasses and let the room blur, not wanting to hold back anymore. Something about the music resonated in a way that words or images could not touch.

...

THE PEACE MARCH CULMINATED WITH our group of thirty or so standing before the Chinese embassy in Vancouver, speaking and singing our pleas to the security camera affixed to the gate. It felt so anti-climactic. Afterwards, I rode home with a stranger and it took three hours to drive what had taken one month to walk. Everyone wanted to know how the march went, but I didn't have grand words of resolve about freeing Tibet.

At home, back in Olympia, I stripped my walls and my fledgling altar, needing things bare and simple, without symbol, without meaning. I sprawled across my bed, purging my heartache and confusion through tears. I stood before the bathroom mirror, imploring my eyes to tell me what they know. *How could I mourn so deeply when I had lived such a privileged life, free of serious trauma or hardship?* I asked my eyes to confirm for me... this grief I was tapping into was real, not exaggerated or crazy. Might I have been a Tibetan in a past life? Or maybe I was responding to memories from my Chinese lineage. Maybe my bloodline was connected to perpetrators—to the generals or warlords, soldiers, rapists. Maybe I was mourning the crimes my own people had committed, a mere generation ago. Yes, and. *All* of this was possible; none I could know for sure.

I wanted to become more informed and politically engaged, *and* I wanted to trust that engagement can happen in many ways. I wanted people to understand the urgency of our planet's situation, and to somehow trust in a bigger notion of Time, in millenia of patterns and movements unfolding, in the Big Time of karma and past lives, in the Big Time of how our every thought and action matters in ways that we can never outwardly measure. But mostly I just I felt exhausted by all my posturing and questions. Could Tibet really be saved? Was I a Buddhist? How could I purport to try to save the world, when inside I felt so weak? All I wanted now was to be alone, in nature, away from the seeming urgency of these questions. All I knew for now was that this pain belonged to me wholly, just as it belongs to the whole world.

Paradox and Interconnection

NOW, TWENTY-SOME YEARS LATER, I wish I could tell my younger self that all of these questions she was asking mattered. Even if she would go on to abandon the "cause" of Tibet. Even if she would doubt that it could ever be "saved." Even if she would continue to question the effectiveness of her role in politics as opposed to other venues, the questions she was asking at the core of it all are the same questions I ask myself now.

Now, twenty-some years later, here's what I know. I know that we each have an essential nature, and that it is our job to listen to that nature and figure out how to work with it, not how to become someone or some role that we are not. I know that I needed to find my voice then, to develop a thicker skin, a certain backbone or stronger ego—the kind of ego that believes in the value of her unique story and vision.

I also know that I needed to keep dissolving the unhealthy parts of my ego, the parts that constantly assessed, judged, and compared herself to others, before I could learn how to be more vulnerable and real.

And I know now that no one told me then that as a young, Asian woman I was one of the most unheard voices in leadership in the world. That there were many reasons why I had trouble owning my intuition and voice that had nothing to do with my "naturally quiet nature," but everything to do with the intersections of my age, race, and gender.

Now, after continuing to write for twenty-plus years, both as a practice and as a vocation, I know that writing can be a spiritual and a political path, its own blend of meditation, action, and prayer.

And now, I also know that I am a teacher. Of creative writing, yes, but through teaching writing I also teach awareness, self-knowledge and inquiry, compassion and acceptance, the ability to see and name the connections between all of us. Essentially, I teach writing through a Buddhist lens, even though I don't call it Buddhism and don't need to.

Essentially, I have always been on the same path. And everything I was tapping into in my twenties in such a raw, pulsing, confusing way, I am still learning how to live more fully into now. While I am so much more solid in trusting the core of my being, I am still learning to embrace all of me, to lean into my fears and contradictions, and to find my own sustainable rhythm between politics and faith, silence and speech, and solitude and community.

The difference is, I have so much more practice writing and then talking about all this now. The difference is, I no longer feel so ashamed of my weaknesses. The difference is that now I understand that growing up takes its own sweet time. And I no longer care to strive for perfection, whether in my parents' eyes or in the name of some Grand Higher Calling.

Yes, I can say now that some part of me is a nun, and some part of me is an activist, and that the more I've been able to claim my path as a writer and teacher, the more I've been able to merge all these parts together.

I also know that Ani-la, a few years after the march, renounced her vows and got married.

I know that people change, yet their core stays the same.

And I know that we are all complex human beings that need to honor our different needs as they arise, that have the right to make vows we wholeheartedly embrace—and the right to break them when they no longer serve us.

For now, I've adopted the term "agnostic Buddhist" to describe my faith, but I also don't take it too seriously. For although I still take my desire to help ease the world's pain seriously, I don't take myself quite so seriously—and let me tell you, that is a huge relief.

It's the present moment I'm still the most interested in, after all this time. And my trust in the only constant I know: the awareness that everything is always changing. Still evolving. Spiraling around and around in cycles of death and rebirth, bringing us back to where we need to be.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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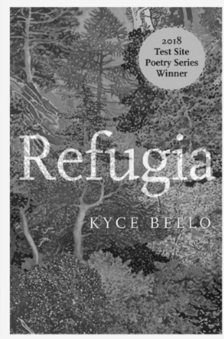

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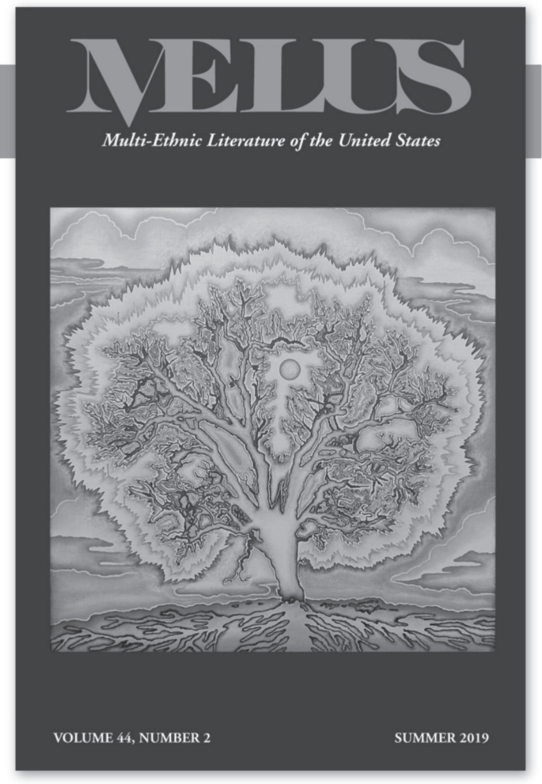

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