

red rock review

Fall 2021 • Issue Forty-Seven



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ANDREW DAVID MACDONALD

Excellent Breeding

MY PARENTS BROUGHT ME A DOG, a female German Shepherd pup, with papers and everything. This wasn't planned, and it wasn't the kind of thing they did: they came from a different era, a different continent of routines and rigid social rules. Moreover, my wife and I weren't looking for a dog, and we'd just had a baby who looked so self-contained and dense we took to calling her the Bean. Puppies and babies, despite cute videos on the internet, were in our minds rarely a good fit.

"Bullshit," my father said, handing over the pup, who already had the lazy look in its eyes of a creature recognizing its dominion over things. "This is exactly the time when you want one. They'll bond like crazy. And German Shepherds, with papers?"

He made a snorting sound as he stepped by me into the house. I took the puppy, which admittedly felt as adorable as it looked. My mother stood behind him, clutching her purse. She shrugged.

"You know how he is," she said. "You're better off just taking the dog."

So I took the dog, and it turned out to be, as my father had predicted, a lovely animal, easy to train. Compared to the Bean, the pup brought next to no hassle at all. My wife had reservations, which upon mixing with the fact that I hadn't bothered consulting her before accepting the dog, created a cocktail of disdain for me that had been growing ever since we had the Bean.

"Bean's not even a month old and you're already trying to replace her?"

"Replace her?" I tried to make it sound absurd. When that didn't work, I used my father's line of reasoning: "I'm giving our daughter the gift of a lifelong protector."

"Isn't that our job?"

Touché, wife.

Joni and I stood over the pup, who was sitting politely on the carpet of

our living room.

“Isn’t she supposed to be going apeshit?” she asked.

“You’d think so. She’s very well behaved. And she has papers.”

“So?”

“So, if we hate her that much, we can probably sell her later.”

I silently apologized to the animal and made a half-hearted psychic promise that we wouldn’t be carting her off to the glue factory, followed by a guilty admission that, despite that promise, I apparently had no problem mixing up horses and dogs in my mind.

MY PARENTS COME FROM a part of Ukraine that’s now Romania. To say that they haven’t fully adapted to life in the Western World would be an understatement. My father played chess once a day in his retirement, my mother played poker with a group of women who likewise came from former Soviet states. He had worked as a mechanic and truck driver for the company of a friend of a friend, limiting his interactions with native speakers. My mother worked as a secretary for a Ukrainian plastic surgeon who serviced rich people from the Eastern Bloc countries. We spoke Ukrainian at home, and it was hell getting rid of my accent (though I adopted their habit of swearing in Ukrainian when alone).

They had been a happy couple, having the understated, almost telepathic communication style deeply at odds with the talky world of internet chat rooms, text messages, smartphones. They’d paid for my college, saving just enough to cover tuition at a time when that kind of thing was still possible for working class parents.

When I became a lawyer, I tried to pay them back. They refused everything except a new couch. And even though my wife pretended to dislike them, they were frankly too adorable to dislike for long.

Anyway. The German Shepherd puppy. We kept it and put its papers in the safety deposit box where we had our gold bullion, birth certificates, wills, and other important but largely bullshit items. She turned out to be great with the Bean, and Joni found a running buddy in the evenings, and I found myself watching Youtube videos on how to get dogs to do tricks.

And we thought: that’s that.

THAT WAS NOT THAT. My secretary, Lans, a no-bullshit woman who fit the cast of women in my life marvelously, informed me that my father was at my office to see me.

“He’s not on any appointment books,” Lans said. “He’s just here, holding his hat.”

According to my calendar, I had about twenty minutes before a client would be in. I pinched my temples and told her to send my father in. He thanked her in English and dipped his head. Like I said: adorable.

“Hello, Mr. Big Shot,” he said in Ukrainian, looking around for a place to hang his hat. “You still haven’t got a coat rack? Where are people supposed to hang their hats?”

“Nobody wears hats anymore, Dad,” I said, standing out of habit until he sat down. Lans mouthed the word *ten* and held up ten fingers; I gave her a nod to signal her reappearance would be most appreciated in that number of minutes.

“So, Pop,” I said. “What can I do for you?”

“How’s the puppy working out?”

“Good. Better than good. She’s well behaved, gets along with Sammy.” Sammy was our baby’s real name; Dad objected to calling her the Bean, since I guess he lived on beans for basically the first five years with my mother and resented them. “Overall, I’d say the experiment is working.”

“Good,” he said. “Good, I’m very glad to hear it. Because I have a favor to ask.”

He crossed, then uncrossed, his legs.

“You’ve probably heard of Nichola Schturr.”

“Why would I have heard of Nichola Schturr, Dad? Is he famous?”

“In the dog breeding world he is. In fact, that German Shepherd was one of his.”

“If you need money, Dad,” I started. But he waved me off.

“No. No money. Just a favor. The whatever animal rights people have some kind of file on him. Nothing abusive. He loves the dogs, as you can tell from the one you got. Keeps them tip top.”

Through the glass wall of my office, I could see Lans raising her five-fingered hand. My father told me that this man, Schturr, was an old friend, “a *very* old friend,” and that where they come from, when you owe someone a debt it must be paid, in full, at the time of asking. “No questions asked.”

“With the deed signed in blood. Yes, I understand how debt works.” Lans watched us through the window of my office wall. “I have a client coming in, Dad. So could you get to the point?”

“Of course. I’d like you to do a free consultation with Nichola.”

“And why hasn’t Nichola come here?”

My father's expression was the same he used whenever people asked him stupid questions about carburetors, or why he always wears a hat.

"Because he doesn't know I'm seeing you. He's proud, too proud." My father took one of my business cards from the stand on my desk, took out his glasses from inside his coat, and after putting them on, transferred a phone number from a much-folded Post-it note onto the back of my own card. "Just give him a call. Set up a meeting."

Sighing, I reached over and slid the card across the desk. It felt like a mob deal.

"And what's his problem, exactly? He needs his dogs back?"

My father folded up his glasses and shook my hand. "It's best he explain."

IT TURNED OUT THAT IN SOME CIRCLES, Nichola Schturr was, in fact, famous. Or at least respected enough to have several glowing write-ups about him in dog trade publications. They all made reference to his immigration in the early seventies, how with a simple love of animals and elbow grease he had grown a small kennel into a respected breeding business. Several of his dogs had won shows, and one was even purchased by a Russian oligarch who was later arrested for sex crimes.

I told Joni I would be home an hour later, news which she didn't enjoy hearing, since the deal was that at a predetermined hour every day, we would switch places and she would have a life and I would do All Things Bean, and the process would reverse when I took paternity leave and she went back to her job.

"Is this about the dog?" Joni asked.

I marveled out loud at her intuition.

"I'm not psychic, doofus," she said. "Your mother just called to apologize in advance for the bait and switch with the dog. She said she thought he was just being nice." I heard a gentle bark in the background. "Cute little fucker, though. I'm starting to think maybe it's best if you got a motel and we made this an all-woman household."

"Ha ha," I said. "You give women the vote and look what happens."

WANTING TO GET THIS DEBT CLEARED, I called the number my father'd given me and a gruff voice answered the phone. I explained who I was, and asked if he wanted to come in, and he abruptly said my father had told him I would go to him.

“That’s not the usual, ah, protocol,” I said.

“You got the dog?”

“I did, but—”

“So, you got the dog, you come over. But let me have a shower first,” he said, and told me an address and then hung up the phone.

The internet told me another curious fact: Nichola’s dog breeding business had recently been raided under suspicion of the mistreatment of animals. I called my father back in what was starting to feel like a game of missed connections, and he told me that yes, there had been some kind of mix-up involving his friend the dog breeder. The dog my family had been gifted was one of those dogs.

“But it’s all a mix-up,” said my father. “Anyway. He’ll tell you.”

For no reason I could think of, except a son’s lifelong devotion to his father, I cancelled my remaining two appointments and left the office. The address for Schturr’s apartment was a place on the northernmost edge of Chinatown, by a market I recalled always smelled of fish. Joni and I shopped in that neck of the woods, in the street markets, from time to time, when we wanted fresh medicinal herbs that you could buy in chunks and grate and dry yourself.

The markets were all closed for the day, the vendors boxing everything up behind rolldown metal barriers and locked with imposing, slightly rusted padlocks.

My car was the only one parked in the street, which was worrying.

The street smelled like fish, and taking one last look at my car, I went to the intercom system at his address and pressed the button and was buzzed in without so much as a word. Once inside, I moved around a shopping cart filled with old newspapers and elected to take the stairs instead of the elevator.

Schturr’s actual apartment smelled of smoke and sweat, and was sparsely furnished: a single table, two chairs, a couch that, if I had to guess, had been passed from tenant to tenant. Schturr himself was wiry and bald, wore glasses that had a tilt. He wore an open polo shirt and a pair of dress pants. My father always wore dress pants and a button up shirt, and in my mind I could see these two roaming the streets as young bachelors and smoking cigarettes.

“You look just like your father,” he said, shaking my hand and closing the door behind me. “Thirty years ago, you are what’s it called—dead ringers?” He indicated that I sit, so I pulled up one of the chairs and sat

down. He brought me, inexplicably, some coffee and olives and a napkin from McDonald's.

When he sat down in front of me, I gave him the spiel I'd been practicing in the car: "I should say outright, that this is off the books, and doesn't constitute actual legal rights."

"Sure, fine." Schturr waved his hand. "I need to get my wife back. Any way we can swing it."

"I thought we were here about dogs?"

He spit out a glistening olive pit and set the napkin between us. "Dog, wife, all the same story."

THE STORY, AS BRIEFLY AS I CAN TELL IT, goes like this. For a long time, Schturr and his wife had been breeding dogs. However, in the last few years, both had been showing what their neighbors considered signs of senility and an inability to care properly for their animals. It was an escalating complaint: dogs going unfed for stretches at a time and howling, the buildup of feces, accusations of more direct abuse ("Bullshit, all of it," Schturr emphasized as he told the story. "Fifty fucking years I've raised dogs. And you see the one you have? Majestic."). Finally, one of the neighbors called Animal Services, and they'd arrived to investigate the property.

That much I'd read on the internet.

What I hadn't read was that, while Schturr showed one of the agents around the property, another pretended to use the bathroom and had isolated his wife, Mary, in the kitchen and had begun questioning her.

"Not questioning. Interrogating," Schturr said. "Real fucking divide and conquer tactics."

By now olive pits had begun piling up on the napkin between us, and Schturr brought the jar out, along with a spoon.

When Schturr saw that the other agent had cornered her in the kitchen, he reacted strongly.

In telling the story Schturr looked at the olive jar. "Yes," he repeated. "Probably too strongly."

Which involved physically pushing the agent out of the way and taking his wife by the wrist to pull her away.

"She fell when I pulled her, bumped her knee," he said.

I didn't need to know what happened next. My lawyerly brain already connected the dots. My particular branch of the law was Estates, but I had enough familiarity with the legal system to know that when people outside

a marriage, especially people in an official capacity, witness what the court determines to be evidence of domestic abuse, the police can intervene and separate the couple, even if the abused party, in this case Schturr's wife, denies that abuse has been taking place.

"And now I live in this shit-hole, away from my own house, away from my wife, and they've taken my dogs." He looked up.

It was a moving story, in its own way, and when I told him I wasn't an expert on this kind of thing, and that he should get a real lawyer, he dragged over the plastic garbage can and swept the olive-napkin in.

"That dog you have, it's worth maybe six thousand, seven thousand dollars."

"It's a very beautiful dog," I agreed.

"And I believe that should more than cover my legal fees."

MY WIFE WAS OF THE (PROBABLY CORRECT) OPINION that I should not get involved. However, she was also of the (absolutely correct) opinion that the dog was a freaking awesome addition to our lives.

"The dog was a gift from your father," she told me. "Not this guy."

"True."

"And he frankly sounds like an asshole," Joni said.

"Also true."

I decided the best thing to do would be to perform the most cursory of investigations, taking care to not actually *do* much of anything. At which point I could say to Schturr, and subsequently my father, Look. I did what I could. But the fact is I'm an estates and trust lawyer whose understanding of this part of the law is rudimentary at best. What I expected to say was: "It turns out they were perfectly justified in splitting you two up—I was sure that's what I would say—And it's for the best about the dogs, isn't it? If you can't take care of another living being, and you are neglecting it, that's not a particularly humane thing."

"Like you're neglecting your wife and child to go on this wild goose chase?" Joni said.

She was joking, mostly, but I took her point. We agreed jointly that I had three evenings I could devote to this, and perhaps an afternoon sprinkled in there at my discretion. After which I would dedicate myself to being a more present, less workaholic father of the Bean.

I ASKED A FRIEND AT THE POLICE DEPARTMENT to get me details about the

Schturr case, and the details came back essentially as I'd expected: somewhere in the blurred middle between what Schturr had said and what the Animal Services agents had said. He hadn't *abused* abused his wife, which sounds strange to say, as if there's some threshold of physical violence that's acceptable. But he had, by the letter of the law, gotten physically violent and injured her, in front of a government official. And that meant the forced separation was legal.

"So, what now?" I asked Buddy, who worked in the dark arts of divorce and family law at the firm. "How can they re-unite?"

"If there's nothing that turns up in an investigation, then it's up to them whether or not they live together as husband and wife. Unless there's children. That complicates things."

At home, I called Schturr from my cell phone and told him that the best thing he could do is just sit tight, which wasn't exactly what Buddy told me, but was close enough that it met the threshold for 'cursory attempt to solve the problem' I'd created for myself earlier.

"Unless there are young children involved," I told him.

"Not young," Schturr said. "But her son is the root cause of all of this."

"Her son," I said. He hadn't mentioned a son.

"From her first marriage. He hates my guts and I think he's responsible for everything."

Was there a point in pointing out that Schturr himself was actually responsible for everything? He gave me the number of the son, and like a somnambulist, I found myself writing the number down without much knowing why.

"You should talk to him," my father said when I gave him the update that evening over the phone. "He's a monster. If anyone is abusive it's that cocksucker."

"You shouldn't talk to him," Joni said when I hung up the phone. "You should wash your hands of this whole business."

We spent the evening standing over our beautiful daughter, in front of whose crib the dog stood sternly on guard.

"Good girl," I whispered, patting the dog's head.

SCHTURR'S ADULT STEPSON WAS NAMED JAMES. He owned two Burger King franchises and drove a Beamer. With all this calling around, I felt a bit like some kind of noir detective, taking scraps of information and stitching them together. (To complete the transformation, one morning

I wore a fedora my father had bought me, in his mania for headwear, to work, and allowed myself a single malt, neat, at the bar across the street from the firm).

James said he could spare some time that afternoon, and when I met him for coffee, I found someone my age, who in manner and dress could very well have been a partner-track lawyer at the firm.

He agreed to meet me at a Starbucks and gave me an address for it without giving the option of suggesting an alternative location—another sign that he would have fit right in at the firm.

Using my phone I ordered a latte, and it was ready seconds after I sat down. Like a dope I got up and walked to the counter and brought the drink back. The barista had made a beautiful little flower design and for some reason it struck me as an emasculating thing to have in your coffee, so I slurped it away before I sat down.

“You should know he’s not well,” James said.

“I’ve got that impression,” I said, sipping my latte. James drank his coffee black. “He says he hurt your mother by accident.”

James snorted, holding his cup of black coffee as if it were a neck he was strangling: both hands around it, tips of fingers touching on the other side.

“Accident my ass,” James said. “He practically threw her through the wall.”

This didn’t jive with my understanding of the event, and I said so. “It’s my understanding he simply tried to pull her away from the agents, who had isolated her under the pretense of taking a piss.”

James shook his head and took out his phone. He scrolled through and found a photo, turning the screen to me. “Does this look like an accident?”

It was a picture of an older woman, Mary, with her arm in a cast.

“Fractured her ulna,” James said.

“You get old, your bones get brittle. Could still be an accident.” I handed the phone back. James set his coffee cup down gently and stared at me.

“That photo was from before the accident. This most recent incident was one in a parade.”

ONE THING JAMES WANTED ME TO SEE was the house they’d been living in. He had the impression that I was actually Schturr’s lawyer, and even though it was unethical, I didn’t do much to dissuade him.

We took his car, leaving mine in the Starbucks parking lot, a decision I

regretted when I realized we were heading out of town. My mind leisurely flipped through a catalogue of horror movies that took place in such places: *Children of the Corn* came to mind first. On the other hand, someone who invested in Burger King franchises probably didn't have time to develop a side interest in decapitating estates lawyers in the middle of nowhere.

It was out in the country, about a mile outside of the city proper, down a road bookended by corn stalks rising in a single swaying mass under the waning sun. Trees had been planted along the road, giving shelter to the properties each spaced from the other by a quarter of a mile or so.

He turned left at a mailbox in the shape of a dog and the tires hit gravel. Past the trees that lined the entrance way was a long bungalow-style place, with an attached hut and a separate garage. The lawn was an unmowed field where clusters of dandelions had established bright yellow colonies. As we went up the road to the house, James slowed the car down and pointed to a patch of dirt that looked a bit like a pitcher's mound, the topsoil dug up and dusty.

"See there? That's the mass grave where they buried the dead dogs," James said. "When he found out the Animal Rights people wanted to confiscate the dogs, he shot all of them, one right after another."

I thought of our little watchdog, guarding my daughter's crib, and felt sick to my stomach. James parked the car and we went inside.

IT WAS, TO PUT IT MILDLY, A SHIT-HOLE, and I could see why anyone would be concerned. It smelled of urine and feces, and the wallpaper inside was brown and water damaged near the ceiling moldings. I thought back to the student housing I'd lived in as a sophomore in college, my first year off-campus, away from home, and how my roommates not only didn't seem to know how to keep the type of clean and orderly house my parents insisted on keeping but treated living in a shit-hole as a badge of Bohemian honor.

James showed me around, explaining that it had been his mother who provided most of the capital for the place, and that in his opinion, Schturr's courtship of her bordered on predatory.

"I don't know if you've met him," James said. "But he has an eye for poking your weak spots."

We went outside on the porch for a cigarette. I saw a tilted shed, a large shovel and pickaxe leaning against the slats, and couldn't purge from my mind the mass grave out front.

“If you ask me,” James said, passing me a cigarette, even though I neither asked nor smoked myself. “This whole debacle is the best thing that could have happened for them. You see this place. No way for animals to live, let alone people.”

I went to use the bathroom and found that it hadn’t been flushed for a while. Two flushes later and the water was still sludgy.

James drove me back to my car. We smoked two cigarettes and passed by one of his Burger King franchises. His head swiveled fast, squinting, assessing.

He didn’t get out of the car when he pulled in front of the Starbucks where we’d met.

“So, you’re going to drop this thing?” he said, shaking my hand after I’d unbuckled myself.

“I don’t think there’s a thing to drop,” I answered honestly. “I said I’d look into it and as far as I’m concerned that’s what happened.”

“Glad to hear it.”

As he pulled away, I wondered what I’d do in his position if my father died and my mother had taken up with someone like Schturr and raised dogs in the boondocks. I’d probably get to the point James probably did, which is to report them to Animal Services and pray for intervention, as I suspected he had.

I AVOIDED SHTURR’S CALLS FOR A DAY OR TWO and felt not a little guilty about it. My gallivanting on his behalf had put me behind at work, so there were estates to settle, billable hours to bill. Which of course didn’t please Joni, who had been rightfully pointing out that I needed to be home more, that the Baby Bean needed her father’s touch in these critical first years. Priorities, she said.

“And that line of your father’s about debts? That shit won’t fly with me,” she said, and I loved her for it.

I also avoided taking my father’s calls, since I assumed he would be calling on Schturr’s behalf. I’m not an avoider by nature, but the entire enterprise had disgusted me, especially the conditions the dogs had been kept in.

Our dog, by the way, was becoming majestic. Say what you wanted about Schturr as a human, but he knew his trade, and our pup appeared to be entering her teenage years, her paws too big for her body. The word ‘clod’ came to mind when she did her rounds around the inside of the

house at night. It was, I suspect, a preview of the years to come with the Bean, who yelled and screamed but would one day find herself with too-big paws herself—metaphorically, anyway.

Eventually Schturr stopped calling, and I stopped thinking about him. This emotional cleansing took about a week. Around this time, my mother showed up, without my father, and I came home from work and found her and Joni in the dining room, having their tea. And it was such a sight—I don't think I'd ever seen two of the three most important females in my life all at once, though I got the impression, from the natural way Joni and my mother interacted, that these meetings were more common than I thought.

"Mind if I join the party?" I asked, sitting with them. "Sorry I haven't been responding to Dad's calls."

Mother waved her hand. "I know why you aren't. He's still trying to help that bastard."

"So, you're not a big fan of him either?"

"Your father has selective memory," she said. "They grew up together and that makes him ignore what's right in front of his face."

"His best friend's an abusive asshole," Joni said.

"They aren't best friends," my mother said. "Not even friends, if you want to know the truth."

My mother said that she suspected Schturr had been abusing his wife for years.

I told them I could believe it. I hadn't told Joni about the mass grave for dogs, since I didn't want to break her heart. After Mother left, kissing the Bean on her little forehead, Joni told me some of the things her mother had said about Schturr—black eyes and a habit of using a belt on his wife when he was angry.

That night, Joni in bed, the Bean fast asleep, I took the dog for a walk.

LIKE A COWARD, I got my secretary to put the call in to Schturr to say that there was nothing I could do, that the best option he had, in my unofficial opinion, was to just let things be.

"Is that how you want me to say it?" Lans said. "Just let things be doesn't sound like good official legal advice."

"That's because it's not official," I said. "Which is why he's not on the books."

Lans doesn't like when I quote go rogue un-quote, which is a fine, probably necessary quality to have if you work for a lawyer, and more than

once she has saved my ass by crossing some T and dotting some I that I'd neglected.

My father I called myself; offshoring family to one's administrative help is always bad policy. Also: Joni wouldn't stand for me shirking the responsibility, mostly because she wanted to make sure there would be no crossed-wires.

"This thing is done," Joni said, so I made the call.

"About time," my father said. "You've been ducking my calls all week."

"Fair point, Dad. But I'm calling now to say that there's nothing I can do for your friend."

"Have you exhausted all the avenues of operation?" Dad asked.

No, I said, and explained to him that because I wasn't officially Schturr's lawyer, I actually *couldn't* exhaust all possibilities. Moreover, I said, interrupting him when he asked why I couldn't just be officially Schturr's lawyer, my specific area of the law had nothing to do with what he needed.

"And on top of that, I'm not a fan."

Dad was silent for a long time. "Goddamnit, he's lost his wife and dogs in the same month."

"Well, to that I would say, given the state of where he was living, and the conditions there, he probably shouldn't have been breeding dogs anymore. And furthermore, it's my understanding that this wasn't the first time he's laid his hands on his wife."

"Have you met her?"

"No, Dad. I haven't met her. But I met her son."

"Because she wants to get things back to normal."

There are many qualities my father has that I like. Through the glass of my office, I saw that I had another client who'd arrived. I told my father that I loved him, that my decision to stop with the Schturr thing had nothing to do with that love, and that his friend seemed like a prick, a fact that was likewise apart from the aforementioned declarations of son-ly love for his father.

AND THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN IT. No call came back from Schturr, and my father moped for a few days then returned to normal. Whatever happened to Schturr, I'd wiped my hands clean of it. What did I hope? I hoped that he would just disappear from the lives of all the parties of this story: from his wife's life, from my father's, and most of all, from mine.

I put the stupid Raymond Chandler fedora back in the closet.

The dog grew alongside the Bean and one evening I got to thinking about how beautiful, and well-trained she was, and I thought of Schturr laying his ugly hands on the pup. She was shaping up to be a big, beautiful creature. Seven thousand dollars was how much Schturr said she was worth, and doing a little search of my own on the internet, I found this to likely be the case.

Schturr would make one more appearance in my life.

How he found the house, I have no idea. My father might have mentioned our address (though I refuse to believe he passed it along knowingly). I'd later learn that my father and Schturr's relationship went back to a shared childhood of poverty in the Soviet Union, and according to my mother, who met my father when they were attending a Polytechnic in their early twenties, there was something sinister that bound them. She wouldn't elaborate. Instead, she simply said that Schturr would appear and disappear from their lives, sprouting like a fungus and asking for money, a place to stay, and when they immigrated, she thought that they'd been freed from him.

Then, one day, he showed up, and they had to empty out their savings.

"Every time I bring up those days, your father tells me I don't know a thing, and so I just shake my head," my mother said.

Very sinister indeed. Secrets and lies. I knew that my father had come from nothing and figured that he and Schturr had done some unpleasant things in the old country, as my father was always calling Ukraine.

Schturr didn't ring our doorbell. He went around to our yard while we were eating dinner. In our nice swathe of suburbia people in general didn't bother locking gates, and he simply reached over, lifted the latch, and came around.

Putting down her fork, Joni said, "There's someone standing in our yard."

The motion lights had gone on and, as if frozen in the flash of a camera, Schturr stood with his legs spread. The Bean ate happily, oblivious, and the dog had started growling. Schturr was staring through the glass. I felt a lump in my throat and almost forgot to swallow, and when I did, I had to put back half my glass of water to get it all down.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Joni said when I told her who it was. She was hugging herself and out of instinct walked to the Bean and picked her up.

My first instinct was to pick up the knife by my plate and wave it like a madman, even though I probably wouldn't know the first thing about

fighting with it.

"I'll talk to him," I said to Joni.

I said it was going to be okay, even though I wasn't sure. The pup followed Joni out of the room dutifully, and she said that I had exactly five minutes to get the lunatic off the property, or she was going to call the police. Again, I reassured her, and when she had closed the door we kept propped open, I went outside and walked to Schturr, who was standing at the edge of our deck, looking out over the garden neither I nor Joni had managed yet to tame.

"This is a disgrace," he said, waving his hand in front of the garden as if it were the embers of a fire and he wanted to keep warm.

"My wife's going to call the police if you don't leave," I said, figuring I'd set the tone of whatever discussion he thought we were about to have.

Schturr kept talking about the garden. "You've got stinkweed," he said. "Once you get that, you have to practically dig the whole thing out and start again." He turned to me, his eyes glassy and smelling of something potent and alcoholic. "I've come to take the dog back."

I hadn't been sleeping very much, the Bean keeping both Joni and me up, and there seemed to be a wavy quality to the conversation. He said the words so calmly I felt at first as though it was a reasonable request. I stuttered out something like, Um, and, no, that's okay, and he said he wasn't asking my permission.

"The deal was you helped me, and I give you the dog," he said, still sounding very reasonable. "And you've quit mid-job, and I have no wife, so I've come back for the dog."

Assessing the logic from the perspective of someone who, for a living, poured over contracts and subclauses and deals of various kinds for hours every day, there were so many problems with what he was saying that I had trouble knowing where to start.

My underarms had dampened, and inside, I could see Joni's face in the second floor window, where the Bean's bedroom was, bearing down on us. Schturr saw me watching her. The window was open slightly, and from that window I could hear the pup's low growl.

"You have a beautiful home and baby and wife," Schturr said. He raised a hand. "Hello up there."

"I'm going to call the police," Joni called down.

As if she intuited the tension, our pup let out two very loud, very deep barks. Before it could get out a third, Schturr made a hissing sound with

his lips and the barking stopped. In the night's twilight, only the thrum of some distant insects. The motion-lights went off for a blip and I moved my hand fast to bring them on again.

"I want you to listen to me," Schturr said very quietly. "All it takes is me saying one command, and the dog will turn on you all. Your baby? Wouldn't last two seconds. It would be in the crib one second, gone the next."

You always hear stories of mothers who, when their babies are threatened, perform stunning feats of strength: lifting cars, moving as if guided by a preternatural instinct to protect. Maybe it's what happens when you work in an office all day, like I do, shuffling papers, that you lose the ability to meet savagery with like force. I felt my face getting red, and wanted to strangle Schturr with my bare hands for threatening my family, Joni, the Bean. He stood as if he knew that I wanted to enact grave violence but wouldn't, or perhaps, I would surmise later, couldn't.

The sliding glass door that led on the porch rolled open and there was Joni, and Joni was armed. The gun was a hunting rifle she'd inherited from her parents. It hadn't been fired in over two decades. But in the violet hour, it was huge and menacing. Joni held it, butt against her shoulder, and raised it towards Schturr.

"You need to go," she said. "You need to get off this porch and you need to go and never come back here, or I swear to Christ I'll make you suffer."

"I have this under control," I said.

"The fuck you do," Joni said.

Schturr looked at me. "You're going to let her talk this way?" he said in Ukrainian.

"Speak English, fucker," Joni said.

"This is between us," Schturr said, switching languages as instructed.

Joni told him to leave for a second time, and with the slip of a finger unlatched the safety mechanism of the rifle.

Schturr stared at her, at me. Then he simply turned and walked off.

Just like that. Apparitionally, you might call it.

Only when the porch shut did Joni lower the rifle. "I need a drink," she said, and handed me the rifle before going inside.

I CAME BACK TO THE HOUSE WITH JONI with the Bean and the pup, who was standing primly, as if—I felt sick to my stomach—waiting for a command to turn on us, to kill us all in our sleep.

So here is the question I ask myself. The German Shepherd is huge, well-muscled, and in her own way, loyal and loving. I say her own way because I could never shake the idea that I had done the wrong thing, as a father, not telling Joni.

I hoped the animal understood, in its fist-sized brain, that his brothers and sisters had been erased in a kind of canine genocide, and that I had put my trust in the dog that it wouldn't, by some nascent programming, kill my baby in her sleep.

Trust, I called her, and in our time alone, on our walks, I reminded her of these facts with a regularity that says much more about my terror at the world, at being a father in a world where people can do others great harm.

So far, so good. My father and I talk again, and my mother says that Schturr has done one of his vanishing acts.

“Hopefully he’s dead,” she said.

She said those words to me while Joni took the Bean to breastfeed. And one day I hope to stop waiting for the sky to fall. Until then, I suppose I too hope he’s dead.

KARIN AURINO

Topics Over Time with You

A police chief tries to shake us down when we bury a friend in a foreign country while I am seven months pregnant with our daughter.

Classical music plays at the Hollywood Bowl where you kick the bottle of red and it splashes on my white linen pants.

On September 11 you get dressed for work and I hold our one-year-old daughter while we watch the twin towers live on the news.

I pack artfully decorated lunch bags with tasty nourishments when you go to work and the company bans food in the offices.

After my heart stops briefly on the table our son is born and he will grow into a fine teenager who starts an online gaming club during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My cousin has hemophilia but our family only recently finds out he contracted AIDS as a teenager in the 80's while receiving a blood transfusion after an accident.

The doctor finds a lump in my breast in the same week that my asthmatic sister contracts the virus and it takes so long to find out if it will kill us.

Our children live with us during the pandemic and we have a little party when our daughter turns twenty.

KARIN AURINO

Uncle Bob dies from Coronavirus after a long summer of suffering and I
remember all the times my sisters and I spent playing on his dairy farm
when we were little.

His wife survives.
We survive.

CYAN JAMES

Traveling in slow pieces from the north

Framed diploma, quinoa tin
tan Ralph Lauren riding boots
I am a stationary-colored woman
who has insisted for a long time,
'No, not white all the way, not
to the bone. No, I'm hard-working;
tough; of the sweaty earth. I swallow
spices; your son wouldn't marry me,
too queer. I belong, on Fridays at least,
among the shrubbery at the country club
rather than poolside; I know too much
about stacked decks and weighted clubs
to play poker or venture out golfing there,
though I, too, am glacial in yoga pants,
able to move at my own speed and weight,
employing exact words to carve the shapes
I leave in my wake as I pass, I pass, I pass.'

HEATHER QUARLES

Fall on Repeat

It seems like I'm always writing sestinas in September. I don't make a habit of it, of course, just that I get roped into drafting them in some poetry class or another. Last time I think I chose words like "enchantment" and "crepuscular." Talk about ambitious. This autumn, and with age, I'm trying to keep things simple, trying to clothe myself in wisdom, or at least shrug under its coat.

I'm always hopeful once fall starts. I like the way the air coats the whole morning with crisp beginnings—September's early-sky goodbye to summer's explosion. This month tricks us into thinking it's simple. Instead, the crackling death of leaves weaves an intricate rope of radiance: a reminder of endings. If only we'd learn to talk about our personal seasons, maybe we'd welcome our own curtain calls—in time.

One fall, I was counting down to October, but my roommate warned not to wish away my time. This was back East when early fall already required a heavy coat and the chilliest autumn nights suspended our breath after we talked. Anyway, my roommate said, "It's only September, things are just getting started," and I nodded, but my mind slid forward, a slick rope coiling into the comforts of whatever simple

pleasures I thought the next month would bring. Life was still simple. We descended the stairs towards the music building, stepping into seconds, into a coda of time

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we never knew we'd someday echo. Ignoring the itchy rope
that ties every era to threadbare dreams, I coated
my own with glistening, fall-filled fantasies. But as we walked, my
September
symphony dropped into a duet, a bantering melody of talk.

"I'm not wishing away anything!" I said, trying to talk
him onto my side of things. "It's simple—
I'm actually embracing September
more because I know every day is leading me towards my favorite time.
Now I'm more aware of the moments that bring me closer to scarves and
flannels and coats
and harvest colors and pumpkins with thick, leafy-vined ropes

curling over orchards and into homes with table runners and rope-
woven rugs, into places where no one needs to talk
to know they're welcome—where you just hang your coat
on a peg in the mudroom and curl up into the simple
silent moment, maybe with a book or a cat." He took his time
to smile. "Ok, that does sound good. Just—let's not forget about
September."

"I won't," I say. A decade later this rope of memory wraps us in the slippery
stairs of September.
The talks we had as twentysomethings hover every autumn, a fermata,
remind me of my time—
how much has already coated my days and how much moves me, if I let it,
toward what's simple.

ISAAC GEORGE LAURITSEN

Gigantic Agrarian

You shrink down from your cumulus hair
to an average human size to find yourself

depressed now that the town away is blanketed
with your old clothes that fabricate each day

in a threaded haze, a sharp-limbed sun, the end
of rain. Based on dust and the acceptance of

an established word, the name for here is Iowa,
Iowa full of wheelbarrows, fields disguised

as food, the scent of feed, the Tractors' Way,
and a variety of overalls. It seems theatrical

to make purpose of this, which I've imbedded
from what you've said before because you are

my dad. You've let these hills be vast
with your own goats. And there you go

with them again, a claim of chores feigned for
escape. I say, *do not go too much further* and

please be back for supper. You have such
advantageous teeth for cutting corn from cobs.

They are a permanence inside our home where
you're smiling in photos. The procession of

RED ROCK REVIEW

your shrinking out here continues, first sized
to a boy, then on par with grass, then nearly

non-existent, even as I say, *come back, come back!*
But you do not hear, and I have yet to speak.

LIS ANNA-LANGSTON

(S)hero of Shahkoka Lake

MY MOM BROKE UP WITH HER BOYFRIEND three weeks before the last day of school. During English, the office secretary called me out of class early to tell me she was waiting out front. With the apartment packed up in her VW bus, she told me the relationship thang crashed and burned. I kept my mouth shut and watched dusty strip malls give way to empty lots, then highway. A mad thud of wheels eating up miles gave me time to obsess over my circumstances. It was not the first move of the school year. It was the third, which churned up a ton of angst, but there was no way to ask questions. Questions led to conversations, and those led to screaming, and that always culminated with a slap to my face. Best to be quiet and use the opportunity to sharpen my observational skills.

An hour later, after crossing state lines, my mother turned into the driveway of a house at the edge of a lake. Crumbling boards, the color of mustard crusted around the top of a squeezey bottle, with ugly vomit green shutters leaned into a porch tilted to one side. It was all I could do not to cry. To the left, separated by a row of trees and chain link fence, was a swimming pool made to look like a beach. The sandy shore glistened in the late afternoon sun. I'd seen the sign for it back at the main road. Outfitted with picnic tables, a pavilion, barbeque pit and a playground, it was like another world.

My mother snapped her fingers, unlocking the front door. "Get your crap outta my van. Don't talk to anyone and don't leave the house. I've got some things to settle with my ex."

That could mean a lot of things, none of them good.

I hoisted a box of stuff into my arms and waited inside until the ungodly sound of her broken muffler disappeared. I checked each room but there wasn't a phone. In fact, the house was so old, I didn't see a jack. The nearest house was about four minutes away. If I couldn't find a neighbor, I'd hoof it

back to the main road where a Food Lion and gas station sat on the corner. Tossing my Vans backpack over one shoulder, I set off in the direction of civilization. A few minutes later I rounded a grassy corner and saw two girls older than me. One was wearing a ripped Nine Inch Nails tee and the other wore a yellow raincoat with a lollipop in her mouth.

“Hey,” they said.

“Hey,” I said.

“Are you moving into that house down there?”

“Unfortunately.”

The girl with the lollipop laughed.

I took that socially awkward moment to bond. “Listen, I need to make a call. Do you have a phone?”

Shaking heads in unison, Nine Inch Nails said, “No but our aunt does. She’s busy with her boyfriend but if you knock on her window, she’ll let you use the cordless.” The word busy was in air quotes. I was in no position to be picky so I followed them to the house and knocked on the bedroom window.

A long, slender arm extended out the window, clutching a cordless phone. I didn’t stand on my tiptoes because I was terrified of seeing naked man butt. Huddled next to the trash cans at the side of the house, I pressed the phone to my ear while flies buzzed around old cantaloupe rinds.

My uncle Stan picked up on the bajillionth ring, sounding unsure. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me,” I lowered my voice. “Write down my new school and look up the address.”

He sighed loudly. “I don’t like writing things down. Just call Mother when she wakes up.”

I inhaled sharply and tried a firmer tone. “I’m using a neighbor’s phone. Listen, come get me on Friday after school. Got it?”

“But—why, ain’t you got a phone?”

“Because adults are complicated.”

Lowering his voice, he whispered, “What’s going on with your mother?”

I huffed, trying to be vague. “Can we not dialogue about this?”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

I lowered my voice to an urgent whisper, “This place sucks. Just please come get me.”

Stan sighed heavily and knocked things off the gossip bench trying to find a pen. I gave him my new info and hung up. Smoochy-Boochy reached

for the phone like a weird, dismembered cartoon figure and went back to heavy breathing.

Nine Inch Nails and Raincoat hung around in the driveway, kicking gravel at a pole.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Anytime.” Raincoat crunched the last of the lollipop and chewed. “So, where’d you move from?”

“South Memphis.”

“Big City,” Nine Inch Nails said.

I shrugged. “Hey, what’s that water thing over there?”

Raincoat pointed down to the curve in the road. “The entrance is down there. Bunch of rich people filled a big hole with sand from Florida.”

“Beach within reach,” Nails said.

“So, it’s a swimming pool?”

“Something like that. Randy Savage comes out there sometimes.”

“The Slim Jim guy?”

“Yeah, he’s cool,” Raincoat said, elbowing her sister. “If you’re old enough, it’s make-out central, but they got a mean cherry pie at the concession.”

Never one to take pie lightly, I said, “Looking forward to it.”

“Catch you on the B-side,” Raincoat said and walked off with her sister.

That night, my mother came home with a guy having a love affair with hair gel. I peeked through a crack in the door and watched her fire up a joint in the living room. “Hopefully she has an insurance policy.”

My ears turned prickly. My mother had never liked me, but I didn’t have an insurance policy. I relied on eavesdropping to figure what was going on in my life but couldn’t collect more info because they started making out. I closed my bedroom door quietly because, gross.

THE FRIDAY NIGHT CAR RIDE with my grandmother and uncle Stan was full of silence. Suspicious, to say the least. We got fried chicken boxes on the way home, which was a strictly Sunday event. Stan went straight to his room. Normally, he pestered me constantly, wondering what the world was like outside the confines of his own. He’d never been to Mississippi and I thought he’d be full of nosey, but he wasn’t, and that sent all of my red flags up.

“What’s going on?” I whispered from his doorway.

With a drumstick in his hand, he avoided eye contact. “Nothing. Eating

my chicken box.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Pinching his face into a frown, he asked, “Why not?”

“Because I know you, Stan Alexander. You’re hiding something.”

“I’m not hiding anything. Mother is.”

“So, there is something going on,” I said, excitedly.

“Cool your jets. It’s pretty depressing.”

“What?”

“Mother has cancer.”

“What?”

He nodded. “She’ll tell you. She just ain’t got her nerve up right now.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause she was worried and went to the clinic, and one of them doctors told her.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

Stan stared at me a minute, then dropped his drumstick back in the box. “I don’t know.”

I ran over to sit on the bed. “What happens if she dies? Where would we go?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Them doctors have always been trying to put me in a home. I’m guessing if she dies, they’ll get their way.”

The room felt dark and small as my feet dangled over the edge. A knot of worry formed in the pit of my stomach and pushed its way into my throat. “This cannot be happening,” I said.

“Get used to it,” Stan flopped back on his bed, sighing. “It’s happening.”

On Saturday we went shopping for underwear and socks. Stan complained until my grandmother bought him a footlong hotdog. He sat in the front of the store at a tiny table while I waited to see what she’d say. All we talked about were ankle or crew, unicorns or hearts. On Sunday afternoon, we went for banana splits, but no one spilled the beans.

As the sun set, my mother appeared on the horizon to take me home. Her eyes had so many red lines they looked like a roadmap. On the long drive back to Mississippi, I broke with tradition and turned in the front seat of the old VW bus. “My grandmother has cancer.”

“So?”

I turned in my seat. “You don’t care if she dies?”

My mother felt around in the ashtray for the rest of a joint. “Kinda hoping she does. Every time I ask for money she lies and says she doesn’t

have any.”

It wouldn't matter to her, but it mattered to me. “I can't believe you're doing nothing.” I growled.

With the joint pinched in between her fingers, she slapped me with the back of her hand. Knuckles popped my lip, making it bleed, and little embers flew all over the dash. “Take a different tone, missy.”

I swallowed back the taste of blood as she pulled into a church parking lot. We weren't going to pray. I knew from experience they had a food pantry.

She took a final hit off the joint, went inside, and came out a few minutes later with two paper bags full of food. I sighed. It was going to be one of those weeks.

In an effort to avoid dealing with my mother, I snuck out the next morning and veered close to the fence. Little black patches had formed on the shore of the freshwater pool. The only way in was through a gap in the gate, directly under a NO TRESPASSING sign. I stood under a covered stand with picnic tables and waited to make sure I was alone. Little black shapes along the shore squiggled to and fro. I watched curiously until I was sure the coast was clear, then walked to the edge of the water.

Little black bodies darted along the shore. They weren't fish. They had black slick skin, and sweet looking faces. From where I was standing, I could see that the freshwater pool emptied out into the lake.

Smoochy-Boochy stood at the bus stop waiting with her two nieces.

“Hey,” I said. “I saw these fish things. Do you know what they are?”

She took a big drink of beer in a plastic tumbler that said Pepsi on the side. Her flip-flops crunched the gravel. “Tadpoles.”

“Don't tadpoles turn into frogs?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Her total disinterest aroused all of my suspicions. “So why aren't there hundreds of frogs at the swimming pool?”

“The owner of the pool waits for them all to hatch, and then puts a chemical in the water that gets rid of them right before he opens the pool up for business.” The scent of coconut suntan lotion wafted through the air.

“You mean, he poisons them?”

Smoochy-Boochy lit a menthol, talking out of the side of her mouth. “Look, there's the bus.”

MY STUDY HALL TEACHER gave me a pass to go to Computer Lab. In the

final weeks not much work was required, especially since I'd switched schools. I took the opportunity to learn about frogs. In my snooping I learned they weren't frogs, they were toads. Toads started out as tadpoles and loved the muddy banks of lakes like the one behind our new place. Lake Shahkoka. Named after a famous Chickasaw who once owned the lands. Legends abounded. I leaned into the monitor. It was just the sort of thing I loved. Rumors of seeing him float by in his canoe were reported in old newspaper articles. One story told the tale of how, if Shahkoka liked you, he'd sing a song. I leaned back in the desk chair, imagining what it would be like to see the ghost of Shahkoka gliding across the smooth surface. The bell rang, scaring the crap out of me.

I hadn't been able to say goodbye to a few friends at my old school, so I hopped off the bus at the Food Lion to call and tell them I wasn't coming back. I walked the two and a half miles home. My armpits stank, but at least I had a Snickers bar and closure.

I ran the last few hundred feet because I had to warn the tadpoles. I slipped through the gap in the gate and ran to the shore. "They're going to kill you," I said urgently. "They're going to give you some ridiculous lecture about toad overpopulation and say it's the humane thing to do." Tiny little baby toads turned their faces up to mine, fresh and innocent to the world. I inhaled deep and looked out over the lake.

I crouched lower. "Run!" I yelled.

They squiggled in the water with no sense of escape because they had no sense of danger. Sweet and trusting, they thought all they had to do was stay close to the shore and grow. Adults stressed me out. A simple curiosity shifted abruptly into a life-or-death situation. It was always that way with grownups. All smiles and fortune cookie Zen koan talk until they turned psycho.

Trees shielded my bedroom window from late afternoon sun, and dim light filtered through the old bamboo blinds. It was cool and dark and perfect for hatching a plan. All I had in my room was my cot I got from Army surplus—dust bunnies, a box of dirty clothes, and a bootleg copy of *Clerks* some kid from my last school gave me. Closet—total disaster, because I shoved boxes one on top of the other in an effort to avoid reality. There on the floor, stuffed back in a corner, left by the previous renters, was a plastic beach bag with a plastic shovel and bucket. I pulled it out.

I'd be at my grandmother's house all weekend. I had to get as many tadpoles to safety as possible. I had to make sure no one saw me sneaking

through the gate. With my small, plastic bucket I'd have to make about a bajillion trips. Not only was I going to have to walk up and down the gravel, I was going to have to forge a path down to the lake where snakes glided across the surface of the water. If I only saved a few buckets of tadpoles, the snakes would eat them. Then I'd have a bunch of fat snakes. I had enough fat snakes in my life.

Every day for the next three days I sat in the middle of my bed until I heard my mother leave for work. Then I jumped up, grabbed my gear, slipped through the fence, and ran to the water's edge, where I saved lives until I had to get to the bus stop. Each time, I carefully tilted the bucket upright and watched the tadpoles all bunch up together. Quickly I ran, steady so as not to slosh, all the way back up the path, through the gate, down the drive, around the house, down the bank to the lake where I submerged the bucket.

Monday was stressful. I rescued thirty-two bucketsful of tadpoles in-between the time my mother hit the bong and left for work and the bus arrived. The rest of the week was the same. I ran to and from the lake, praying no one saw me. I had enough problems. I didn't need to be arrested for trespassing. I got off the bus on my last day of school to find the black patches along the shore gone. Any tadpoles I hadn't been able to rescue were poisoned. An ominous sign.

THAT WEEKEND, my grandmother told me,
"I have uterine cancer."

"I don't know what that means."

"It's a problem with my girl parts."

"Do you need them?"

"Not to survive. They're going to surgically remove them."

"Who's going to take care of you?"

A tight smile formed on her face as she reached out for a hug. "I'll be okay," she whispered.

I didn't believe a word. Not a single word. If there was one thing I'd learned during my brief stay on planet Earth, it was that adults lie.

"I'm going to take care of you after your surgery."

My grandmother looked sad. "Oh, you don't have to do that—"

I interrupted, clearing my throat, "Yes. We do. I'll make a schedule for me and Stan."

An hour later we reconvened in the kitchen, and I handed out my list.

Grocery shopping. Washing dishes. Cooking. Laundry. Running errands. Folding clothes. KFC runs.

“Do you think you can do this with me?”

Stan’s eyes trailed down the list. He stopped and thought a minute before saying, “I reckon.”

I’d never been so relieved to hear my urban hillbilly uncle reckon in agreement in my life.

My grandmother pulled her mouth into a frown. “This is a lot of responsibility.”

I waved away her protest by pointing at the list. “I created a schedule,” I insisted.

I was incredibly glad I did. By the time I returned the next weekend, my grandmother was already asleep, post-surgery, in Stan’s room. Stan and I were on our own. The first trip to Piggly Wiggly was stressful.

“Why do you think she has such a hard time getting up?” Stan whispered in the middle of an aisle.

“Because this is a way bigger deal than anyone will admit.”

I loaded up the cart with cans of spinach and weird peas floating in water.

“What if she just goes to sleep and don’t wake up?”

I swung around, pointing my finger. “Do not say that.”

My abrupt movement startled Stan and he inhaled, worried. “Okay. I won’t say that.”

I grabbed a can of mushrooms. “Ever tried these?”

“They’re disgusting.”

Putting the can back on the shelf, I rolled the cart forward. “Moving on.”

And that’s what we did. Moved on, running errands every day of my summer vacation until it became routine. My grandmother moved into Stan’s room, because he had a bathroom. Meanwhile, he moved into her room, where he was longer than the bed, so his big feet hung off the end.

“Chop. Chop.” I said, grabbing a hairy toe. “Help me get this laundry to the basement.”

“Ugh,” he sighed, rolling over, pulling the blanket over his head.

“No laundry. No snack.”

“God, that’s not fair.”

“Chop. Chop, bunny hop.”

Stan spent the summer finding his keys, finding his shoes, finding

his motivation. I spent the summer as a little shadow that heckled him constantly. I learned how to cook and blazed through stack after stack of library books. I discovered Edgar Allen Poe. Poe's stories were like Stan's life, except literary, with a plot, and often had a rhyming quality, which his life did not.

Once upon a daytime dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary. The opening lines of breakfast. Stan had Thorazine with his grits. The uncertainty was getting to him. Any time the subject of my grandmother's health came up, a cold terror made his hands shake. The sunroom where he now slept had no blinds to push out the morning light, so he woke at the crack of dawn, worried about his future.

I worried about mine, too. My mom's last boyfriend had been gone for months. I'd spent a lot of time thinking he'd pop in for a visit, but lately I realized that that was a totally farfetched scenario. Wasn't going to happen. Not now. Not ever. He was gone. And that was that and nothing more. Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, dreaming dreams no mortal dared to dream. It kept me occupied. Psychological torment had its place.

When my grandmother slept peacefully, we went to the library. In the media room I put the big headphones on and listened to Alanis Morissette while I flipped through reference books on toads. You Oughta Know helped me stay centered even though I knew my granny would freak if she heard the lyrics. I logged into the webcam for the beach within reach. Dunhan Beach. Grainy black and white images of people in bathing suits filled the screen. I looked out beyond them, out to the lake, hoping to catch sight of a toad hopping. I sighed. After twenty minutes, not a single form hopped into frame. I logged out and went to find Stan.

I found him in the relaxation area, concocting disaster scenarios. "What if someone breaks in while we're gone and kills mother, thinking it's me?" He whispered as we waited in line to check out the stacks of books and one DVD of Groundhog Day.

"Good grief, you make me worry," I huffed.

"Whatever," he said, pointing at me, "you know you've already had that thought."

I didn't say it aloud, but I had, and a thousand others. My grandmother was my safe haven. I couldn't imagine what I'd do without her.

A few days later, I woke up on the sofa to the sound of Stan screaming. While a drama queen at heart, the cold-blooded sound jolted me upright.

I hit the corner of the living room door in my attempt to get down the hall half asleep. With a shooting pain searing down my shoulder, I rounded the corner to Stan's room to find him on his knees, and my grandmother on the floor.

"Oh my god, what happened?"

"Call an ambulance," he screamed. "Call an ambulance now."

Stan held her shoulders and I saw the faintest rise and fall of her chest. Alive, but not awake. She looked tiny on the hardwood floor, all crumpled up. A dark stain fanned out on top of her nightgown like a black hole about to suck us all inside, where we'd be crushed under the weight of darkness there and nothing more.

"Call for help!" Stan yelled again.

I ran to the phone on the gossip bench and dialed 911.

"State your emergency."

"My grandmother is on the floor."

"Do you know what happened?"

"No. She had surgery. Something must have happened and she fell."

"Is there anyone else in the house with you?"

"My uncle. He's with her."

"Okay. Help is on the way."

Help takes forever. I can tell you that much. I stood next to Stan, who hadn't moved, and willed myself not to cry. Tears would freak him out and unravel our flimsy grip on the situation. I laid my hand on his shoulder and didn't move until I heard sirens.

At the hospital they wheeled my grandmother off and sent us to the waiting room. Patience was definitely not my superpower. I had a lot of time to think. I wasn't sure how to get a life right that second, but I knew I needed one. One where I made all my own choices. A life fashioned from my own tastes, instead of being stuck in rooms, trying not to get high off second-hand smoke.

Stan sat next to me and bumped my knee. "She's gonna die," he said quietly.

I pointed a sharp finger in his direction. "Stop that."

Dropping his chin to his chest, he stared at the floor. Framed pictures of frogs hung on the waiting room wall. Ugly and generic, the faces of unknown frogs stared back. Justice. I hadn't been able to save all of the toads. Now I'd pay the price. A fat snake was gonna gobble up my grandmother, too.

Stan stared idly at the frogs. "Daddy believed that if you put a frog in someone's mouth it would take away the disease. That's where they come up with the saying, 'a frog in your throat.'"

"Do you believe that?"

He shrugged, "Ain't no crazier than what anyone else believes, I reckon."

"You think we can sneak in and put a frog in her mouth?"

"Probably not."

"Let's go wait in the car," I said.

Too stressed and exhausted to argue, Stan followed me to the nurse's station, where we told them how to find us. Then we sat in the underground parking garage, listening to each other breathe.

Eight hours later, on our way to the cafeteria, a nurse stopped us and told us to meet with the doctor.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Surgery is stressful on the body. Her blood sugar was low. Several things that added up to something more dangerous than it really is."

"Will she be okay?"

"That's hard to say long term, but she can go home."

On the way home she squeezed my hand and said, "Trust God's plan." Which I didn't. God was slippery.

I maintained our schedule and watched my grandmother constantly. Peach yogurt, orange Jell-O, and cream of celery soup came and went on trays. Stan and I washed dishes and played checkers. Outwardly I stayed busy, inwardly I worried.

At the dead hour of night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—

"What are you doing?" Stan asked, flopping into a chair.

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer. "Reading Poe."

Stan put his head on the table and groaned. "That guy is a freak."

The next morning, I walked around the corner and saw my grandmother sitting up on the edge of her bed. "Good morning."

"How are you?" I asked, because I wanted to know, but only if it was an answer I wanted to hear.

"Tired of sleeping, but still sore."

That sounded pretty good. Hard to tell with adults.

"I've missed you," she said. "What have you been doing?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Just trying to make my little corner of the world better, I suppose."

That afternoon we played checkers, and Stan fell asleep listening to his radio program. Sweeping floors and stress were exhausting. I made grilled cheese, turkey chili, and lime Jell-O with Cool Whip, leaving his on a plate in the oven.

During dinner, my grandmother took a bite of lime Jell-O and said, "I don't want to scare you, but if anything ever happens to me, get the key from my purse and unlock the hall closet."

The tone of her voice swept away the confidence I'd been building all day. "Is something going to happen?"

She shook her head. "I don't mean to worry you. I've just had a lot of time to think."

Yep. "I know that feeling." I'd spent a lot of time thinking about tadpoles, hoping they'd found a warm gooey place in the mud to grow up.

"Tomorrow we'll get a cake for your birthday."

THE NEXT DAY, the three of us drove over to Piggly Wiggly. Stan and I picked out the cake with the most frosting.

"We should get some peach ice cream to celebrate not starting a grease fire or falling down the basement stairs," Stan suggested.

"Or just celebrate the fact we're all still alive," I said.

"Or *that*."

We celebrated my birthday in the kitchen with the most off-key happy birthday song ever heard. Later, Stan paced the length of the living room, talking to himself. School would start soon, and he knew I'd leave. Not a single person visited all summer.

"I don't understand why I can't just come live with you," I said to my grandmother on the last night. "This is so dumb."

"Because your mother gets a check every month because of you. Plus, she gets a bunch of free stuff from the government. She's never gonna give you up because she'd be forced to give up the check. Not gonna happen."

"So, I'm forced to stay in the house with her because Uncle Sam is a baby daddy?"

"Something like that, yes."

When my mother showed up the next day, she was high, swearing, and wearing her clothes inside out. "Get in the car," she yelled. "I get so tired of

driving all over town to get you.”

Stan walked my suitcase to the curb. “Y’all got a phone yet?”

“No. We can’t afford it,” she said, giving him the stink eye.

“What am I supposed to do if something goes wrong?” he whispered to me at the trunk.

“Call Smoochy-Boochy. Her new boo will come get me. The number is still on Caller ID.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “I’m worried.”

“Stick to the list,” I whispered. “I’ll be back here on the weekend.”

My mother walked out of the house leaving the front door open. “I see no one died this summer.”

Stan walked past her, up the stairs. “Nice to see you, too.”

Back in Mississippi, the house was uglier than I remembered. The screen door leaned against the house, its hinges dangling from the side. My room had been unoccupied for months. My sheets smelled old. The bong gurgled in the living room. I sat down on my cot and sighed. I’d take the uncertainty of death over Mississippi any day. My grandmother had given me a hundred dollars for helping all summer. Stan was so relieved we all survived that he gave me forty-six dollars in change from a drawer he refused to put clothes in. I was rich and hid my loot inside a stuffed gorilla I found in a box.

The pool was still open. For three more days, people could splash in the water and blast music from the jukebox. Laying flat on my cot, obsessing over my life, I heard a Foreigner song end, and Coolio’s *Fantastic Voyage* start up. I took ten dollars from my fat wad and snuck through the gate under the NO TRESPASSING sign. At the concession stand I stood in line, reading the menu. A corn dog, tater tots in a big greasy paper boat, with two fried cherry pies were my reward. An orange Fanta rounded out my cardboard tray. Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I snuck around to my bedroom and climbed through the window.

As the sun went down, something magical happened: a new sound rose from the banks of the lake. Toads croaking, a strange amphibian song. Louder and louder they croaked. A symphony of toads joining in. Like the biggest barber shop quartet of toads ever heard. I opened my bedroom door and went into the hall. The toads were so loud, like they were inside. I walked to the back door. Outside on the concrete porch I stood, listening. In front of me, hundreds of toads sang into the end of summer. Like a heartbeat, the pulse of a planet, the rhythmic beats of telltale ribbits rising

higher.

My mother stomped past the open window.

“Jesus, frick those frogs are loud. Someone turn them off.”

They’re toads, I thought. I’d only been alive a decade, but I’d managed to save a few things: some coins, a few notes, a book or two, a grandmother, and some toads. To my mother, it was the sound of nuisance. To me, the sound of victory. Me and those toads had something in common. All the toads I’d saved were out there, along the bank, celebrating with a victory croak, loud and clear on a late summer night. My eyes drifted out to the surface of the water, out to where I believed Shahkoka spent his days. I didn’t see a Chickasaw gliding past, but those toads made me think he’d christened a song.

I stood with my fried pie in my hand and sank my teeth into a gooey cherry center. Warm like the night, the sweet filling squished to the edge of my smile, where I knew a ribbit or two was for me.

YAN AN

追赶着雪的女孩

追赶着雪的女孩 大声喊叫着
露出了令她自己暗自吃惊的野性子
她甚至突发奇想 像飞一样
使出燕子的轻妙
用惊心动魄的一跳 从一座大楼的顶端
跃至另一座大楼的顶端
她甚至对着风雪迷茫的远山呼唤
却无意中应和了那里的一只老鼯鼠
（昨天它刚刚风雪夜归
跨过一座悬崖时险些摔死）
行将冬眠时告别空山的最后一声悲啼

被雪追赶的女孩
她正在撒野似的追赶着雪
她在漫天大雪的大街上放肆地奔跑着
跑过了头 就跑向了郊外 跑进了黄昏
降临的黑暗中 被白茫茫的雪光所映照的
黑黝黝的郊区和旷野上
而当此之时 神已回家安歇
和她一样披头散发的妖冶女鬼们
一个个阒无行迹 藏得深深

被雪追赶的女孩
爱雪爱得疯狂的女孩
今夜突然变得不害怕的女孩
她捧起厚厚的雪层为自己洗脸
把雪大口大口吃进嘴里
祈求上苍平息她面颊上的发烫的红晕

和狂跳的内心

这黑暗中越堆越多的雪多么优美
这黑暗和雪如此憔悴又如此温馨

她甚至拿出镜子照了又照

NOTE:

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YAN AN

Translated from Chinese by Chen Du & Xisheng Chen

Snow-Chasing Girl

A snow-chasing girl is shouting her loudest
Revealing the ferity surprising herself
She is even struck by a whim
To jump in a heart-thrilling manner
From the summit of one edifice to the top of another
With the ethereality of a flying swallow
She even calls to the yonder mountains hazed in windy snow
Unintentionally echoing the last moan of an old mole
(Who just came home last night in the blizzard
And nearly fell to its death when traversing a precipice)
Going to hibernate and bidding adieu to the hollow mountains

The girl chased by the snow
Is wildly chasing the snow
She is galloping loose on the street shrouded by the immense snow
And overrunning towards the suburbs and into the tenebrosity
Of the falling dusk and the dim gloomy outskirts and wilderness
Shining with the reflection of the vast white snow
Whilst at the moment deities have gone home to rest
And the pretty coquettish female ghosts with disheveled hair just like her
Are all quiet without a single soul to be seen hiding deeply

The girl chased by the snow yet crazily loving the snow
Suddenly becomes undaunted tonight
She cups a thick layer of snow in her hands to wash her face
And to take in mouthfuls of snow
Praying to heaven to subdue the burning flush suffusing her cheeks

RED ROCK REVIEW

And to pacify her wildly beating heart

The snow keeping piling up in the dark is so graceful
The tenebrosity and the snow are so wan yet so cozy and lovely

That she even takes out a mirror and looks into it again and again

YAN AN

被梦挟持在雪夜及其空地上的女孩

雪来了
用梦和身体同时追逐雪的女孩
她感到了带在身上的一颗苹果的冰凉
偷偷地哭了

一个人在机关后院里堆雪人
红袄子 绿裤子
她要穿戴得更有姿色
而有关梦的颜色 属于她的不够美好的那一小部分
由于衣服过于单薄
险些被劳动中变得渐热的身体
出卖或者不恰当地暴露出来
献给雪

爱整洁的女孩 洁癖
折磨着羽毛般的雪
下班后的雪地陪衬着轻率而危险的飞奔
她的近乎失控的匆忙 她要大声喊叫
要和雪带着同样的鲁莽一齐冲入家门
在旧衣服和樟木立柜
憋足了劲的香味中

她要把梦的颜色 从那些
积压着许多旧东西的旧时光下面
一片片地整理出来

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YAN AN

Translated from Chinese by Chen Du & Xisheng Chen

Girl Coerced Into a Snowy Night and Its Vacancy by a Dream

Snow is coming
The girl chasing the snow with her dream and body at the same time
Feels the icy coldness of an apple on her
And thereby weeps furtively

She alone is building a snowman in the backyard of an institution
Wearing a red overcoat and green pants
She just wants to dress to be more glamorous
Yet the colors related to dreams
A small portion of her not being beautiful enough
Are nearly betrayed or inappropriately exposed
By her body becoming hotter and hotter during work
Due to her overly thin clothes
To be dedicated to the snow

The girl loving to be neat and clean with mysophobia
Is torturing feather-like snowflakes
After work the snowy ground is a backdrop
For her hasty yet dangerous gallop and her nearly uncontrolled haste
She just wants to shout her loudest
Rush into her house together with the snow with the same recklessness
And in the fully energetic pent-up scent
Of old clothes and a camphorwood cabinet

CHEN DU & XISHENG CHEN

Arrange piece by piece the colors of dreams
From under the old days with tons of overstocked old stuff

YAN AN

镜子

你告诉那个人
他永远在外边
即使他迷恋着一场雪
在雪中藏起了自己 甚至由于藏得太深
在一场并不算意外的雪崩中
埋掉了自己的死

一场大雪注定要发生在外边
一个在大雪中控制不住迷狂的人
那无声地 迅疾地堆积的白
追赶着他沉默的飞奔
当他在雪的厚度 深度和寂静中
渐渐耗尽了身体中的水和火焰
当他身体的水银柱上的刻度
允许了冰雪一步一步深入进去的探访
并允许了它和梦一同冬眠起来

你告诉那个人
那个乐于献身甚至牺牲的人
他仍然在外边
被死亡所托付的雪与微笑
拥有着失踪般的迷惑表情
也在外边

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YAN AN

Translated from Chinese by Chen Du & Xisheng Chen

Mirror

You have told that man
He forever stays out
Even though he is infatuated with a snow
Has hidden himself in the snow
And even has buried his own demise
In a not-so-unexpected avalanche
For having hidden too deep

A blizzard is destined to happen outside
The man can't contain his delirium in the blizzard
The silently and swiftly accumulating white
Is chasing his reticent gallop
When he gradually depletes his body of water and flames
In the thickness, depth and quietude of the snow
And when the scale on the mercury tube of his body
Allows the in-depth step-by-step inquiries of the icy snow
And its hibernation with dreams together

You have told that man
Ready to dedicate or even sacrifice his life
He still remains outside
So do the snow and smiles entrusted by death
With bewildered countenances seemingly astray

YAN AN

蜘蛛

你的灵魂里盘踞着蜘蛛
蜘蛛的形状
就是你的灵魂的形状
蜘蛛抽丝的样子
就是你的灵魂与某个幻影藕断丝连的样子

这一切仿佛命运
也仿佛前世既定
蜘蛛的身影
就是你的灵魂的身影
你走到哪里
蜘蛛就能跟到哪里

你告别的次数太多了
脸上有太多的忧郁和雾霾一样的迷惘
你喜欢往人群里钻
试图让那些突出的驼背和肿鼻子帮你蹭掉点儿什么
你一直在寻找很多人离而又去变动不居的地方
去那里打听另外一些蜘蛛的下落
因为你很久不见蜘蛛的影子了
蜘蛛的影子
就是你每日都要死而复生一次的灵魂的影子
甚至就是你本身的影子

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YAN AN

Translated from Chinese by Chen Du & Xisheng Chen

Spider

Snuggling in your soul is a spider
Whose shape
Is also the shape of your soul
The look of the spider spinning silk
Is the look of your soul unable to cut off ties
With a phantom

All of these are like fate
As if determined in previous life
Its silhouette
Is also the silhouette of your soul
Wherever you go
It follows you

Too many times you bid adieu
On your face is too much melancholy
And haze-like befuddlement
You like to weave into the crowd
Attempting to let those prominent hunchbacks
And swollen noses help you rub something off
You have been looking for places
Where many people leave and return alternately
And move constantly without settling down
To inquire about the whereabouts
Of some other spiders
This is because you haven't seen
Any hide or hair of a spider for long

RED ROCK REVIEW

Which is also the sign of your soul
That resurrects once every day
Or even of yourself

KEITH PROCTOR

Two Tumblers

THEY WERE LATE GETTING HOME. Liam swung the door shut and tossed his keys into the earthenware bowl. Susan, placing a slender hand on his shoulder, slipped out of her sandals.

Liam let out a breath. "What an evening," he said.

"What was wrong with it?"

"The four of us, sitting around, talking about, what exactly?"

She shrugged. "I had fun."

He followed her into the den. Soft light emanated from recessed fixtures. "You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding." She sat on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her. He watched her with some envy. All that yoga. He'd tear an ACL sitting like that.

"You realize," she said, "we've known Charlie and Kim for thirty years. Think about it. Thirty years."

"They felt like strangers to me."

"Oh, come on."

"Did you hear Charlie going on about the election, the protests? Bring the boot down on them, he said. Christ. He used to be a Marxist. Remember? He carried around that little book."

"That's not exactly what he said."

"And Kim? She used to live in an ashram. She ate nothing but cold rice for three years. Yet she spent half of dinner urging us to incorporate as a pass-through entity for tax reasons."

Susan was shaking her head. "You're always trashing things," she said. "We have a nice evening with old friends, then we come home, you slump into a chair and say something like—" she dropped her voice, mimicking him "—'we'll never get that time back.'"

He laughed. "Well, we never will."

"If it weren't for me, you'd never leave the house. You'd have no friends. I've enabled you. What will you do when I'm gone?"

"Don't be morbid."

"Who's being morbid? The women in my family die young. It's a fact."

He moved toward the antique credenza they used as a bar. An array of green, blue, and amber bottles gave off a gentle, aquatic glow.

"I don't want one," she said to his back.

When he turned, he held two tumblers of scotch. He set one on the coffee table near her, then lowered himself into a chair. Susan, frowning, leaned forward and re-positioned the glass onto a coaster.

"Where'd you go?" he said. "Earlier. You and Kim disappeared for a year."

"Oh." She laughed a little. "Kim was giving me a tour of her new kitchen implements. They're French Revolution-themed. Her new cheese slicer is a tiny guillotine."

He nodded. "They've gotten into replicas, apparently," he said. "Charlie took me to his study. He's started collecting Civil War miniatures. Thousands, in lighted display cases. He paints all of them himself. Can you imagine the time it takes? He has a table in the middle of the room with railroad tracks and hills, cornfields. Tiny Confederates around fires, beside tents, warming their hands, drinking out of tin cups. There was a field hospital. Doctors covered in blood, gore down their fronts to their elbows, sawing off people's legs."

She lifted her glass from the table.

"Maybe that's what happens as people get older," he said.

"What is it that happens?"

"Your world shrinks. You focus on smaller and smaller things." He frowned. "Maybe it's empty nest syndrome. That kid of theirs, the one with the hair, he's been out of the house five years."

"We're empty nesters, too."

"Yes," he said, then glanced around the house, as if to be sure their daughter was really gone. "But just barely."

Idly, she massaged her upper chest, a fingertip tracing the collarbone. "Is that what's bothering you?" she said. "Talking to Charlie tonight, did you see your future?"

Liam stared down into his glass, as if attempting to divine something. In the silence, Susan rearranged a stack of magazines on the coffee table into a fan.

She stood. "I'm beat."

"Do you think we've done that?"

"Think we've done what?"

"Changed. Become different people."

She moved around the sofa, lightly, on the balls of her feet, away from him. She still cradled the tumbler in her hand. It was empty.

"Does that worry you?" she said.

"If I ended up like Charlie, sure."

Liam levered himself out of the chair and poured himself another. He turned to find Susan studying him. Her face looked thin and wan under the lights.

"What is it?" he said.

"I'm trying to imagine you changing," she said. "I'm trying to imagine what that might possibly look like."

She left him, and the sound of her footsteps receded up the stairs. Above, in the master bath, she turned on the taps. He imagined her standing over the basin, waiting for the water to get hot so she could wash her face. He downed his glass too quickly, and his eyes misted. The soft roar of water, moving through pipes in the wall behind him, rushed upward through darkness and into his wife's cupped hands.

MOSS INGRAM

May

AFTER ALL THE SHOUTING, I close my eyes and reappear in the dim room where I retreat to have my vision checked, sitting in a large chair with a wide metal plate for a footrest, and wait for my exam to begin. The doctor appears in a crisp white lab coat, her hair pulled into a tight knot at the top of her head, entering through a little door that opens in the back of my mind.

She pushes the cold beige contraption to my face, maneuvering it to rest on the bridge of my nose as daintily as a snowflake, and through it I see a small luminescent square projected onto the far wall, the picture beaming from somewhere above my head, but when I look through the phoropter, the doctor doesn't ask about E's going this way and that, or strings of random letters, but rather scenes from my life: key moments, potential paths, conflicts.

"Let's begin with your right," she says, and a dark disk descends in front of my left eye. At first, my responses come easy. "Which is clearer," she says, "This?" then she slides a different lens in front of my right eye, "Or this?" and I am soothed by the sound of her switching lenses, the rhythm of swishes, but after a series of these questions, I pause longer, increasingly unsure.

"1?" she says patiently, "Or 2?"

She shows me two moments from years ago, the first is of my wife and me leaning toward each other over a small table in what used to be our favorite coffee shop.

"Was this the first moment you fell in love with your wife?" she says. "Or this?" and I hear the doctor breathing while I look at an image of limbs and strewn sheets. I can't help but smile, remembering that afternoon, my wife and I laughing so loud in our 3rd floor walk-up, people surely heard us from the street.

“Which is clearer? 1?” she says. “Or 2?”

When she switches the phoropter to examine my left eye, she shows me two more moments, the first well before we had discovered our coffee shop. “Was this when you first changed your mind about becoming a father?” I see hope and an expectant gush of glee awaiting release in my wife’s eyes, “Or this?” and then the doctor turns the lens and I flinch as it swivels to a stop—my wife’s eyes are burdened by the possibility of having her world crushed from the threat of me saying no.

When I do not respond, she turns the lens one more time, repeating, “1? Or 2?”

She works the mechanism again and again, each time pairing different lenses for me to compare until she lifts the dark disk in front of my right eye so that I am looking at an image through both lenses at once, and I am confronted by a picture taken of me from the very moment that compelled me to escape here after arguing with my wife.

“Is this how you feel about your marriage?”

For the first time I am seeing through my wife’s eyes, a vision of fury and rage I never thought I was capable of—aggressive, grotesque, sickening.

Then the next pair of lenses slip into place, and now the sound is in stereo, and it reminds me of my mother insistently shushing me to sleep, agitated, frenetic, embarrassed, after she and my father fought fiercely into the night. “Or this?” and through the second set of lenses I am staring at a much older couple who I recognize as my wife and me decades from now, watching our future grandchildren spinning on a merry-go-round; yet, despite the tangible frailty I see in our curvatures, there is a light in my wife’s eyes I have not witnessed in years, and I see that same light in my own, and that light begins coursing through my chest to my capillaries until the image feels unreal, unimaginable—could we ever love each other like this again?

I slump forward from the weight of the question, leaning my head into the contraption, and I am distracted by the doctor noting my dilated pupils. She must hear the quickening of my breath, sense my struggle to seek something more than a reprieve from my misery, a glimmer of possibility within my desperation for even a sliver of the happiness lost between my wife and me, and here is a glimpse of the comfort we once shared that now feels impossibly distant, and I begin to cry behind the contraption.

After a moment she repeats, “1? Or 2?”

Is there hope? After all these years, is our marriage mendable? Could my wife and I elevate our relationship to this?

Then the other lenses fall back in place and tears of frustration flood my eyes from vacillating between the two extremes—from the unbearable present to what feels like a preposterous future, only to regress once again and confront my heavier, immediate reality—my own appalling behavior—and in the midst of this I ask myself what feels ludicrous to ponder—forgiveness?—is it possible?—and then once again the vision of my wife and me sharing a moment of happiness evaporates and I shout, “Wait, go back! Go back! What is this?” and I recoil from the image of me, captured through my wife’s eyes, exploding in a tornado of rage, but the doctor’s voice remains calm and clinical as she presses the contraption to my face again, slowly repeating, “1? Or 2?” and I am infuriated how each image is just as clear and crystalline as the other.

“Go back!”

“1? Or 2?” she insists, yet now I hear her voice deepen with a tremor of impatience, the sound of the lenses mimic a window violently ascending and descending within its encasement, rushing open, then closed, and my eyes are pummeled by wave after wave of harsh, dry air and I want nothing more than to escape, just as I always had before climbing through my bedroom aperture at 2am.

But there is nowhere for me to go, no escaping my escape, and I am dumbstruck, not by the choice cycling before my eyes, but by my inability to comprehend which actions could lead to the moment in the second image, how could our love be nurtured anew, and as I am witnessing, through the eyes of my wife, our grandchildren, my own, there is a better way to live, as a man warm and kind, whose relationships are rooted in love and understanding; relationships built of trust, acceptance, release.

My spine straightens and I twist my fingers into a vice to tear apart the question—If the path of one’s life is merely a series of steps and each step is within stride of the next, what could manifest this vision other than unfathomable leaps? How can I make something which I have not the seed to grow nor the tools with which to build?

Pressure mounts in my ears and I feel my feet straining to push the metal plate to the floor. The lenses now sound like the quick raising and letting loose of a guillotine, and my jaw cinches tight until my teeth ache.

“1? Or 2?” she says again, and for the first time I am threatened by the question. The edges of the latter image begin darkening, like a smoldering

fire creeping toward celluloid, while the former turns brighter, harsher, louder, as if held under the noonday sun, becoming upsettingly over-exposed, over days, months, years, all passing with each switch of the lenses and the sound of the lenses cycling turns shrill, like of a pair of fish knives fervently scraping against stone.

“This? Or this?” she says, and I repress an urge to denounce, “Neither is a choice!” while I am tormented by more questions—How have I let this happen? How can I possibly change the future when everything feels permanent, set, immobile? Is my only way forward to go back? Is there another way I can begin again? I analyze the pictures like a child rushing through a house of a thousand closed doors, desperately trying each—maybe, maybe, maybe—I might find a hint or clue of how I can do better, be better, to find a way to take the next step forward.

“1? Or 2?” she says in a way that makes it clear my examination is nearly over.

“Please,” I say, “Please, may I see them one more time?”

ELLEN WHITE ROOK

The Empty Ruby Universe

I would put all my possessions in the front yard and write numbers on circles. I wouldn't dicker about the price. I would traverse the mall parking lot carrying a rough sack of skinned possum. I would stuff each meter with a quarter. I would ignore the elevator and run up the stairs. Over the roof. Down the loop of black metal links. Across desolation's continent. I would pull out my pearl-handled knife to cut vines or the nails of elephant hands or my own frenulum. I'm ready. I promise. I cross my heart with a chisel-tip pro. The cave's paint is fresh. The cave's palms are open. Let the sole emerge from the shoe and see where it falls. My cheek is turned. It all comes from stone: Water. Death. Traffic. Eternity. Coffee is not a solution. Wine with dinner. Wine without. Whiskey before sleep. Sleep without words. Bite down. Bite down hard. Bite down so hard the cheekbone splits. I want something. I want something. I want something.

ELIZABETH CHRISTINE POPE

The Return

The world unfastened in ways
my body was unable to support. Ceilings

hazed a storm that didn't know how to break.
Humidity made my ears and chest

throb. Treebark sweat drowning carpenter ants
in pools of tarry pine wax, crimson speckled soldiers

sprinkled below the dark skirt. I pushed
the grapefruit and peppered bread back. An inhale

of steam coughed. Little more, little more each fall.
Eyes glazed over. Everything pined. I'd lost

the taste of forever. She saw it and brewed evening
primrose to bring my heart back—a heart

I didn't even know I had. Though, she knew
only by the loss of hers—crumbs escaping dust

from her teeth. I lived on her that summer of grief.
The night felt everything, its answer striking

still the grandfather clock in the vestibule.
Mourning was this cage that opened in strange ways.

RED ROCK REVIEW

I could feel it flowering as a wisteria, seeding, sprouting
gruff winding arms, groping bone, spine. I considered if

I was the only one who felt this absence as a presence.

JASON ABBATE

Flight School for Sons & Daughters

We're hunched over placemats in The Captain's
Café, your fingers jacketing a faux pewter mug.
I decide that you're performing a forgotten ritual
as you smear gold splotches from your eyes, that your
fingertips are spilling secrets we knew at birth but
have lost through decades of distortion. We listen
to the bartender blend strawberry exit strategies.
There is no other sound except me telling
myself that I should be hungrier for beginnings.

I'm sticking commas after everything that's
about to disappear. I suspect what you suspect:
that we are orphans of the same greedy truth,
crimsoning a helicopter graveyard with heat from
a borrowed star. We gathered just enough altitude to
dust the earth with seeds from another couple's trail.

Who will imagine that we wrote "be so awake that it hurts"
across every filthy fun house wall? That the rest of our
injuries melted like wax wings in dry southern rain?

ANDREW MILLER

The Children of Boutades

That night, the girl had held the candle too close.
The wick's smoke stung the boy's eyes and her own.
Still, with a bit of coal, she traced his shadow
On the plaster wall. That work done, the boy dead,
The cornice came to hold the profile of a ghost.
Boutades covered over it with paint and clay.
He shaped and molded the boy's Thessalian nose
As it had been, the boy's curling black bangs,
As he remembered them, and with blue shells
He fixed the eyes. What remained was to shape
The furl in the boy's low forehead. Done.
What remained was to model the boy's square ear.
Done. What remained was the radiate sneer,
Of the boy's thin lips, which Boutades had hated
In the living boy. But now, he did this work too
So perfectly even that old hate was satisfying:
Yes, the bull-necked, low browed, yammering boy
His daughter had loved Boutades had made again
So ugly the artist felt certain, at any minute,
He'd overhear that head of clay laugh again
And ask for money. In the far room, the weeping
Was the same. The cries ransacked the calm
Of every room. They worried the nights away.
Through it all, Boutades worked. He added.
He painted. The moon askance in the window,
The white noises of night birds calling till dawn.
He tested the pigments, mixed the glazes, fixing,
Revising, then changing those changes back again,
All the time whispering: "My boy." "My sweet boy."

BERGITA BUGARIJA

Solids

MARNI'S MATERNAL INSTINCTS FAILED HER from the beginning. The first week, she wiped Baby's umbilical cord stump with a soaked rag which delayed its falling off for months. Meanwhile, the folds under Baby's chin, armpits, and thighs remained untouched until they flamed up in a rash. Sponge baths confused Marni. So did breastfeeding, swaddling, and burping.

She stood in the dining room, crusty picture books and disarrayed toys in her peripheral vision, doing her best to ignore the soiled wipes defiling the exquisite furniture she'd hand-picked from the world's poshest purveyors. The sunlit day hovered in the living room and dissolved in the middle of the open-floor-plan brownstone where the dining table loomed. Marni stood opposite Baby, ready to spar, armed with a plastic spoon and mashed carrot, at the brink of a new fiasco: feeding solids.

When Marni learned that *solids* meant boiled, pureed, unseasoned root vegetables, she added it to the list of perplexing rules of baby care. Whoever thought to label bland mush *solids* had clearly never had a pot roast or a sandwich. Baby, strapped in a highchair, squirmed as if the boiled carrot Marni had smooshed with the back of the fork was the most disgusting meal in the world. The smell, a hybrid of sulfur and grandma's evening armpits, suggested that it probably was. What Baby didn't get was that Marni, too, had to do many things she didn't like: leave work, gain weight, and watch her boobs sag, forever annihilating any chance of appearing in Playboy. Not that she would have done it, but droopy breasts meant being relegated to the used-up pile. Her boobs had been spectacular. Many people had said so, including Matt, her husband. She'd given up all that and much more for this enterprise, this raising-a-family thing, but Baby couldn't care less. It fussed, threw blocks all over, ripped the Burberry catalog, slobbered its hands and gelled its dust-bunny hair with snot.

She should have seen the red flags. Even before she had Baby, Marni's

body had resisted motherhood.

“Seems your uterus is struggling with the implantation,” Dr. Tate had said. “Curious because you’re healthy and not even thirty.” It sure was curious. Until that point, Marni had excelled at everything: graduated *summa cum laude*, created ingenious marketing campaigns for Dove, Apple, and Method, made them money—made herself money. These accomplishments had required hard work and sacrifice, surely more than having a baby would. Making a baby was an easy sell and the rest of it—the raising and caregiving—was supposed to be just as organic. At least that’s what she’d been told by most everyone: Mother, Matt, the Today Show. It had sounded like a good idea, a respite from scrambling to meet report deadlines—it would be a gentle curve to success compared to the years of Pilates and cronut abstinence she’d endured for a faint six-pack outline. Besides, it might be fun to have a Mini-Me and tweak it over time into a better version of herself.

When Marni got pregnant, Matt pranced and whistled *I feel pretty*; his hands mimed the flutter of a flamenco fan, and his lips pursed. The whole sight was utterly unattractive. Considering that they were at the cusp of going the IVF route, sure, conception was a kind of relief. It meant no giant, fat needles injecting rampant hormones into her flesh. The natural pregnancy spared their marriage of the emotional strain and utilitarian sex. Marni didn’t want to ruin teary-eyed Matt’s ecstasy with her clear-headed reminder that fertilization was the easy part—they were in for a shit show.

Now, here she was in their once-pristine dining room, in the midst of said shit show. Baby was coughing after its first bite of solids. This wasn’t the dry cough Marni had heard before, the predecessor to a long phlegmy bout that sometimes ended in vomit. This cough was different—a bark, really. It reminded her of that one happy hour when she had taken the cinnamon challenge. Josh at work had seen the thing on YouTube and made everyone try to swallow a teaspoon. YouTube was right; none of them could do it. The cinnamon felt like sawdust in her mouth, like inhaling a cloud of shredded sandpaper. Fun in a frat-boy-hazing-ritual kind of way, but that was before the intern turned blue.

Baby didn’t look in quite as much trouble, but its eyes did well up as it struggled to expel whatever was disturbing it. For a second Marni wanted to offer Baby some water. Then she remembered she wasn’t supposed to yet. An orange chunk came out of the side of Baby’s mouth, a little piece of carrot Marni’s fork must have missed. Marni removed the piece with her

finger, looked at it, then pointed it at Baby.

“Are you kidding me?”

The amount of ridiculousness she had had to go through for the past five months with Baby exasperated Marni. Initially, she had planned on buying premade baby food, but Mother protested.

“Who knows what chemicals they put in those jars; things that mess up the brain. Then everyone wonders why kids nowadays end up with ADHD. You want what’s best for the baby, not an easy way out, right?” Mother knew her well; Marni detested half-assery. Making her own baby food was only a matter of minutes, Mother reassured her. A few to boil a vegetable, then one more to mash it up. The fork mashing method had worked well when Marni was a baby, but she should get a blender, make the veggies extra smooth in a blink—having a baby nowadays is practically zero effort, Mother rested her case.

Baby goo-goo-gaga-ed and used her plastic dinnerware to catapult the leftover carrot. The shreds landed on the rug and the vintage credenza Marni had shipped from Florence, Italy, not South Carolina. She moved to the side, opened her laptop and bought a Ninja blender with one click. Easy. Done. Unlike Baby.

“You’ll eat carrots one way or another,” Marni said. Baby dipped spoon and hands into the mush, grabbed its feet over the tray and nestled the orange bits between its toes. Its flailing hands lurched, and a bit of carrot landed in Marni’s eye. It stung. Marni ran to the sink to flush her eye. She turned to Baby, wiping water off her face with a sleeve.

“You will eat carrots, and parsnip, and sweet potato, and brussels sprouts, and all the rest,” she said, though she feared her own threat; the fiber would only strengthen Baby, the mushy-slushy blob of secretions, and turn it into something worse. But the transition to solids also represented Marni’s revolt against the exploitation of her nipples. By now, nursing was second nature—even calming at times. Marni didn’t romanticize the ordeal, but the feeding occupied Baby’s mouth and distracted it from wailing, so it served a purpose. But Marni would never forgive the two-week long crime scene after Baby came home, how her chewed-off nipples hung by a thread to their areolas.

Baby constantly surprised Marni with its capabilities, calculated and cruel. How was such spite stored in such a small, supposedly innocent bundle, supposedly of joy? Its first day of trying solids, and it had already converted the harmless plastic utensil into a high efficiency weapon. Marni

removed the spoon from Baby's clenched grip and replaced it with a soft bunny rattle before it noticed and protested with high-pitched shrieks.

Come to think of it, Baby had started its hegemony from its first days in the womb. Marni knew she wasn't the only pregnant woman who had ever had morning sickness, but other women could at least vomit to relieve themselves, if only temporarily. Marni, on the other hand, was at the brink of puking all day, but never could. There was no way out of it. She'd made the decision to have a child, and all she could do was acquiesce to its unforeseen tortures—including the horror of labor and delivery. An awful, thirty-six hour ordeal. Appalling. Offensive. All dignity forfeited. Baby just wouldn't come out. The doctors finally had to use the long metal salad tongs to pull Baby out of Marni. The forceps had mangled Baby's head like abandoned Playdough.

"But all that will be forgotten once your baby is home," said Mother when she visited in her pressed pastel suit, each curl in place, lipstick protected from running over the edge of her lips by its bodyguard, Botox. "It will all be worth it."

What a strange way to put it. Worth what? The infected episiotomy, the sleepless nights and flaccid vagina, the lifelong physical exhaustion and once smooth skin obliterated with stretch marks?

"You mean, a woman's beauty marks," Mother added then checked her phone and—golly, time flies!—off she went to her tennis date.

Baby threw the bunny rattle across the room and started to shake the highchair. It would not tolerate the straps for much longer. Marni transferred it to the jungle gym on the floor for some tummy time and enjoyed watching it struggle to lift its chest.

Marni feared she didn't like Baby. And that Baby didn't like her. When it was about a month old, she thought Baby smiled at her. All she needed was that hint of a better future, a ray of light at the end of the infinite parenting tunnel. She was even a little moved. Baby's pimple-covered cheeks seemed weirdly adorable. Marni felt proud: her prodigious offspring had reached a milestone before the chart said it would. When she mentioned the achievement to Dr. Laurie, he said, "Gas spasms."

MARNI USED TO TRUST HER GUT. It had served her well for the most part, even though no gut was foolproof. She'd done stupid things like everyone: drove drunk, lost her keys then climbed twenty-two floors of fire escape to her bedroom, danced a squeezer with Dan, the accounting guy, a bit

too literally at an office holiday party. But the gut was mostly on its game and had saved her on more than a few occasions. Like that one time when she walked around the Adriatic coast port town during her semester at sea and two men on the street had lent her their lighter. They'd asked if she wanted to go to this rad party that was really close, right beyond a narrow medieval staircase that cut through an unkempt arboretum with overgrown, low-hanging pine branches obscuring (from vision though not from smell) all the waste bags piled up after a month-long garbage workers' strike. No thanks, she'd said to them, and scurried back to the boat.

Before she got pregnant, the gut had told her motherhood was not for her. Matt said it was natural—it was what you did next, what you're supposed to want. Marni admired his conviction.

"I couldn't imagine being with a woman who didn't want children," Matt had said on one of their early dates. "Or at least keep the option open."

At the time, Marni was too busy being in love to give his stance any definitive weight. She'd thought his remark bold, but at the time, more a statement of serious interest in her. She'd made a note to self to discuss children more seriously later, when her mind was made up. But then, many months into their romance, Marni thought their relationship was past such bourgeois conventions and never brought it up. Matt must have taken her silence as agreement.

Marni looked at Baby, now sleeping on the jungle gym playmat, a gooey river seeping from its nostrils. Baby had exhausted itself trying to catch a stuffed giraffe dangling from the propped arch. Marni didn't help it catch the animal even after Baby's disgruntled shrieks of frustration.

"Payback, asshole," she said. "Learn that cooperation is a team sport, give and take. You scratch my back, I scratch yours." Or was that bribery? Irrelevant, same idea.

If she wanted Baby to stay asleep, she needed to clean off the drying boogers and unblock its airway. Then again, scraping its nostrils could wake it, too. There was no winning with Baby. Calculating the elusive return on investment of her ad campaigns was nothing compared to these baby conundrums. Marni sat on the rug, stretched out her legs in a V, framing Baby. Baby's chest moved up and down like a perfectly timed hydraulic press. Its mouth opened to welcome oxygen. It was a peaceful sight. Marni traced Baby's ear with the back of her finger, then gently squeezed its pulpy lobe. Why couldn't Baby's waking hours be this sweet?

Sitting on the floor, Marni's neck fit right at the top of the couch seat.

She threw her head back and closed her eyes. It felt like those long-gone times when she'd get her hair done at the salon with those weirdly shaped basins that somehow made the most relaxing neck rests, and the smooth edge where her nape touched the cold porcelain was like a massage. Although back then she'd kept looking at her watch, eager to go back to the office. Now, she could conjure up the swoosh of the sheers, hear the Pandora Escapes station on low, feel the sun bathe her cheeks through those floor-to-ceiling windows, and luxuriate in passivity.

How could she ever think she could do this—care for someone powerless? Maybe she hadn't reached far enough into her past to examine her sensibilities, recognize worrisome patterns. There was that one time she was eating ice cream with her brother Joey at the playground. She was nine or ten and Joey a couple of years younger. Some neighborhood kids raced to climb the dome. The fastest one, Luke, kept looking over his shoulder to check his distance from the slowpokes. In his vanity, he must have forgotten the deep, empty sandbox on his path. Everyone saw he was doomed to bust into it. Marni sat on a bench, savoring her ice cream. Joey yelled to warn him, but it was too late; the boy landed on his shirtless ribs with a thud. Joey mustered the maturity to jump inside and check on the poor kid. Luke cried for mommy. Marni chuckled. When the ambulance arrived, Joey helped him to the stretcher.

"He'll be fine," Marni shouted to Joey, motioning to her wristwatch. "They'll fix him in a jiffy, he'll live happily ever after."

Joey's mouth contorted, his eyes moist with pity. His silence took her aback and her body stiffened with shame.

She wondered if her cold inaction during that childhood incident may have been an early sign of empathy deficiency. Was she a sociopath? She'd only been curious to see what happened next, if Luke's accident would make for a riveting story she could report to her friends. Or could it have been something less monstrous, her gut telling her she just wasn't cut out for attending to neediness. Perhaps she was just being too hard on herself? She couldn't have done anything, she was just a little kid. Though, older than Joey.

AFTER A FEW CRACKLY BREATHS, Baby woke up. Marni stretched her arm to the other side of the couch and grabbed a basket with wipes, diapers, and all the other gear needed to keep the tiny creature in business. Nail clippers, petroleum jelly, bib, saline drops, booger extractor. She opened the saline

drops, drew a few into the dropper, and aimed them into Baby's nostril. Saline softened the crust enough for the next step: sucking out the mucus with the pointy rubber extractor. Joey once told her that, in his experience, it was much easier to just suck out the boogers with your mouth. Every time she cleaned Baby's nose, she pictured her brother sucking on his son's snot and gagged. Marni couldn't understand the likes of Joey, those who turned into freaks and abandoned all civility once their babies were born. But membership in the parent clan robbed her of license to scoff.

There were some specks of fun in parenting, like when they sat in the shadow of a Japanese cherry and Baby kept covering its face with the fallen petals. Or how it only stopped splashing the bath water when she played David Bowie. During these moments, she didn't mind Matt's incessant camera clicking, his compulsion to immortalize babyhood. She understood the value of having the fleeting jolly episodes captured and handy in the sea of grind.

She finished cleaning Baby's nose. It shone anew, the smooth skin reddish from the scraping. And then the familiar sound both Marni and Baby lit up for like Pavlov's dogs: the metallic click of a key unlocking the front door.

"Daddy's home!" Matt said. He didn't take his shoes off, nor his jacket, didn't look at Marni. He threw the keys in the general vicinity of the wooden bowl—a memento of the surprise zip-lining trip to Costa Rica Matt had planned for their first wedding anniversary. The keys landed on the floor with a crash that only startled Marni. Matt was already oblivious to reality and all its sensory stimuli. He extended his arms toward Baby and made that puckered lip face. A face so incongruous with the hunk she had fallen in love with, she worried she'd never be attracted to him again. As soon as he cradled Baby in his arms, it cooed. Then a gas spasm stretched Baby's lips.

"The most beautiful smile in the world," Matt said. Marni loved that sentence, uttered enough times for her to feel seen yet not too many to cheapen its power. But Matt kept staring at Baby.

"It's just gas spasms," Marni said. "She's farting."

"Sorry, what?" Matt said, using his baby voice, still fixated on Baby's face.

"Never mind."

She watched as he lowered Baby on the floor and blew raspberries on its tummy. Baby laughed. For the first time.

“I love it when she laughs!” Matt said.

“Wait, she’s done it before?”

Matt nodded, still looking at Baby. Baby had laughed before. Such bullshit. Marni was the one with Baby all day long, the handmaiden attending to its every need, jumping at its every squirm. But Baby gifted its laughs to Matt, the ass-kissing passerby, the sweet talker who would shaft it for an extra hour of sleep and replace it with someone new, like he’d done with Marni.

Marni marched to the trashcan to dispose of the boogered wipe. When she tried to throw it in, it stuck to her knuckles. She flapped it against the can. Matt turned to look at her. He wore the face Mother had after low scores had disqualified Marni from competitive gymnastics.

“So, how did the big day go?” he said.

Marni tried to remember what was big about today that she’d forgotten. It was not unlike the day before or the day before the day before and all the other days for the past five months.

Matt hyperextended his neck. Eyeballs bulging, he nodded a few times as if that should be plenty of hint. “The solids?” he said as he placed Baby in a playpen.

“Oh, yes...the solids.” The big day indeed. “I steamed and mashed a carrot, but she didn’t love it. She kind of coughed. I guess it’s normal for the first time.”

“You didn’t put any salt in, right? You remember what Dr. Laurie said.”

“Of course I remember.” Marni turned away to indulge in an eye roll. She collapsed on the couch and exhaled the day’s drudgery like a worker taking a break from the assembly line. Feed. Change diaper. Bathe. Put to sleep. Repeat. A finite set of robotized motions any brainless body could do.

“Marni, you didn’t feed her *this*, did you?” Matt said. He held the plastic plate with the mashed carrot she’d tried to feed to Baby earlier. She didn’t understand the question and didn’t know what to say. Matt’s eyeballs inflated into Ping-Pong balls, his gaze moving back and forth from the plate to Marni.

“This has huge chunks of carrot. She can’t eat this yet. She coughed, you said? You mean, choked? Oh my gosh, Marni. Seriously?” He threw the plate in the sink where it traveled down from the summit of the dirty dish pile. He leaned on the counter and breathed in and out through the nose like a bull. Marni’s former self wanted to tell him to fuck off and challenge

him to trade places with her. That is, take a year off work (since they could afford it, it would have been a sin not to) lest Baby ended up in the care of qualified strangers for a few hours a day. She wanted to remind him that what he'd been doing—playing on a computer in an office—was a fucking sabbatical.

But she'd burned out. None of her grief reached him. The only thing she could do to avoid killing her marriage with whining was to kill Matt with kindness, to subdue her rage and retreat for the higher cause.

"It's what my mother used to do," Marni said. "She mashed the cooked veggies with a back of the fork and...I turned out okay, I guess." Marni leaned her cheek on Matt's back and hugged him. "I ordered a blender on Prime. It'll be here tomorrow, okay?" He scraped her hands off and sighed, as if he was the only one entitled to frustration with the new family dynamics. He walked over to Baby and resumed the tickling. They giggled like a couple of crazies, their faces disfigured with glee. These were no spasms. This was a good time.

Marni felt like that wipe full of boogers: reeking of a showerless week, greasy and discarded. She hadn't felt like this, like a third wheel, since that time the newborn Joey first came home from the hospital.

She could still see Mother unwrapping him on the side of the bed to change his diaper. She'd hummed Marni's favorite lullaby to *him*; this newbie no one even knew yet had transformed *her* mother into a smitten fool. One who clapped in ecstasy every time Joey yawned or stretched his arms. That asshole monopolized her mother and bumped her from the center of her own universe. When Mother turned around to grab the butt ointment, Marni knew it was her only chance to reset things to the way they had been: happy, wondrous, hers. She grabbed Joey's feet and, with all her three-year-old might, hauled him off the bed. His head hit the carpet, sparing him from permanent brain damage. The sound was muffled but audible enough for Mother. She turned around and froze. There was a moment of silence and then the shrillest wailing filled the space, overtaking all other senses so much that Marni didn't feel her bum burn like a chili pepper until later, well after the spanking had ceased.

The next day nothing changed. The little brother was still there, reddish and wrinkly; Mother still fussed over him. Aside from shaming her about the incident and nagging her to clean up her plate and Joey's toys, Mother ignored Marni. Like she'd never existed in the first place.

And now, after she swore she'd never allow it again, Marni was invis-

ble, an extra, replaced by Baby, the little schemer of Marni's own making.

THE NIGHT WAS ROUGH. Baby woke up dozens of times. Neither Ferberizing nor Baby Whisperer method worked. In the pale gray of early morning Marni nursed on the couch, fighting to stay awake. Baby unlatched to play with Marni's breast, squeezed it, scratched it with its prickly nail corners neither Marni nor Matt dared to clip off, so they nestled in the finger beds, sharp like tiny daggers. Marni puffed hoping that for once Baby would get the hint and get back to suckling and stop messing around with her body and her life. But whenever Marni nudged its upper lip with her nipple Baby grinned as if it were a game. Marni knew better than to get too worked up. By now she understood that spontaneity of child rearing was a myth, a shameless lie. Acquiring latching skills reminded her of her early enthusiasm, her pragmatic approach to Baby as if it were but another project to conquer. Caring for Baby might have been her biggest challenge yet, but throwing in the towel was not Marni's style. She was going to figure it out. Now she chuckled, demoralized in the face of Baby's provocations, remembering other ways she'd tried to hack baby care. Instead of agonizing over what shade of yellow to paint the nursery, like Matt, she'd equipped it with practical things. She hung a clipboard with a gridded sheet on the changing table to track and analyze Baby's sleep patterns and devise tactics to maximize efficiency. She placed infrared goggles at the top of her baby shower registry for night feedings. The gadget would minimize stumbling as she located Baby (and the sleep pattern tracking sheet).

But nothing worked. Not with this baby. The only thing that soothed it was nipples. Marni's nipples. She looked at Baby who finally decided to get on with the sustenance ritual, sucking at her like a leech, its lower lip turned out, its eye contact intense as if making sure Marni didn't dare to move while it feasted, sticky milk dripping down its triple chin. Marni didn't mind being a human pacifier if it brought her some rest. But whenever she broke the nipple-to-mouth bond Baby shrieked in protest. When this happened at night, like it did last night, it was a cue for Matt to spend the night in the other room. After he'd changed Baby's diaper once, he retired to be fresh for work. Fresh. Marni hadn't felt, looked, or smelled fresh in months. But that was "just a phase of life"—Mother's assurance twisted through Marni's ears like a rusty screwdriver.

"Ouch," Marni cried. Baby's gums were getting stronger. "Not okay! Not. Okay." She felt so silly and helpless using a firm voice and wagging her

finger at Baby. “You know what? Enough of this suckling bullshit. You’ll have some applesauce like all normal five-month-olds.” Marni unlatched Baby from her body and shoved it in the playpen. It started to scream. In the kitchen, she peeled an apple. She plopped it into the steamer and waited, tapping her foot on the tile, determined to overpower Baby’s wails with her nervous humming. When the apple softened, she scooped it onto a plastic plate and smashed it with the back of a fork.

“If I could’ve survived without a blender like countless generations of babies before me, so will you,” Marni hissed through her clenched jaw. She leaned into the playpen to pick up Baby and propped it on her left thigh. They sat at the table as Marni blew on the steaming apple mash to cool it. As soon as she brought a spoonful close to Baby’s mouth, it jerked its arms and legs overturning the spoon and the plate. The applesauce splattered over their faces.

“Arrrrrgggghhhh!” Marni roared. She took Baby and carried it on her hip to the kitchen, struggling to see through apple-sauced eyes. She opened the faucet and splashed water over her face then Baby’s. She couldn’t get the sauce off fast enough. It felt like she was covered in it from head to toe. *This stupid apple slop and this ungrateful baby.* She switched on the garbage disposal and directed the mash and the peeled skins into the sink. The disposal devoured the garbage and Marni reveled in its disappearance. She stretched to turn it off. Baby’s legs dangled above the sink. Marni could see one of them over the drain, sized to fit it perfectly. How liberating, how cleansing it would be to just let Baby fall inside the drain with the apple skins. How quickly it would be sucked out of her life along with last night’s putrid leftovers—gnawed chicken bones, cartilage, skin, failed hollandaise. Her hand still on the switch, the disposal still growling, Baby restless and unsuspecting, hovering over the violent whirlpool. Marni ground her teeth to stop the molten lava rising in her chest. She squeezed Baby’s leg covered in velvety pants, plush like a bunny. She leaned into Baby’s head and filled her nostrils with its oily cradle cap aroma, unsure whether it calmed or infuriated her.

Then, a forceful knock on the door. Marni’s finger pressed the disposal switch off. The sudden silence disoriented her—her knees wobbled, her breath stuck in the back of her throat. She felt Baby turning its head left and right, clinging to her hip, waist and shoulder. Its tiny limbs, fingers, toes, elbows, and knees pressed into her flesh as if desperate to fuse with her. She pulled the leech off and lowered it into the playpen. It started to wail. She

turned away from Baby and held onto the counter. The cold quartz shot chills through her body and kept her from crumbling. She limped out of the kitchen, leaned on the wall on her way to the door, pressing her palms onto Matt's photos of Baby, one for each month of its life, another nine for each month of incubation inside Marni. She hadn't noticed until now that no one would know the pregnant woman in the photos was Marni. Her head was cut off. The belly could have been anyone's.

Another urgent knock on the front door. Marni fell on the knob and opened it. No one was there. Just a box. The blender had arrived.

She pushed it inside, closed the door and crawled into the coat closet. Inside she shuddered, grasped on to the coats—hers, Matt's, Baby's—their smells mingling into a nauseating potpourri.

MARNI LAY ON THE COUCH with a cold compress over her eyes. She'd exited the closet when Baby finally cried itself to sleep. Then, the key in the knob: an abrasive end to the dense silence.

"What the hell..." Matt tripped over the blender box in the hallway. Baby woke up and picked up where it left off before the nap, screaming deafeningly.

"Marni, what the hell. Get her," Matt said.

I can't, I'm tired, Marni wanted to say but couldn't. Her body had lost its ability to function. She lay motionless.

"Or get the blender. Couldn't you move it to the side? I almost broke my neck."

Marni felt Matt's puffing land on her face.

"She's hungry, can't you hear? Marni! What's going on here?"

He shook her by the shoulders. Baby cried louder.

"I'm sorry, princess. Daddy will make you some yummy dinner. Look, the Ninja blender is here. Marni, can you please get her? I'm going to put the blender together."

Marni lay still, unable to move a muscle. Through the frayed rag over her eyes, she could see Matt's frantic arms. He paced around, cupped palms pounding over ears.

"What's wrong with her?" Matt yelled.

Nothing, it's what babies do.

Matt lifted Baby out of the playpen and it stopped crying. When he placed it in the highchair, it cried more than ever before, the cry of the offended, the frustrated, the helpless, the dependent. Cried like a baby.

Maybe the two of them, Marni and Baby, were in the same boat: Marni stuck with the consequences of a decision she'd not really made, and Baby stuck with the mother it hadn't chosen.

Marni heard Matt rummage through the blender box in the kitchen and the sound of parts falling on the tile, the acoustics of all that granite and ceramic exacerbating the dissonance of the house.

"Give me a minute, princess. Daddy needs to read the manual. Tasty dinner is on the way. Marni," Matt said. "Get her! Fuck."

Marni's body lay numb. It had been worked beyond its capacity and shut down. Under the rag, Marni watched the silhouette of Baby fretting. Its head was a screaming machine, a chaos-sowing mouth hole, and its body rocked, trying to break out of the highchair. Baby managed to detach the tray and push it off, but the bang was muffled by the sound of Matt fumbling with the blender parts on the countertop. Marni saw one of Baby's legs dangle over the side of the highchair seat. The crying subsided as Baby focused all its energy on escape. Matt, busy with blender assembly, didn't notice. Hadn't he strapped Baby in? The chair shook. Its other leg must have gotten stuck in the seat, but most of its body weight was out on one side. Marni felt tingling in her chest, like bees swarming in a hive. The highchair legs were set wide enough to prevent flipping over, right? Right. From the front or back. Not from the side. Marni watched the chair tilt, watched Baby's head plummeting toward the tile, like Luke into the sandbox, like Joey onto the floor.

As if plugged into a reel of memories, Marni's favorite moments with Baby started to roll before her, like life flashing before one's eyes. The first time she felt Baby's warm breath on her face, the time she binge-watched Netflix and Baby purred on her shoulder like a little monkey, the way it looked at her without blinking while nursing as if to say, "I don't know you, lady, but you're here. With the boob juice."

Marni flew to the highchair, caught Baby, then scooted to the side as the chair crashed to the floor like an old oak.

Matt ran in from the kitchen. "What happened?" He looked at Marni with a mix of fear and exasperation she recognized. It was the look she saw in the mirror every morning while brushing her teeth. The eyes of an overwhelmed parent unable to do anything right.

"She wasn't strapped in," Marni said. Matt covered his mouth with the hand not holding the rubber blender lid. Marni held Baby on her hip, its cradle cap in her face. It looked gross. It smelled like home. She

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kissed Baby's head. It looked at her, its spasmodic fingers traversing her face, piercing deeper into her eyes and ears and nose and mouth. Marni and Baby, attached at the hip, sat across from Matt and watched his shaky hands assemble the blender. The magic machine, the ad had claimed, that whipped life into a smoothie.

LUISA GOVELA

Translated from Spanish by Kate Kingston

Malinalli Poems I-V

*Poems written in the voice of Malinalli, the translator of Hernando Cortés.
These five poems relate her life as a young woman before she met Cortés.*

I

Malinalli, Malinalli, Malinalli

The echo answers: “*Translator, Traitor, Betrayer*”

Malinalli, name given in surrender.

Languages open worlds in my soul:

a sieve through which this body flows.

But how do I flee

when the self is splintered?

Malinalli,

lavish name, dark throat,

hard to believe

that nine letters can cause such damage.

There’s no sacred well on this earth

that I wouldn’t lean over

to curse my name,

nor a field of ball courts

where I wouldn’t cry out facing stone walls.

I

Malinalli Malinalli Malinalli

El eco me responde: “*Traductora Traidora Traicionada*”

Malinalli, nombre entregado a la rendición.

Mis lenguas abren mundos en el alma:

una coladera por donde se fuga el cuerpo.

¿Pero cómo fugarme de mí

si de mí fui segregada?

Malinalli,

nombre profuso, garganta oscura,

parece mentira

que ocho letras hagan tanto daño.

No queda un pozo sagrado en esta tierra

sin que yo me asomara

a maldecir mi nombre,

ni un campo de juego pelota

donde yo no gritara frente a sus muros de piedra.

II

Transformed into a circus spider
I leave my body when I leave your bed.
I slip floating through the eye socket, my face in ruins.
I take my pulse to listen to blood's throb.
Can't believe this is me.
I vomit spider webs of rage from my mouth,
spume of rotten prickly pear but not one hair touches you.
I don't have any power,
husband of my mother,
than to nail your eyes shut with an avalanche of pins.
The healer repeats the singsong:
*Come in. See the child changed into a spider
for lying down with her stepfather.*
The cure? A cleansing with pimento branches
and red geraniums to drive away evil,
to purify me in a *temazcal*, to drink the broth of *zopilote*,
to offer *tlacahuili* to the owners of rain.

II

Convertida en araña de un circo
salgo de mi cadáver al salir de tu lecho.
Me deslizo flotando por el hueco de un ojo de mi rostro en ruinas.
Me tomo el pulso para escuchar el latir de mi sangre.
Casi puedo creer que estoy conmigo.
Vomito telarañas de rabia por la boca,
espuma de tunas podridas que ni un pelo te toca.
No tengo más poderes,
esposo de mi madre,
que clavar en tus ojos un alud de alfileres.
El curandero repite el sonsonete:
*"Pasen. Vean a la niña convertida en araña
por acostarse con su padrastró".*
¿La cura? Una limpia con ramas de pimiento
y geranios rojos para ahuyentar el mal,
purificarme en un *temazcal*, beber caldo de *zopilote*,
ofrendar *tlacahuili* a los duendes de la lluvia.

III

How shattered the child's look.
The look buried there, in Paynala, distant.
Or in Soconusco?
How many moons ago?
Today I remember that sad look
like two drops of amber
inside a wound.
That look of not knowing what to do
fleeting, humble, pleading.
Not knowing what to do
when you are the dirty drop in the rain,
sister of so much,
the uncomfortable daughter
with her wounded child scent.
How it hurts.
All at once the girl's glance disarms me
bursting into the present like a flashback fluttering pain
the way a pyramid in Palenque appears,
when you least expect it
in the very heart of the rain forest
or when you discover the stunning blue of the Caribbean
from Tulum
rising through the talus of white sand.
Like that, suddenly
the child's glance stuns me.

III

La mirada de niña cómo duele.
La mirada enterrada allá, en Paynala, lejos.
¿O en Soconusco?
¿Cuántas lunas atrás?
Hoy recuerdo esa mirada triste
como dos gotas de ámbar
dentro de una herida.
Esa mirada del no saber qué hacer
huidiza, humillada, suplicante.
No saber qué hacer
cuando eres la gota sucia entre la lluvia,
la hermana de más,
la hija incómoda
con su hedor de criatura lastimada.
Cómo duele.
De pronto la mirada de niña me desarma
irrumpe en el presente como un pasado ondeando su dolor
como aparece una pirámide en Palenque,
cuando menos la esperas
en el corazón de la selva
o cuando descubres el azul deslumbrante del Caribe
desde Tulúm
subiendo por el talud de sus arenas blancas.
Así, de pronto
me atraviesa la mirada de niña.

IV

A bat's wingbeat
its breath of rags.
Its scratchy fingers
dig into me ... wound ... hurt.
They know the perfect monster:
the nagual-vampire: my stepfather.
He holds me down against the cold's blade
and stomps to uproot my soul
until nothing sane is left in me,
collapsed in fear,
extinguished
an ugly bird's embryo.

IV

Un aletazo de murciélago
su aliento de trapo.
Sus dedos rasposos
hurgan en mí ... hieren ... lastiman.
Conozcan al monstruo perfecto:
el nagual-vampiro: mi padrastro.
Me sujeta contra el filo del frío
y a patadas me arranca el alma
hasta que no queda nada sano en mí,
desmoronada de miedo,
extinguida
un feo embrión de ave.

V

My mother has sold me,
one night
in the dark and in secret.

My half-brother will inherit Paynala.
My mother and step-father have decided.
To avoid problems they've said:
"The child Malintzin has died."
They've buried another body with my name.
Malintzin has died.

V

Mi madre me ha vendido,
una noche
a oscuras y en secreto.

Mi medio hermano heredará Paynala.
Así lo han decidido mi madre y mi padrastro.
Para evitarse problemas han dicho:
"La niña Malintzin ha muerto."
Otro cuerpo han enterrado con mi nombre.
Malintzin ha muerto.

NOTE:

Spanish original published in *Cruce de Cebra, Poemas*, Grupo Rodrigo Porrúa Ediciones, 1916.

PURBASHA ROY

Balancing the universe around us

we grew emptiness between us
like tropical forest regenerations
shadow measures of not you
have turned to white holes
accepting anything but zero
time moved busy on migratory wings
unsewing photons from futures
we never accept loss
unless we become witness of ruins
bones of rivers leaving no ashes broiled
our epiphanies without shapes of salt
is the consciousness centered on knives
it's strange, silence working through us
made us unreadable as cretan hieroglyphics
not everything has a meaning
inside geometry of modern philosophies
lately, I hear soundings of love
like run out summer waterfalls
what I feel now is the yield of evaporation in me
unweighing burden of shadows
cast by forgotten shapes
addictive to open wounds
hanging upside down

ELISSA MATTHEWS

Saint Cecelia of Paramus

WHEN CECELIA KAUFMAN'S CAR rose thirty-seven feet (and four inches) above the surface of the Garden State Parkway, two miles south of the Paramus, New Jersey exit, many people wondered how a Jewish atheist had come to be honored with such a miracle.

She herself, hanging above the now stationary rush-hour traffic, was the first to wonder much the same thing. "What the hell did I do to deserve this?" were her precise words, once the initial panic had subsided.

She had been heading home from her job at Kreutzer Bio Labs, breeding hybrid pumpkins, mindlessly listening to chatter on the radio and wondering if she had enough time to wash her hair before her latest blind date showed up, when her car had lifted gently off the ground and floated upward, gliding to a halt the aforementioned thirty-seven feet (and four inches) above the ground.

There she stayed for three hours and twelve minutes, long enough for television crews, police, thousands of gawkers, and the local branch of the FBI to arrive on the scene.

Oddly, Cecelia rather enjoyed that time. True, when the engine had first cut out and her wheels lost traction, her stomach had jumped and her palms had slicked with sweat. She had wrenched herself around, looking for the cause of her sudden change of direction, and by the time it occurred to her to open the door and jump out, she was too high to do so. But the floating was so gentle, so peaceful, that fear seemed irrelevant. So, she sat back and enjoyed the view—watching the stalled traffic back up until it was out of sight—and wondered how long they would all be stuck there. She rolled down her window and peered down onto the crowd. *At least if I need to pee, no one can see me*, she thought, eyeing the styrofoam coffee cup in the cup holder. She turned on her phone and left a message for her sister Jessie, a little surprised that she got service. Wasn't she, well, out of

the service area? She couldn't think of anyone else she wanted to talk to, so she fired projectiles at angry birds. Just before the battery died, she texted her blind date to say she'd gotten stuck in traffic and would have to cancel. She turned on the radio and listened to a few news stations, but all she could get were traffic reports about some massive backup on the Garden State Parkway.

Obviously, some local science fiction anomaly had descended from who knew where, to capture her Chevy and hoist it aloft. She unbuckled her seat belt and waited for the miracle to give out, hoping her life would not end as a splotch of metal and flesh two miles south of the Paramus Park Mall. *Before I die, it would have been nice to date just one guy, just one guy, who isn't a jerk.* She sighed. She wondered if Jessie would take care of her plants.

At 8:02 pm, the car settled back down just as softly as it had lifted off. Cecelia leapt out even before the tires were solidly grounded, and one quick photographer captured her image that instant: leggy and disheveled and flinging long brown hair out of her face, thus forever associating the woman, rather than the car, with the event.

Amidst the tangle of police, first responders, journalists, and gawkers, one reporter managed to lunge in next to her and stab a microphone into her face.

"Were you frightened?" the reporter had asked.

"Well a little, at first, but it was all so quiet and calm. After a while I realized all I could do was just wait it out."

"You could feel the Hand of God upon you, was that it?"

Cecelia looked a little more closely at her interviewer, saw that the intensity in those questioning eyes was bordering on the "do not accept a ride from this person" level, and side-stepped away. "I don't believe in God," she said.

Eventually, a police escort led her back to her apartment complex. She handled her car carefully, not quite trusting it. Dogged by reporters, she scuttled into her apartment, where she poured herself a tall scotch with very little ice, left another message for her sister Jessie, and turned off her phone. Her inbox was already full. She put a large sign on her door that said "Fuck Off" in black magic marker, then fell across her bed and crashed into sleep.

Jessie arrived an hour later, having battled her way through the cordon of reporters. When Cecelia opened the door to let her in, a reporter shoved

in behind, wedging a shoe in the narrow gap.

Cecelia kicked at it as the reporter babbled questions.

Jessie stepped up and stared up at the reporter. “I’m Ms. Kaufman’s attorney,” she said calmly. “If you don’t remove your foot, I will file trespassing and harassment papers.” Then she quietly closed the door behind the retreating foot. Cecelia blinked. Jessie actually did look a little like a lawyer on a day off from the office, not the home appliance sales rep that she actually was.

By morning, the photo of her leap from the car had gone viral. It ultimately appeared on www.funz-funny.com site with the words “I don’t believe in God,” bubbling over her head, and the caption “The Flying None” below. By the end of the day, it had 3,248,027,913 hits. Reruns of the 60’s tv sitcom rocketed to the top of the Netflix hit list.

“This better blow over soon,” Cecelia said. “I already have a major headache.”

“I think you’re missing the big picture here. People believe you worked an honest-to-literal-God miracle on prime time. This isn’t going to disappear any time soon.”

“Since when do you believe in God?” Cecelia asked.

“I don’t,” said Jessie. “But I can work with this. Selling miracles beats selling water softeners.” She took a pad out of her briefcase and started making notes while Cecelia admitted that, although she didn’t think the event had anything to do with her, the situation made her curious. Maybe something good could come of this after all.

Soon Fox News was announcing that for the third week in a row, churches all over the country were crammed to capacity. They aired endless footage of Cecelia waving graciously to the crowd and walking with flowers in her arms. “Christ, I look like Princess Kate,”

“You’re supposed to,” said Jessie, who had taken over Command Central, as Cecelia had begun to call her apartment. “I’ve been very careful with your image. Non-partisan, non-religious, non-anything, really.”

“Yeah, yeah, the Flying None. Well, the None is bored. I’ve been cooped up all day with nothing but the occasional trek—wait for it—all the way down the stairs to the front door and back! Spiced up by the weekly raucous jaunt around the terminal ward at the children’s hospital.” She lit a cigarette, a new habit she was quite coming to enjoy. “My heart breaks for those kids. I hate those visits. I’d really like to get back to my pumpkins.”

“Settle down, eventually the right offer will turn up.”

“Like this one?” Cecelia turned her laptop around so Jessie could read the screen. One conservative religious group was petitioning the Pope to canonize her.

Jessie sprayed coffee over the table as she laughed. “Saint Cecelia of Paramus? Really?”

“Thank God it takes three miracles to make a saint,” Cecelia said, pointing to one of the comments below.

“And I think you have to be dead.”

THE NEXT MIRACLE BEGAN THAT VERY AFTERNOON. A doughnut shaped cloud appeared in the sky, centered over her apartment building. The hole in the middle allowed a patch of clear sunlight to illuminate Cecelia whenever she left her apartment, with rain prevailing for seven tenths of a mile around.

Everyone, including Cecelia, stood in the parking lot and stared, open-mouthed. People fell to their knees in the mud and started to chant her name. As Cecelia stepped forward the crowd surged, straining to touch her.

“This,” said Jessie, standing in the rain, “is the chance we’ve been waiting for. Let’s get packed, we’re going to Zambia.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been complaining you want to do something. Well, Central Africa needs rain.”

“How do we know it will follow me?”

“I guess we’ll find out. Either way, we’ll get a fun trip out of it.”

Jessie arranged private transport to the capitol city of Lukasa. The cloud followed them like a well-trained hound. Physicists and meteorologists raced to study the phenomenon.

“This is getting out of hand,” Cecelia thought.

An entourage followed them. Every time she opened a browser or turned on her laptop, images of her were trending. Someone had dug out a copy of her high school yearbook. Cecilia refused to look, that haircut was just plain embarrassing. The more serious reports were trying to explain the phenomena as a miracle, a hoax, or mass hypnosis perpetrated by a secret cabal that had remained in power after the fall of the Soviet regime.

She alternately walked and drove slowly from town to dusty, starving town, trailing her pet cloud behind her. Everywhere she went, the best possible accommodations were prepared for her. Everywhere hands and eyes reached for her. Crosses were lifted up for her to bless. “I’m sorry,” she

repeated over and over, "I don't really do that."

Even more unsettling was the look she caught Jessie giving her once in a while. Jessie was starting to become one of the believers. The New Believers, they called themselves. Cecelia felt completely alone.

As a result of the surge of press, Jessie now spent her time poring over resumes, looking for a speechwriter to prepare sound bites. She chose D'Shawn Mariaus, who had crafted the award winning, wholesome-but-witty ads for Mama Genero's spaghetti sauce, and the award winning, ethical-but-entertaining ads for Big Tiger condoms. He had volunteered for the position because he truly believed that God was working through Cecelia and wanted little more than the chance to be near her.

"Schmuck," muttered Cecelia. He was cute, but he had the common sense of a cranberry.

"I believe we should work harder than we have been to settle our differences without violence," he penned for a visit to South Korea. "After all, no one looks good in bandages."

Statistics began to roll in: the fighting in the Crimea was tapering off. Attacks in the Israeli West Bank ended overnight. Even gang crime in Los Angeles was down by 14.2 percent.

"I believe we should try to face the problems of life and reality by turning to each other, not by turning away. Life, love, and rock'n'roll, people!"

He had originally written "my people," but Cecelia flatly refused. She did, however, appreciate the way he consistently messaged that people try, just try.

Drug use dropped immediately. Alcohol and liquor sales were down the world over. Deadbeat fatherhood was out, visiting animal shelters was in.

"People just needed an excuse to be nice to each other," D'Shawn said.

"He's a sap." Cecelia eyed Jessie's purse. "Where did you hide my cigarettes?"

"You can't smoke, you have to watch your image."

"Screw my image." When no one was looking she stole a pack from the Egyptian translator.

The donut cloud finally dissipated, leaving behind an awestruck planet and a mass migration toward zero population growth, green resource usage, and macrobiotic diets. Cecelia was ecstatic. The miracle was over, she could finally go home! She hadn't said anything, but this strange new

life was taking its toll on her. Her day was filled with people begging for salvation, for inspiration, for blessing. Her dreams were filled with hands, with eyes, with voices reaching out, grabbing and tearing pieces until there was nothing left.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Jessie shook her head. “You can’t go home. This isn’t your show, you’re just the lightning rod. Where you go, it goes, and so do the crowds, and the attention, and the believers. People need to believe.”

“In other words, I’m trapped. Forever.” Cecelia stomped into the bedroom and slammed the door. “All I want before I die is to date one guy, just one guy, who isn’t a jerk.”

THE MIRACLE TEAM CONTINUED TO GROW. Jessie was still in charge, D’Shawn still led public relations, but now there were assistants to make travel arrangements and advisors on everything from public policy and government affairs to Oriental art and space technology. There was a chef and a personal trainer. The arguing was incessant, and Cecelia sometimes thought she would punch Jessie, when she opened her briefcase every morning at 8:02 and announced the day’s agenda. How she longed for the clean solitude of her bio lab and being responsible for nothing more than the hybridizing vigor of her pumpkin seeds.

Jessie agreed with Cecelia on one thing—the less the world saw of her, the better. Cecilia had taken to snarling and swearing at nearly everyone, if not handled very carefully. She would stray from D’Shawn’s carefully worded statements, launching into her own belief that no God existed. When Prince Stephan of Castille presented her with his hypothesis that God looked on her as a challenge, she stabbed him in the leg with her salad fork. Privately the Miracle Team had begun to refer to her as Snagglepuss.

“Maybe we could get her a tranquilizer,” someone suggested.

“Cecelia doesn’t do drugs,” Jessie snapped.

“I was thinking a tranquilizer dart, actually.”

Several people snickered, but it was notable that no one actually laughed. Or disagreed.

“Maybe she needs a vacation.”

“Yeah? Where can she go?”

“Maybe she should take up painting.”

“Jogging.”

“Maybe she needs to get laid.”

“If it gets me out of the saint business, I would sleep with a yak,” Cecelia said, when a carefully worded suggestion was made.

They picked a man in secret and vetted him completely, but he appeared in Cecelia’s bedroom overlooking Lake Geneva with a bomb concealed in a body orifice. He was killed instantly when it detonated. The front wall of the chateau blew out, landing on the crowd, killing two and injuring four.

Several fringe religious groups took credit for the attack, with Beware the False Prophet (a limited liability corporation) leading the way.

Cecelia was unharmed.

The world press announced a third miracle and the movement toward sainthood began to build up an unstoppable head of steam.

The second potential date was selected, vetted, stripped, searched, and x-rayed. He was completely clean, but when he tried to garotte her with the lamp cord, they rolled out of bed, and he hit his head against the corner of the glass bedside table and died on the spot.

Cecelia was unharmed.

The Miracle Team tried to hush it up, but the Medical Examiner in Buenos Aires was a New Believer who felt it was his duty to share his faith, and his official report.

Someone digitized a halo into a photo of Cecelia and posted it on the New Believers website. It quickly became the first, and sometimes the only, image that came up in a search. It made Cecelia nauseous to even look at it, so she shut her laptop and refused to open it. World of Warcraft had so many healers name RogueCecelia9675232 or ElfCeeCee3627 she couldn’t even escape to Pandaria. Her life had been reduced to library books and a deck of damp playing cards.

Four gunmen in Paris were turned in by friends while planning their attack. Three more bomb attempts were made: in Kenya, Ireland, and Laos, killing a total of twenty-three people, and a horse.

Cecelia stumbled and broke the heel on one of her favorite shoes.

“It truly is a miracle,” murmured D’Shawn in a hushed voice. “Lo though ye walk through the Valley of Death, ye are—”

Jessie and two of the other team members pulled Cecelia off him before serious damage was inflicted. Cecelia went into her bathroom and threw up, then laid against the cool tile floor and cried.

Leaders from every nation clamored for Cecelia’s attention. “It is an honor,” said Pope Pius XLX, “for me to be in the presence of a living saint, Your Holiness.”

"I can't think why," she replied. "You're the one that hired me, so to speak. Your Holiness." The Roman Catholic Pontiff had risen to the top of the World Church, which had canonized Cecelia sometime around the third poisoning attempt.

"Please, call me Henri," he said. "It is an honor because you have brought God to us, to me." He was a young Pope, with a broad, strong, peasant's build and a French accent.

"Oh yes? How so?" She realized his eyes were green. One didn't often think of the Pope in terms of eye color.

"You have made faith so much simpler, so much more joyous, for so many." He leaned forward, his chin propped in one hand, his gaze distant. "God is a fisherman, bringing us all into the grace of His net."

He really did believe, Cecelia marveled. He had no doubts at all. "God selected you because you don't believe in Him. He is showing us that faith is of the believer, not of worldly evidence."

"The last man who suggested that got the pointy end of a fork in his thigh."

"Ah yes, so I have heard." His smile was gentle. Forgiving.

She wanted to confide in him that all she really wanted was a date with a nice man, but she didn't think that would be, well, courteous. She bid him a rapid goodnight.

ALONE IN YET ANOTHER HOTEL ROOM, Cecelia stared at herself in the mirror. Everyone was filled with the light of salvation, except her. Everyone was in love, except her. World peace had finally occurred, and she still couldn't get a damned date. She couldn't even go home.

She turned away from the mirror in disgust and burst into flames.

"Oh hell, what now?" Her clothes curled into charred snow and flaked to the ground. She turned back to the mirror and watched the flames dance around her, up and down her arms and body, twisting through her hair. "D'Shawn and Jessie are going to have a field day with a naked, flaming saint. A real challenge to their creative marketing skills." She laughed until she couldn't stand up, sinking to the floor in a heap, gasping for air.

Jumping back to her feet, she surveyed the singed outline of her buttocks in the roses of the carpet, surrounded by a dance pattern of grey footprints. She fled to the bathroom and climbed into the tub. Knowing it would do no good, she turned on the shower. The water hit her skin and skittered off, sizzling into steam then rising away. She reached out to turn

off the lights, leaned back against the cold enamel and sighed. It was going to be a long miracle.

She tried to make herself comfortable in the hard tub. At least the flames had warmed it up. She looked up through the skylight over the tub. "I haven't slept in a bathtub since college, you know," she said to the dark sky. "Is this the way you treat all your saints?" Stars stared silently back.

It would be so much easier if she really did believe, she thought. If she'd been caught by the faith, like all those others. Like D'Shawn and Jessie. "You're wasting your time, you know. You keep throwing this shit at me, but faith is something you have, not something you decide to have." She curled her arms behind her head and fell asleep gazing at the silent ocean of stars.

The flames spun around her for a minute more, then quietly flickered out.

Inside Cecelia's dreams, she could feel the return of the ordinary world.

Jessie took one look at her the next morning at breakfast and stopped reading. "There aren't going to be any more miracles, are there?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What happened?"

"I think God gave up on me."

"You don't believe in God." Jessie tipped her head and studied her sister.

"That doesn't mean he doesn't believe in me."

"Well, not if He's given up on you, He doesn't."

They both began to laugh at the same time.

Things were looking up already. She and Jessie were speaking the same language again, for the first time since practically the very beginning.

"I'm finally going home." Her whole body seemed to relax into that sentence.

"People still need to believe," Jessie protested.

"But on a sane schedule. With time off for good behavior."

"Ok, fine. We'll dial it back." As she did every morning, Jessie pulled a folder out of her briefcase and began to review the day's appointments. "Want to go to Pompeii after we bless the economists at the Università da Roma? D'Shawn is bringing some archeologist to meet you."

"Sounds good." Cecelia poured another cup of coffee. "Maybe this one won't blow himself up. How soon will people get bored with me now that I'm just ordinary again?"

"They'll never notice. Besides, once a saint, always a saint."

D'Shawn came into the room and kissed Jessie on the top of the head.

"Cecelia," D'Shawn said, indicating the man at this side, "this is Roberto Saldana. He's currently studying the evidence of advanced agriculture in Roman civilization."

Cecelia glanced up and found herself swimming in warm chocolate.

He smiled.

She smiled.

"Early attempts at squash domestication in pre-literate cultures." Roberto said.

"You're kidding, right? Pumpkin seeds? Not Roman gods and goddesses? Early evidence of true faith?" He certainly was yummy.

"Nah, I'm an atheist."

"Oh wow," Cecelia said. "That's good." She tried to look away, she really did.

One last miracle. The final worm a fisherman might throw into the lake, no hook attached, at the end of a long and successful day on the water, a small tribute to the one that got away.

NICHOLAS MCCARTHY

Last Wish

You were born from wishing wells,
though those wore thin when you turned twelve,
they were broken stones and dreams of copper.
At thirteen, we made beds of four-leaf clovers.

It was a life lived,
a fairy-tale prayer, looking for luck
among ladybug lairs.

Every fall,
we grasped golden
straws and at fourteen,
we paid for time
with penny applause—loose change caught up
in the dips of your dimples
as the pockets of strangers became simple pills.
But
even those wells ran dry with each descent;
and every day, the sickness spread.

Your birthday came with the taste of rust and a broken bottle;
it only came for me.

MICHAEL WALLS

Birthday #76

& picking up sticks fallen off a pecan tree out back,
like I did as a kid. Young squirrels spiral up & down.

Young squirrels playing chase, spiral up & down
the pecan trunk, scamper out on skinny limbs. Leaves

shake from limbs, tumble to the ground, leaves
pecans hidden under piles. Squirrels scratch around

looking for easy pecans & I'm scratching around
pondering easy plans. Kid squirrel climbs to a rooftop,

pauses a moment, takes a leap from the rooftop,
beckoned, no doubt, by that flaming maple.

But the long leap, beckoned by that flaming maple
almost misses. Kid grabs skinny limb & scrambles.

Making do with squeaky limbs but still scramble,
picking up sticks fallen off a pecan tree out back.

RACHEL FISKE REYNOLDS

No One Is As Mean To Me As Me

no one so sure that this mouth
is a rude hole, slick scar
that just won't heal—

you call them lasers
but if you close the door behind you
i'm stuck alone on the other side
with these eyeballs that glare
from their root. it's my skin
they bore through. see,

i wasn't born with lungs
nestled beneath thin points
ready to pop. no,
while you sleep, i fold over,
gnaw myself into the shiv
i best know how to be.

i love it when i'm sharp.
i love how bright
and unrelenting— i love the feel
of my own lean shine.

over the years, i have practiced
forgetting, worked hard to stop freaking
people out, to play
the normal part—a phone on the counter, boots

RED ROCK REVIEW

in the back of a cab, my first love's
true name. i am good
at it: the next time we buy a pomegranate
i will google (again) the best way
to peel back its skin.

KEN HOLLAND

Hurdy Gurdy

This morning the hurdy gurdy
of solitude came cranking its
brash chords of silence.
It's all inside your head anyway—
the last time you heard your
mother's voice, the barber's scissor
decapitating the errant hair
near the lobe of your ear—
they've all got a monkey on their shoulder
as they grind their own particular
barrel organs for they've something
to tell you, and they know the tiny
bones that sit like clockwork, like
gears, like homunculi just inside
your eardrum are waiting for
the percussion of their voice
that will incite three or four thousand
neurons to start chattering like a
rainforest when a predator approaches,
not that your mother meant you any
harm, while the blood from the nick
in your lobe was quickly stanching
and your barber, good man that he is,
didn't charge you for his services
as he patted your cheeks with
his private cologne whose scent made
you smile, the gentle slap of his palms
on your skin better than any words,

better than the stripped down inhumanity
beaming on the news or the wag of
your mother's finger, its very motion
calling out the hurly burly of your
failures, but not without love, not
without a kiss on your forehead
as she cuffs your ear in a well-practiced
manner just shy of pain, her lips
ensnaring the air, the moment or two
before you can again hear what she
wants you to hear—the rattle of a coin
in the monkey's cup.

DENISE S. ROBBINS

Oblivion

IT'S NIGHTTIME SO MY HUSBAND and I walk and talk in circles. We are running away from something, together, as we walk the same route every night around our neighborhood. Every conversation between us has melded. My husband and I know each other's thoughts so well all we do is give a signifying look. Why waste breath? We only have so many.

I love him, still, yet it's almost worse than being alone. When you're alone, you can let your mind roam. With another, you have to keep the conversation going, spinning the wheels of the same things over and over: When will this end. When can we get away. They're no longer questions because we know they have no answer. The virus isn't worth talking about anymore. Nor is the lockdown. My husband and I live in a slow-burning horror story. There's no need for panic. Dread is a way of life. We look at each other and hope love will get us through this. Love is an empty pail. It thuds at the bottom of our chest when we throw in whatever we can to stay alive.

It's a late-October Thursday night. Barely six thirty, yet it's already dark. Mars hangs low in the sky. My husband gripes about something or other with a few mumbled words. I point out Mars, as he knows I would; he acknowledges it with a flick of the wrist.

When we round the first turn, we are forced to stop. Yellow-vested utility workers have blocked off the street. We peer over the barriers to see what they are doing. They have dug into the pavement, ripped it up, and are standing down there, fixing something deep in the earth.

This is the beginning of a strange night, and a stranger period in our lives. Our path diverges. We walk instead to the public library. It's lit up outside and dark inside. It's been closed for three months. Our dozens of overdue books have been forgiven. We continue past the hardware store, which dozens of people are now spilling out of, getting kicked out as it

closes. We wonder if they all know one another. We don't have to say it out loud.

Down the next turn, more utility workers stand in a circle. Between them, a hole in the ground gushes like a geyser. It spews out thick water at an even pace. The air smells of fresh tar.

Then we're back to the street that leads us home, the street with our little yellow house. When we left, it was a normal street.

Now, it's an empty chasm.

An emptiness the size of a two-car garage is in front of our house, next to the driveway. It is buttressed by two-by-fours. PVC pipes stick chaotically out of the dirt underneath the street. Two excavators are on either side, one with pincers like an arcade claw machine. Dozens of workers are working the machines, standing in the trench, or watching on the road.

The workers get out of the ground at once and peer down. We watch what they watch: the giant claw is about to carry out the climax of the evening. It clamps down on a car-sized block of concrete. In its maw it carries the concrete block up, slowly, one inch per second; the workers' eyes are glued to it, to make sure nothing goes wrong, a slip of the claw, a tumbling into instantaneous skull-crushing death.

All goes well. The claw releases the concrete block on the side of the road.

It is a perfect cube, if not for the piles of dirt on top. It has holes that match the pipes sticking out of the ground: one in the center, five around it like flower petals. It is what lives beneath the street: the grounding for water pipes. Water rushes through here from the water treatment plant to our kitchen sink, for us to nag over who would do the dishes that day, and to our shower, for us to remind each other to wipe your feet before getting out. This is the water that lingers on our shower walls, creating mold every week if we don't wipe it down with vinegar. And leaches into our entrance hall, a fuzzy halo around the door.

We watch the construction workers for a few minutes, as do the neighbors we've never met. All of us stand across the street looking down. And at the car-sized concrete cube.

Afterwards, as we eat dinner, my husband is despondent. He can barely speak as I make our common jokes. I try to come up with a few new ones to cheer him up. Nothing works. He pushes his Indian food around his plate. A lentil gets caught in his mustache. Eventually I ask him what's wrong.

He sighs and mutters, "Nothing."

“Come on. Tell me.”

“Everything.”

Right.

“I’m sorry, love. Let’s take a minute to picture a perfect life in our heads.” It’s something I do to cheer him up, or myself up. I picture a house on a beach next to a crab shack, where I can float in calm ocean waves, burn my nose from staring at the sun, and let myself disappear into oblivion. Often, I wonder what he pictures, but I never ask. I wish I could take the dread from him and keep it for myself. To me, sadness is a little bit beautiful. He finds it paralyzing.

Today is his turn to do dishes, but I offer to do them. The faucet sputters when I turn it on, then lets out a steady stream. It heats up too quickly; I nearly burn my hand.

IN THE NIGHT, early morning really, there is a crash outside our bedroom window. I have forgotten to close it. We usually like to sleep with the window open for the sound of crickets and bats, except for on Thursday nights, Friday mornings, when the garbage men come and crash our bins into their truck.

“Shit, sorry.” I get up to close the window.

But when I approach, there are no garbage men in our street. Something else has announced its presence.

The block of concrete, in our driveway.

I put on my shoes and jacket, grab a flashlight, and leave to inspect it. It is taller than me by three feet. The holes in the center are just below eye-level. I peer inside with the light. I go through the outer holes, all five of them, one by one, and look through to see neighbors’ houses in round flashes. A purple doorway. A window with a cat keeping guard. A rat skittering into a garage. A barn-shaped mailbox. A street lamp.

Finally, as I bring my flashlight to the center hole, I am filled with a dread I cannot name. My eyes are pulled to it at the same time as they are pushed away, like the desire to stare at the sun, yet instead of a sun it is a black hole, and instead of burning my retinas it would steal my soul through them. My chest seizes and pulls me back. I have pointed my flashlight into the hole, but I stare only at the sky, not bringing my eyes to see what’s inside.

I decide this is silly. What good would it be to inspect a hole? A hole is a hole. I turn off the flashlight.

A quivering mass of black pours out.

I leap back and turn the light back on, pour it over the ground with abandon now, hungry for discovery. But I see nothing. I decide it was a trick of the eyes, the shadow of the light. I hug myself and shake the thought from my mind.

When I get back inside, my husband is gone.

The bed is empty. I call out his name. I look for him in the closet, in the bathroom, in the kitchen, in the living room, in the basement. I lift every pillow on the couch. I peer behind suitcases and boxes of paperwork in the basement. I search like he is a missing set of keys, in the drawers, in the fridge. He is nowhere.

I head back outside.

When I open the door, a thump. I press it open gently and look around.

He is standing on the other side. In the dark, without a coat or shoes. And staring at the driveway with cloudy grey eyes. He does not move.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

He seems startled at my presence. His curly hair is matted with sleep. He shakes the fog from his eyes. “I wanted to check... I don’t know. I must have been dreaming.”

EXCEPT FOR THE BLOCK OF CONCRETE in our driveway, the next day is another day. We work from home. He stares at his computer; I stare at mine. We pick one of our rotating restaurants for delivery. I call 311, tell them about the concrete cube. The woman on the hotline apologizes on the city’s behalf, saying it must have rolled over in the wind.

There was no windstorm last night, but I say all right.

She asks for our patience and says they’ll put it back as soon as the work is done. She says they’ll reimburse us for taxis if we need to drive. After I hang up, I narrate this to my husband, who has finished work and is reading a magazine on the couch. He shakes his head numbly. He says there’s no need, we don’t have a car and we can walk where we want to anyway. But we skip our evening walk this night.

FOUR MONTHS AGO, the water main broke on our street. Our basement flooded in the height of summer. We used it for storage, so while the luggage and summer shoes were ruined, the gardening tools were fine. We kept our passports in a box down there, so that was the worst part, getting those replaced.

Once, even longer ago, we tried to remodel the basement. We had planned to turn it into a bedroom for the child we decided we didn't want. This was a mistake. All we did was put in shag carpeting before we lost steam and gave up.

We had to rip up the carpeting completely after the flood. The wet shag pulled at our bare feet. It dripped in our arms as we brought it to the dumpster. The water pooled in the high basement windowsills and never seemed to completely disappear no matter how often we vacuumed it up. It still drips all day and night. If I close my eyes tight, I can hear it in my sleep.

I'm glad they're now overhauling the water pipes in our neighborhood. Took them long enough.

IT IS THE SECOND NIGHT with the block of concrete in our driveway. I wake to a rustling. My husband is getting out of bed in the crack of night. It's the weekend, so I shouldn't care, I shouldn't worry about his sleep schedule, but I do, I always worry. So I ask him what's wrong.

He doesn't respond.

He walks out of the bedroom, to the front door. I follow him and tap him on the shoulder. I kiss the spot where his neck meets his back. "What is it?" I ask.

"That... noise. Do you hear it?" His words came slowly and with great struggle. His voice was thick with sleep.

There is only silence.

"Love, come back to bed," I say.

He agrees and goes back to the bedroom.

But now I'm awake and my nerves are tingling. I go on a walk to cool off. I observe the block of concrete. When it was first lifted from the ground, it was covered in dirt piles, whereas now it is perfectly clean. Again, I feel the beckoning dread of the empty hole in its center, where once water rushed through.

I turn back before I let it tempt me to lean in and look.

Back in bed, my husband is sleeping without a sound. Without that usual throaty breath of wet nostrils. I lean over and put my hand on his chest to make sure it's still moving up and down. Of course, it is.

BACK IN JUNE, shortly before our basement flooded, my husband's father died. His name was Rick and that's about all I knew of him before he committed suicide. My husband cut ties with him twenty years ago.

After the funeral, my husband was fine. He was normal. He didn't speak much. But then he started remembering all kinds of things about his father. He whispered them to me on Thursday nights, with the lights out and the windows closed. He told me about the drinking. The abuse.

He said his first memory of his father was of the man trying to drown him in the bath. A normal bath on an angry night. Being held down in the tub too long. And the feeling of water in the lungs. The burning feeling. The panic. The wish to scream; the attempt to scream that led to more burning. He remembers his mother pulling him back. Drawing the attention to herself. It was never enough.

Throughout these stories, he spoke in an even tone, with no emotion. His stories made me cry but did not seem to affect him.

He had never told me anything about his dad before. He said he was a bad man but that was it. I knew not to ask. I knew not to pry. I regret bringing it up when he died.

IT IS THE THIRD DAY with the block of concrete in our driveway. We get into a fight. One or both of us is looking for some way to break up the monotony, I suppose. We fight over everything trivial: dishes, vacuuming, trash, and so on.

He walks off in a huff when I am going to bed. But I wake hours later and he's still not there.

This time I do not search the house. I peer out the window and there he is: standing in our driveway, next to the concrete block. He's reaching up into the hole in the middle, about to place his hand inside...

"Hey!" I shout.

He pulls his hand back.

I rush outside, barefoot and jacketless, to see him. I shiver in the icy air. I ask him what he's doing.

He looks as if he barely recognizes me. His eyes are unfocused. "Must have been sleepwalking," he mumbles.

"You've never sleepwalked before."

I walk him inside and put him to bed. His skin is ice. I rub his shoulders and tuck the blanket around his chin.

Then I go to the basement, where I grab a bag of neglected potting soil and bring it to the driveway. Without looking, I shove fistfuls of dirt into every hole with my hands. I push them in until they are blocked up. The soil stains my fingers and lingers in the air until my hair smells of nitrogen.

IT IS THE FOURTH DAY. The holes in the concrete cube are empty.

Not a speck of soil remains in, on, or around it.

The utility workers aren't there today. But I will not go close to this monstrous thing. I call 311 so I can tell the utility department they must remove it. No one picks up. I consider calling 911 instead, but something tells me not to.

I decide: I must somehow put it back.

It's not impossible. I need a system of planks and rollers. There are plenty of pipes lying around that would make a good conveyer belt. I set them up in a line that would carry the concrete cube from the driveway back into the hole. I don't know what will happen if I dump it back in, but I don't care. I stick a pry bar underneath the concrete block and push it down. The block lifts an inch at my feet. I place a plank of wood underneath it and push my pry bar further under the block. Up an inch, another plank. And keep going until I have it at a forty-five degree angle, nearly enough to push it onto the pipes and roll it away from our house and out of our lives, and I make one last push of the pry bar and feel my back scream with pain and seize up. I drop the pry bar and leap away, letting the block tumble over the pile of wood and fall back to the ground.

THERE WAS RAIN, then there was ice. It damaged the equipment. So, I am bedridden with back strain, and the workers cannot work. The concrete block remains in our driveway. It is the sixth day.

It isn't that cold. But their equipment turned to ice overnight after the storm cleared up. The empty air can turn anything to ice. When there is not a hint of clouds in the sky, the void steals heat wherever it can find it. It takes heat from water and creates ice in the warmth. The emptiness is all that's needed.

DAYS PASS AS I HEAL. During the day, my husband is in a thick stupor. I can no longer joke around with him. I can no longer go on walks with him. I can no longer do much of anything. I can barely get out of bed.

He is taking good care of me, but barely speaking, to me or anyone. He brings me breakfast and rubs my shoulders, but it feels methodical; he avoids my eyes. I ask about the concrete block. I'm frustrated no movement is made. He says it's fine. That frustrates me more.

I can't tell if he's in pain or if he's feeling anything at all. I worry I have

lost him. He has fallen into himself.

During the night, I watch my husband wake and walk with a force beyond him to the concrete block outside, then to the void it left behind. If I say anything to break him from this trance, he changes into a monster. He looks at me with mortal anger. He lunges at me as if he means to throttle me before he pulls himself back into collapse.

So, I let him go. He stands over the void in our street as if he means to throw himself in. There is nothing I can do.

IT'S NIGHTTIME, and nighttime's demise. They converge and fall apart: One night ends, another begins, it's hard to know what happens in between.

MY HUSBAND DIDN'T WANT TO ATTEND his father's funeral. In fact, he didn't attend in person. He would not fly across the country in a pandemic. There was no question. But when he learned the funeral would be livestreamed and all attendees could join by video, he considered.

I didn't push it, but I didn't not push it. When my husband said he was thinking about attending the livestream I encouraged it. I thought it would help him put that relationship to bed—the relationship I knew so little of. I sat on the couch next to him and squeezed his hand as we watched his father's coffin get pushed into the incinerator.

I didn't know about his father. I didn't know. I wish I did. I wouldn't have pushed. I wouldn't have forced him to relive the memories. To confront the death of the man he hated. To confront that this man possibly hated himself as much or more, so much that he took his own life.

THE VIRUS HAS BROUGHT DEATH to our neighborhood too. Two streets over is a retirement home where seven have died. One person died on this street. I never knew them. I don't like to think about where they are now.

As for everyone else, when the virus began we would see them from a distance and wave. But now we don't see anyone. Our neighbors stay far away from the concrete block and the void it left behind.

THIS SUMMER, the water main flooded our basement the week after the funeral. I felt guilty for asking my husband to work on the basement while he was suffering so greatly. But we needed to rip up the carpet and clear everything out and I really needed his help.

He did help and I was grateful. He put on a smock and threw himself

into cleaning. He was covered in grime at the end of each day. And dripping from carrying all that moldy shag carpeting.

IT IS THE TWENTIETH DAY. The water stops working. There was a notice taped to our door alerting us of this, apparently, that I didn't see while bedridden. The water maintenance has hit a snag, the notice says, the city sends their condolences.

We bring home dozens of gallons of water from the store. Well, my husband does as I walk next to him. My back feels well enough to walk but not well enough to carry anything.

He's putting on a good face, but I can tell he resents me right now. I wish he knew how much he means to me. I tell him that a hundred times a day, but I can tell he doesn't hear it.

We take dinner on the couch, where I can recline my feet. He asks me what I would do if he died. I don't respond. Instead, I suggest we play the game of picturing our ideal lives in our heads. He gets angry when I suggest this.

Now I am reconsidering his question. What would I do if he died? I normally wouldn't allow myself to think about the answer. I fear how much the thought would break me. But perhaps I should. I'm looking at him on the other side of the couch, trying to see what he sees.

I WAKE UP AND MY HUSBAND IS NOT THERE. I know where to look for him.

I carefully get out of bed. I have arranged my slip-on sneakers at my foot of the bed and my coat on a rack at the door with the flashlight in its pocket so I can enrobe without moving my back. Standing stick-straight, I squeeze open the door.

My husband is still as stone. He is standing at the side of the road, looking into the void left behind by the concrete block.

"Please, love, why are you doing this? What can I do? What do you need?" I ask the same question a dozen different ways in hopes that one of them will reach him. But he does not respond to any.

I go over to stand next to him, touch his shoulder. At my touch, his blankness is replaced with fury. He grabs my hands tightly. He looks like he will murder me. I wonder if he tries, would I fight back, or let him do it. I wonder if it would break him from his stupor. I wonder if I would look down at him from the sky if I died, or not think of anything at all. In the moment, time moves slowly. I think of a million things. I think of how

strong his hands are. I think of our love. I want to fill the empty pail with... something. Anything.

He says, "Come with me."

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE CONCRETE BLOCK ARRIVED, we did an experiment to remove my husband's pain.

When we went on our walk, he was quiet. I looked up to see him crying. It was the first time I'd ever seen him cry.

I told him: Let's do something about this. Let's have you write down every painful thought and memory on a piece of paper, attach it to a huge balloon, and release it into the sky.

He did. I bought the biggest helium balloon I could find at Party City. It was a large white skeleton. His pain took up four sheets of paper, front and back. We put the papers in an envelope and fastened it to the skeleton's ankle. As the balloon lifted off, my husband was giddy. His laughter was of relief. But as the balloon shrunk to a tiny white dot, then blended into the night sky, my husband's laughter faded. His smile disappeared. Then he went to bed without saying a word.

WITH MY HAND IN HIS, we go into the hole in the ground. He leads me down a makeshift ladder of planks and pipes. He is not sleepwalking this night. His eyes are clear and looking ahead with a strange force. The wooden planks are damp and full of splinters. I hold them with care as I lower myself down. I expect to smell mold, dirt, and rain. Instead, I am surprised to smell...nothing at all.

Underneath the planks that lead under the street is an empty tunnel.

Looking into it gives me the same feeling of dread as the hole in the concrete block. A sucking force that wants me to enter at the same time as I want to run away. It seizes my chest and pulls.

I need to follow it. My husband tells me without saying anything that walking down this tunnel will let me understand his pain. And I am ready.

I hear rats scurry around our feet, but I keep my hand in my husband's and I follow his pace, step for step. Our footsteps meld into one in the dark. Sneakers squish dirt. The muddiness fades away, soon it's dry as ashes. The ground is soft and the air is empty. Our breathing patterns align. The light from the streetlamps scarcely makes its way down here, and we are leaving it, going further into deepness.

We move past the light, and I remember my lips exist when I feel them

tremble. I am shaking in the cold. I may as well close my eyes, but I trust my husband to keep me walking. I notice the vestiges of fear; I know I should feel afraid, I can tell my body is reacting with fear, but my mind is filled with calm anticipation. I want my husband to know I am here for him, I will follow him, I will always do what I can, and if what he needs is this, this is what I will do...

He stops walking abruptly. It's pitch black. The fear I've suppressed comes back with a raging force. The dread that sucks my chest into a black hole.

"Turn on your flashlight," he says.

I do. I point it downward so it will bounce a soft light everywhere. His face looks like white marble in the low light. I point it up to examine the hard dirt ceiling. The tunnel is a perfect rectangle. I turn it back and see our side-by-side footsteps. I turn it forward and see...

Nothing.

This is it. This is what he wanted me to see. Just before us is the emptiness of an abyss. And a fear so strong it hurts. It pulls on my head and brings my chest to bursting. I feel I can't breathe; I suck in again and again, but my lungs won't expand the way they should. My heart is a wrinkled peanut shell.

The flashlight is as useless as it would be to search the empty night sky. I shut my eyes. The memory of light dances on the back of my eyelids. I open them again into a void.

My happiness...any memory of happiness...is gone. It has flown into the abyss in the tunnel underneath our street. And I know: that's where my husband's happiness is too. Like the air stealing the heat from water and turning it into ice, the emptiness is taking him, and he doesn't fear it anymore.

Without a thought, I reach my hand in. I want to fall into it so he won't hurt anymore. So there will be something in the void to latch onto. To be the something in the nothingness. As I reach, I feel a wind on my fingertips and the most wretched feeling of pain in my hand, but on the other side, a peace, and I move to throw my body in...

A tugging on my arm. I wrench my eyes away from the void and look at my husband. He's holding my hand and pulling it back. He brings me back through the wretched pain and we walk back through this dingy tunnel, now dripping with moisture and skittering with rats, now with the light of the streetlamps making shadows of his face.

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I look up at my husband and I understand. I still don't understand him, but I have glimpsed his pain. And I realize I don't know what love is, but I think it is less about making each other happy, more about crawling into one another's skin. And I don't know what to do next, but I understand that I would do anything. And as drips of condensation fall into my eyes, as the ashes of the tunnel fill our lungs, as my husband's eyes well up with tears, I have never felt so grateful or in love.

MADISON RAHNER

Love as Desert Mountain

We bounce over the dirt road's ancient ruts.
The mountain's an oil painting 'til I'm close

enough to count the bluffs and purple cuts
lining it, to watch how the sage grass grows.

Then, I see I knew nothing of this place
until now. The ridge was never blue nor

smooth. Always, my mind drifts to you, the days
lost in your bed and on your floor. We swore

we weren't in love, and yet in our nearness
I knew your palms, their every crease. I learned

the splay of veins in the bend of your wrists.
You're more than the man I distantly yearned

for—I found in the stubble on your chin
dreams so like my own, etched into your skin.

DORSÍA SMITH SILVA

Before Hurricane Isaías

July comes with a longhand of
 misery, a smash grab hurricane season with a
quadriptych rap sheet, but this isn't my first
 time at the rodeo. I give a friendly reception to
the packs of batteries and pallets of water
 and escort the latitude and longitude hubbub
to the map. Back to when we surrendered
 to green, letting the malanga and cane
mimic our posture like gilded epergnes. Nothing's
 impossible. I'm trying to see if green will still
cheat a hurricane like white stars seeding eudaemonic
 blue sky. You take a Polaroid to hardscrabble that
pastel morning, vault memory before evening undoes
 the other—clumps of pathos piling our way home.

RUSSELL ROWLAND

Moving Heaven and Earth

Now six, she can read to her grandfather—
giving back the gift, as it were—

but at play her aggie marbles, toy cars
as fleet as mice, still roll beneath a sofa,
behind a bookcase—such is their way.

It requires him, forerunner of the pair,
to move heaven, earth, and furniture.
He is older now than when he knelt
in prayer; still, these are emergencies.

What's more important—though earth
should change, seasons no longer cycle,
and folk without get even less—

than restoring a treasure so transient
to the fingers of little and least?

He has discovered secrets under things
(on hands and knees, fanny in the air),
besides last year's pennies and popcorn,

truths you only learn at floor level:
what makes a marriage last or not,
why parents lie awake at the silent hour;
when floods come, what is worth saving.

ANNE BABSON

August Bunker

"There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of tabernacles of the Most High."

- Psalm 46:4

Jerusalem bakes in a hot desert.
An underground stream just got discovered
By people digging a railroad tunnel.
Under the Sisters of Zion Convent
They discovered a natural pool, not
Kidney-shaped, like the blue pool at Graceland.

In God's city, the river runs under.
This tabernacle of my texts gets cooled
By the Mississippi. Is God's heart glad?
I lift its gilded cover, flip heavy
Pages and look up my circumstances.

I read *"therefore will not we fear, though the Earth be removed, and though the mountains be Carried into the midst of the sea; the Waters thereof roar troubled, the mountains Shake with the swelling thereof. Selah."* I
Shut the book. I look down the poplar shelves.
I walk to the wall. I lean my ear to
The concrete. I hear gurgling. Selah.

JOHN ZIEBELL

Review of *Because the Light Will Not Forgive Me*

Shaun T. Griffin

Because the Light Will Not Forgive Me: Essays from a Poet
University of Nevada Press, 2019, 264 pages, \$27.95

IT IS THE JOB OF WRITERS to forge what is true from what is factual, and it is the nature of writers to embellish; that said, Shaun T. Griffin's voice remains one of the most honest I've ever read. Griffin is a kind of Renaissance figure that Nevada can be justly proud of: teacher, activist, painter, father and spouse, journalist, champion of the underserved...and, above all, poet. He believes that language, when guided by the hand of the fully invested practitioner, has an ability to make communal sense of innate notions that we share but can't always articulate. If the poet is worthy, language can enlighten, heal, bridge the chasms that divide so many of us. But this does not come easily, as we see again and again in this book; to be a poet is a lifelong commitment, a title one must continue to earn, more demanding than any religion.

Because the Light Will Not Forgive Me is divided into three sections; the first contains essays on the American west, the second on poets who had a significant impact on Griffin's life and work, and the third on literal and figurative borders. No matter how the essays are categorized, or titled, none are ever about a single thing: the importance of language, the primacy of the natural world, the contemporary cultural spectrum, moral frameworks, and random affirmations of basic human goodness are all there to help us sort out the tangle of contradictions that comprise life. Griffin is very much present to guide us through these pieces, a worthy reader's Virgil—you will

want to read the books he discusses, visit the places he travels to, meet the people he counts as friends.

On the front page of this collection, there is an added line beneath the title: *Essays from a poet*. That line is not an afterthought. Griffin believes in the transformative power of language, and the poet's discipline is evident in these essays; reading his prose, you understand that he means every word. But poets own language differently than the rest of us, so while he means exactly what he says, what he says can mean different things. "I have grown stubborn in my belief that beauty can transcend greed," Griffin says in an early essay, and that phrase resonated frequently in my mind as I read on, it being perfectly applicable to every piece in the collection.

In the early essays, even evocations of the natural world boast phrases that encompass ideas far larger than themselves: "Fire does not ask why," or "Cold is a weather of few mistakes," or "Until you step into a place as large as the high desert of my home, empty sounds like an abstraction." Whether writing about Nevada or Ireland or Africa, Griffin's work is never not about poetry. And while I admit a weakness for lyrical prose that brings the physical world to life in my mind, I felt most engaged by the central section of the book, "Most of What I Believe was Found in Poetry's Ancient Hands."

Griffin writes eloquently about his intellectual and poetic exemplars, and passionately discusses the poetry he loves. Many other writers have done that as well, but what elevates this work is Griffin's earnestness. There is no pretense, no facile asides. When he discusses literature, Griffin is a thoughtful and incredibly generous critic; when he talks about his teachers, peers, and students, his acute condensations of real lives show us more than any 500-page biography could. Hayden Carruth, Carolyn Kizer, Vassar Miller—they rise off the page fully formed, like they're sitting in the room where you are reading this. And when he tells you about running a poetry workshop in the state prison, the bars and walls are tangible.

This is a book that you leave, but do not finish. It's definitely a book that is smarter than I am, which means I'll be returning to it for more. I can sense some essays—in particular, "The Magnetic Pull in a Poem"—still coalescing in the recesses of my brainpan, sparking random flashes of insight that will lure me in again until the full depth of the author's message settles around me. A lot like reading a good poem.

Contributors

JASON ABBATE has written poetry and other things for many years. His work has been included in publications such as *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Subprimal*, *Margie*, and *Pif Magazine*. He is the author of *Welcome to Xooxville*. He lives and writes in New York City.

YAN AN is a most famous poet in contemporary China, author of fourteen poetry books including his most famous poetry book, *Rock Arrangement*, which has won him The Sixth Lu Xun Literary Prize, one of China's top four literary prizes. As the winner of various national awards and prizes, he is also the Vice President of Shaanxi Writers Association, the head and Executive Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal *Yan River*, one of the oldest and most famous literary journals in Northwestern China. In addition, he is a member of the Poetry Committee of China Writers Association. His poetry book *A Naturalist's Manor* translated by Chen Du and Xisheng Chen was published by Chax Press.

LIS ANNA-LANGSTON was raised alongside the winding current of the Mississippi River on a steady diet of dog-eared books. Twice nominated for the Pushcart, the bestselling, award winning author of *Gobbledy* and *Tupelo Honey*, she loves ketchup, starry skies, fireflies, French hip hop, and stories with happy aliens. You can find her in the wilds of South Carolina plucking stories out of thin air. Published in dozens of literary journals and given lots of fancy awards, learn more about her at: www.lisannalangston.com.

KARIN AURINO writes poetry and fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Sou'wester*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Literary Orphans*, *The Satirist*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, and elsewhere, and has received recognition from *Glimmer Train*.

ANNE BABSON is the author of four full-length collections of poetry—*The White Trash Pantheon* (Vox Press); *Polite Occasions* (Unsolicited Press); *Messiah* (Saint Julian Press); and the forthcoming collection *Bunker Book*,

slated for publication this winter by Unsolicited Press. The video of the opera for which she wrote the libretto, *Lotus Lives*, is slated to launch next year. Her poems have appeared in literary journals on five continents.

BERGITA BUGARIJA was born and grew up in Zagreb, Croatia and now lives in Pittsburgh. Her fiction has appeared in *Pleiades* and *PANK Daily*. She recently completed a collection of stories and is at work on a novel set in Dalmatian Hinterland.

XISHENG CHEN, a Chinese American, is an ESL grammarian, lexicologist, linguist, translator, and educator. His educational background includes: top scorer in the English subject in the National College Entrance Examination of Jiangsu Province; a BA and an MA from Fudan University, Shanghai, China (exempted from the National Graduate School Entrance Examination owing to excellent BA test scores); and a Mandarin Healthcare Interpreter Certificate from the City College of San Francisco, CA, USA. His working history includes: translator for Shanghai TV Station, Evening English News; Lecturer at Jiangnan University, Wuxi, China; Adjunct Professor at the Departments of English and Social Sciences of Trine University (formerly Tri-State University), Angola, Indiana; notary public and contract high-tech translator for Futurewei Technologies, Inc. in Santa Clara, California, USA. As a translator for over three decades, he has published many translations in various fields in newspapers and journals in China and abroad. A set of three poems co-translated by him and Chen Du was one of six finalists in the 2020 Gabo Prize for Literature in Translation & Multilingual Texts.

CHEN DU is a Voting Member of American Translators Association and a member of the Translators Association of China with a Master's Degree in Biophysics from Roswell Park Cancer Institute, the State University of New York at Buffalo and a Master's Degree in Radio Physics from the Chinese Academy of Sciences. She revised more than eight chapters of the Chinese translation of the biography of Helen Snow, *Helen Foster Snow: An American Woman in Revolutionary China*. In the United States, her translations have appeared in *Columbia Journal*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Pilgrimage*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay was published by *The Dead Mule* and Hamline University English Department. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Levitate*, *American Writers Review*, and elsewhere, and her

CONTRIBUTORS

poetry chapbook was published by *The Dead Mule* online. A set of three poems co-translated by her and Xisheng Chen was one of six finalists in the 2020 Gabo Prize for Literature in Translation & Multilingual Texts. In addition, she was longlisted by the 2021 John Dryden Translation Competition together with Xisheng Chen for *The World's Ten Portraits* (from *Rock Arrangement*) from Yan An. She is also the author of the book *Successful Personal Statements*. Find her online at ofsea.com.

JOHN GIFFORD is a writer, author, photographer, and conservationist based in Oklahoma City. His work, which includes travel and nature photography and environmental portraiture, explores our relationship with the natural world. John is the author of *Red Dirt Country*, an essay collection celebrating the rich biodiversity of Oklahoma and the southern Great Plains. His images have appeared in *American Forests*, the *Dallas Morning News*, *Oklahoma Today*, *Fly Fish America*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and elsewhere. He serves on the board of directors for WildCare Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization dedicated to wildlife rehabilitation. Additionally, he is the resident photographer for Southern Plains Productions, an Oklahoma City-based theatre company that's working to make the performing arts more accessible. Find him online at johngifford.net.

LUISA GOVELA is a poet, narrator, journalist, essayist, translator, and author of the following books: *Tiempo de Palabras* (UAT, 1993); *Península del Viento* (Institution for the Arts in Tamaulipas, 1995); *Claraboya* (Imp. Cultural Benjamín Franklin, 2000); *El Enemigo Entrañable* (2005); *Cruce de Cebra* (Editorial Porrúa, 2016). Her stories, essays, and poems have been published in numerous anthologies and literary magazines. She holds a BA in Spanish Linguistics and Literature from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a BA in English from the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas and a Master's Degree in Education. She has taught Spanish Literature, Linguistics, and English for 40 years in Mexico City and Tampico. She is now a retired professor, engaged mainly in the study of literature, writing, and translating.

KEN HOLLAND, an award-winning poet, recently received his second and third nominations for the Pushcart Prize, and has had work widely published in such journals as *Tulane Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *Rattle*.

Current/forthcoming publications can be found in *Tar River*, *Pinyon*, *Confrontation*, *The Louisville Review*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Plainsongs*, *Sugar House Review*, *Main Street Rag*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. He lives in the mid-Hudson Valley of New York.

MOSS INGRAM's fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Caribbean Writer*, *Crack the Spine*, *Gone Lawn*, *Blink-Ink*, and elsewhere. He is also the co-author of *Contemporary Product Development: A Focus on Innovation* (Cognella Academic). He lives with his family in Michigan, where he is a professor at Grand Rapids Community College.

CYAN JAMES's MFA is from the University of Michigan, where she was awarded three Hopwoods. Her work has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, and has been published or is forthcoming in *Conjunctions*, *Shenandoah*, *Image*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *The Account*, and *Salon*, among others. Currently she is revising a novel about the women who survived the Green River Killer. She loves fiddles, falconry, long road trips, old front porches, and Laphroaig.

KATE KINGSTON has published five collections of poetry. Her manuscript, *The Future Wears Camouflage*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in 2022. She is the recipient of the Karen Chamberlain Award, *The Atlanta Review* International Poetry Prize, and the W. D. Snodgrass Award for Poetic Endeavor and Excellence. She is currently translating a book of Luisa Govea's poems, written in the voice of Malinalli, Cortez' translator.

ISAAC GEORGE LAURITSEN is a writer and illustrator. His work can be found, or is forthcoming in *Bennington Review*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Sidereal Review*, *TIMBER*, *Your Impossible Voice* on a broadside from Octopus Books, and elsewhere. He lives in New Orleans.

ANDREW DAVID MACDONALD is the author of *When We Were Vikings*. He lives in Canada.

ELISSA MATTHEWS was born in New Jersey, grew up in New Jersey, and began work at the phone company in New Jersey, at which point she freaked

CONTRIBUTORS

out, quit, and launched into adventure. She went to Florida, California, New Zealand, Australia. She was a cook on a prawn trawler, a bartender in a strip club, a receptionist in a law office, a professional scuba diver. One frigid day in November, at 6 in the morning while climbing into cold-water scuba gear, she realized that a 9-to-5, climate-controlled job maybe wasn't as bad as it sounded, but her love of adventure still sneaks out in her stories.

While currently employed in the world of Information Technology, **NICHOLAS MCCARTHY** has maintained his passion for poetry over the past 15 years and writes in his spare time. Nick loves to spend time with his friends and family, especially taking trips to the beaches of Cape Cod and enjoying life with his lovely wife and muse.

ANDREW MILLER is a poet, critic and translator with over one hundred publications to his name. His poems have appeared in such journals as *The Massachusetts Review*, *Iron Horse*, *Shenandoah*, *Spoon River Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Rattle*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Ekphrasis*. In addition, he has had poems appear in such anthologies as *How Much Earth*, *Anthology of Fresno Poets* (2001) and *The Way We Work: Contemporary Literature from the Workplace* (2008). Finally, he is one of the co-editors of *The Gazer Within*, *The Selected Prose of Larry Levis* (2001) and the author of *Poetry, Photography Ekphrasis: Lyrical Representations of Photography from the 19th Century to the Present* (Liverpool University Press, 2015). Presently, he resides Copenhagen, Denmark, with this wife and daughters.

ELIZABETH CHRISTINE POPE is a poet and painter of Abstract Expressionism from the Appalachian coal-town of Harlan, KY. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Bluegrass Writers Studio. Currently, she lives in Louisville, KY with her husband and daughters. Her honors include an Emerging Artist Award from the Kentucky Arts Council, two Pushcart Prize nominations, and an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Euphony Journal* and appear in *The Fourth River*, *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*, *New Madrid*, *Still: The Journal*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and elsewhere.

KEITH PROCTOR's stories can be found in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Every Day Fiction*, *The Colored Lens*, *Gateway Review*, and elsewhere. He

lives in Alexandria, Virginia,

HEATHER QUARLES is a poet and educator in Northern California. This is her tenth year teaching teenagers the magic of language and literature and she is working on creating more literary opportunities for her community. Heather's latest projects include opening the Unbound Writing Center and drafting a collection of creative-nonfiction essays. Heather believes everyone is a writer, and that writing is a balm for the soul.

MADISON RAHNER is a poet and biographer living in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina where she received her MA in Writing from Coastal Carolina University. Her poetry can be found in *Popshot Quarterly*, *The Normal School*, and *The Threepenny Review*.

RACHEL FISKE REYNOLDS lives in Philadelphia. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming with *Duende*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Faultlines*, *Liminalities*, *VICE*, and more. They teach middle school English.

DENISE S. ROBBINS is an author, cat-parent, and climate activist from Wisconsin now living in Washington, DC. Her stories have appeared in *Barcelona Review*, *Pif Magazine*, *Oyster River Pages*, and more. She has a novel and story collection in the works. Find her work at www.denisesrobbins.com.

ELLEN WHITE ROOK is a poet and teacher of contemplative arts residing in upstate New York and southern Maine. In the pre-COVID-19 world, she offered workshops on Japanese flower arranging and led day-long Sit, Walk, Write retreats that merge meditation, movement, and writing. In 2021, you can find her on Zoom. Ellen is a recent graduate from the Master of Fine Arts program at Lindenwood University. Her work has been published in *Montana Mouthful*, *New Verse News*, and *Trolley Literary Journal*.

Seven-time Pushcart Prize nominee **RUSSELL ROWLAND** writes from New Hampshire's Lakes Region, where he has judged high-school Poetry Out Loud competitions. His work appears in *Except for Love: New England Poets Inspired by Donald Hall* (Encircle Publications), and *Covid Spring, Vol. 2* (Hobblebush Books). His latest poetry book, *Wooden Nutmegs*, is available from Encircle Publications.

CONTRIBUTORS

PURBASHA ROY is a writer from Jharkhand, India. Her work has appeared in *Rigorous*, *Golden Walkman*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Teesta*, *The Raven Review*, *Everything in Aspic*, and elsewhere.

DORSÍA SMITH SILVA is a Pushcart Prize nominee, three-time Best of the Net nominee, Cave Cavem Poetry Prize Semifinalist, Obsidian Fellow, and Full Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Her poetry has been shortlisted for the Queen Mary Wasafiri New Writing Prize and is forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, the *Minnesota Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Offing*, *Upstreet*, and elsewhere. She has attended the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers' Workshop, Bread Loaf Writers' Workshop, Kenyon Review Writers' Workshop, and Looking Glass Rock Writers' Conference. She is also the author of *Good Girl* (micro-chapbook), editor of *Latina/Chicana Mothering*, and the co-editor of six books. She has a PhD in Caribbean Literature and Language.

MICHAEL WALLS is a retired labor lawyer who lives in Atlanta. His poems have appeared in a variety of journals including *The South Carolina Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *South Florida Poetry Journal*. His full-length collection is *Stacking Winter Wood* (Kelsay Books / Aldrich Press, 2017). His chapbook is *The Blues Singer* (The Frank Cat Press, 2003).

JOHN ZIEBELL is the associate editor of the *Red Rock Review*.