PONDER REVIEW

Volume 2, Issue 1

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PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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A Note to Readers

They say that Spring is a time of renewal. A new chapter. A new year. That pivotal first season when trees and plants are joyously sprouting and flooding the air with greenness (and pollen). We also say: don't forget the rainstorms.

Here at *Ponder Review*, we found ourselves blessed—and a tad besieged—with a deluge of another sort: submissions. We had over 500 submissions total, from creative nonfiction to new media, art to fiction, short plays to poetry. Sorting through and reading each entry has been a challenge for our admittedly smaller editorial team, but the selection this semester is keen and deep. There are pieces that cut us to the marrow and let out demons we didn't know were hiding within our souls.

Then there are the pieces about our demons and how we confront them, as humans. Anger. Resentment. Bereavement. Joy. Neighbors. Fathers. Spouses. Pets. Age. Death.

The works on these pages thrum with the tension of tightly strung wires—will they snap? Or will they hold, pulling you into their worlds for that indescribable moment between memory and fantasy?

As you read, consider the stories your friends, alien though some may appear and act. Let them wind sinuously around your ankles and tingle your spine. Drift away into the artwork as it tells stories that need no words.

The loose theme for this issue is "Barriers" and you will find that each work we selected deals with a barrier of some nature, whether it be cultural, social, or political. As a result, we humbly invite each of you to toe the barrier lines found within these pages and see where your curiosity will take you.

Most of all, happy reading and thank you for picking up a copy of *Ponder Review*.

Sincerely,

The Editors

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ASHLEY CROUT
Dog Theology 1

MIKE JURKOVIC
The night unfolds like Simone rising from Sartre's lap (Remy & Nina) 3

ANN STEWART MCBEE
Things You Can Do to Manage Anger . .4

SHAY K. AZOULAY
Shade 6

KATERYNA BORTSOVA
Dreaming 15

ASHLEY GEIGER
Erasure 16

JUYANNE JAMES
The Woodpecker 17

SONNY BREWER
Death and Taxes 19

LISA HASE-JACKSON
33rd and Southwest Trafficway 26
Owl Survey 28

DIANE
Letting Go 29

BRANDON FRENCH
A Thousand Hours 30

WILLIAM THOMPSON
My Father Walking 35

SHAW HOMER
The New Dress 39

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER
Skyward 41
Performance 42

MITCHELL NOBIS
Communion 43

TAUNJA THOMSON
A Warmer Twilight 44

FIERCE SONIA
Anxious Alice 45

AMIR SAFI
If Blue Ivy is Jay-Z's greatest album, then Rumi must be Beyoncé's greatest poem 46

DREW ATTANA
White Noise 47

LINDA QUINLAN
Campground for Jesus 48

REBEKA FERGUSSON-LUTZ
A Fine Balance 49

ANN STEWART MCBEE
Voces Mysticae from Under the Masonic Temple 50

RIKKI SANTER
An Almost Ghazal for My Mother's Hats 52

ALEX DUENSING
This 53

RIKKI SANTER
Wardrobe Conditional 54

PHYLLIS REILLY
Last Dying Wish 55

V HOLECEK
Leere Passagen der Erinnerung (Empty Passages of Memory) 58

BETH ANN BAUMAN
Under A City Sky 59

CLAUDIA BARNETT
Mice Into Horses 61

KEVIN SUDEITH
The Feeling of Being Alive 68

BRANDON FRENCH
First Blood 69

EMMA SYWYJ
Wall and Window China 71

SAVANNA SCOTT LESLIE
Family 72

DIANE
Scarce 76

RICHARD BADER
In Lieu of Flowers 77

JOSE ENRIQUE MEDINA
The Underwear Models' Convention . 82

LEAH OATES
Transitory Space 83

KEVIN LICHTY
The Space Between 84

BETH STARGER
Doll Face 87

MAYA AVIDOV
The Listener 88

Contributors 90

ASHLEY CROUT

DOG THEOLOGY

for Hud

Theology is faith with understanding.

The dog understands weather as that
which comes to the faithful or faithless.
Weather is the dog's God gauge.

Noon and the sun is nowhere. Clouds
grayed with saturation, and there is
a growling down. The dog thinks
the rumble is God's anger. The dog

thinks today God is a dog menacing us
and shudders under the low table.
I have done this, yes. Then the lightning
fracture, streaked tear in the black.

The dog recedes beneath the sleeper's bed.
If he cannot see God, then God cannot
see him. This, too, I have believed this.
The arrival of weather, its alterations,

its pass over us is the sizeless, inestimable
higher power that controls the quality
of the day's light, renders the quiet hour,
shifts by minute by minute. The dog

does not need faith. He is always present.
Weather is infinitely always. It is what
is and is only now. Yes to the vast
because *no* disappears nothing.

The dog knows the relentless sky—
its arc a shining water bowl, a circle
of blue black porous with stars.
He walks in it unafraid, delighted by

the grass blade, his warm back.
He knows today and most days he is
a good dog and God is a good dog.

The dog does not consider not knowing.
Each day I pray to be the dog.

MIKE JURKOVIC

THE NIGHT UNFOLDS LIKE SIMONE RISING FROM SARTRE'S LAP (*REMY & NINA*)

the night unfolds
like Simone rising
from Sartre's lap
And we're left alone
watching, from our hovel
east of theirs. It was so rare to see
them cohabiting intimate corners
like this: He holding her book,
she holding his.
We giggled at their dalliance,
their feral talks along Montparnasse
and dark carafes of wine.
Reviewing detours, before and after
and how the crossroad crisis
costs us all in the end: The girl, the train.
the day. The ellipsis and apothecary.
The moment and its time.
Nazis rally. Soldiers invade.
Havoc ensnares. Innocents die.
Did you hear that? Innocents die.
Even those on the periphery
doing radio for the Vichy
or arguing symmetrically
for the gulag and free will.
We overheard them over
our macarons and sauvignon.
For a day in Paris
is always
a day in Paris
it just depends what side you're on
and how history's cold deceits
blow far beyond the Seine.

ANN STEWART MCBEE

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO MANAGE ANGER

1) Look at art with splashes of red, like *Red Riding Hood* by Jessie Wilcox-Smith.

2) Draw two circles side by side, rotating the pen over and over on top of them, deeper and harder, until you cut the circles out of the paper altogether. These are the coins for your eyes.

3) Pick up a blunt object–something made of marble, or lead, or something filled with water. Weigh it in your hand.

4) Smoke a pinch of marijuana. Write this poem. Rip it into pieces and put it in your pocket.

5) Spend two hours at the library reading about poisons. Learn that nightshade looks like a purple lampshade that spews yellow light. Find some at the dog park, and tell your girl it causes excessive stimulation of the heart. When she laughs and rolls her eyes, write this poem again. Call her the beautiful lady who cuts the thread of life.

6) Spray paint a Kool-Aid red triangle with a face emerging from in beneath the overpass in town. Call it *Red Riding Hood*. This is your tag.

7) Remember there is no overpass. There is no wolf. There is no park. There is no thread. There is no girl. There is no paper. There is no weight too heavy for this poem.

8) Eat raw Kool-Aid from the container with a spit-coated finger until your finger is as red as your anger. Switch fingers. Repeat.

9) Kiss on the bench at the dog park until your lips are vibrating. Ignore the dog's jealous nails on your pant leg. Ignore the press-on nail, tip filed to right angles, jabbing between your ribs. Pay attention only to your hand, resting limp on her collarbone. Don't let your jaw clench no matter how much it begs to.

10) Collect small bags of recycled plastic full of dog shit, tied ever-

so-loosely at their openings. Hide them in a copse of nightshade in a particularly stygian part of the park, where dogs often point but rarely wander.

11) Say the word *stygian* under your breath. Feel your jaw clench. Memorize the spelling and definition. Forget it as soon as the quiz is over. But remember the two coins resting on the eyelids of the wolf.

12) Fill your backpack with shit...literally. Feel the tension build with each shush of the crinkly plastic as each bag goes in. Seventeen shushes. Seventeen clenches. Seventeen years. Seventeen minutes for the poison to set in.

13) Shush.

14) The river will throw the dogs off your scent. Dive in but don't forget to pay the ferryman.

15) Draw an imaginary line from the center of your foot to the wolf's slackened jaw. Don't open up your shoulders too early. Wind up. Breathe. Let go. You should land fully on the ball of your foot. The wolf's strike zone will break open the bag.

16) Taunt the wolf, dressed in drag, corrupting your bed. What big ears you have. What big eyes you have. What wet slimy jaws you have. And did you know you smell like shit?

17) Now run. *Run*. RUN!

SHAY K. AZOULAY

SHADE

Characters:
WRITER, a man in his late thirties
NEIGHBOR, a man in his mid thirties

A suburban yard. A tree stands in the center of the stage, surrounded by a well-tended bed of flowers. To the left–a pile of recently trimmed branches, to the right–a wooden chair and table.

The WRITER is sitting on the chair with a pen in his hand, facing a notebook on the table, which is evidently empty. He occasionally glances over at the flowers and returns his gaze to the white page.

The NEIGHBOR enters from left with a ladder, places it near the tree, dangerously close to the flowers, and exits to the left. He returns with a rope tied to the edge of a sun shade and climbs the ladder carefully. The WRITER looks at him with some concern, places his pen on the notebook, and stands up. He advances a few steps towards the NEIGHBOR, hesitates, and finally approaches him.

WRITER: (*Jokingly*) Wha…What's up? Taking over my yard?

NEIGHBOR: (*Deadpan*) Yes. (*Pause*) Don't worry, I'm just tying this to the tree, so I'll have shade over my yard.

WRITER: Oh, okay, just…If you don't mind, after you finish…The branches.

NEIGHBOR: What?

WRITER: The branches you sawed off, please don't leave them in my yard.

NEIGHBOR: Yes.

WRITER: Thank you. (*Turns to leave*)

NEIGHBOR: You know it's your tree.

WRITER: What?

NEIGHBOR: It's your tree. The branches were sticking over my yard, so I

cut them off.

WRITER: That's fine, I don't mind, just pick them up after you're done.

NEIGHBOR: Yes.

WRITER: And please, watch the flowers.

NEIGHBOR: I see 'em.

WRITER: Thank you. (*Turns to leave*)

NEIGHBOR: I'm just saying, it's your tree.

WRITER: Yes?

NEIGHBOR: So the tree's branches are also yours, but they were sticking over my yard.

WRITER: That's fine, I don't mind that you sawed them off.

NEIGHBOR: But they're yours.

WRITER: What are you trying to say?

NEIGHBOR: If say, your dog walked into my yard, and I returned it to you…

WRITER: I don't have a dog.

NEIGHBOR: Fine, but let's say you had a dog, and it walked into my yard and I returned it to you.

WRITER: So?

NEIGHBOR: I'm just saying, these branches are yours too, you're responsible for them.

WRITER: But I didn't saw them off. If I had sawn them off, I would have thrown them away too.

NEIGHBOR: But they were sticking over my yard.

WRITER: If they bothered you and you sawed them off, then you're also responsible for clearing them away.

NEIGHBOR: But they're from your tree.

WRITER: Then if those are my branches you have no right to saw them off.

NEIGHBOR: But they were sticking out over my yard.

WRITER: So?

NEIGHBOR: They were bothering me, they made it shady.

WRITER: And why are you tying that sun shade to the tree, isn't it to have shade?

NEIGHBOR: It's not the same shade.

(*Pause*)

WRITER: Look, I don't mind the fact that you sawed branches off my tree, and I don't mind the fact that you entered my yard without permission, and I don't mind the fact that you're tying your sun shade to my tree, all I'm asking is that you clear away the branches you sawed off.

NEIGHBOR: No.

WRITER: What do you mean, no?

NEIGHBOR: For years your tree's branches shaded my yard, and for years your tree's branches dropped leaves into my yard, covering my flowerbeds and dirtying up my swimming pool, and now, when I finally decided that I'm sick of cleaning up, after I understood that you're not going to do anything about this nuisance yourself, I finally cut down these filthy branches myself, you come over and make demands?

WRITER: You know what? If you don't want to clear away the branches, fine. Leave them. (*Turns to leave*) And just please, when you get off the ladder, please mind the flowers.

NEIGHBOR: I see 'em. (*To himself*) Philistine.

WRITER: (*Stops for an instant, considers whether to respond or not, finally turns back to the NEIGHBOR*) What did you say?

NEIGHBOR: Nothing.

WRITER: Nothing?

NEIGHBOR: Nothing, it's just that, after all I said I was expecting…

WRITER: Expecting what?

NEIGHBOR: I was expecting an apology.

WRITER: An apology? What do I have to apologize for?

NEIGHBOR: For what your tree did to my yard.

WRITER: What the tree did? The tree did what trees do, I'm not responsible for what the tree does.

NEIGHBOR: But it's yours.

WRITER: So what?

NEIGHBOR: If say, your dog went into my yard…

WRITER: I already told you I don't have a dog.

NEIGHBOR: Fine, but let's say you had a dog, and it went into my yard and took a shit, wouldn't you apologize?

WRITER: I'd apologize.

NEIGHBOR: So? Your tree has been shitting in my yard for years, don't you think you should apologize for that?

WRITER: But the tree also gave you shade.

NEIGHBOR: And who says I want shade?

WRITER: You're putting that thing up to have shade.

NEIGHBOR: It's not the same shade.

WRITER: And if this tree wasn't here, you'd have nowhere to tie this sun shade.

(*Pause*)

NEIGHBOR: So you're not going to apologize?

WRITER: I don't have to apologize. If anything you're the one who should apologize for sawing branches off my tree without approval, for entering my yard without permission, and for tying things to my tree without asking.

NEIGHBOR: I did all of these things only because you left me no other choice. You and your tree pushed my back to the wall. After suffering from your tree for years, I finally understood that you're not going to lift a finger to solve this.

WRITER: Solve this? I didn't even know there was a problem.

NEIGHBOR: Ignorance is no defense.

WRITER: Excuse me?

NEIGHBOR: If say, your dog went into my yard…

WRITER: I don't have a dog.

NEIGHBOR: Let's say you had a dog, and every day it went into my yard and took a shit, let's say every day for years he went into my yard and took a shit, and you didn't do anything about it…

WRITER: But if I didn't know…

NEIGHBOR: Didn't know what? Are you that stupid? Don't you know what a dog is? Don't you know what dogs do? If you're so irresponsible, you shouldn't even be allowed to have a dog!

WRITER: I don't have a dog!

NEIGHBOR: You shouldn't be allowed to have a tree either!

(*Pause as the NEIGHBOR finishes tying the sun shade*)

WRITER: You know what, I'm sick of arguing, if it means that much to you, no problem, fine, I apologize. (*Somewhat cynically*) I'm sorry that my

tree's branches shaded your yard, and I'm sorry that leaves from my tree fell into your yard.

NEIGHBOR: Apology accepted.

WRITER: But just, really, the flowers…

NEIGHBOR: I see 'em.

WRITER: Thank you. (*Turns to leave*)

NEIGHBOR: And what about compensation?

WRITER: What?

NEIGHBOR: Compensation for what your tree did.

WRITER: What compensation?!

NEIGHBOR: If say, your dog…

WRITER: I don't have a dog!

NEIGHBOR: But let's say…

WRITER: No but! I have no reason to compensate you for something I didn't do.

NEIGHBOR: Wait a minute, if you're saying you didn't do anything then what did you apologize for just a minute ago?

(*Descends ladder, stands only a few paces away from the WRITER*)

Are you telling me that was a fake apology? That it was meaningless? That you don't stand by what you say?

WRITER: I…

NEIGHBOR: I knew it, you're not a man, you're just a worm. You're willing to talk and blabber, but when it really comes down to it, you don't care about fairness or justice.

WRITER: You want justice? Fine, if the tree wronged you then you've already punished it. You punished it by sawing off its branches—a serious corporal punishment, to which you've also added community service—to hold up your sun shade.

NEIGHBOR: Even if I accept your claim about the tree's punishment, there's nothing in it for me, the victim. Punishment is one thing and compensation is another.

WRITER: You got shade.

NEIGHBOR: I had shade before.

WRITER: It's not the same shade. (*Pause*) And in any case, since justice is such a big issue for you, I'm sure you received some satisfaction from

sawing off the branches.

NEIGHBOR: Satisfaction is…hard to measure. I really thought that cutting off the branches would give me some satisfaction, but afterwards I felt this wasn't enough.

WRITER: So what else do you want?

NEIGHBOR: I want to feel that justice has been done.

WRITER: And what will make you feel that justice has been done?

NEIGHBOR: Hard to say. (*Pause*) Let's say that cutting off the branches in some way compensates for the shade, there are two other issues that have to be addressed—the leaves dirtying my pool and covering my flowers.

WRITER: So what do you want?

NEIGHBOR: I think the appropriate thing would be for me to trample your flowers and pee in your pool.

WRITER: What?

NEIGHBOR: It seems only fair.

WRITER: First of all, I don't have a pool, and second, there is no way I'm letting you trample my flowers.

NEIGHBOR: That's really a problem, about the pool.

WRITER: I'm not letting you trample my flowers!

NEIGHBOR: What if, instead of peeing in the pool I pee on you?

WRITER: What?

NEIGHBOR: I'm reminding you, we're talking about years of dirt.

WRITER: Yes, leaves, not urine!

NEIGHBOR: Fine, you know what? Because it's you and not a pool, I'm willing to replace the peeing with spitting. I want to spit in your face.

WRITER: What do leaves in a pool have to do with spitting in someone's face?

NEIGHBOR: I'll admit, it's a bit of a stretch, but I think that if you let me do this I'll really feel satisfaction. I'll feel fully compensated for dirtying the pool.

WRITER: And what about the flowers?

NEIGHBOR: Flowers are a different issue, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Dirt for dirt and flowers for flowers.

WRITER: If say, just for a minute let's say, in theory, that I let you spit in my face, is there a chance this might be enough, and you could forget about

trampling the flowers?

NEIGHBOR: I don't know...

WRITER: You have to understand, these flowers are really important to me, they inspire me, I look at them every day when I sit and write.

NEIGHBOR: Sit and write? What are you, a poet?

WRITER: I'm a playwright.

NEIGHBOR: A playwright? Interesting, I could get a lot of satisfaction from spitting in the face of a playwright.

WRITER: So you agree? You'll forget about the flowers?

NEIGHBOR: I can't commit one hundred percent, but I think that spitting in your face would really satisfy me.

WRITER: Fine, if you're willing to forget about the flowers, I'm willing to get spit in the face.

(*The NEIGHBOR moves closer to the WRITER, examines him from various angles, as if weighing his options, and finally spits on him.*)

WRITER: (*Wipes his face*) Fine. If that settles it...

NEIGHBOR: No.

WRITER: What do you mean no?

NEIGHBOR: I still want to trample your flowers.

WRITER: But you said...

NEIGHBOR: I said I can't commit one hundred percent.

WRITER: But you still spat in my face.

NEIGHBOR: Yes, and I feel that's adequate compensation for the pool, but the flowers...

WRITER: And how did you get from leaves gently falling on your flowers to roughly trampling mine?

NEIGHBOR: I'm reminding you, this is years of dirt.

WRITER: But I told you how important these flowers are for me.

NEIGHBOR: Maybe that was your mistake. If I hadn't known, maybe I would have let it go. But the minute you told me that these flowers are so important to you, trampling them seemed a lot more significant than spitting in your face. Even while I was spitting in your face I was thinking about the flowers.

WRITER: But...

NEIGHBOR: And you went on and on, telling me how you look at them every day, that they inspire you, and I thought, what's more important for a playwright, his dignity or his inspiration? Humiliation is a daily occurrence, but inspiration is rare.

(*Pause. The WRITER opens his mouth as if to speak but no voice comes out.*)

And maybe it seems like this is more a punishment for you than compensation for me, because what do I care about your flowers, or your inspiration, but you have to understand, every time I raked leaves in my yard or fished them out of my pool I was cursing your tree, and you too, in a way, and now I feel that I would get the greatest satisfaction from trampling your flowers. It would give me a feeling of sweet revenge after years and years of injustice.

(*Moves near the flowers, looks over at the WRITER.*)

You have no idea how sweet this moment is, the moment just before…

(*The NEIGHBOR hesitates for another moment, then begins trampling the flowers methodically, raising his legs high up and stomping, jumping on the flowers, kicking them, and tearing them up with his hands. After about 30 or 40 seconds of this his pace slows until he is finally standing between the trampled flowers looking a bit defeated.*)

WRITER: Is that it? Are you done? Do you feel satisfied?

NEIGHBOR: Satisfaction is complicated. (*Pause*) I really thought that trampling your flowers would satisfy me, but now…

WRITER: Now you feel empty.

NEIGHBOR: Yes…

WRITER: For me, these flowers were important, but for you they were just flowers.

NEIGHBOR: Yes…

WRITER: You trampled them because you thought this would give you some meaning, that the meaning they have for me would somehow transfer to you, but…

NEIGHBOR: (*Shakes his head*) Nothing.

WRITER: No feeling of relief, no sweet revenge, just a series of meaningless actions.

(*The WRITER approaches the NEIGHBOR sympathetically, almost placing a hand on his shoulder. The NEIGHBOR looks at him angrily and pushes him away. The WRITER retreats, but the NEIGHBOR grabs him*

by his clothes, the two struggle and fall to the ground. The NEIGHBOR gains the upper hand, pins the WRITER to the ground and beats him. He finally gets up and exits hurriedly, tossing a hateful glance at the tree. A few second later the WRITER stirs, gets up, and totters back to his table. He takes the pen in his hand, stares at the trampled flowers, and begins writing.)

END

KATERYNA BORTSOVA

DREAMING

ASHLEY GEIGER

ERASURE

JUYANNE JAMES

THE WOODPECKER

My father's eyes are always open, or they blink to his rhythm in nature. In a gown he has worn home from the hospital, he sits at the edge of the bed, soaked to his bottom, unable to go to the bathroom properly, on his own. His diaper needs to be changed.

"My dyddie is wet," he says, unashamed and with a smile. He has not lost his cool, irreverent sense of humor.

He has boys' eyes—eyes that wish to see where he will be going. He is holding on, I know, with all his strength. He wants to reach 90, just half a year away.

"Oh, the party my girls'll give me," he says, and it's as clear as anything to be imagined: he will make it. Screw those doctors, what do they know?

He waits for me to come to him, to cross the small room of the Katrina trailer. I have been sitting at the table still eating my breakfast. I cannot help but see him as he is: aren't those his toes beginning to curl, signaling the end of his long and passionate life? But optimism flitters all around him, pecking at his heart. Ah, the sound of it.

He listens...tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

§

The woodpecker is no more than thirty feet outside the window. It hangs, claws, from a broken hickory tree, its top missing. I am sure the tree was healthy in its youth, and grew even stronger against the uncooperativeness of time. But then it grew old, or wasn't properly nourished, which left it vulnerable to a most obtrusive wind.

The bird's color is there—a full red slice down its small crown, which makes it male. The wings are black and white ridges, with a splash of red, barely visible on the bird's tummy. My father and I have spent many moments aching over the bird's red-bellied beauty.

"Remember the one we used to have in the yard?" I ask him. That was at our first house, all those years ago. As a young girl, I would sit in the grass and wait for the giant woodpecker—a full red head and impressive black wings.

After we've listened for a long while, my father says, "Yeah, but this one's better." The bird, it moves in circles around the old tree...tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. I imagine the sound reminds my father of the weapons he used in war, or the sound of the gunfire from a distance...tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

§

My father and I have history. We are both people of nature. We tried to save an ailing chicken hawk one summer—the bird, in its final hours, searched my father and me out as we cleared away weeds from beneath fine oak trees, which simply wanted to grow freely and give off an air of greatness and indignation. We found the bird waiting near our truck and rushed it to the nearest vet clinic. But we were too late.

We used to ride in my sports car, with the windows down, as we crossed the Causeway, from the country to New Orleans, rushing to his doctors' visits. We were both troubled by the V.A. He, the real soldier, having fought for his country in World War II. Me, who served the Navy well as a yeoman, but I never pointed a rifle at another soul. On the car rides home, we'd complain about the state of the V.A. hospital and how carelessly they seemed to treat the vets.

Sometimes we'd stop at diners, and he'd tell me his life's stories, once again, sure that one day I would write them down. The stories never changed but remained planted, like small trees, growing in my memory. How he got shot in the leg in the Aleutians. How he came home from the military and found his first wife "shacked up" with another man. How he married my mother on Valentine's Day. How sorry he was to have mistreated her over the years of their marriage.

We'd sit in old booths and eat omelets, and he'd smile, as though he were lighter, having spoken his truth once more—neither of us aware of how quickly those moments were passing.

§

When I go to him, and help him up from the bed, I feel guilty—mostly for blaming him for so long. Perhaps the blame shifted to guilt. It could be why I am here now, doing all the dirty work.

Slowly, he leans his bent, frail body into mine. He has the walk of a baby bird. His feet, a slight rhythm, a sure tap here and then there—not steady like music, or the tick of a clock. But it's his rhythm. We near the bathroom, and he slows even more. We both hear the tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, so close outside the window.

SONNY BREWER

DEATH AND TAXES

Frankie told me Mama was ready to die. Told me, "Before you come up here, you might as well know about last Friday when I took Mama to the clinic." I listened to the silence on the phone, heard my brother take a long breath, and knew he was out on the porch, smoking his brown cigarettes.

He told me, too, that she was coming unglued over something and he could not solve what the hell she was asking for. "You know how she does, pointing this way and that when she's trying to get us to figure out what she wants?"

I told him I know how she does. She can't speak since her stroke.

"Maybe, by God, you can hit on what it is," he said. "She's been mighty upset for two or three days now. Won't let it be." I told him we'd all of us try once I got there.

"I'll be passing through," I said, "but I won't leave until we settle her down."

Ordinarily, when I pushed my car north up the western edge of Alabama those two-hundred and fifty miles from Fairhope to Mama's house in Kennedy, it was to stay with her for the weekend and give Frankie a break. Let him go camping or fishing, or whatever he wanted to do. He lived with Mama. He had offered more than a dozen years earlier to move in and take care of her when his own struggles threatened him with homelessness. He was a year younger than me, had been married three times with no children, was a recovering alcoholic with a host of health issues. He'd had open heart surgery at the V.A. hospital in Birmingham to put in a new valve. "You hear that sonofabitch clicking?" he asked me. "Come over here and put your ear close."

"I hear it," I said. It had been six weeks since his surgery.

"Well, by God, it'll just have to click 'til it quits. They'll not get their knives and saws on me again," he declared. The surgeons had misaligned his rib cage at his sternum when they closed him up. Frankie said it stuck out like a bird's breast. And he was right.

My two sisters, Sandra and Missy, they also each took a weekend in rotation. We did it for years. Sometimes, on that fourth weekend Frankie would hire a neighbor lady to take his place, come and keep Mama. Other times he'd just stay close himself. "Ain't like I got shit else to do," he said. "I just need a break every now and then."

My mother couldn't talk since the stroke—about eighteen years

now—but she could read a menu, and she could sing some songs. She could say a few words. "Okay, yes," and "Okay, no," have helped a lot. "Shit!" has got her point across a time or two.

I told Frankie that William Gay, a writer friend from Tennessee, and I would stop by on our way to his place.

We landed at Mama's house just before noon. Frankie greeted us at the door. Mama sung out from the couch, "Okay!" She was grinning and her green eyes were shining. I hugged her, and sat beside her for a few minutes, while I introduced her to William. Mama's lap blanket moved as her Chihuahua Lilli Belle crawled from one of her legs to the other, but careful to stay out of sight.

As we sat, Mother watched *The Price is Right*. Then, she remembered and cried out, "Okay!" She sounded angry. Same word. Totally different intent. Easily detected.

"Here we go," Frankie said. "What I told you about." He tacked on, "Good luck."

"What is it, Mama?"

"Okay," she said, agitated, her eyes wide, insistent. She pointed in the direction of her bedroom down the hall. Also, the bathroom was that way.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

She shook her head, and waved her left hand, pointing in the general direction of the hall, or maybe the dining room just there. "Okay, no!" she repeated, frowning.

"Do you need to go someplace?" I asked my mother.

She pointed her finger at my chest. "*I* need to go someplace?"

"Okay, yes," she nodded with some relief. But we still weren't done. Frankie and William looked on. Frankie's face said, *Don't get cocky, Brother*.

In narrowing it down, I decided it was not a room, or anyplace inside that she wanted me to go. So I named the towns that lay in the general direction she was pointing—Millport, Kennedy, Columbus, Vernon. It was Vernon that got the nod and another "Okay!"

"Let's see, Vernon, hmmm—" I said, cutting a glance at Frankie. Then in William's direction. Back to Mama. "Vernon? Let's see—Why do I need to go to Vernon?" Mama looked at me like I wasn't trying very hard. Shook her head, agitation rising. I felt useless.

"Do you want to go see Uncle Carl?" Frankie asked. Our uncle lived in Vernon.

Mama scowled at Frankie and whipped her head toward the window beside her. She stared away from me. We always sat her on the end of the couch closest to the window. We'd hung a hummingbird feeder and another bird feeder just outside so she could watch birds fly in and out all day. But not now. She was getting pissed and just wanted to look away from her dumbass

son. “Not Uncle Carl?”

She looked back at me. “Okay, no,” she said in a small voice. She was about to cry. I reached for some humor.

I scooted closer on the couch, cut my eyes around the room, leaned in and said, “You want to go to the county jail?”

“Okay, yes,” she fairly shouted.

“What the hell, Mama?” Frankie asked. “This ain’t no damn joke. You’ve been on me for three days. And now you making like you want to go to the friggin’ jailhouse?”

“Vernon’s the county seat?” William asked. He looked from me to my mother. Frankie said it was, adding, “Courthouse on the square in the middle of town like all the other piss-ant county seats around the state.” Frankie didn’t love local government, or state government, or the federal government.

“Have y’all paid her land taxes? It’s time to,” William said. “We just paid ours.”

We all cut out eyes at Mama. She nodded, and said, hardly above a whisper, “Okay, yes.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. She did not blink. She held out her hand to William. He stepped up and took her hand in his again. Frankie and I looked at each other. Neither he nor I spoke. I patted Mama on the knee and she drew me to her. I don’t know if anybody else was crying. Real men don’t check each other out at a time like that.

“We will pay your taxes, Mama,” I said, betting that Sandra had already done so. She was still crying, but nodded and tried to smile. She looked back out the window.

“Gotta be tough, you know,” William said to Frankie and me.

“I can’t imagine,” Frankie said. I just shook my head. Words, put together, clear and strong, making stories that somebody could believe, was what William Gay did so very beautifully. Something that I wanted to do better, always better. Something that was taken from my mother in ten seconds.

Is it bigger than a breadbox? And that line of query had got us by with Mama. Everybody just making the best of the hand dealt her in the stoke. And, on balance, we were, each of us her kids, pretty damned good at discerning what Mama wanted us to know. And she knew a lot. Her mind was sharp as ever. It was the rest of her that didn’t work so good anymore.

And when we couldn’t make out what she tried to tell us, it was rough on everybody. Frankie was best at catching her silent meanings.

I got off the couch and rejoined him in the kitchen.

William took my spot, sat beside Mama, and watched some of her TV show with her. I looked at William, so at ease with this old lady he’d just met. He was actually watching the game show like it mattered. That was William.

Thing is, in that moment, *The Price is Right* was really enough. There was nothing else to be said.

"So what did Mama do at the clinic?" I asked my brother.

Frankie said, "Well, she was pointing this way and that, getting pretty upset. Finally, the nurse told us that Mama pointed up to the ceiling two or three times when she'd been in the room with her earlier. Sandra and Missy were there in the room with me and Mama."

"Pointing up?" I asked.

"Pointing toward Heaven," Frankie said, and looked down at the floor. "Sonny, she's been crying a lot since she came back from Fairhope, from your house over Christmas. Several times a day. I believe she's tired, bub. Had enough of this shit. Ready to go home."

Frankie told me that it was the nurse who had been taking care of Mama for several years who figured out why she pointed up. "Hell, she lost it and went out in the hall. The woman was boo-hooing like it was *her* mother."

I hung my arm over Frankie's shoulder.

"You still coming to see Mama next week for your birthday?" Frankie asked me.

"I am," I said. "I'll come about Wednesday and stay on through the weekend."

"It ain't your weekend," Frankie said. "It's mine."

"Yeah, I know, but I want to spend a few more days this time with both of you. All three of us will have a damn blast," I said.

"Around here? Bullshit," Frankie said. "But it'll be good, bub."

§

Mother was sixty-two when she had a stroke. My twin nephews, Cameron and Kelsey, got off the school bus at Nanny's house to find her on the phone one minute and on the floor in her bedroom the next. Sandra, their mother, was a school teacher and still at work, and she and her boys were living with Mama for a few weeks following her divorce. I don't know if those kindergartners could say their ABCs, but they had the presence of mind to take off running to a neighbor's house. Right there, they saved their grandmother's life.

The local rescue squad ambulance came and hauled Mama, first, twenty miles to a small hospital in Fayette, then on to Druid City Hospital in Tuscaloosa. My sister Missy, a radiology technician at DCH, actually read the head CT scan on some patient who she'd soon learn was her mother. Mama was in a coma for five days. Sandra and Missy made a cassette tape of talking and singing that was played to her on headphones. When she finally came around, she was immediately wheeled into surgery and we were told she might not make it through the night.

We waited. When the neurosurgeon finally came out and talked to us, he shook his head and said he could not believe it, but they discovered in surgery that the bleeding in her brain had stopped on its own.

So, she'll be all right, we wanted to know, relieved.

"The aneurism was in the left hemisphere," the doctor said. "She will have some paralysis on the right side of her body. Her speech will be affected. We won't know the full extent of damage from the stroke until she is awake and more time has passed."

It was clear within the following days, and after initial rehab therapy, that Mother would not walk again, and would no longer speak. "She'll require round-the-clock care," he said. She'll be like a child, I said.

He corrected me. "No," he said, "a child develops. Your mother will decline."

I don't know what we kids expected for Mother, what we expected *from* Mother, but she surprised us, and over the years, except for the effects of the stroke, she was mostly healthy. And through it, her second son looked after his mother for about fourteen years. He cooked and cleaned for her, gave her shots and medicine, argued with her and talked to her. They sang some songs. He put her to bed of a night and got her up and dressed her of a morning. He took her to the bathroom. He tended Lilli Belle. When he went somewhere in the car, he put her in the passenger seat.

They kept each other company and fended off for each other what last week's newspaper called the silent killer of the aged—loneliness. But then my brother finally called my sisters and me to say we needed to *do something different*. We knew he was about done for. He was tired and his own body was worn out. He could no longer control his blood sugar. Mama was still going pretty strong, but there was one illness after another for him.

"I just want to go over to the county lake campgrounds and rent me a *bungalow*," he said, knowing it would be a shed, really. The county park service had bought portables from Home Depot or Lowe's, and converted them into something habitable for campers. Each of the cabins was named for a fish, and Frankie liked the Catfish Cabin. "I want to stay there and fish and watch sparks fly up from a camp fire."

And he did.

Missy took Mama in at her house near Tuscaloosa. Sandra also lived close by. Frankie moved to the lake. Into the Catfish Cabin. And her house sat vacant for the first time in fifty-some years, since the summer of 1964 when the builder finished it.

Less than two months at the lake and Frankie died. When the doctor told him he had cancer, he asked how long he had. A few months. Sandra told me pretty soon Frankie asked everyone to leave his hospital room. He said he just wanted to rest. Missy and Mama left. Sandra refused, and he

didn't mind, really. She was there to open his blinds so he could see the sun and sky above the parking lot outside.

The weird thing is, in afternoon the day before, I had lost my cell phone on the construction site where I was working. At ten o'clock in the morning on the day my brother died, a co-worker handed my phone to me, said some guy on the sidewalk beyond our barricades said he found a phone. I turned it on and keyed in the password and saw call after call and message after message from Sandra. She said Frankie was real sick, she was worried about him, and I should come to Tuscaloosa right away.

I left the job, dropped my hardhat on the pickup seat, and headed out of Mobile, making a trip I'd been making for forty years since moving away from Lamar County. I called my brother-in-law, who was a cop, and asked him about talking my way out of a ticket for driving a hundred miles an hour or better. He asked me to not add myself to some patient list and drive the limit and *maybe a little more*. "Please," he said. I didn't take his advice. I ran between ninety and a hundred when I wasn't near a town. I was getting updates from Sandra every quarter hour or so. Frankie was drifting in and out, she said, and more and more he was out. He would open his eyes and stare out the window, but then his head would sink into the pillow and his eyes would flutter and close.

Coming into Greensboro, about an hour south of Tuscaloosa, my cell phone rang. "You can slow down, Sonny," she said. "Brother just died." I took my foot off the gas pedal and cried, and slammed my fist on the steering wheel and cussed for losing my phone. If I'd got her first call that morning, I'd be three hours there right now. At least he was not alone. Sandra watched him take his last breath, certain that he willed himself to go and not put up with the hassle. Neither do I doubt it.

Mama was strong through the funeral, oddly peaceful with her son's passing ahead of her. But not by long. Grief set in and she joined him before the year was out. Sandra recently sent me a picture of Mama holding Frankie's hand as he lay in his hospital bed. It's hard to look at, but it says something strong about a mother's love, the real rock of the ages. Religious differences start wars, but a Baptist mama and a Hindu mama will both offer their lives in love for the sake of their children.

William died before them both. That news came to me when, again, I was stopped off at my mother's place on the way to Hohenwald. This time to pick up William to travel together to a guest reading for the two of us at Lincoln Memorial University in east Tennessee. Another odd thing with the phone. No cell service at Mama's house, then as soon as I drove away and got in range of a signal, my phone blew up with messages and calls. People wanted to know was it true William Gay had died. I learned myself, behind the wheel, on the road, that it was true. But I drove on to his house, saw his

son, and the next day to the college where I read on stage from William's work.

Frankie Lane Brewer died on 11-12-13. Easy to remember. He was 63.

Mama died at the age of 83 on September 13, 2014.

William was 70 when he died on February 23, 2012.

So far, I'm still driving at 69. Still paying taxes. The road out front of my windshield is shorter, that much I know. And, my tax bills are lower. On both counts, I'm satisfied.

People would ask Frankie how was he doing. "Good enough," he'd say.

Yep, me, too, Bub. Things are good enough. Okay, yes!

LISA HASE-JACKSON

33RD AND SOUTHWEST TRAFFICWAY

there were two men knocking on the door that night
when my mother answered the door

two men breaching the door-chain that night
when my mother came to the door

two men pushing my mother into the living room
that night because she is so small

two men pushing her into the bedroom that night
my mother's very small

and no one heard the banging
and no one heard the screaming
and no one used the phone that night
to tell the police to hurry

just those two men pushing my mother
pushing her onto our bed

two men saying strange things that night
pushing my mother onto the bed

and when they saw a child that night
pop up from the blankets warm

there were two men surprised that night
in the face of a sleepless child

two men who ceased their assault that night
in the eyes of a wakened child

and when those two men ran away that night
my mother heard them swear

that those two men didn't know anything that night

about there being a kid

and those two men disappeared onto the streets that night
running from what they did

OWL SURVEY

Far away from neon-washed surfaces
of Western expansion, stars hum
thin stories of tremendous
histories and violent beginnings,
spinning gestalts, of chaos and order.

She is counting owls,
my daughter, in the Siskiyou National Forest.
Nocturnal citizens are busy
foraging underfoot,
        in a micro theater of ecology,
home to grubs and snails
        devoured each in turn by small
mammals and reptiles to canticles
of early Spring Peepers,
        a din of toads.
It is 2:00 AM. She cradles
        a hollow-boned spotted owl with eyes cavernous
and silent
        as still well water, an unexplained echo
of wilderness sounds
        in contrast to the silver band
she's cinched around its feathered leg.

DIANE

LETTING GO

BRANDON FRENCH

A THOUSAND HOURS

Characters:
DUKE, man
VAL, woman

As the curtain opens, a man and a woman are seen dancing together, although it is hardly dancing but rather, a shifting of weight from one foot to the other.

Their faces are worn and shiny with perspiration. The man needs a shave. Each wears a collection of ill-matched, wrinkled and shapeless clothing. Both wear placards with the number 44 on their backs.

In the background, throughout the entire scene, we hear 1930's dance music.

The stage is unevenly lit, with pools of glaring light alternating with murkier areas. In the center of the stage, suspended from above, is a spinning mirror ball.

Although VAL, the female character, continues to shift her weight from foot to foot, she is apparently asleep.

DUKE: Val...Val...(*Shouting*) VAL!

VAL: (*Waking instantly and answering at the same volume*) WHAT?!

DUKE: Nothing. I was just...lonely.

VAL: You're always lonely. You're a very dependent person, Duke. (*Pause*) My father said that loneliness was a congenital disease. Did I ever tell you that?

DUKE: Yes.

VAL: Con-genital. A disease which comes with the genitals.

DUKE: Yes.

VAL: I never said that before.

DUKE: Yes, you did.

VAL: Are you implying that I repeat myself?

DUKE: No.

VAL: You're damn right I repeat myself. I'm worth repeating.

DUKE: (*After a pause*) There's no need to be irritable.

VAL: You wake me up to tell me I repeat myself–

DUKE: I didn't say that.

VAL: Oh, now I'm hearing things. I repeat myself, and I hear things. What else? I suppose you have a list.

DUKE: No.

VAL: Stop speaking in one-syllable words.

DUKE: Monosyllables.

VAL: I know that one-syllable words are monosyllables. I know that.

DUKE: There's no need to be irritable.

VAL: You're repeating yourself.

DUKE: Yes.

VAL: And that was a monosyllable.

DUKE: How do you keep it up, Val?

VAL: Keep what up?

DUKE: Talking.

VAL: Somebody has to.

(They dance in silence for a few moments.)

VAL: (*Bursting out*) I'm sick to death of Sally Fensterwold.

DUKE: We never see her anymore.

VAL: I'm sick of the thought of her.

DUKE: Just put her out of your mind.

VAL: I'm not the sort of person who can put people out of my mind. Once somebody's in there, she's in there for good.

DUKE: That's too bad.

VAL: Oh, I suppose you think I ought to be like you. A man who forgot his entire childhood. A man who remembers his childhood in one monosyllable. "Nice." Nobody's childhood is nice.

DUKE: Mine was.

VAL: How do you know? You can't remember it.

DUKE: I remember it was nice.

VAL: When I was four, my father told me that a man painted Lillian Roth's naked body silver. I couldn't decide if it was a warning or a threat. It made me sick to my stomach. I had stomachaches every night for a year. My parents took me to a special doctor, and the doctor said, "She's a very nervous little girl. Are you doing something to make her nervous?" No, my father said. He was only telling me bedtime stories about painting naked little girls silver.

DUKE: You never told me that story before.

VAL: Yes I did.

DUKE: I don't remember.

VAL: That's why I repeat myself. I never know what you'll remember, and what you'll forget. I'm liable to end up like your childhood. Nice. "I had a nice childhood and a nice girlfriend."

DUKE: I'll never remember you as nice.

VAL: I hope not.

(*They dance for a few moments in silence.*)

VAL: You know who always used to drive me crazy? Lenore Peterson. I stepped on her turtle. It was awful. I had nightmares about it until she dropped my cat from the second floor of her apartment building. Then I just hated her.

DUKE: Did the cat die?

VAL: No, but we were even because the turtle was an accident. (*Beat*) I can't kill babies waiting for the mother to come home, and it makes me cry. (*Beat*) I know you think I'm made of stone but the truth is, I cry quite a lot. The tears run down the insides of my skin and dry in the spaces between my toes.

(*DUKE has fallen asleep on VAL's shoulder.*)

VAL: Stay awake!

DUKE: I'm sorry.

VAL: I don't fall asleep when YOU'RE talking.

DUKE: I know.

VAL: Rare though it is when you have anything to say. (*Beat*) You just don't carry the ball, Duke. I mean, what goes on in your mind? What's going on right this minute?

DUKE: Nothing much.

VAL: Well, what?

DUKE: Nothing.

VAL: That's not possible. There has to be something going on in your mind. You're an intelligent person.

DUKE: (*Giving his mind a thorough search*) No.

VAL: What's it like in there? Nice?

DUKE: Not bad.

VAL: Kind of like a mossy knoll? A windy beach?

DUKE: (*Meeting her challenge*) Like a glassy lake.

VAL: Ah. (*Beat*) Like an Indian burial ground.

DUKE: You always have the last word.

VAL: Ah.

DUKE: You see?

VAL: Of course I see! I ask what's going on in your mind, and you tell me you've got water on the brain.

DUKE: (*Bested*) There's no need to be irritable.

VAL: Did your mother say that to you or something? I mean, that must be your favorite phrase in the whole world.

DUKE: There's no satisfying you, Val.

VAL: Are you saying I can't be satisfied? Because if you're trying to save your precious male ego by saying that, it won't work. I can be satisfied!

DUKE: Good to know.

VAL: I am capable of multi-satisfactions. I am multisatisfactional.

DUKE: You bet your life.

VAL: You bet your ass.

DUKE: That too.

VAL: Don't humor me.

DUKE: I wouldn't dare.

VAL: I don't think you care about me at all.

DUKE: (*Quietly*) Yes I do.

(*They dance for a few minutes in silence. VAL leans against DUKE wearily.*)

VAL: (*In a small voice*) I'm feeling very sad.

DUKE: Why?

VAL: I don't know.

DUKE: You always know.

VAL: No. Not this time.

(*DUKE holds her tenderly. They continue dancing.*)

DUKE: I had a dream last night. Very strange. We were in a room all by ourselves, dancing. There were numbers on our backs as if we were…racing greyhounds or something. And…and our clothes were dirty…we looked really sweaty and exhausted. But we kept on dancing for a thousand hours. I don't know why, but it all made perfect sense in the dream.

VAL: (*Looking up at DUKE intensely*) Did you really dream that? Or did you just make it up?

DUKE: I really dreamed it.

(*There is a pause as VAL's mood shifts.*)

VAL: I wonder what it meant.

DUKE: I knew you would.

(*They go on dancing. The curtain slowly closes.*)

END

WILLIAM THOMPSON

MY FATHER WALKING

I see my father at a distance. He is walking toward me up the street, Manitoba Maples lining the boulevard on the left and open lawns to the right.

It's a curious thing about our street. On our side, the side where number thirteen stands, only one front-yard-fence breaks the expanse of lawn. This expanse is where we play football in the summer and long games of tag or hide-and-seek through the lengthening evenings of June. On the opposite side of the street, only one or two front yards are fenceless. That gap-toothed side of the street is uninviting and closed off.

My father is the only moving thing on the street. It's a day in early fall—the grass a faded green, the maples a golden yellow and already dropping leaves on this October afternoon. My father walks with a determined stride, as though he is unconsciously wanting to get away from something, or needing to get somewhere. I want to hold him there in that push-me-pull-me present, the world rolling beneath his feet as he walks.

It's the jacket—the forest green jacket he wears that fixes him in both my child's eye and mind's eye. I'm standing in front of the house and watching him walk. He is carrying a case of beer in his left hand. The weight of the case throws off his gait, just enough to emphasize that determined stride. He seems painfully visible to the world, but I'm the only one who watches.

It's either an early Friday evening or late Saturday afternoon. Remembering it, I can't be sure either way. But my father only went to the liquor store on those days—usually on Fridays, the end of his work week, the beginning of the two days of the week he was free of his job, with just his wife and kids to populate and trouble his landscape with arguments, chores, and noise—always noise.

My father was a working man, a blue-collar man, who cared deeply about the world around him. He cared about politics, about football, about his family, and about his house—number thirteen, as he always reminded us. But that caring was always undermined by a world that didn't care about him in return—especially his opinions. And my father had opinions about everything.

He cared but didn't care. He would rail against the government—the Conservatives, in those days. He would expostulate from his armchair in the living room as he watched the news, his face growing simultaneously harder and more animated, insisting part way through his tirade that he didn't give

a shit. He would rail some more, then not give a shit. Sometimes he just didn't give a shit as a place to begin.

"I don't give a shit. Goddamn it. They couldn't find their bare asses with both hands if they tried."

Sometimes he would employ what he thought was irony. "Progressive Conservatives...what the hell does that mean? How can you be progressive and a conservative?" It was never really a question.

We were his audience. My mother, my sister, and me. My brother never cared one way or another. He was the youngest in the family, and what we now call developmentally delayed. He was one of the chief worries that gnawed at my mother's heart. My brother was content to play in the basement and stay out of the way when things heated up. It was my mother who felt the need to respond to my father's tirades, and me who wanted to do something and couldn't—both pointless responses. And when my father didn't give a shit, I knew I needed to, and I was caught between my heightened awareness of his anger and my inability to do anything about it.

But the tirades were also punctuated by spaces of quiet—stretches of time when he sat with the paper, played solitaire at the end of the table, or rolled his cigarettes. I basked in the quiet because then my father was more approachable, more reliable, a quiet, solid presence that smelled of pipe smoke and vitalis, the man who had gum in his shirt pocket, and who would trust me with a trip to the store to buy his pouch of tobacco.

But the memory of that October day—early evening or late afternoon—brings me back to my eight-year-old present. The sight of my dad walking up the street and carrying a case of beer registers with me in a particular way. Beer isn't bad; half a magnum of wine is worse. If it's wine, then I know an evening of drinking, television, and smoking is to follow. He will watch TV, getting louder as the evening progresses, until finally falling asleep in his chair, snoring tremendously, until at some point he wakes, and takes himself off to bed.

I wasn't afraid of my father, but I was afraid of his explosions of mood. In many ways, he was an unpredictable man, but a predictable drinker—first cheerful and more talkative, then angry and filled with a bitterness that he never had the capacity to explain, only expressing it in utterances of blame and condemnation.

But out here, on the street, he's at a distance—for now, at least. And I can just watch him approach. I can store the image, hold the picture in my mind and forever keep him there. And that's what I want, right now, in this moment of time. I want to keep him at a distance because that way I can feel those things I keep hidden from myself—my own anger, my feeling of weakness in the face of his, and the sense of powerlessness I was learning as his son.

But I'm no longer that confused eight-year-old. I'm a grown-up son and father, who's remembering this child standing on the street. I'm no longer trapped by that present, and the picture of my father walking reminds me of another—a better one, one in which I'm watching my father walk through a dripping forest, wearing that same green coat.

It's a family holiday, and we are camping. He is less troubled on these holidays, less troubled than he is at home. I'm standing in the woods, next to a giant cedar—giant to my boy's eyes. The forest is dim, both from the canopy overhead and the incessant rain. I can smell the wetness of living wood and the dampness of muffled earth. And watching my father in this forest allows for another feeling to find its way into my waiting silence.

I know I loved my father in those days, but I never said it that way to myself. He certainly never told me that he love me—not me, or my sister or brother, and if he did, I don't remember it. We were his kids; he was our dad. He provided for us, leaving the house every weekday morning by 7:00 for a job that took him away from us and the house that often made him angry. I wondered even then if he was relieved to be away; I was often relieved he was gone, which in turn fired all my guilt receptors.

My dad was a working man, and he was never out of a job. He worked hard all his life, and his jobs were physical. He was a steam engineer by trade, which meant he took care of big boilers that heated buildings. Every day he was off to work, metal lunchbox clutched in his heavy-knuckled hand. My mother always put that lunchbox together the night before.

I was a nosey kid. I was always prying into my dad's stuff. I would sit on the floor and go through his lunchbox at the end of the day. I was hoping for treats or bits of things he didn't eat. My father was like that—he would buy candy or chocolate bars and hide them so we wouldn't find them. He wasn't a secretive man, but he was a hard-to-understand man, which is perhaps why I went through his stuff. I needed some way to comprehend this man, the pendulum of his emotions, and his inscrutable silences.

For three weeks in the summer we went on holidays. Sometimes we had a destination—once to Saskatchewan to visit relatives on my dad's side, once out to Vancouver to visit relatives on my mom's. My grandparents on my dad's side lived in the interior of British Columbia, and we often went there to visit.

I'm remembering a forest from one of those trips—somewhere in the interior of B.C. We don't have trees and forests like that back home. My father is walking along the forest path. He isn't wearing a hat; he rarely does. His green jacket is darkly wet, and he has his pipe clenched between his teeth. I can see his pipe is upside-down to protect it from the drizzling rain. The path is winding, and I watch him disappear and reappear from behind the trunks of trees as he comes toward me.

He was never an outdoors type, but watching him walking through the forest in drizzling rain made me want to believe so. I wanted desperately in my confused boy's heart to believe this man was much more than he was, much more than he tried to be, and that he wanted to give me much more than he ever did. I feel a rush of affection for this man, who looks taller and stronger in these dripping woods. Here, he's a man who has less to worry about, less to weigh him down—all the bills, the things to fix, the money that just wasn't there, and all that has been left behind on that tree-lined street, where another version of my father walks to escape, drinks to hide, and doesn't give a shit to protect himself from the world.

SHAW HOMER

THE NEW DRESS

My grandmother's hands tore helplessly at the tissue paper surrounding the new dress in its box. I leaned in and folded back one leaf of the paper, so she could better see what she was doing.

I had bought her the dress, a dark green knit, because in the nursing home all her dresses that hadn't been stolen were covered with food stains, pilled and frayed. I had taken her to lunch at Peddler's Village, to the Cock 'n Bull, where she sipped her frozen daiquiri through a straw and ate a ball of butter whole, perhaps thinking it was cheese. I didn't mention that it wasn't cheese.

Trying on the dresses after lunch—none of them like she used to wear; the styles had changed, and this was a long way from the dress shop she had patronized in Albany for 27 years—I noticed that her slip was gray and wanted mending. There was an unclean smell about my grandmother, an old, sour smell. I knew they bathed her regularly in the nursing home, or at least I hoped they did. The smell must have been coming from the dirty slip, but I remember hearing that death has a smell, and for many hours, even after many cigarettes, I couldn't get that smell out of my memory's nose.

And now, a week later, I was collecting her to take her back to Philadelphia for her 90th birthday party, packing up her meager things so that she could overnight in my grownup house, trying to find her toothbrush, the bed jacket, clean underwear—all jumbled together in the several drawers of the antique dresser we had moved into her room.

I knew that she didn't know where she was going, or why, but I hoped her mind, long past complete utterances, was also beyond worry. She followed my instructions meekly, like a guilty child.

When she pulled off the sweater and trousers, neither of which belonged to her, I was surprised to find her naked below, the small pale V sandwiched between loose thighs and the hanging flesh of her abdomen—gray, wrinkled, vulnerable. In our great old age, almost 90, we step backwards, I thought, stripped of our minds, our memories, even our dignifying pubic hair. Why wasn't she wearing panties? Her bra was in place—someone must have to help her into that; her arthritic hands, once pianist's hands, could never fasten the hooks of that bra.

There was the faint smell of urine hanging in the air of her room like an acrid fog. And, as I turned away to hide my sadness, fumbling through the few possessions I had gathered for our trip, it occurred to me that she must

finally be incontinent. I found some panties—not her style; she had always worn open-leg panties, and these had elastic around the thighs—and held them out for her to step into.

First the mind, and then the body goes, the bare little wedge of pubis now hiding a urethra that betrays her. I helped her into the panties, her swollen hand supporting her weight on my shoulder, and then I made her sit down on the edge of the bed to stretch on the pantyhose. She never used to wear those either, always a girdle with garters. Even if she were staying at home all day with no one coming to visit, Grandma would pull her girdle over her plump hips, slip into her all-in-one, fasten up the nylon stockings, put on a nice dress and the single-strand pearl necklace that was her signature.

She never put a worn garment back into the closet, so that everything there smelled fresh and new.

While she was struggling to get the pantyhose straightened around her hips, I looked in the cabinet under the sink in the bathroom she shared with the occupant of the room next door and found a box of disposable diapers. I packed it into the bag for home, not certain if I could ever insist she put one on.

Next, I helped her into the slip I had washed and mended, and finally I gathered up the dress and held it over her head. She lifted her arms up straight like an expectant child, and a small uncertain smile touched the corners of her mouth. A new dress. This much she understood. I guided her arms into the sleeves and pulled the dark green knit around her, straightening the shoulders over the narrow bones. I led her to the mirror above the dresser, fished my own comb out of my purse and arranged her fine, pale hair. The eyes reflected back at me were expressionless. Did she know whom she was looking at? Did she remember the music?

I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed gently, putting my cheek next to hers in the mirror, trying to smile through the constriction of my heart. “You look beautiful,” I said. And, for just the flicker of an instant, the distant memory of a smile in her eyes, I thought she recognized me.

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

SKYWARD

Those who are not astronomers
see the glittering fabric above—

a guiding array at night. We might
as well be cavewomen and men, so

enamored by the perforated curtain.
Last summer we lay on the lounge

chair on the deck, ready for the meteor
showers the astronomers predicted.

They probably had their telescopes
focused and steadied. Not us.

We whooped and pointed at the streaking
light, felt magnetized

to the dark dome. And to each other,
naked in the cave.

PERFORMANCE

A bagpiper unfolds elegy, beauty.
I wanted one
for my wedding in Vermont,

latched onto the Scottish blood
banked in my veins,
but my mother never found one.

A three piece musical group
pulled people into the town hall
on the hill at the skirt of the green.

But for my mother's service I unearthed
a piper, felt the plaintive music drift and sift
through the spring air, sat there

until I walked down the aisle,
its creaking wood hushed under
the worn red carpet,

smiled at the minister, stood still,
and read a poem on the podium to the silhouette
of a piper through the arched door.

MITCHELL NOBIS

COMMUNION

Plump & ripe,
glutted with juice & sugar,
the grapes hung and
swayed impatiently in the breeze,

pulling down
the branches
lower
and
lower

as though they,
the grapes,
were ready to sing themselves,
to hit the ground running,
para bailar el jarabe tapatio
at the harvest celebration,

as though they were ready
to work themselves into wine.

TAUNJA THOMSON

A WARMER TWILIGHT

Autumn is a mess—
jumble of bent limbs litters sidewalks
bare clouds cut sky.
Days stretch auburn
and nomad wind slashes at hair
kicks leaves that skate
rasping on pavement
until randy drizzle
drowns them
in fuzzy puddles.

Winter is a cleaner—
snow clears mile after mile
smooths over once-gnarled ground
of bruises and scars
and blisters.
Ice does its part
polishing lakes to a sheen
rivaled only by sun.
Even midnight skies are pristine
clad in black and barbed by Bethlehem
blue of late afternoon
horizon.
Raccoons footprint holds its shape
on hard ground.
Nothing is hidden.

Eventually dawns will bloom
opal with moon's rays
loosen this clarity
and a warmer twilight
will put it to bed.

FIERCE SONIA

ANXIOUS ALICE

AMIR SAFI

IF BLUE IVY IS JAY-Z'S GREATEST ALBUM, THEN RUMI MUST BE BEYONCÉ'S GREATEST POEM

Beyoncé names her daughter Rumi
and my heart becomes a whirling dervish.
It is of no surprise to me that the home
of a black woman is where a Persian name is most welcome
in America, where I have for too long
watched people who look like me
bleach their names like my neighbor Amir, who goes by Eric.
Who says hello to me in English, but I hear him speak to his mother in Farsi.
And I want to tell him that we already let Alexander burn takhteh jamshid.
It is time for us to stop committing arson to our own names.

What's a résumé to a history, Eric?
Do you think a racial slur cares what you go by?

But, instead I say, *I hope you have a nice day Eric.*
And I mean it because Eric is a really nice man.
But it sounds like *Erreh*.
and the music stops
like an *Error* like when Chalie Boy remixed "I Look Good,"
when nothing looked better than the original.
And I look at the photo of Beyoncé holding her twins
like two Grammys Adele could not steal from her
looking as proud as Chalie Boy is of being from Hearne, Texas.
And I suspect the same kind of Americans who made fun of my name
and threw away my résumé, will name their children Rumi,
without ever knowing where he's from or that
he was one of the greatest poets who has ever lived,
but I guess that's what InstaQuotes are for when a people are more
afraid of bigotry than erasure. I mean can you even be mad at someone
for wearing something you threw away?

DREW ATTANA

WHITE NOISE

I spent Easter morning
with Aviators low on the bridge
of my nose,
a single spoke in a friend-wheel
sitting cross-legged,
our knees together like moored ships,
losing white grains
to the loose coils of shag carpet,
and I couldn't hear you
asking to leave
over warbling bass lines,
over talk of Werner Herzog
and the promise
of Portland summer,
or maybe I didn't want to;
I know I didn't want to,
because in bed I refused to take off
those sunglasses, screaming that:
I was the *Lizard King*
(I could do anything)
so you turned over and over
then away
and I stumbled back
to the friends passing
their mirrored reflections around
like trading cards,
until every last baggie
the city had to offer
was hollowed out, licked clean,
and the wheel lay splintered,
leaving me solo on the couch
to analyze the start,
stop and start
of the garbage truck,
the wet, collective thump
of heartbeats
and the water-cooler gossip
of birds waking up with the sun.

LINDA QUINLAN

CAMPGROUND FOR JESUS

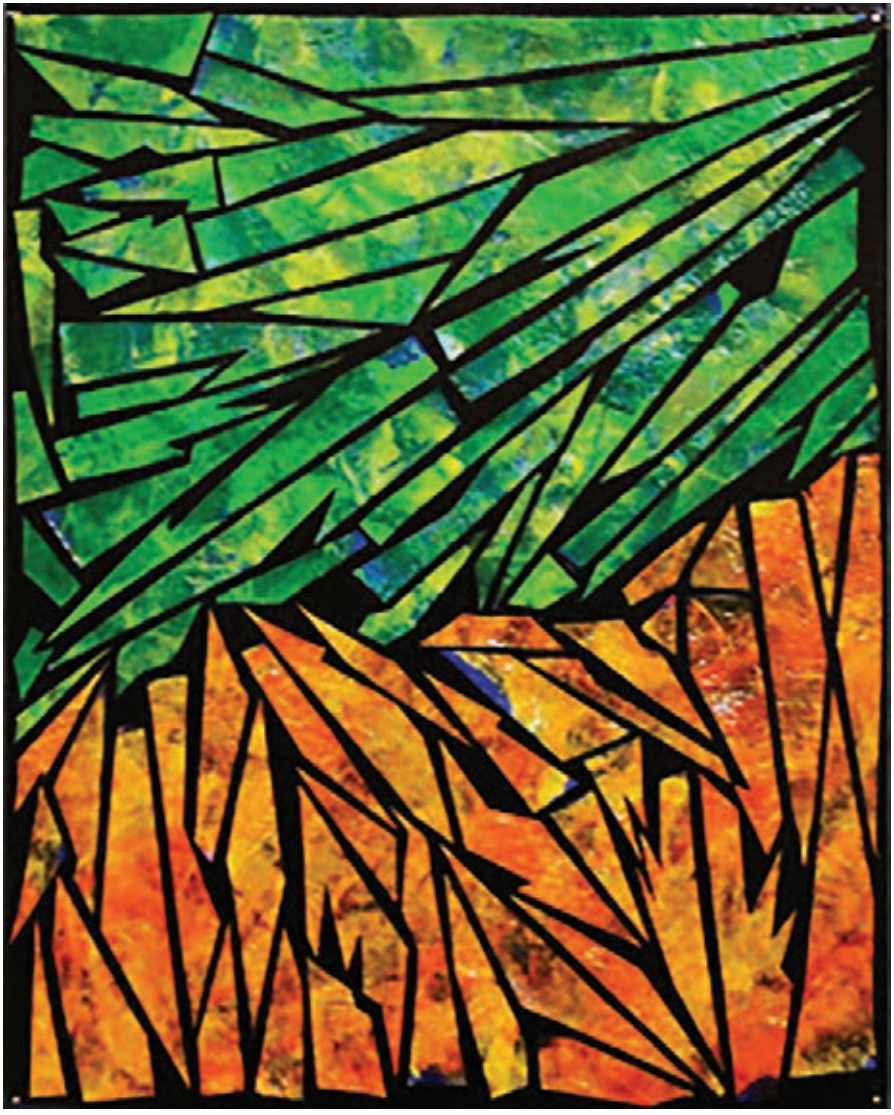
At my parents' lake house
Betsy and I pause by the bay.
A crow has warned the others
we are here
early morning intruders
deniers of tasty morsels
the sun has rotted.

This piece of heaven
where bikinis aren't allowed
and drinking is forbidden.
My father hides his rum bottles in the trunk of the car.
I envy their easy belief,
knowing who to hate and who to love.

Still, the landscape has magic,
a superstitious touching of toes to sand,
the ritual of my diving right in,
her slow and careful walking.
Blood sisters at fourteen
the touching of fingers
a timing of cycles
among the other teenagers on the beach,
no one else mattered.

We were heathens
and never once got saved at the chapel.
I became formless by the fire pit
and delighted in burning marshmallows
with pitchforked sticks we plunged into the flames.
Sometimes I play devil's advocate,
but not in this place,
a place that captures the hateful church bells
and the lingering sound of preachers.

REBEKA FERGUSSON-LUTZ



A FINE BALANCE

ANN STEWART MCBEE

VOCES MYSTICAE FROM UNDER THE MASONIC TEMPLE

Dear Hecate...
Dear fierce one,
I curse the kitchen artist and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together, and her words, may she be unable to speak what is concealed.

Unfortunately my current contract forbids me from involving myself in such matters. Please read page 92, section 14 of your handbook for further information. Or burn it and place the ashes in a bowl of blood from a newly castrated bull. Or chew it up and swallow it slowly. Stomach contents should read THIS IS KNOWN.

Good and beautiful Proserpina:
Snatch away the health, the body, the complexion, the strength, and the faculties of the box binder. Hand him over to your husband. Hand him over to fevers: quartan, tertian, daily. Let them overcome him to the point where they snatch away his soul.

Thank you for contacting me, informed citizen, on this important matter. I will keep our shared goals in mind as we continue to examine these issues in the Underworld.

I give over to you this victim, O Proserpina.
Summon for me the triple headed hound to tear away the heart of the security sealer. I will give you dates, figs, and a black pig if you complete this before the month of March in an orderly fashion.

I see your dates, your figs and your black pig, and raise you a molded plastic teddy bear bank, a bottle of perfume in the shape of a fire hydrant, a hand towel of synthetic fiber with Cap'n Crunch's face sewed into it, and a foam trolley car that you can wear on your head like a hat. These products are for sale a thousand years from now.

Proserpina Salvia,
I give over to you the head of Governor Walker.
Proserpina Salvia,

I give over to you the forehead of Governor Walker.
Proserpina Salvia,
I give over to you the eyebrows of Governor Walker.
Proserpina Salvia,
I give over to you the eyelids of Governor Walker.
Proserpina Salvia,
I give over to you the pupils of Governor Walker.
Proserpina Salvia,
I give over to you the nostrils, lips, ears, nose, tongue, and teeth of Governor Walker, so that he may not be able to say what is causing him pain. I give you the neck, shoulders, arms, and fingers, so that he may not aid himself in any way. I give you his breast, liver, heart, and lungs, so that he may not discover the source of his pain. His intestines, stomach, navel, and sides, so that he may not be able to sleep. His shoulder blades, so that he may not be able to sleep soundly. His sacred organ so that he may not be able to urinate. His rump, anus, thighs, knees, shanks, shins, feet, ankles, heels, toes, and toenails, so that he may not be able to stand by his own strength.

Proserpina Salvia is currently unavailable. Proserpina Salvia can't come to the temple right now. Proserpina Salvia is either away from the temple or unable to reply. Proserpina Salvia will return to the temple on Monday. Proserpina Salvia has a pain right there. And here.

Dear fierce and monstrous Hecate.
Crush, kill the hatpin maker. May he dilute, languish, sink. May all his limbs dissolve. Let him perish miserably. Let him leave life miserably. Let him be destroyed miserably. Take care of him so that he may not see another month.

Done. Now you have to do something for me. See that child, making pies out of mud and cattail fuzz? Take this geode, bring it down on her sweet-smelling skull. See? Not so easy is it?

RIKKI SANTER

AN ALMOST GHAZAL FOR MY MOTHER'S HATS

From my brother's musty basement, a memory
fermata—your weathered cache of dormant hats.

Who wants to be a milliner? It's me who yearns to
adorn you again with your signature crown panache.

Not Carmen Miranda's tutti-fruitti tower or the
mystique that Audrey Hepburn's brims begat

but your astute and effortless pillbox, satin
cream to match your linen dress, jeweled flats.

Not in Lady Gaga's floppy blushpink Boho
or in Schiaparelli's high-heeled shoe-hat

but your quail-feathered bowler with emerald ribbon—
pure hattitude for luncheons, their green-eyed chitchat.

When you stepped out you were a standout, behold
that black-velvet, pearl-beaded, mink-trimmed half-hat,

your summer straw with gingham flowers, your tufty
headband with clown bouncing atop a circus hat.

Tonight I salvage from sagging round boxes
your weathered cache of trademark hats, still

beguiled by scarlet lips, veiled fascinators, this daughter's
finishing school for accessorizing—the play in being all that.

ALEX DUENSING

THIS

RIKKI SANTER

WARDROBE CONDITIONAL

It would have been smoother
if I hadn't been hijacked by his hat menagerie
crumpled against the circular wall
of a mildewed hat box, faded stripes
in hoarse harmony with themselves, or the
two I had taken from that sack
of discarded neckties left on the freeway's
meridian, three sixes swirled into the flavors
on each of its tongues.

If I could only rewind and unsee
the hawk's crime as it raided the murder
of crows, the limp blackness dragged
across the manicured lawn, the deconstructed
cloak of white down and black feather forsaken
while the helpless opera of grating caws
lingered like ghosts in twilight, or if only
I could reweave the peach and cream
gingham of a ripped party dress and erase
the red palm print stinging a six-year-old's thigh.

PHYLLIS REILLY

LAST DYING WISH

It was 1959 and my father was sick, not just a little sick but count the days till you die sick. He was a handsome man: tall, lean, with haunting wolf-like eyes, and silver hair. Even in his drunken days, he managed to look distinguished.

It was said that he was one of the worst drunks anyone knew.

For the first ten years of my life that was true.

Then he got sober.

AA had saved him from his alcoholic insanity and gave him back his life. Gone was the violent husband, the monster father who had no regard for anything but his next drink. The police stopped coming to the house. He stopped beating my mother and terrorizing me. The change was so abrupt that I had to check the closet to make sure there wasn't a pod in his image growing there. He got a job and kept it. He went to church every Sunday, carried a St. Jude prayer card in his wallet. Went to meetings every day, sometimes twice a day. When he was a guest speaker and led AA meetings, he packed the house. He was one of the most charismatic people I had ever known. There were days when I wondered, who is this man?

Sometimes the change in my father was too much for me. When he first got sober, I lived in a constant state of anxiety, always looking for signs that he had started drinking again. I would wait for him on the stoop to make sure he was walking sober and that the left side of his suit pocket wasn't weighted down with a pint. When I ran to greet him, I always kissed him to check for Sen-Sen, a breath freshener that he used to mask the scent of alcohol. I watched for a long time until the new version of him took hold and over time, I began to relax and enjoy being part of a more normal family.

He became a VP of a Title Company. On payday, instead of a bottle in a twisted brown paper bag, he brought me a brown paper bag filled with fresh fruit. Every day, he told me he loved me. Over time, I began to believe him.

We lived by the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous. It taught me acceptance and to let go of the things I couldn't control—very freeing for a child who felt responsible for everything and everybody. Life was good.

Then he got sick.

Within months he lost weight, turned yellow, and sat propped up in bed like a baby Eagle, hollowed-eyed and skeletal. His high cheekbones dominating a face I barely recognized. His striped pajamas hung from his frame. He hadn't been to church for a long time but suddenly he got religion

again. The priest came to the house heard his confession and give him Holy Communion. I asked him, "What is this new found religion all about?" He looked at me with jaundiced eyes and said: "I don't know if there is a God or not, but at this stage, why gamble."

In those days, doctors made house calls and when Dr. Silverstein came to see my father, he took one look at him and called for an ambulance to take him to Kings County Hospital.

My mother called me from his room. "It doesn't look good, get here as soon as you can. I can't deal with it. I'm going home. He is on the 4th floor, room 401. Take a taxi, I don't know how much longer he can hang on."

Driving over the Brooklyn Bridge, all I could feel was the thud of the wheels and a numbness that made November feel as cold as the Arctic. My mind filled with images of passing over to the other side, a bridge heading towards death, a span of time between the present and the loneliness I felt as a child.

"Why the fuck now!"

He had a million chances to die when he was lying drunk in an alley. Or when he thought he could fly and was going to jump off the roof of our apartment building. How many times had he almost gotten run over crossing the street as I stood on the curb and watched him sway in and out of traffic so drunk he could barely see the cars, or when his brown paper bag of Sherry wine fell on the IRT train tracks and broke into a million pieces, the wine seeping through the bag. With tears in his eyes, he climbed down on to the subway tracks trying to make the broken glass somehow magically become whole. As the lights of the oncoming train moved closer he stood frozen, licking the Sherry wine from his hands and sobbing like a baby. A tall Orthodox Jewish man, dressed in black, pulled him up to the platform shouting at him in Yiddish as I stood there and watched in horror.

I was eight years old!

He could have died then. It would have been just fine with me.

But it seemed so unfair after all the "drunken years" when it would have been so easy to deal with his death.

"Why Now?"

The 4th floor was eerily quiet with low lights and nurses who spoke in hushed tones. Death roamed the halls, moving slowly from room to room looking to see who was calling his name. There were no get-well cards or bouquets of flowers on the nightstand, no television or visitors. This was the last stop. The waiting room for death, you could smell it in the halls.

When I entered my father's room, he was talking and waving to the ceiling. I kissed him and held his hand. He managed a smile and told me that Bill O'Keefe was right up there and rattled off names of other people I didn't know. When I looked up, the only thing I saw was a half dead fly moving

towards the light.

The doctor on call came into the room to check on him and asked me to step outside. When he finished, he opened the curtain and told me, "It's just a matter of time, his heart is very weak. I gave him another shot of morphine for the pain. There is nothing more I can do."

I went back into his room, and my father was saying something, but his voice was so low that I leaned close to his mouth to hear what he was saying.

"I'm thirsty."

I poured him a glass of water, but he shook his head no.

"No water, I want beer. Do this one thing for me, and I will never ask for any thing else."

I squeezed his hand and managed a smile. "Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back."

I put on my coat and walked past the nurse's station to the elevator. Ran out the front door and down to the corner bodega. I asked the guy behind the counter for the coldest can of beer he had. He gave me a 16oz. Budweiser. I paid him and ran back to the hospital making sure to hide the beer inside my coat so that no one would see it.

I closed the curtain and raised the bed so that he was upright and opened the beer. He was too weak to drink from the can, so I took the plastic straw from the water glass and held the can until the only sounds in the room were the last few drops of beer moving through the straw and the soft beep of the heart monitor. When he finished, he looked at me through half-closed eyes and told me it was time to leave.

"I love you daddy." I kissed him good-bye and left taking the empty beer can with me.

A few hours later, the hospital called to tell me he had died peacefully in his sleep.

At the wake, hundreds of people paid their respects and told stories about how he had changed their lives and that he was a glowing example to people in recovery. They referred to him as "Mr. AA." Someone asked, "How many years was he sober?"

Jim Murphy, my father's oldest friend thought a moment and said, "He had his last drink twenty-one years ago."

I listened and never said a word.

V HOLECEK

LEERE PASSAGEN DER ERINNERUNG

(EMPTY PASSAGES OF MEMORY)

BETH ANN BAUMAN

UNDER A CITY SKY

Every day for a week in my little neighborhood park, the woman lies on a patch of soft grass, her head on a pillow. Around her the city pulses. Traffic roars by. Girls with shiny hair eat falafels and dab lipsticked mouths, a boy slashes his plastic sword through the fountain. Assorted dogs trot by, grinning. A teen couple whispers into each other's hair. A nanny feeds a solemn baby. They come and go. I come and go. Some days I read a book or sit on a bench, crunching an apple. I talk to my ex on the phone because I miss his voice, miss being known by him. And all the while the woman lies on a pillow, face to the sky. She wears summer dresses and sneakers with bright laces. Today the pillowcase is lavender.

Now it's dusk, the air slippery. I've been sitting for hours. Restless. Lonely. Wondering. A light rain begins to fall, and the park clears fast. The woman on the grass opens an umbrella. So, she's been watching the forecast! I have an idea and go across the street to the deli and then squat beside her.

"Hey," I say. "I brought you some asparagus soup."

"You did?" she says. Her eyes are bright. I'm so pleased when she takes the plastic spoon.

"I've seen you here all week," I tell her.

"You know what I love about New York? You can fall apart, and everyone will leave you to it."

"You're falling apart pretty admirably." I touch her pillowcase. Nice. Must be 400-thread count.

"It's just that the apartment's stifling. The walls. The ceiling. How is it we live with walls and ceilings?" She laughs. "You want a taste?"

I wave her off. I eat it all the time.

Soon the rain stops. I close my umbrella and she comes out from under hers. Overhead a lone star shines.

"What is it?" I ask.

She blinks. "My sister died."

I tell her I'm sorry, wishing for something better to say.

A sister spools far back. I remember mine standing on a little stool, peering down at me in the crib. She'd rest her chin on the bar and bring me all news. She was always, always talking. I remember how we'd ride in the backseat of our grandparents' yellow station wagon. Grandma lighting Pop Pop's cigar and Pop Pop driving the backroads of Squankum, New Jersey. The grassy open land and the dump. How we loved the dump with the stacks

and stacks of compressed cars. "Junky cars," we trilled. What a treat and so reliable those heaps, pressed thin, piled high, and winking in the sunlight. Why did they thrill us? Who knows? But there she was—my sister—right there beside me.

The soup steams, and the woman lowers her face to the warmth.

What are her junky cars, I wonder. What brightness does her sorrow hold? For now, I hand her a package of salty crackers. "Eat," I say.

CLAUDIA BARNETT

MICE INTO HORSES

Inspired by "Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper" by Charles Perrault

Characters:
FIFI, a mouse, her bow is crooked
BABETTE, a mouse, her bow is straight
MAMAN, a mouse, Babette and Fifi's mother
HÉLOÏSE, a mouse, Babette and Fifi's stepsister

On the floor of a stable, a huge cage with bars (aka the mousetrap). In the background, a giant pumpkin.

At rise. FIFI, BABETTE, and MAMAN are inside of the mousetrap. MAMAN struts like a show horse. FIFI and BABETTE watch, unimpressed.

MAMAN: (*Demonstrating as she speaks*) Head high in the air. Poised. Proud. Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore.

BABETTE: You'll never get anywhere at that pace.

MAMAN: You *strut*. You *don't* scamper.

FIFI: I like to scamper.

MAMAN: It's not dignified.

FIFI: Dignified?

BABETTE: Dignified!

(*FIFI and BABETTE squeal with laughter.*)

MAMAN: If you don't stop that now, we'll be trapped here forever.

(*FIFI and BABETTE stop squealing.*)

BABETTE: Trapped?

FIFI: Forever?

BABETTE: What about the ball? You said we're going to the ball.

FIFI: You promised.

MAMAN: We're not going anywhere if you don't learn how to strut. Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore.

(*FIFI and BABETTE look at each other, shrug, and then start to strut in time to MAMAN's count.*)

Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore. Careful…keep in time.

Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore. Look alert! Heads high! Fix your bow, Fifi.

FIFI: How'd you learn this, Maman?

BABETTE: Weren't you listening? Last week she saw Phillipe turn into a horse.

(*FIFI and BABETTE stop strutting and squeal with laughter.*)

MAMAN: If you didn't believe me, you shouldn't have come.

BABETTE: How could we miss this, Maman?

MAMAN: I only told you for your own good.

BABETTE: We appreciate that, Maman. Don't we, Fifi?

FIFI: *Absolument*, Maman. We know you have our best interests at heart.

BABETTE: *Absolument*. But I am confused about one thing: You always say that I'm beautiful, and now you want me to change.

MAMAN: Of course you are beautiful, Babette.

FIFI: And what about me?

MAMAN: You want me to say you are beautiful, my pet? Let me straighten your bow.

(*MAMAN attempts to straighten FIFI's bow.*)

FIFI: I want Édouard to say I am beautiful. You promised he'd be here, Maman!

BABETTE: You did, you know. You promised all the handsomest mice: Édouard, Phillipe, Maxime, Raulf.

MAMAN: They must be running late. Perhaps it's for the best. We can't all be horses.

FIFI: But Édouard's my Prince Charming!

BABETTE: Are you sure it's tonight?

MAMAN: *Mais oui*, I've made certain. The dirty girl will fix her sisters' hair, just like last time. Only this time she has the pumpkin ready in advance.

(*MAMAN gestures toward the giant pumpkin.*)

FIFI: I like the dirty girl. You shouldn't call her that. She's always kind to us. Whenever she sees us, she frees us. Remember that glue trap? She wiped our feet so kindly.

BABETTE: Ugh.

FIFI: When will she get here?

MAMAN: After her sisters leave.

BABETTE: They're not her real sisters. They're stepsisters.

FIFI: What's a stepsister?

MAMAN: She comes from a different litter.

BABETTE: Ugh.

FIFI: Speaking of which, where is Héloïse?

BABETTE: Maman, did you not invite her?

MAMAN: Of course not. She's not my daughter. Why should she be a horse?

FIFI: But who will brush our fur?

BABETTE: And who will feed us cheese?

MAMAN: Horses don't eat cheese. They eat oats and carrots and hay. As much as they like. It's all delivered. As if they were queens. My daughters shall be horses! My beauties. Fix your bow, Fifi. It's crooked.

BABETTE: Maman, you know we're in a stable full of horses.

FIFI: Have they always been horses, or were they mice once, too?

(*FIFI and BABETTE squeal with laughter.*)

MAMAN: If I weren't your mother, I might not love you.

(*FIFI and BABETTE stop squealing.*)

BABETTE: Maman! What a thing to say!

MAMAN: Then stop squealing, and practice. Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore.

FIFI: Did Phillipe practice?

MAMAN: Phillipe had no idea. *Now* everyone wants to be a horse. Now there's competition.

BABETTE: There is?

FIFI: Who?

MAMAN: Practice!

FIFI: What about the real horses?

MAMAN: They'll drive the sisters' carriage to the ball. And when they leave, the dirty girl will look for mice. And maybe, just maybe, if you know what you're doing, and if your bow is straight, she'll choose you. But if not, perhaps she'll choose Héloïse!

(*HÉLOÏSE enters, scurrying. SHE is outside the cage.*)

HÉLOÏSE: *Bonjour*, Maman. *Mesdemoiselles*. Did you call for me?

FIFI: Héloïse!

MAMAN: *Non*, Héloïse, I did not call for you. I merely spoke your name in idle gossip.

HÉLOÏSE: *D'accord*, Maman. Would you like for me to leave?

BABETTE: Héloïse, have you heard news of Phillipe?

HÉLOÏSE: *Mais oui*, Mademoiselle Babette. He disappeared last week with five others. All six became horses and then later, when they were mice again, they had to hitchhike home. They've only just returned.

MAMAN: You mean it wasn't permanent?

FIFI: What wasn't?

MAMAN: They didn't stay horses?

HÉLOÏSE: It was a magic spell, Maman. The mice were horses just as long as the dirty girl was pretty.

FIFI: You call her the dirty girl, too!

HÉLOÏSE: That is her name, *non*?

FIFI: Héloïse, would you like to be a horse?

HÉLOÏSE: Certainly not. Horses are servants of man, but mice, we are free. Most of us.

BABETTE: This is only temporary. The dirty girl will free us.

HÉLOÏSE: I am sorry I cannot help. I do not understand the mechanism.

MAMAN: Oh no, Héloïse. We have chosen to be trapped.

HÉLOÏSE: *Mais oui*, Maman.

BABETTE: So we can be horses. So we can go to the ball! And dance with the prince.

FIFI: And Édouard—if he makes it.

HÉLOÏSE: Édouard is in bed with the flu. I must run and bring him tea.

FIFI: Don't you dare, Héloïse!

HÉLOÏSE: *Pardon*?

FIFI: I'll bring him the tea myself. Édouard is *my* Prince Charming.

HÉLOÏSE: *Bien sur*. But you are trapped in this cage, and he would like his tea *maintenant*.

(*HÉLOÏSE scampers off*.)

FIFI: Maman!

MAMAN: Calm down, my pet. You're no one's nursemaid. Now fix your bow.

FIFI: I don't wish to be a horse without Édouard.

MAMAN: You're too young to know what you want. Trust your Maman.

(*FIFI scampers to the corner and sits in a huff*.)

Your bow is still crooked, my pet.

FIFI: I don't care about my stupid bow.

(*FIFI yanks the bow off her head and flings it to the ground*.)

MAMAN: Fifi, listen to me. When the dirty girl arrives, she'll have her choice from dozens, and she will not select a slattern who scampers and huffs.

FIFI: I don't want to be a horse!

BABETTE: Didn't you hear what Héloïse said, Maman? Horses are servants, but mice are free.

MAMAN: Héloïse? That girl is a servant herself. She knows nothing of freedom.

BABETTE: Perhaps, Maman, but why does the dirty girl need horses?

MAMAN: To drive her to the ball.

BABETTE: *Exactement*. Then they're her servants, *non*? They're her transportation. They drag that giant pumpkin across town! Then: Do they dance at the ball, or do they wait in the stall?—in the cold, damp stable full of scampering mice?

FIFI: Oh, Maman! You had promised we'd dance. I don't want to be a horse if I can't dance.

MAMAN: Stop whining this instant. You know I have your best interests at heart.

BABETTE: Yes, but what about our stomachs, Maman?

MAMAN: I told you, Babette: We'll get piles of hay when we're horses.

BABETTE: I'm hungry now.

FIFI: Me too. Or I would be if I weren't so devastated about Édouard.

(*FIFI starts to scamper around the cage.*)

FIFI: Let me out! Let me out!

MAMAN: Fifi! Stop that scampering, and strut! This instant. Right hind, right fore. Left hind, left fore.

(*HÉLOÏSE enters, carrying a tray with two tea cups. FIFI stops scurrying when she sees her.*)

BABETTE: Héloïse! Thank goodness. You've brought us tea.

HÉLOÏSE: *Mais non, mademoiselle*. These cups are empty.

FIFI: *Two* cups?

HÉLOÏSE: I took tea with Édouard.

FIFI: Maman!

BABETTE: Bring us a snack, Héloïse. We are starving.

HÉLOÏSE: But of course you have cheese inside the cage. There's always a chunk of *raclette*.

BABETTE: No, nothing.

HÉLOÏSE: You walked into a trap without bait?

BABETTE: Maman!

HÉLOÏSE: I'm afraid I must run. The dirty girl needs me.

FIFI: The dirty girl?

MAMAN: Is she leaving for the ball?

HÉLOÏSE: *Main non*, Maman. The ball's tomorrow. She twisted her ankle this morning and has been in bed ever since. We mice are helping her with chores, so she can rest.

BABETTE: *We mice*?

HÉLOÏSE: Phillipe, Maxime, Raulf, Édouard. We are happy to help, for she's always been kind.

FIFI: Édouard?

HÉLOÏSE: He is feeling much better. He will clean the kitchen floor.

BABETTE: You mean he'll eat the crumbs!

HÉLOÏSE: *Exactement*.

BABETTE: I could do that.

HÉLOÏSE: *Mais non, mademoiselle*. You don't do chores. And besides, you're in a cage.

FIFI: What will happen to us now?

HÉLOÏSE: Phillipe says that the dirty girl will take us to the palace when she becomes queen.

MAMAN: You mean she'll turn into a queen, and you'll turn into horses? … Just for tonight.

HÉLOÏSE: *Non*, Maman. The dirty girl, she will be queen forever. But no one will change. We will simply be clean. And we'll live happily ever after.

FIFI: You and Phillipe and Maxime and Raulf and Édouard. You and four princes. The four handsomest mice.

HÉLOÏSE: *Oui, mademoiselle*. I feel like a girl in a fairy tale.

FIFI: So do I, but not the good girl.

BABETTE: If we're in a fairy tale, there must be a moral to the story.

MAMAN: (*Addressing the audience.*) Beauty in a mouse is a rare treasure that will always be admired.

(*MAMAN picks FIFI's bow off the floor and tries to attach it to FIFI's head. FIFI resists.*)

FIFI: Maman!

HÉLOÏSE: (*Addressing the audience.*) Graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value. Young mice, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than wearing your bow straight or strutting like a show horse.

(*HÉLOÏSE scurries off.*)

MAMAN: That wasn't very gracious.

FIFI: What happens to us now?

BABETTE: I'm hungry.

END

KEVIN SUDEITH

THE FEELING OF BEING ALIVE

BRANDON FRENCH

FIRST BLOOD

Becky was in the last seven minutes of her finger exercises, the excruciating boredom of a forty-five-minute daily regimen prescribed by her celebrated piano teacher Hildy Bruck to transform her from an ordinary eight-year-old child into a prodigy capable of playing a Mozart concerto or a Beethoven sonata in a concert hall filled with music aficionados. The Classic Comic she was reading, *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, was nestled inside her annotated "Fur Elise," and her mother Dottie, in the habit of flitting back and forth across the living room like a trapped pigeon, was usually too preoccupied to notice her daughter's subterfuge at the baby grand. But today, already angry at Becky for stopping off at a boy's house on the way home from school, a boy who all the teachers at Woodrow Wilson including Dottie agreed was strange—which in this boy's case meant creepy—she came up behind her daughter as Becky was practicing and caught sight of the Classic Comic slyly hidden inside the music book. Aghast, she executed a wallop she would later claim was aimed at her daughter's buttocks but which landed, after Becky ducked, squarely on her nose, causing blood to shoot out like a shaken Coke can, soaking the little girl's white blouse in bright crimson.

They were one of those families, the kind you hear screaming at each other in the next apartment, or at the supermarket or in those big echoing indoor malls where the sound bounces around like a basket of tennis balls, the kind of families who make you think that someday one of them is going to pick up a gun and blow somebody's head off. But Becky, only eight, avenged herself by stuffing the bloody blouse into her book bag and bringing it into the teacher's lounge at school the next day.

"Look what my mother did to me last night," she announced, unfurling the blouse like a battle flag.

That evening, Becky's parents got into a shouting match about the wisdom of continuing her piano lessons, the father Douglas arguing that the fate of most female concert pianists was to become "hunchbacked neurotics with greasy, pockmarked complexions and foul breath," and the mother retorting that he was "just too cheap to pay for the lessons" because he "didn't give a damn about anybody except" himself. But the spectre of a hunchbacked, pimple-faced neurotic put a damper on Becky's already ambivalent feelings about pursuing a career in classical music. It also caused her to make a special effort the next morning to drench her breath in Listerine.

As for the bloody blouse incident, once Dottie explained to the other teachers about the hidden Classic Comic and the dalliance with the creepy boy, the women rallied to her side. Helen Benson, the kindergarten teacher, said, "Haven't we all wanted to give 'em a good hard swat at some point?" And the second grade teacher, Sue Ann Ellinson, added, "Just aim lower next time, Dottie," which gave all the teachers, including Dottie, a good laugh.

But that bloody afternoon formed a covenant between mother and daughter, not of shared womanhood when a girl begins to menstruate, but a covenant of violence. And Becky carried it into the next generation with her own daughter Anastasia until one night the eighteen-year-old grabbed her mother's wrists as Becky was about to slap her in the face and hissed, "Not anymore, mother," her eyes molten with rage. "The next time you hit me, I'll kill you."

EMMA SYWYJ

WALL AND WINDOW CHINA

SAVANNA SCOTT LESLIE

FAMILY

Tamara heaved on the laundry line and the pulley squealed. The clothes had hardly taken any time to dry. Finally, a bright day without rain. It had been a strange sort of summer, all storms and grey skies, so that she was glad of the chance to hang the clothes in the backyard. From the back-porch steps, her friend Doreen sighed. Tamara pretended not to notice, humming along to the chipped little radio she had set on the picnic table. The song was old, and one she knew, except that she'd forgotten. Lately she couldn't remember things—not big things, but ephemera—so that sometimes her whole life resembled towering monoliths jutting out from clouds.

Doreen had arrived only the day before, and already Tamara resented her presence. It wasn't that she didn't want to see Doreen. She did. It had been so long. Tamara thought the grimy feeling had more to do with the house than with Doreen. Since Robert's kids moved out, the house seemed to have closed in on itself the way a tube of toothpaste shrinks as it empties. When Tamara found herself alone in the one-and-a-half–story home, she felt a little stifled. It was Robert who made it stifling. His energy filled every room, every closet and cupboard, so that now, with Doreen there too, the house was overfull. The night before, staring up at the ceiling, Tamara had felt like she was tumbling about inside a glass that was overfilling.

She folded the last of Robert's shirts and dropped them into a wicker basket she had set beside her on the patio stones. Doreen started up again, and Tamara thought Doreen's voice was like gravel settling underfoot. She preferred her friend over the telephone.

"Can't believe it," she said. "Won't have her own mother at her wedding."

"Yeah," Tamara said.

"I mean, no matter what's going on," Doreen said, "that's still your family. Right? I mean that's your mother."

"Yeah." Tamara peered in through the kitchen window. Between the blinds she saw floating strips of Robert. He was standing in front of the sink, bending forward to lift a sandwich to his mouth. Tamara pinched her tongue between her teeth.

"There's going to be drama over that," Doreen said. She shook her head. Her laughter came in short clucks. "I mean it's tension, right?"

"Yeah," Tamara said.

"Dad won't be happy. Jesus, eh? Isn't right. I mean I don't care what's going on. That's family. That's still family."

Tamara murmured her agreement and sat down on the picnic bench. She planted her elbows on the table behind her and let her eyebrows draw together in the ugly way they seemed to favor these days. A stubborn ache in her shoulder had come back. It had started coming on whenever she lifted her arms. She could feel it beneath the skin, a hard lump of sinew pressing against bone.

Doreen was sitting on the steps in front of the screen door so that Tamara kept wondering what would happen if Robert tried to come out and found her blocking the way. Once, Doreen had called Robert a bastard, and Tamara had thought he was going to hit her. The severed strips of Robert's body disappeared from the window and Tamara let her fingers unwind from the fist she had made.

Doreen was wearing denim shorts and a plain white shirt with a shield-shaped pocket over top of one breast. After dinner she had pulled her hair up into a ponytail, and now a few loose strands sprayed out behind her ears. Her roots had come in beige and muted while the rest of her hair was a dull black. Once, Tamara remembered, Doreen had been a series of right angles, nothing but elbows and shinbones and knees. Then the years had filled her out, softening all the edges. Tamara herself had only sharpened, and even still, year by year, the skin pulled tighter around her skeleton. She sometimes felt like she was disappearing, day by day and ounce by ounce.

"She's not doing herself any favors," Doreen said," not having me there. People will talk." She pursed her lips as if she wanted to reel her words back in, but the comments just kept bursting out. "Tell the truth, it's childish. It's childish, if I'm being honest."

"Yeah." Tamara frowned, then nodded too, to show solidarity. *Maybe it is childish*, she thought. She remembered wanting her own mother at her wedding. At the time, she had wanted her there, despite all their differences, though Robert had not. In the end it hadn't mattered. Fate had made the decision for them, pushing back the wedding and closing another door. If her mother had lived, Tamara thought, maybe she wouldn't have come after all. All kinds of slings and arrows could have flown between them in the time they never had. Death had made everything hypothetical.

"Dry already?" Doreen jerked her chin toward Tamara's laundry basket.

"Oh. Yeah," said Tamara. She prodded the basket with her toes and watched it slump inward before springing back into shape. "Long as the sun's out, takes no time at all."

"Don't know why nobody hangs it up anymore," Doreen said. She stretched her legs out across the cracked patio stones. Like peaches, her legs were covered in fine golden hairs and speckled with bruises. Her tennis shoes were pure white.

"Yeah," Tamara said. From where she sat, she could see over the

wooden fence. A grid of backyards ran between two rows of houses, and there were plenty of clotheslines covered with shirts and sheets and dresses that filled up like sails in the wind. "I like to hang them," she said. "It freshens them up like dryers don't." Plus, she thought, hanging the clothes to dry outside meant less time in the basement. Like so much of the house, which had belonged to Robert long before they met, the basement was his domain. While she'd sometimes trespass in the early days, when provoking him could lead to a bit of excitement, she'd lost the energy to bother at some point.

"Even in summer, when you're sweating, right, I just hang it all up," Doreen said with a dreamy look in her close-set eyes. "Don't even need to wash it. Just put it on the line and they freshen right up, just like you said. It's the UV that does it." Tamara pictured Doreen's unwashed clothes ripening like fruit on the vine before being plucked off the line and put back in drawers and closets, perhaps right back onto Doreen. She felt a rivulet of sweat wend its way down her chest. "Of course, you still wash them every couple days," Doreen added suddenly. "But in between, you can just…." She gestured vaguely to the empty line, to the empty sky, to the immense divine indifference.

"Yeah," Tamara said. She lit a cigarette, savoring the percussive spark as the wheel lurched beneath her thumb.

"Jesus," Doreen said. A dog had started barking in the yard next door. He was forever barking, and it seemed the entire neighborhood was getting louder all the time. Doreen rolled her eyes and leaned forward. She had a way of saying *Jesus* so that it rhymed with *please us*. A screen door slammed on the far side of the fence. The neighbor girl—her voice shrill and ineffectual—called for the dog. At last the creature stopped barking, and then another slam of the screen door announced their exit.

Doreen turned up the radio, and Tamara closed her eyes. She let the sun warm her eyelids, shining through her skin and losing herself in the diffused colors. On and on the music played with the liminal timbre of a cheap radio. Tamara drifted in a sea of orange and red as the wind swept her bangs back and forth across her forehead. She pretended she was far away and long ago. She uncrossed her legs.

"Hey," Doreen said. Her voice was soft now and almost pleading. Tamara opened her eyes and saw that Doreen had pulled her knees in close. She had wrapped her arms around them, and she looked very small in the growing shadow of Robert's house. Doreen peered down at her white, white shoes. Finally, she said, "You didn't get an invite, did you? To the wedding. Did she…."

Tamara took a drag of the remains of her cigarette and watched her coral-colored lilies sway at the edges of the yard. She had planted them years ago, knowing they'd do well because so many neighbors had them. Now she

wanted something that tasted the way they looked, a sweet summery essence like orange sherbet or real lemonade. Doreen's question seemed to blur, and for a moment Tamara lost track, preferring to let it go with so much else. But then Doreen was staring, and a terrible hunger began to flash in her eyes. Her brows had come down and formed a vertical line above her nose that made her face look old.

"Did Haley invite you to the wedding?" Doreen's lips trembled.

Tamara felt the nettle-like burn of embarrassment. Her mind spiraled back to the mint-green envelope she had stowed in Robert's writing desk. It had come last week, and it had spoken in a round script of family, of true love, of chicken or of fish. Haley had been like a niece to Tamara. She had burned like a comet into adolescence when she and Doreen had begun to drift apart. All at once Tamara could see herself at the wedding, with her hair pinned up and Robert in tow, the two of them sauntering across a blue-green lawn and crinkling their eyes up in smiles of greeting. She knew they wouldn't mention Doreen until after, on the car ride home, with the conspiratorial hum of the air conditioning and the ease that always came when they hurtled down the highway. Not all the words would be kind. And then, when they got back to Robert's house, Tamara knew she wouldn't call Doreen with her report of the day's proceedings. She knew she wouldn't check in at all. Instead she would let the silence stretch between them.

"Did Haley invite you?" Doreen asked again. Her eyes burned like embers, but her body had slumped.

Tamara exhaled. "No," she said. The word came easily. It slipped through her lips like smoke.

Doreen shook her head again. The line between her eyebrows had gone. "I don't care what's going on in your life," she said feebly. "I don't care who did what to who. You have your mother at your wedding. That's family."

Tamara looked to the sky for signs of another downpour. Between the maples and the telephone lines, there was only a vast, dim blue.

DIANE

SCARCE

RICHARD BADER

IN LIEU OF FLOWERS

"Beloved," Jane said. "I have a problem with beloved."

"What's wrong with beloved?" her brother wanted to know. "Everybody says beloved."

"Well, for starters, he wasn't. Not by Mom, anyway. Not for a long time. Beloved husband. It's just not true."

"I think it's customary," Henry said. He leaned forward so he could see the nametag of the funeral-home person sitting next to him. "Nick—tell her it's customary."

The president and owner of Boyd Funeral Home straightened in his seat. "It's common, though by no means mandatory," said Nicholas Boyd III. "Some people leave it out." He had tried art but that didn't work out, so he took over the family business at II's passing. He found he had a real knack for painting the faces of corpses, his own father's being the first. He hated when people called him Nick. If he'd wanted to be called Nick he would have put Nick on his nametag, which very clearly said Nicholas Boyd III, the III conveying stability, continuity, experience. From time to time he thought about creating a IV, in the same way one thought about opening a 401k.

"It sounds funny without beloved," Henry said. He was the brand manager for a tech corporation and had flown in from Singapore. "Victor Morgan, husband of Marie. It's empty, sterile."

"Sometimes I wish he'd been sterile," Jane said. "Beloved's just not fair to Mom."

"Like Mom is going to care? She doesn't even know who he is anymore. Was. She doesn't know who we are."

"That doesn't make it okay. We shouldn't do something we both know she wouldn't want."

"Let's leave it out for now," Nicholas Boyd III said, taking her side, still irritated by the Nick thing. "See how it flows in the context of the whole notice. We can always come back later and change it."

"Fine," Henry said, flicking his hand as if to shoo a fly. "Let's get this done."

"Husband of Marie, comma," Nicholas Boyd III said slowly as he wrote, "he is survived by his daughter Jane and son Henry."

"It's passive voice," Jane said.

Schoolteacher, Nicholas Boyd III guessed. He suppressed a shudder.

"Let's put beloved in there, then," Henry said. "Before our names."

"Seriously?" Jane said.

"Oh, c'mon, Jane. You can't just say no to everything. There's a way you do these things."

"You can be beloved if you want. But not me. That should send an interesting message: survived by his daughter Jane and beloved son Henry. One out of two. That's not so bad, considering."

"May I?" Henry said to Nick. He took the pencil and notepad. He crossed out the line that was written there and wrote something else above it. Nicholas Boyd III read it silently to himself: ...survived by his wife Marie and his beloved son Henry and daughter Jane. He sent a warning glance across the table to Jane, raising an eyebrow Henry couldn't see.

"What'd you just do?" Jane said.

"I wrote it like you said."

"Let me see." He passed the pad to her. "That's not what I said. That way it implies—"

Henry interrupted her. "It's what we're going with."

They glared at each other across the table.

Nicholas Boyd III glanced at his watch. Eleven-fifteen, and he had Dolores Maple at noon. Eighty-four, lost her identical twin sister. Some identical twins got less identical as they aged. Not these two. That would be strange, he thought, seeing someone who looked just like you lying there in a casket. They were two spinsters who lived together their whole lives. That one should go smoothly, though Miss Maple could be crotchety. And would be, if he was late. Did people say spinster anymore?

There was still plenty of time. Let these two calm down a little and then wrap this up. "Can I get anybody coffee?" Nicholas Boyd III said.

He left and returned a few minutes later with a tray with coffee for himself and Henry and tea for Jane, all in dainty little white cups and saucers that broke easily. Dust to dust, he supposed, though he hated the things. He made a mental note to buy mugs. And coasters, to protect the table. And maybe a brighter rug.

"How do we handle Valerie?" Henry asked when they started again.

"Valerie?" It was the first Nicholas Boyd III had heard of a Valerie.

"Our little sister," Henry said. "She passed away when she was fifteen."

"Ah," Nicholas Boyd III said. "I'm sorry for your loss." How many times a day did he say that? Ten? Fifteen? Like bless-you after a sneeze. "Predeceased is what we usually say. And was predeceased by a daughter, Valerie.

"Predeceased?" Jane said. "Is that even a word?"

"It's how they say it, Jane," Henry said.

"It's a terrible word."

"How would you say it then?"

"How about, His daughter Valerie committed suicide at age fifteen?"

The room became silent, the only sound the distant hum of the refrigeration system keeping bodies cool somewhere.

Henry looked at Nicholas Boyd III and shook his head, then looked back at his sister. "Jesus, Jane. We're not going say that."

"Took her own life, then. Is that better?"

"Be serious."

"Or how about predeceased herself? Predeceased herself with sleeping pills."

"Jane, can we please think about how this is going to sound to people?"

"Sound to people?" Jane said. She slammed a hand flat on the table and leaned toward him, like a missile ready to launch. "The family brand? Is that what you're worried about? You fly in here, what, twice a year to manage the family brand, while I live here, day to day, managing the, the…" She searched for the right word. Her arm waved in the air helplessly.

"Family?" Nicholas Boyd III said, still on her side, trying to be helpful.

"Exactly!"

Nicholas Boyd III felt the whole thing was on the verge of running off the rails. Henry had a tone that could set you off, especially if you were a sibling. Too patronizing. Too sanctimonious prick. He tried to mediate. "We could go with, Another daughter, Valerie, passed away in…. What year was it?"

"Passed away," Jane said, shaking her head. "She died, is what she did."

"What year was it?" Henry asked Jane.

"Nineteen eighty-seven. On her birthday. March fourth." Jane sat back and gave a little laugh. "She used to make that joke, remember? She'd ask you when her birthday was and when you said March fourth she would get up and stomp around the room."

Nicholas Boyd III wrote down the date. The room began to feel uncomfortably warm. He wanted to loosen his tie but tightened it instead. A faint smell of formaldehyde came from somewhere. The basement? His hands? He fought an urge to sniff them. "Here's what we have so far," he said, and read:

Victor Morgan, 79, passed away peacefully on August 17. He is survived by his wife Marie and his beloved son Henry and daughter Jane. Another daughter, Valerie, passed away in 1987.

Not for the first time it struck Nicholas Boyd III how much this was like that kids' game where you filled in nouns and verbs and adjectives in the blank spaces, and at the end, you had this funny little story.

"It still sounds a little awkward," Henry said.

"It was a little awkward," Jane said.

Nicholas Boyd III forced a respectful smile, hoping she meant it to be

amusing, or at least cleverly ironic. A little humor was good—it could lighten the mood. He looked at Henry and Jane, but neither was smiling.

"Are we almost done?" Henry said.

"You need to be somewhere?" Jane said. "Have a plane to catch?"

Henry pursed his lips.

For a man like Victor Morgan, Nicholas Boyd III typically suggested including something about his career, but now it was eleven thirty-five, and if he opened that can of worms he'd be late for Dolores Maple. Besides, he wanted to be done with the Morgans.

"What about Angela?" Jane said. "We need to mention her."

"We most definitely do not need to mention her," Henry said.

"Angela?" Nicholas Boyd III said, almost afraid to ask. New names were coming from everywhere. A surprise a minute, these people.

"Our father's love child," Jane said. "His little extracurricular mistake."

"Who we are not going to mention."

"Why not?" Jane said. "She's as much his kid as you and I are."

"Jane, don't do this."

"You see, Mr. Boyd, our dear half-sister Angela has lived her entire life blissfully unaware that she's our dear half-sister," Jane said. "She's old enough to be in college now. Our father impregnated Angela's mother when he was, what—sixty? Sixty-one? Either they were careless, or he thought he was firing blanks at that age. She was twenty-five. His secretary, for god's sake. His fucking cliché. He blurted it during a death-bed confession years ago. I took him to the emergency room with chest pains. He thought he was having a heart attack and just sort of unloaded. Then the doctor told him it was acid reflux." She snorted a mirthless laugh and took a sip of tea. "You should have seen the look on his face. I thought then he might have a real heart attack."

"He took care of her," Henry said.

"He threw money at her," Jane said. "To a degree we only recently learned about when we went through his bank records."

"He was trying to be responsible."

"He was trying to erase his guilt. Trying quite hard, apparently."

"There's more than enough money for Mom. She won't have to worry."

"She can't worry, Henry. She can't do anything except just sit there in her Alzheimer's fog. Why don't we just say, Victor Morgan is dead. In lieu of flowers, go out somewhere and celebrate?"

"He wasn't perfect, Jane," Henry said. "Neither are you. Neither am I. Neither was Mom."

"Oh, please. Spare me the lecture. And can we not try to blame this on Mom?"

"Do you even know why their marriage got so miserable?"

"Maybe because Mom got tired of him cheating on her?"

"No," Henry said. "The other way around."

Once again, the room fell silent. Even the refrigeration system stopped humming.

"What are you talking about?" Jane said.

"She had an affair."

"Who told you that?"

"Dad. He was in L.A. to visit a client. We had dinner. Do you remember Mom's miscarriage? We were little, then. It wasn't a miscarriage, Jane. It was an abortion. She was afraid it wasn't Dad's. So, she told him, and they stopped it. Which wasn't so easy to do, then. Dad had to pull some strings."

"You're lying," Jane said. "He was lying."

"Why would he lie about that?"

"To make it her fault. To make himself look better."

"Men don't talk about being cheated on to make themselves look better," Henry said. "Especially Dad. Anyway, I believed him."

"Did you ever say anything about it to Mom?"

"No."

"So, she never knew you knew?"

"I don't think so."

Jane shook her head. "The things we bury," she said.

Un-burdenings weren't uncommon at this table. They could be cathartic. Nicholas Boyd III looked at his watch.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jane said.

Henry leaned forward, elbows on the table, his hands folded as if in prayer and his chin resting on them. "I don't know. I should have. He didn't want me to. You were always so close to Mom."

"Why did they stay together?" Jane said. Her voice had softened.

"Who knows? For our sake, maybe? Maybe they realized they were each other's best options. Maybe despite everything they still loved each other."

"Unbelievable," Jane said. She began massaging her forehead with her fingers, and her shoulders started to heave. Nicholas Boyd III thought she was crying, but she wasn't. She was laughing, and it grew and caught like kindling, and crackled and grew some more until she was laughing uncontrollably, and Henry was laughing along with her, and before long both of them had tears in their eyes.

When the laughter subsided Jane took the notepad and stared down at the sheet of paper with the few sentences they'd composed in an attempt to summarize their father's life. She tore it from the pad and crumpled it. "So," she said, picking up the pencil. "Victor Morgan…"

JOSE ENRIQUE MEDINA

THE UNDERWEAR MODELS' CONVENTION

What's going to bother you, twenty years after the fact, is not remembering: were you *asleep or awake* when the ground started to gyrate, drunk hips, a merengue dancer setting off car alarms and cracks of blue lightning in the pre-dawn darkness?

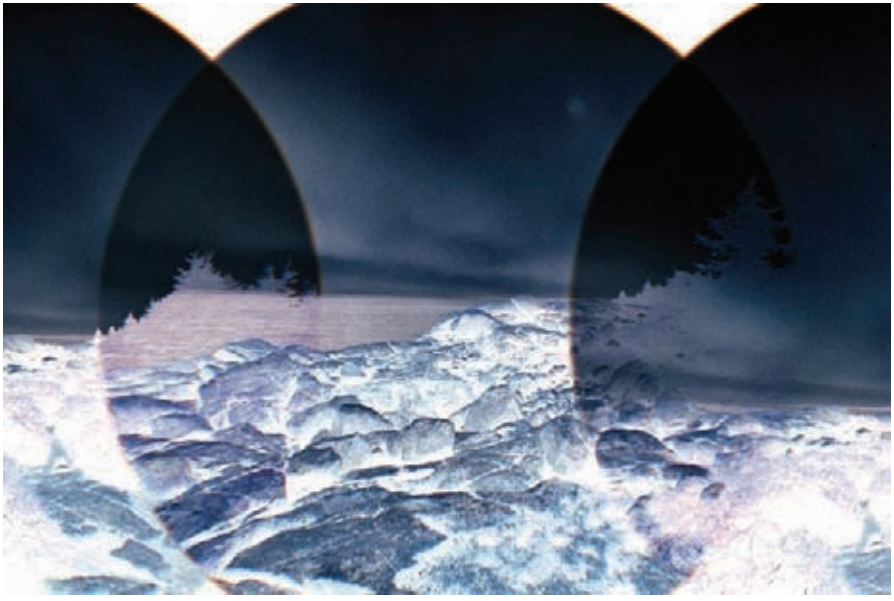
You and your boyfriend stand up. Dressed in identical boxers, feet spread apart, you two surf the buckling mattress. That moment, when you stare into each other's eyes, means something.

When your house lands safely back on terra firma, you and your man run outside, almost naked. To your amazement, all your neighbors have gathered on the sidewalk in their undies, too. Half nude. Gabbling. Everyone's exhilarated to be alive but scared of aftershocks.

In her hurry to save her life, Laura, the most beautiful woman on the block, forgot to fix her silver-tinted hair and you see a bald spot the size of Africa on the back of her head. Juan Carlos hugs his brother's trembling wife in her skimpy red negligée, her throat paisleyed with big purple hickies. María, who lives across the street and has been trying to seduce you for years, looks at your and your partner's *matching underwear* and frowns and stomps away. Your boyfriend smiles at you, but one of his dimples is missing, a half-smile withholding something. You will discover in three weeks that he is hiding that he has AIDS.

Lolita, who always gives you fruit, is going to be dead in two years, but for now, you can stare at her only breast, a perky nipple lifting the transparent nightgown in moonlight.

LEAH OATES



TRANSITORY SPACE

KEVIN LICHTY

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Dad said our trailer wasn't big enough to hold hope. We need the room, he said. We were getting rid of mom's things, grabbing armfuls of clothes and stuffing them into black trash bags. We pullled out the bins of her lipsticks, her body spray, her shampoo. Here, the book she was reading before she left—dog-eared, spine broken in five different places, corners of the cover torn away. Here, the bin of her headbands and hair clips to hold back her mass of curls from her face. I took out a clasp: square, pewter-colored, covered in rhinestones.

I remember the last time she wore it. It was a Saturday, my eighth birthday. The carnival opened late. She said, come on. We're going to be like everyone else tonight. We stepped out of the trailer into the cool together, her hand wrapped around my hand, breathed air thick with the smell of fry oil.

We walked through the midway. The clasp in her hair absorbing all the reds and yellows and blues.

"What do you want to eat?" she asked.

We walked past everything that was fried—the french fries, the corn dogs, the chicken, the egg rolls, the onion rings, the fried ice cream, the elephant ears, the fried Oreos and Twinkies, and candy bars.

"Bob's kabobs," I said. His open fire, his skewers of meat, his black char on the peppers. We watched Bob slap the skewers onto the fire, the juice drip down onto the wood, heard it pop, watched the curl of black smoke rise into the sky, watched him turn and turn and turn.

"And lemonade," I said, "the lemonade by hand." We watched the floating hemisphere of a lemon be pressed into a glass; its clear juice leaked in the sugar—white, translucent, gone.

We sat under a canopy strung with incandescent lights and ate. She bought me a caramel apple embedded with peanuts and we walked to the games and she let me throw darts at balloons, my favorite. Jason gave me the real darts because it was my birthday. I felt the heft of them in my hand. They felt heavy and deadly and beautiful. I won a fuzzy lion hand puppet and a Harley Davidson keychain. Mom told me to hold on to that keychain, hold on to it tight.

"Someday, we're going to have a key to put it on and a door that will fit it and you'll have your own bed to sleep in, the same one every night, in the same place. And you'll have the same grass to play on, and the same

friends to play with, and they'll come over and we'll have water fights in the afternoon and have cookouts and make popsicles out of orange juice and toothpicks and dad will come home from work and we'll sit down at a table and eat roasted chicken with fried potatoes every night and I'll put you to bed and tuck you in and everything will be the same in the morning."

"What about the Ferris wheel?" I said.

"You love the Ferris wheel, don't you?"

"It's my favorite."

"Come on," she said.

And we went and got into the bucket and held on to the arm bar and rocked as it went higher. We reached the top and Joe Joe held us up there, so I could look out at the black mass of trees down below, see the road snake away, see the cars moving back and forth, the circles of their lights, the orange haze from the town's street lights rise into the black of the sky.

Here: mom, the tangle of her hair pulled back, the clasp she wore shining white in the light of the Ferris wheel. Down there: the yellow of our Funnel Cake sign, the white pouring out from the front windows, the shadow of dad moving left to right. I wanted to say something about the space between there and here, between the shadow of Dad and the light in Mom's hair, but I didn't know the words. Instead: the top, or near the top, of the Ferris wheel, the dark of the sky, the light on my skin, yellow and white, the non-space between mom and me.

"Just like everyone else?" I said.

"Just like everyone else," she said.

Then the Ferris wheel lurched, and for a moment, as the bucket swung out, I couldn't tell if we were still rising towards the sky or falling back to the Earth.

§

Dad came out of the trailer and wheeled out the handcart. He stacked the bins one by one until the handcart was full.

"Put that in the bag, too," he said.

"I'm going to keep this one."

"There's no room."

"I can put it in my pocket." I put the clasp in my pocket.

"That's not how this works."

"But I don't have anything else," I said.

"What did I tell you?" He crouched all the way down, his knees indented into the loose dirt beneath him. I crouched down, too. "Draw a circle," he said. We drew until the circles touched each other.

"Now stand inside," he said.

I stood inside my circle and he stood inside his circle.

"This is all the room you have now," he said.

"But it fits in the circle with me," I said. I held the clasp in the palm of my hand.

He slapped my hand and the clasp flew up and burned orange in the orange shaft of arc lamps and then fell into the dust. "Everything outside of this circle doesn't belong," he said. And then he said, "Now put the clasp into that bag."

I walked over and picked the clasp up. I held it in my palm, felt the heft of it. It felt heavy and deadly and beautiful there. The rhinestones were prisms through my tears. I put it in the bag.

"Now grab those trash bags and that's it," he said.

BETH STARGER

DOLL FACE

MAYA AVIDOV

THE LISTENER

Synopsis: Ossie's retiring today from the mannequin factory having been there for all of his working life. Now that his colleagues have left it's time for Ossie to say his final farewells to the ones he holds dear.

As a filmmaker, I've always been interested in blending genres, particularly fiction with non-fiction, and using different types of methods and materials to explore that with. It's also very important to me, and what I creatively strive for, to create films that use the medium for all its immense advantages—sound, image, and pacing—juxtaposing them to express something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

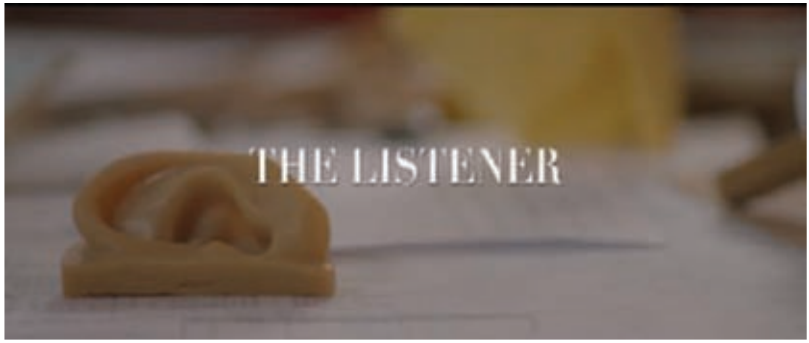
When I was approached to take part in this project, I was very excited because The Listener's Project is a spontaneous one. You pretty much get told your location (in my case the warehouse) on day one, you have 48 hours to write the script, and four days to assemble a crew and cast it. So, your response to the location has to be immediate, sort of like a reflex.

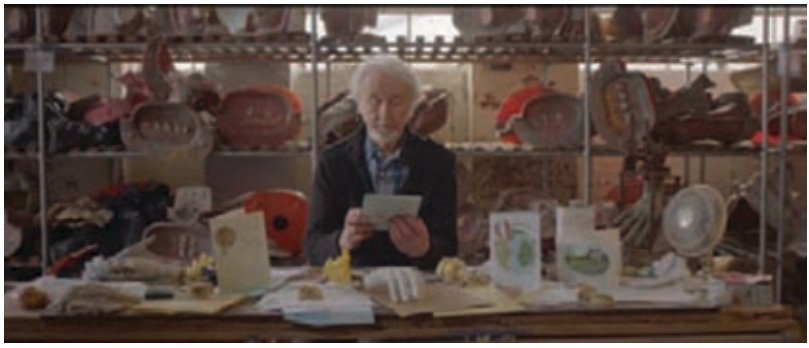
You have to look around and listen to the space and try to come up with something that best uses this (particular) place to tell an engaging story. It's a very exhilarating experience because it both quickly heightens your storytelling skills and hones your craft. You also sort of find yourself "in service" of this space and you want to honour it, which I found immensely inspiring.

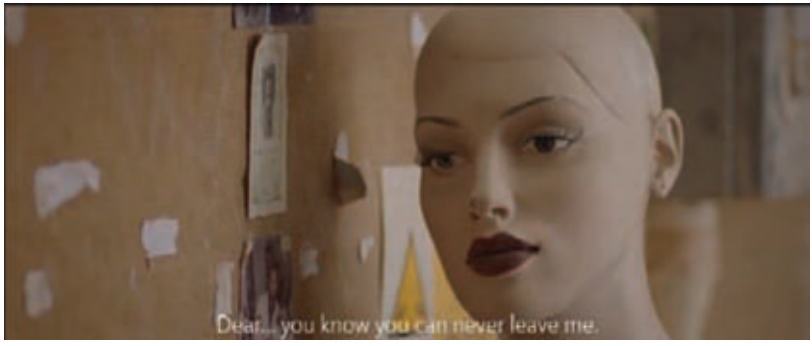
I thought of how I could keep all production in this space, so I had all of the mannequin characters played live by the actors voicing them (off camera). So for Ossie's shots the voice actor would be standing where the mannequin was in order to help the actors realize a real human connection.

It's a very interesting thing to cast inanimate objects as characters. First you have to respond to its look, and then you have to think if the actors voice fits that object, and lastly, could the voice bring it to life? Often, we'd come across a good blank canvas, but something was missing, there was no spark. Then we'd place a wig or glasses on them, and suddenly they'd come alive. It was a very interesting experience in taking filmmaking back to its "make believe" roots and seeing what you can do with emotional projection.

One of the things that Gráinne Creighton (editor) and I decided on was that every encounter/scene will have its own soundscape, exemplifying its own world—giving us a time frame, a mood, etc. We found that was crucial to bringing this imaginary world to a place where viewers could suspend their disbelief.







“ e Listener” in whole: ponderreview.com/new-media/5243-avidov-maya

CONTRIBUTORS

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Maya Avidov is an all-round filmmaker (writer/director/producer/D.o.P). Born in the U.S., she immigrated to Israel in 1990. Before beginning her filmmaking path, Maya studied fine art at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Midrasha Art College, specializing in photography, video, and printmaking. After which Maya attended the Sam Spiegel school of film in Jerusalem ('12), where she shot and produced several award-winning films and was awarded a place at the Budapest Cinematography Masterclass. Maya moved to London in 2012, where she currently lives and works. She's since created everything from shorts and docs to ads and music promos, for brands such as HTC, Warehouse, The British Library, and The Ministry of Stories. For more info about the listeners project please go to: listenersproject.com

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Richard Bader makes his living as a writer and brand strategist for nonprofit organizations. His fiction has been published by the *Burningword Literary Journal*, *SN Review*, *R.kv.ry. Quarterly*, and *National Public Radio*.

Claudia Barnett writes experimental plays about women, history, and science, and she's currently at work on a new script—*Kingdom* (a play about Snow White and climate change) as a Tennessee Playwrights Studio Fellow. She's developed five plays with Venus Theatre, where *Aglaonike's Tiger* premiered in 2017. She's a professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University and the author of *I Love You Terribly: Six Plays* (2012) and *No. 731 Degraw-street, Brooklyn, or Emily Dickinson's Sister: A Play in Two Acts* (2015), both published by Carnegie Mellon University Press.

Beth Ann Bauman is the author of a short story collection *Beautiful Girls* (MacAdam/Cage) and two young adult novels: *Rosie and Skate* (Random House), which was selected for the *New York Times* Editors' Choice list and Booklist's Top Ten First Novels for Youth, and *Jersey Angel* (Random House), selected by *Publishers Weekly*, *Boston Globe*, and *The Horn Book* as a best summer book. Beth has received fellowships from the Jerome Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She teaches at NYU and is on the faculty of Spalding University's brief-residency MFA program.

Kateryna Bortsova is a painter, graphic artist, scientist, participant of many international exhibitions (Art Revolution Taipei, Taiwan; ART.WHO. ART #6 festival, Moscow; UAMO festival "Fortress", Munich; Mini Print International, Spain; International biennial of Mini prints—Tetovo 2009, Macedonia; "Matrices 2010" International electrographic art exhibition of small forms, Budapest, Hungary etc.), and prize-winner of a number of contests (silver medal in the category "realism" in participation in "Factory of visual art", New York, USA; Winner of the 2015 Emirates Skywards Art of Travel competition, Dubai, United Arab Emirates). Her creative work is characterized by originality and search for new forms.

Sonny Brewer is the author of several works, including the novel *The Poet of Tolstoy Park*. He is formerly a Eudora Welty scholar at Mississippi University for Women. He is currently writing a memoir called *A Boat to See Me Home*, an excerpt from which was published recently in *Garden & Gun Magazine*.

Ashley Crout was born in Charleston, SC, and graduated from Bard College and the MFA program at Hunter College. She is the recipient of a poetry grant from The Astraea Foundation and has received awards from

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HARSHAL DESAI is an artist, writer, and photographer, charting identities through various art forms and taking on societal norms armed with nothing more than his cheeky wit and undeniable charm. His work is forthcoming in *Gulf Stream Magazine, Sediments Literary Art Journal, Stonecoast Review*, and elsewhere. Currently, he is a co-founder and art editor of *Parentheses Journal*. Email him at hersheydesai@gmail.com

DIANE is a native Hawaiian, Houston/Austin based, self taught painter and sculptor that derives inspiration from mindfulness. To remind ourselves to be mindful of ourselves, our fellow humans, our past, our present, our future, our strengths, weaknesses, uniqueness, abilities, our love, passion, endurance, and our presence. Honor. Respect. Build. Make better. Lift. PastTheShadows.com

ALEX DUENSING. Wishing the best for your unendingness, he is sincerely yours, Alex Duensing, Founder and Friend of the Friendists, Brains of the Operation, Ender of a minor apocalypse, Poet, Artist, Breathing Being.

REBEKA FERGUSSON-LUTZ is a full-time professional high school English teacher and part-time semi-professional creative person. Her primary breadwinning comes from teaching English language and literature at the high school and college levels: over the past 17 years she has taught in Romania, Washington, D.C., Qatar, Oman, Honduras, and China. When she's not writing lesson plans and grading papers, however, she works as a freelance writer, editor, and researcher. When she's not chained to my laptop with those side-hustles, she experiments with drawing, painting, sewing, printmaking, collage, and various combinations thereof. If you would like to see more of her work, please visit: fergussonlutzart.blogspot.com.

BRANDON FRENCH is the only daughter of an opera singer and a Spanish dancer, born in Chicago sometime after The Great Fire of 1871. She has been (variously) assistant editor of *Modern Teen Magazine*, a topless

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Ashley Geiger is a digital artist and improviser. Her day gig is as the Chair of Faculty at the Jesup Scott Honors College at the University of Toledo, where she cajoles students to learn philosophy through improv games. Check out her gallery @ashcat7077

Lisa Hase-Jackson earned her Master's Degree in English from Kansas State University and a Master's in Fine Arts from Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals, anthologies, and online magazines including *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Kansas Time and Place*, *Fall Lines*, *Sin Fronteras*, and *I-70 Review*. Born in Portland, Oregon and raised primarily in the Midwest, Lisa is a traveler at heart and has spent her adult years living and writing in such locations as Anyang, South Korea, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Spoleto, Italy. Her current perch is Charleston, South Carolina. Lisa is editor for *Zingara Poetry Review*.

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Shaw Homer is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell. She has lived in Costa Rica for 27 years, where she has taught languages and worked for the environment, along with her writing. For several years she wrote a column for the English language press, and her writing has appeared in several print and on-line literary and travel journals, as well as on her blog, writingfromtheheart.net. Her first travel memoir, *Letters from the Pacific*, received excellent *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly* reviews.

JUYANNE JAMES is the author of *The Persimmon Trail and Other Stories* (Chin Music Press, 2015), her debut collection of 17 stories in which she interprets the African American experience in Louisiana. James is an Associate Professor of English at University of Holy Cross in New Orleans. Her stories and essays have been published in journals such as *The Louisville Review*, *Mythium*, *Bayou Magazine*, and *Eleven Eleven*, and in the anthologies *New Stories from the South 2009* (Algonquin) and *Something in the Water: 20 Louisiana Stories* (Portals Press, 2011). She also wrote a story for Symphony Space's Selected Shorts Project. James was nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times. Her essay "Table Scraps" was a notable essay in The Best American Essays 2014.

MIKE JURKOVIC is a 2016 Pushcart nominee and his poetry and musical criticism have appeared in over 500 magazines and periodicals but have generated no reportable income. Full length collections, *Smitten by Harpies* and *Shiny Banjo Catfish* (Lion Autumn Press, 2016) Chapbooks, *Eve's Venom* (Post Traumatic Press, 2014), *Purgatory Road* (Pudding House Press, 2010) Anthologies: *WaterWrites & Riverine* (Codhill Press, 2009, 2007), *Will Work for Peace* (Zeropanik, 1999). President, Calling All Poets, New Paltz, NY. Producer of CAPSCASTS, performances from Calling All Poets, available at www.callingallpoets.net. Music features, interviews & CD reviews appear in *All About Jazz* (July 2017 -) & the *Van Wyck Gazette*. He loves Emily most of all.

SAVANNA SCOTT LESLIE writes fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in Canadian and Scottish publications such as *NōD Magazine, The Maynard, Canthius,* the *UC Review*, the *Quarterday Review*, and the *Dangerous Women Project*. She is currently earning a Master's Degree in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh.

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ANN STEWART MCBEE has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she taught literature and creative writing

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Jose Enrique Medina earned his BA in English from Cornell University. He writes poems, short stories, and novels. When he is not writing, he enjoys playing with his baby chicks, bunnies, and piglets on his farm in Whittier, California.

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Leah Oates has had solo shows at venues such as Susan Eley Fine Art, The Arsenal Gallery in Central Park, The Brooklyn Public Library, The Center for Book Arts, Tomasulo Gallery, Real Art Ways, and at the Sol Mednick Gallery at the Philadelphia University of the Arts and national and international solo shows at Anchor Graphics, Artemisia Gallery and Woman Made Gallery in Chicago, Illinois and at Galerie Joella in Turku, Finland. Her work has been in group shows locally at the Schweinfurth Art Center, Prospect Park, Nurture Art Gallery, Metaphor Contemporary Art, Denise Bibro Fine Art, Yale University, The Pen and Brush and The Center for Book Arts and nationally at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Florida, Unsettled Gallery in New Mexico, The Southeast Center for Photography in South Carolina, and at Nave Gallery in Massachusetts.

Linda Quinlan has been published in many literary journals, some of which include, *The New Orleans Review*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Pudding*, and *The North Carolina Review*. She was Poet of the Year in Wisconsin. She

and two other colleagues have a television show called *All Things LGBTQ*. Presently she lives in Vermont with her partner of 35 years.

Phyllis Reilly is seventy-five years old and has recently started the Croton Writers Group. In 2006 she received a distinguished writers award from La Belle Lettre for flash fiction. Her work has appeared in the *Croton Review*, *Poets On*, *The Hudson Review*, and other small press magazines. She was shortlisted in the International Poetry Contest 2017 for Fish Publishing. One of her non-fiction pieces will be published in the May 2018 issue of *Brevity Magazine*.

Amir Safi is from College Station and based out of Houston, Texas. He is a 2017 Houston Poet Laureate Finalist, and his work was most recently selected as a finalist for the *North American Review* James Hearst Poetry Prize. It has also been featured by *A Plus*, *Texas Monthly*, *Whataburger*, *The Huffington Post*, *Upworthy*, *Total Frat Move*, and more.

Rikki Santer's work has appeared in various publications including *Ms. Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Margie*, *Slab*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *RHINO*, *Grimm*, *Slipstream*, *Midwest Review*, and *The Main Street Rag*. She is a Pushcart Prize and Ohioana Literary Book Award nominee with a fifth poetry collection, *Make Me That Happy*, published recently by NightBallet Press.

Sarah Dickenson Snyder has written poetry since she knew there was a form with conscious line breaks. She has two poetry collections, *The Human Contract* and *Notes from a Nomad*. Recently, poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Chautauqua Literary Magazine*, *Piedmont Journal*, *Stirring: a Literary Journal*, *Whale Road Review*, *Front Porch*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *RHINO*. In May of 2016, she was a 30/30 Poet for Tupelo Press. One poem was selected by Mass Poetry Festival Migration Contest to be stenciled on the sidewalk in April 2017, another poem nominated for Best of Net 2017.

Fierce Sonia is a mixed media artist. She builds a substrate with acrylic paint and collage. A narrative is constructed by the tension between the lush layers moving to dreamy feminine mindscapes with a brighter palette. If you listen closely her work has a soundtrack, a rhythm, a pulse that will

give you a magic carpet ride to a fairytale that restates your own heartbeat. She has a public studio at Torpedo Factory: 105 North Union Street, studio 5 Alexandria, VA 22303. Follow on Facebook at www.facebook.com/fiercesonia or @fiercesonia on Instagram.

Beth Starger lives in Vermont, paints, toils, staves off the dread of mortality with the often glass of wine, does not take herself too seriously, likes to talk about herself in the third person.

Kevin Sudeith is from the banks of the Mississippi, along the north shore of Lake Superior, and into the boreal forests. Sudeith experienced wilderness for the first time while camping as child. As a young adult, Sudeith's wanderlust had him hitchhiking around Australia, where, in the Kimberley Plateau, he stumbled upon rock art that amazed him with its combination of ancient and modern imagery. Twenty years later, Sudeith's art practice now centers around living in the wilderness and making rock art. Sudeith's practice affords him long sessions of solitude in the wilderness where he embodies the spirit of the archetypal, free, nomadic man among the raw elements of nature followed by sessions experiencing the comforts of a civilized urbanite. His rock carvings and prints exhibit a contrast of diverse local communities which all collide in the span of a segment of time.

Emma Sywyj has been an artist for 14 years. Five of those years she was based in London whilst studying photography at the Camberwell College of Arts at the UAL. From there she received a BA Honors in Photography and a Foundation Diploma in Art & Design. She has exhibited her artwork internationally in the US, New York, LA, & San Francisco, in Athens, Greece, and in Budapest, Hungary. She has also exhibited nationally in the UK and London several times, where she currently lives and works. She has also been published in several independent art magazines in the UK and exhibited her video art work in international film festivals around the globe.

William Thompson is totally blind, and he teaches children's literature for MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. His work has appeared in *Firewords Magazine*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Penmen Review*, *The Danforth Review*, and *Literary Orphans*. He has two

collections of stories—*The Paper Man and Other Stories* and *Fractured and Other Fairy Tales*—both available on Amazon. He also maintains a blog at www.OfOtherWorlds.ca. He considers coffee a food group, and he loves to walk and read, usually at the same time.

TAUNJA THOMSON's poetry has most recently appeared in *Alcyone* and *The Ekphrastic Review*. Three of her poems have been nominated for Pushcart Awards: "Seahorse and Moon" in 2005, "I Walked Out in January" in 2016, and "Strum and Lull" in 2018. She has co-authored a chapbook of ekphrastic poetry entitled, *Frame and Mount the Sky*, that was published in 2017, her chapbook, *Strum and Lull*, placed as a semi-finalist in Golden Walkman's chapbook competition (2017), and her chapbook, *The Profusion*, will be published in 2018. She has a writer's page at facebook.com/TaunjaThomsonWriter.