PONDER REVIEW

Volume 2 • Issue 2
Fall 2018

The W Mississippi University for Women
FOUNDED 1884 COEDUCATIONAL SINCE 1982

PONDER REVIEW

Ponder Review is published bi-annually by the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Mississippi University for Women. The views expressed herein are those of the writers, not the editors or Mississippi University for Women.

Ponder Review considers new media, visual art, creative nonfiction, fiction, flash fiction, and poetry twice a year from December 15 – March 15 and June 15 – September 15. No previously published material will be accepted. See our website for full submission guidelines: PonderReview.com

Single copies are $12 and subscriptions are $20 per year for addresses within the United States. Foreign postage is additional. For submissions and subscriptions use Submittable: ponderreview.submittable.com

We request *Ponder Review* be credited with initial publication. Queries or other correspondence may be emailed to: editors@ponderreview.com. Queries and subscriptions sent by mail should be addressed to: The Editors, *Ponder Review*, MFA Creative Writing, 1100 College St., W-1634, Columbus, MS 39701.

ISSN 2572-6455 (print)
ISSN 2572-6463 (online)

Cover Art by Seungkyung Oh • "Cactus Woman"

A Note to Readers

As we at *Ponder Review* close out our second year of publishing thought-provoking pieces of literature, art, and new media, we continue to discuss our identity as a magazine. We debate the same markers that many new magazines do—regional vs. international scope, conventional vs. experimental form—and we wonder how we will find the right thematic label when we continue to fall in love with contradictions: the pastoral and the gritty, the lyric and the grotesque. Perhaps, though, it is more constructive to consider the magazine's identity as layered, multifarious, and complex, like the lives and stories of those who submit to and produce the magazine itself. It is this search for (or creation of) identity in its layers that heats the pages of this issue of *Ponder Review*.

The arresting cover art, Seungkyung Oh's "Cactus Woman," serves as the perfect opener for the issue's thematic arc: a person of mysterious identity in a mask who seems shaped by—yet unnatural in—her surroundings. Our writers grapple with the process of self-identification at every turn—including the many masks we wear—and the poetry and prose pieces ask so many important questions: Should our identities be defined by nationality and DNA? In what ways do our environments, including the natural world, shape us, and how do we shape them? What are the ugly realities we face when we uncover our true selves? Or, conversely, how liberating can it be to shed one identity for another? Finally, what will be left of any of our modes of identification when our world ends and we are reduced to ash? Each of these concerns is punctuated by the stunning visual art that reflects the beauty and strangeness of our world and ourselves.

We hope that you will be as gripped by this journey as we have been. We are proud to be associated with this dynamic group of writers and artists, and we are grateful to you, the readers, for pondering their work with us.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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MATT PACZKOWSKI

AT THE TRACK'S END

I noticed a fly land on my corn when my older sister, Amber, brought up the hole. It was during a barbecue with her husband, Michael, in late June. The fly rubbed its hands together in prayer and flew off. I took a swig of my beer.

This was the first time I'd gotten together with Amber and Michael since Mom died six months prior. They invited me over often, but I always declined. I still don't know why I agreed on that day. Maybe it was the warm weather, that burst of heat and life that accompanies June, or maybe because I was free from quadratic formula demonstrations to despondent fourteen-year-olds…at least until September.

"Really, you remember that hole?" Amber asked, bringing me back to the red checkered tablecloth and undercooked hamburgers. I hadn't thought of the hole in years, which surprised me, considering I'd been in and out of the past so often since Mom's death…going down memory tracks, avenues that led no place meaningful.

"Michael and I were watching—what was it?" She looked to him for confirmation, but he seemed more interested in digging his fork around the potato salad. "Some documentary on Nazi tunnels and shit, about these deep mines in Germany. And all I could think of was that weird hole."

Amber had not touched her food. She'd been talking nonstop since we entered her backyard. I was grateful; one of us needed to speak, to bridge the communication gap that worsened after Mom's death. "This was when we lived in Pennsylvania," she explained to Michael, "Woodland County. Redneck County."

Michael grinned and wiped the corner of his lips. He stood and tossed me a beer from the cooler; I snapped open the can. I noticed that he listened carefully to me, more so than when my sister spoke.

"When Amber and I were kids, we explored the farms outside of Woodland," I began. "Wasn't much else to do there on weekends. Our mother didn't mind."

Of course Mom didn't—single mother, kids of out of the house for once. I could see her in that dark, narrow foyer beyond the oak double doors, her long tangled hair, a basket of folded laundry leaning against the banister. She looked young then. Eyes wider. Face fuller. A nine-year-old Amber charged

for the screen door and I trailed behind. A squeak and a slam.

"One weekend, we followed the train tracks past the Dodson Farm, over Indigo Lake and into the woods." Dodson Farm. Indigo Lake. I was surprised how easily the names resurfaced. "Past the track's end, we found a clearing—a circle of these cracked trees with a…hole in the center of the dirt. Clearly man made. Dug, real deep."

"Jesus," Amber muttered, her eyes closed. I'm sure she was seeing it. When we'd come home from the hole—after dinner and after dark—Mom would tuck me into bed and read from my children's Bible. At nine, I knew I was too old for this, but the softness of her voice relaxed me. The way her hands rubbed against the crinkled pages, those splashes of faded color. The stories took me away from Woodland and the hole and placed me somewhere intangible, a world where miracles existed. Her beliefs became my beliefs. Abraham and Sarah. Pillars of salt. Floods and arks and hungry whales. The nativity and the crucifixion and the resurrection.

"What was it, a well?" Michael asked.

"No," I said. "It was just a hole. Had these planks all around it." I imagined the white chipped paint on those wooden beams, the smell of peat moss stinging in the air like an aged scotch. "I guess to keep people from falling in."

Amber leaned forward, opened her eyes, and looked to the thin trees that stretched over her small, northern Jersey property. She spoke softly. "We bought a brick and a spool of fishing line once." She looked to Michael and then to me, her green eyes intensifying. "Tossed it down. Every week we'd go to Hal's Hardware and buy another spool with our allowance. Tied it to the same spool. The line never went slack. It just dangled there. I'm telling you," she said, "over two miles. I calculated it in Miss Reynold's math class."

"Bullshit," Michael laughed.

I grinned and tossed a potato chip into my mouth. "Tell him about Jumps."

Amber let out a long sigh. "Look, I have goosebumps!" She held her arms out as evidence.

"You all are crazy," Michael said. "What's Jumps?"

"Jumps was Madeline's cat," Amber explained. "Madeline was this fat girl at St. Mary of Bethany Elementary, a year older than me. I'd been telling my friends for weeks about the hole, and rumors spread. And when Madeline's cat died in April, she wanted to bury him in the hole. I don't know why, maybe she thought it would give some meaning to the death. Anyway, I felt bad for her, so I took her to the hole one Sunday afternoon. Madeline muttered some prayer and dropped the stiff fucker down in a Payless shoebox. Thing disappeared into the darkness. Poof."

"Did you go?" Michael asked me, his eyebrows raised, and I shook my

head.

"Weeks later, Jumps was seen throughout Woodland. Alive. Black stripe above the left eye, green collar, bell and all. By Mr. Holland, by one of the teachers, by Miss O'Brien, even a few of the kids. I get chills just thinking about it."

Michael questioned if either of us had seen Jumps and we both shook our heads. "And you believe it came back?" he asked.

"I guess," Amber muttered with a shrug. "Who knows? Woodland was nuts." She widened her eyes at me. "The thought of hearing Jump's bell collar out my window used to scare the shit out of me."

"We stopped visiting the hole after that," I said. "Our mom heard about the cat and forbid us to go."

"She found it 'blasphemous.'" Amber made air-quotes. "As though we were worshipping Satan."

"Jesus, glad you both got out of that town."

Amber "got out" because of Michael. He was Mike then. Athletic, too. I often think of that night so many years ago. Mom screaming out the window. The taillights of a Plymouth taking a seventeen-year-old Amber far away from Woodland. The walk upstairs to the source of the sounds, the view of my mother sobbing into a curtain. Those breathy gasps, her trembling hands. I often wondered if Mom was crying because her only daughter had run away, or because of the dogmatic threat of pre-marital sex, or because Mike was agnostic.

Regardless, Amber was gone. Four had become three, and three became two.

A breeze blew my now empty beer can onto the grass.

"So, how are you?" Amber asked when Michael entered their home with a stack of serving trays, condiments, and utensils. I noticed that she made a point to establish eye contact, and I looked away. "I feel like we don't talk anymore," she said, "since Mom."

A long silence was interrupted by a bird's caw. I watched a fly land in a dab of ketchup.

"You don't blame me, do you?" she asked. "For not visiting at the end? Christ, you know she wouldn't have wanted me there."

"If she even recognized you." I shook my head. "You know, I started going to church again."

"Get out. Really?"

"We'll see if it continues. Found this and felt the guilt." I reached into my white v-neck and pulled on the silver chain, revealing the small wood crucifix. "Do you remember?"

"Holy shit, yes! I lost mine years ago."

Mom had given us each one, on the day of our First Communion,

wrapped in silver foil. I never found out where she got them—could have been a Walgreens or the Vatican. I sometimes wondered if she carved them herself.

"Where did you find yours?" Amber asked.

"In a drawer." I returned the wooden object to the inside of my shirt. When Michael returned, he sat close to Amber and rubbed her bare knee. I watched her pull away. She continued to stare at the imprint on my shirt just below the collar bone.

§

Welcome to Woodland. The sign was fading, but the image was still visible. A family of four held hands—mother and father in the center, two young children on either side. They faced a mountain of pine trees that stretched out to a nothingness of green.

My aging Hyundai passed that sign sometime in August. I'd been back to visit Mom, of course, but I'd never actually driven through Woodland itself. Only to her house and then straight back to Queens. Woodland felt different now. Like I didn't belong there. Like I'd betrayed the town. But with end of summer approaching, I needed to find that hole. I couldn't get it out of my head since Amber's barbeque. I had to see it again, to breathe in the air, to peer into the emptiness.

I reached Main Street while there was still daylight, and I noticed that little yellow gas light switch on. First time I'd seen it in my life.

I shifted my gaze to the street before me, to the low-hanging telephone wires, the sugar maples, the bakeries and pizzerias, the cracked concrete, the angular hydrants, the awnings billowing in the August wind. I rolled down my window to take in the thick, humid air. The news made it sound as though these places no longer existed in America, but somehow Woodland was just the same, suspended in time.

I filled my tank at Norman's Gas, where the pumps were new and accepted credit cards. This alleviated the absurd suspicion that I had traveled back in time, or the more realistic concern that I'd spent so much of my summer in the past that I was now stuck there.

I returned my wallet to my back pocket and tried to turn over the ignition key. Nothing. I tried again. And again. On the empty road before me, streetlamps flicked on, one at a time down the street like fireflies.

The engine kicked to life on my seventh or eighth try, but I could only shift the gear into reverse. Never seen anything like that. I had to steer backwards down Main Street, hand on the passenger headrest, neck craning, moving back, back, back, until I pulled aside into a ditch behind Talman's Pharmacy. I got out and started walking. West. Into the woods. Into the night. Hoping to find whatever it was I was looking for.

§

Since the barbecue, Amber and I started calling each other at least once a week. We talk. A lot. Mostly about what we remember.

What do I remember? I remember the chair Mom was in after the stroke. In that hospital behind Red Robin. I remember the bed, the stained white sheets. I remember the sticky floor, the stuck button on the elevator. I remember the body. The twists. The tangled hair, gray for the first time. Long, too. I remember the wrinkles that somehow deepened. I remember the slack jaw. I remember the veins. I remember the paper-dress, the long nails, the yellow in one eye, and the tongue that didn't know where to go.

I remember what I want to forget.

Amber didn't visit Mom at the end, so she remembers hopscotch and tricycles, planting sunflowers and trick-or-treating. She remembers snowball fights and playdates and reading lists and braided hair. Christmas trees and dance recitals and swimming holes and cotillions.

What did Mom remember at the end? She knew phrases, expressions, rote. If I began, "I pledge allegiance," she would say, "to the flag" and not stop until she reached liberty and justice for all. She could recite all the words to the Happy Birthday song and half the animals on Old McDonald's farm.

"Mom," I finally asked. "Mom. Do you remember me? Do you know who I am?"

"I—" she started, and her eyes glazed over. "I…Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

I held a knotted hand and said nothing. I left that day. Got in my Hyundai and drove home. Not home to the hotel, but home to my filthy apartment six-hours east in Flushing. I didn't stop for food. I didn't return to Pennsylvania. Not until the arrangements twenty-seven days later.

§

Mom used to tell us about our dad, that he smoked tobacco on weekends, that he never missed a day of work in his life. She said that they both believed life had three priorities: "God, family, and country. In that order." As a child, this made sense to me, but as an adult I wondered how one could possibly put the intangible "God" ahead of one's family. I don't have a family of my own, but I imagine they would be first.

At the end, Mom could recite the Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Pledge of Allegiance. But she couldn't remember my name. She couldn't recognize me. I suspect she mixed up country and family.

§

Past Dodson Farm and Indigo Lake, I found the track's end. I followed it beyond the pine trees to the clearing. My legs felt heavy, burning, but I kept up the pace. One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other. Again and again and again. I wished Amber had come, to tell me I was crazy, to ask me what on earth I was doing here. "Mom's dead. Gone." Amber always knew better, like her decision to run away from Mom and me and Woodland, to find a new family, one that would last.

By the time I arrived at the hole, my eyes had adjusted to the Pennsylvanian darkness. I could make out the plywood boards, weathered, chipped, broken. An August breeze cut through the trees and made me shiver. I approached the hole slowly; my shoes sunk into the wet dirt. I smelled the moss, the sharp scent of scotch, and I could swear the wind was whispering something. A name, a memory, a place.

Miles away at their house in New Jersey, Amber and Michael were on the couch watching a television program, or cleaning up after dinner, or talking about their seemingly meaningless jobs.

Four became three. Three became two. Two became one.

I peered over the edge of the plywood and into the hole. Into the void. I got down onto my knees to get a better look, and without understanding or comprehension, whispered, "Mom?"

I turned my head to listen for the echo. Silence.

"Mom," I said again, louder than before.

Nothing.

Instead of trying a third time, I pulled on the crucifix from inside my shirt—the silver chain cut free and flung out like a ghost, before whipping back against my hand—and I held it tightly above the darkness while staring hard at the carved object, its twists and intricate cuts. Moments passed.

I let it fall.

§

It's early September now—the leaves outside are full and beginning to crinkle—and my homeroom class sits before me, some of them smiling, others frowning, others digging their pens into paper. A class of freshmen: new and nervous. A mess of cell phones and braces and hair gel.

We go around the room to introduce ourselves: who we are, where we're from, our favorite academic subjects, and one notable thing that happened to us this summer. It's a shitty ice-breaker, I know, but one that helps me remember their names.

Sandra Lopez flew to Spain to visit family. Leo Ankia took in a stray cat. Keith Dexter went on a cruise to Mexico. We circle up and down the

aisles—different names, faces, stories—and at the end, I introduce myself. I tell them that I grew up in Woodland, Pennsylvania, that I moved to Queens nine years ago, that I love teaching math here, that they are at an exciting time in their lives and have the capacity to go off into a million different directions if they only study hard and with an open mind.

I don't tell them what I did this summer. I don't tell them about the hole in my childhood town that sinks deeper into the ground than the miles of fishing line I dropped down there with my older sister. I don't tell them that I went back just a few weeks ago, that I dropped my crucifix into it along with any lingering beliefs about God and love and the great beyond. I don't tell them how long I stood there, listening, waiting. I don't tell them that somewhere in Woodland, I still stand above the opening, in that clearing beyond the track's end, arms braced against the plywood, ear to the void, straining to hear the object hit the bottom and echo back with a sound so loud and lovely that I will believe again, the way I did as a child.

I want to tell them this—desperately—but I don't.

Instead, I hand out their textbooks.

SAMANTHA CORBETT

THE IMMIGRATION OFFICE

You went in to ask for a band
aid, the immigration office told you
they didn't know how
to fill out that form.
"I can't stop the bleeding."

SEUNGKYUNG OH

SEED OF A TREE

JOSEPH AVSKI

KORBIN JONES, translator

GUANA GUAISER, GÜERO?

"The storm blessed my ocean patrols.
I danced on the waves lighter than a cork,
called the eternal crushers of victims.
Ten nights, a sin to miss the stupid eye of the lighthouse!"
— Arthur Rimbaud

I arrived at the beautiful cities of Bryan and College Station in the summer of 2009 after having driven a rented truck more than 680 miles. I had cut across the State of Texas from west to east, in the opposite direction of the sun, following the trajectory of the stars in the celestial sphere. Astronomers call this kind of movement retrograde. In reality, my life in Bryan and College Station turned out to be a journey for the American Dream and Nightmare.

I went to Bryan to study a doctorate in Hispanic Studies at Texas A&M University. Though the university was based in College Station, a friend of mine told me that it was much cheaper to live in Bryan. In the end, both cities had been united to the point that one couldn't tell where one started and the other ended. But before long, I realized that I was living isolated from the world of the university, which I would soon belong to for five years. The neighborhood surrounding my apartment on 725 Pepper Tree Street didn't seem like any other that wrapped around the university. My place was in the slums.

In one of the most educated areas of the country, I was the only university student in the neighborhood. Out of the more than 176,000 people who make up Bryan and College Station combined, some 70,000—around 40%—are professors or students. College Station has some 100,000 people, of which almost 80% are white. Bryan, on the other hand, has 76,000 people, and fewer than 50% of them are white. Is there some sort of correlation between skin color and access to education? I wondered. Around me there were people only educated by *Judge Judy*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Dr. Phil*, *Univisión Noticias*, *Telemundo*, and *Fox News*. Just under a mile away

was the promise of inclusion: one of the richest universities in the world, with an annual budget many times larger than my state in Colombia, ten Nobel Prizes in various disciplines, and the commitment to train leaders and scientists in order to make the world a better place. However, my neighbors had been cheated by the same education system, one that had left them in a kind of exile instead of giving them a better place. Let's not fool ourselves: people attending universities perpetuate the status quo more than they challenge it. The success of a university is measured more by the number of well-paid executives it places in large companies than the number of social activists it puts in the streets. That great symbol of the American Dream—Texas A&M—was more accessible for a middle-class Colombian than for those who had been born and raised just a few steps away.

The bars, the restaurants, the hotels, and the shops were mostly in College Station, the university zone. In the slums there was nothing more than a gas station with a minimart run by a Hindu man, and the bar: The Cowboy. Not having a bar close by is one of the greatest tragedies for someone like me. Of course, The Cowboy had nothing on the university bars in Northgate. Where I lived there were no blondes in jean shorts with perfect asses and cowboy boots. No white boys with plaid button-ups, belts with large buckles, and leather boots. No Bermuda yuppies, hair styled like a Ken doll and wearing Ralph Lauren shirts. The Cowboy's patrons had necks burned by the sun, hands thick from working in construction, faces tired from the repetitive factory work, and the sour odor of accrued sweat.

In that neighborhood I spent the first two years of my doctorate, and although the better part of my social life was spent with people from the university, I still remember some neighbors. Living catty-corner to my apartment was Jesús, a Mexican between forty or fifty years old by my calculations—short, dark, and good-natured. Out of all my neighbors of that time, Jesús was the one I shared the most with.

In the afternoons when I'd come back from the university, I would find him sitting by the door of his place with a Budweiser in hand.

"Guana guaiser, güero?" he asked me halfway between English and Spanish.

"Yeah, of course," I said in Spanish. "Who am I to say no to a beer?"

He was surprised by my answer, but he handed me a cold can and we started to chat. A bit later his friend showed up, asking him from a distance, "And that güero? No shit? You can already speak English, Jesús, you fuck."

"No shit, dumbass. This güero speaks better Spanish than you," said Jesús. Güero is what Mexicans call a fair-haired person. It took some time to convince them that I was Colombian, not some gringo. In the end, they said I looked like Pibe Valderrama, a Colombian soccer player, and from then on, they called me Pibe.

Jesús had crossed the border into Texas near the Rio Grande eight years back. His wife and their two kids still lived in Guanajuato. He hadn't seen them since leaving. The oldest was twelve and the youngest was nine, though the photos he'd stuffed inside his wallet had to be outdated. During one of our earliest conversations, I asked him if he'd spoken with his family via Skype, and he said he didn't know what that was. I brought him in to my apartment and showed him. He loved it. Days after helping scope out a computer for him and one for his wife, various internet subscriptions, etc., it seemed reasonable to him and he asked me to accompany him that weekend to buy them. "I got some money saved up," he told me.

Days later he told me he wasn't going to buy the computer because he'd decided to spend Christmas in Mexico. He'd saved up for six years so he could go, and that expenditure would postpone his trip another year. Just paying a coyote to take him back to the country would cost him $40,000, he told me. While American companies that offer services in Mexico can cross the border without a problem, Jesús couldn't do the same, to come and offer his services here. The Free Trade Agreement between Mexico and the U.S. had nothing for people like Jesús.

In December of 2010, he left for Mexico and would never return. I want to think that he couldn't give up his family again and decided to stay, that he hadn't died crossing the border like so many die each year, cheated by immigration politics and social structures.

Not all those excluded were Mexican or black. The issue can't be reduced to something singular like race. My neighbor to the left looked like a supporting character from American History. He'd had a swastika tattooed on each elbow, some vines wrapped around the left side of his chest, and along his back a Celtic cross sprouting wings. He frequently told me that I was the only neighbor he could talk to because all the rest were black and Hispanic. "I'm also Hispanic," I told him countless times, and he'd always say, "It's not the same." Jake was unemployed—or, as he would say, "between jobs." He never left his place much, except to smoke, leaning against the doorframe. In reality, I suspect that he'd been released from jail and probably belonged to the Aryan Brotherhood, the largest crime group in the U.S., formed around a Christian ideology of white supremacy and shit like that.

I never enjoyed talking to him as I had with Jesús, but at times when I was coming home it was inevitable crossing him, smoking his life away. I started to avoid him, not just because he was a neo-Nazi, but also because Jake, in all reality, was boring as hell. He'd only talk about cars, something which I know nothing about. When he saw me coming, he'd start babbling about makes and models and prices and speeds and miles and other things I didn't know about. It was all very repetitive. At first, I liked confronting him, tearing apart his ridiculous theories about white supremacy, to which

he'd tell me that he respected the whole world, people of every race, but believed that they shouldn't mix. If I pressed him long enough, there'd come a moment when he'd see he was out of arguments and say, "You're probably right, man. I don't know." Then he'd start talking about cars again.

For having been a criminal, Jake had very few stories to tell me. The few he had described dealt with cars and swamps and large tires. Nothing memorable. One time I asked him if he belonged to a white supremacist group and he told me that he'd known people in them for a while, but that he wasn't really associated with them. A short while later, he disappeared, and the apartment remained empty for a few months.

In the summer of 2011, I left the neighborhood and moved much closer to the American Dream, just a few blocks from Northgate, where all the cool people from the university hung out. From my new place, I could see the golden arches of a McDonald's sign lighting up the night sky.

ERIC FORSBERGH

SPIT INTO THE CUP

Over the countertop
between the microwave and fridge,
she leans to spit
into a screw-tight plastic cup,
DNA hanging by a thread.

Hung with documents, a tree
had grown from her computer screen.
Birth. Race. Death. Race. Port of entry. Race.
So far, an Irish tale. A story of sod
furrowed up like pages in the earth:
typhoid, flood, death by childbirth,
by ax, gun, boat, chain, log, horse.

Until the word *mulatto* launched off the page:
a census record, 1810, Virginia's shore.

She spits with purpose.
Hopes to tell what truth
may rupture out of truth-be-told.
Perhaps to watch
her knob-knock uncle punch the wall.

That night, through the ceiling,
she envisions a constant brow of clouds
sifted by savannah grass
rising off a tan continent of hills,
and she sees
a beaded Tswana bride,
brass loops lengthening her neck,
emerge from the preparation hut,
a symmetry of self.

NANCY KELLEY

GIRL BOXER

Characters:

NETTA: A girl in her early teens, dressed in workout clothes and boxing gloves.

MARCO: A seasoned boxing coach.

MOM: A well dressed woman in her 40s, Netta's mother.

SETTING: We are in a no-frills boxing gym. Afternoon, Present Day. There is a bench with some towels and water bottles on it, a boombox on the floor, and a punching bag.

AT RISE: NETTA is training with MARCO. The action is light and easy.

MARCO: Come on. Jab. Jab. One, two. This ain't some damn hobby. You ain't in no fancy health-club-fitness-center-spa-resort! This ain't no zumba class! No yoga posin' hour! You see any flat screen TVs with soap operas on 'em? Or fancy bathrooms with hair dryers?

NETTA: (*Playfully*) You think I don't know that, Marco!

MARCO: You're in Big Lou's Boxing Gym! And don't you forget it! Come on now, like you mean it, Netta! Like it's in your blood...in your bones!

NETTA: (*Landing a good punch*) Think I meant that?

MARCO: Yup! Message delivered!

(*NETTA and MARCO keep sparring.*)

MARCO: You've come a long way, girl. Keep em up! Don't let down now! You got a real fight comin' up! You gotta be ready! Stop hitting like a girl!

NETTA: But I am a girl!

(*NETTA clocks MARCO. Then she slows down and tosses a look over her shoulder. Distracted.*)

MARCO: That's it! Try and stay relaxed now. What's the matter with you? You up all night? Up all night on Spacebook?

NETTA: It's Facebook, and you know it. And no, I wasn't. Just tired is all. Tired of listening to you!

MARCO: One, two. Snap it back. I don't care how tired you are as long as aren't doin' all that girl talk on your computer, or your telephone, or whatever damn thing!

NETTA: What do you know about girl talk?

MARCO: One, two, uppercut, uppercut, hook! I've seen lots of girls come and go, and it's always the same thing. Some distraction to keep 'em from focusin'. (*Playfully*) Like talkin' about boys. Oh, yeah, I know plenty about girl talk. Keep em up, Netta!

NETTA: I bet you do.

MARCO: And that's why I keep sayin', and I'll say it again to all you girls around here. Boys are nothin' but trouble to keep you from doin' what you're supposed to do.

NETTA: Oh, yeah, and what would that be?

MARCO: (*Stops and turns serious*) Think better of yourselves. Stick up for yourselves. Not in a mean way, but a strong way. But first you gotta find the fire inside you. I know it's there! I know it's anger that got you here in the first place, Netta. None of my business what it's all about. Only my business to help you face it! Look it right in the eye and knock it on its ass!

MOM: (*MOM enters and observes momentarily. MARCO exits*) What does he really think of you?

NETTA: He thinks of me as an athlete, Mom. Imagine that!

MOM: What does he want from you?

NETTA: Unlike the men in your life, Mom, Marco doesn't want anything from me, except to be a good boxer. Can't you see that?

MOM: (*Looking around the gym*) What about these boys around here…they must be laughing at you behind your back!

NETTA: Do you see anyone laughing, Mom?

MOM: (*Pleading*) Why would you want to hurt your pretty face?

NETTA: Oh, only ugly girls box, right? That makes it okay!

MOM: Is that it? You don't think you're pretty enough?

NETTA: Oh, please. I don't have any problem with my looks. Maybe you do. But I don't.

MOM: (*Exasperated*) What part of being a girl don't you like?

NETTA: Oh, let me count the ways!

MOM: Netta, stop it. (*Pause*) Why are you here? Why are you doing this?

NETTA: Where else should I be? Cheerleading practice?

MOM: Well, that would be a start! You're an A-student! You have a nice home! In a nice neighborhood! Haven't your father and I given you everything? Certainly a whole lot more than I had growing up.

(*MOM looks around and rubs her hand up and down her other arm, as though cold.*)

NETTA: (*Coldly, directly*) He's not my real father.

MOM: Well, he's the best one you've got!

NETTA: (*Shaking her head in disbelief*) Best one?

MOM: He provides for you quite well. Pays for you to be standing there in that get-up…as much as he hates the thought. And he's none too happy about you taking the subway to this…this…rat-pit! And neither am I!

NETTA: What have you got against taking the subway? You said you used to run wild on it when you were a kid, like you were proud of it.

MOM: Well, maybe if I'd had someone looking out for me, I wouldn't have been! You've got no such excuse. (*pause*) Why, Netta, why? Why do you continue to come here? (*pause*) That's what I want to know!

NETTA: (*Ironically*) For my anger issues? Remember? I hit a girl…shoved her head against a locker?

MOM: Yes, I'm well aware of that ridiculous incident, Netta. Just because some high school gym teacher dyke thinks coming here is a good idea for you doesn't make it one!

NETTA: Whoa, Mom, who are you calling a dyke? Didn't think that word was in your vocabulary.

MOM: (*Looking around embarrassed*) Keep your voice down. You're not like these other girls.

NETTA: These other girls? You mean, these throw-aways? These damaged goods? Well, you're right about that. See her over there? That's Teneka. The only meal she'll eat today is the one coach brought her. And Maria? She's got not one, but two parents in jail. And the pale skinny girl? Cheyenne's her name. On probation for prostitution. They're my friends, Mom. Believe it or not, my friends. And maybe I'm not so different from them after all.

MOM: How can you possibly say that, Netta?

NETTA: Because unlike you, Mom, I see how china-boned and quick little Teneka is...like a hummingbird! And Maria...how that lopsided grin of hers just lights up this shithole of a room. And how Cheyenne's always cheering you on. (*Pause*) Can you see those things in these girls? Can you?

MOM: I'll tell you what I see. (*Pointing at the girls one by one.*) I see poverty, homelessness, drug addiction. You think I don't know what they're all about? There's a lot you don't know about me. (*pause*) I wanted things to be different for you. I want you to come home.

NETTA: There are a lot of things you don't know about me either.

MOM: What, Netta, what don't I know about you? That's what I'm trying to understand.

NETTA: (*Lowering her head*) You won't understand.

MOM: Netta, please.

NETTA: (*Pausing*) When I box, I'm in my body. I'm moving in my body. I can jab and thrust and pull back when I want. When I want.

(*MOM looks uncomprehending.*)

NETTA: And I feel safe. I can't hurt anybody here, not really, and nobody can hurt me.

(*NETTA takes off her gloves and offers them to MOM.*)

NETTA: Go ahead, put them on.

MOM: Don't be so foolish. People are watching.

NETTA: Nobody's watching. Go ahead.

MOM: I have no desire to fight.

NETTA: Maybe you should.

MOM: Sometimes I just don't understand you, Netta.

NETTA: (*Goading*) Like Marco says, most of us girls are angry about somethin'!

(*MOM puts on the gloves, reluctantly.*)

NETTA: Now do a few jabs...like this. (*NETTA does a few jabs.*) How does it feel?

MOM: (*Following suit*) Ridiculous.

NETTA: Try this.(*NETTA takes MOM over to the punching bag and shows her a few moves.*) You do it.

(*MOM starts hitting, half-heartedly. NETTA stands behind the bag, holding it like a shield.*)

NETTA: You should be mad. (*Pause*) You should be mad…at him.

(*MOM stops and stares.*)

NETTA: You didn't protect me. Even when I tried to tell you. You only ever saw what you wanted to see.

MOM: (*Confused*) Protect you?

NETTA: From him. My stepfather.

MOM: (*Frightened*) Netta…

NETTA: You want to know why I do this, Mom? I do it because it's for me. Just for me. Not the good, obedient little girl. But for me.

MOM: Oh, Netta! (*Stops, unable to speak*)

NETTA: Go on, Mom, hit it. Hard. Like you mean it. Find the fire inside. Face your anger. Look it right in the eye!

(*MOM starts to hit, a little harder each time.*)

NETTA: That's it! Harder! Harder!

(*MOM punches the bag hard, then stops. She and NETTA look deeply at one another. MOM slips off the gloves, and reaches out slowly, touching NETTA's face, as though finally seeing her daughter for who she is.*)

(LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE)

END

LAUREN DAVENPORT

HALLOWEEN

In an hour, we'd be walking on Henry towards Carroll Gardens. They would gather as much candy as they possibly could in the small bat bags gifted to us years ago when they toddled on these same streets.

In this moment, however, we are stuck.

"But what CAN I be?" My ten-year-old, on the cusp of becoming something else entirely, had changed her mind so many times and it was far too late for elaborate inventions.

"Ghosts are timeless," I offer.

My son was satisfied with the hybrid zombie soccer player.

I put on my witch hat. The same hat my mother had donned each October. Honoring the choice of witch was easy as aging offered elongated noses, hair sprouting from chins, and an uncensored cackle. I embodied it as well as she had.

"Are you really a witch?"

Soon, we would wrestle for the Tootsie Rolls, and then the siblings would negotiate in a language I am not privy to. The chocolate ones to my daughter and anything else to my son.

"I don't want to be anything then."

We'd discussed choices in September, after she'd shaved the back of her head replacing her curls for fuzz and adding red blood highlights that lit up her face. She'd stopped wearing girls bathing suits that summer opting instead for boy's trunks and surf shirts.

"You don't understand ANYTHING!"

As a girl, each year I was presented with a cardboard box to become whatever I wanted. I was once a box of tea, once a robot with blinking lights, and later, as an angry feminist, I just painted an enormous set of breasts.

She settles on a sort of warrior, a mix-and-match of costumes from previous years. Outside, I can hear the excited giggles and the rustling of wrappers.

"Do you think I look pretty?" For just a moment I see her as she was, as she is, in this in-between spinning place.

"Inside and out."

She rolls her eyes.

On the corner of our street the elderly have been wheeled out from the

old age home. Jimmy, the one dying from emphysema, trembles as he hands my son a Dum Dum lollipop. I know my son hates the lime flavor so I suck in my breath. But my son looks right at me then back to the retreating hand and says, "Thank you very much, Jimmy."

I hug them both to my chest for just a moment smelling the sweat and shampoo, the falling leaves carpet our feet.

My son is not afraid of scary movies, or roller coasters, or haunted houses. He laughs when I cover my eyes as soon as ominous music plays. He calls me scaredy-cat.

He has been having nightmares and makes his way to my bed nearly every night. He worries about buildings collapsing, and school shootings, and that Daddy and Mommy do not love each other anymore.

It is getting dark, but I am not afraid of the werewolf who paws for his mother as he crosses the street. And this year, the house with the giant spider doesn't give me pause. I am not really afraid of scary movies I tell him. It is the suspense that gets to me. The unknown. I don't like things that I cannot name.

Nearly midnight now and I am awake with thirst. The witch hat is crumpled on the floor with the rest of the illusions. If I am honest, as I move my son's foot from my waist where he has wrapped himself, what truly scares me has nothing to do with Halloween. It is the fear of losing my bowels on the F train, the weird pulsing in my chest that I feel but cannot name, and the ghosts whispering the time in my ear.

SCUDDER PARKER

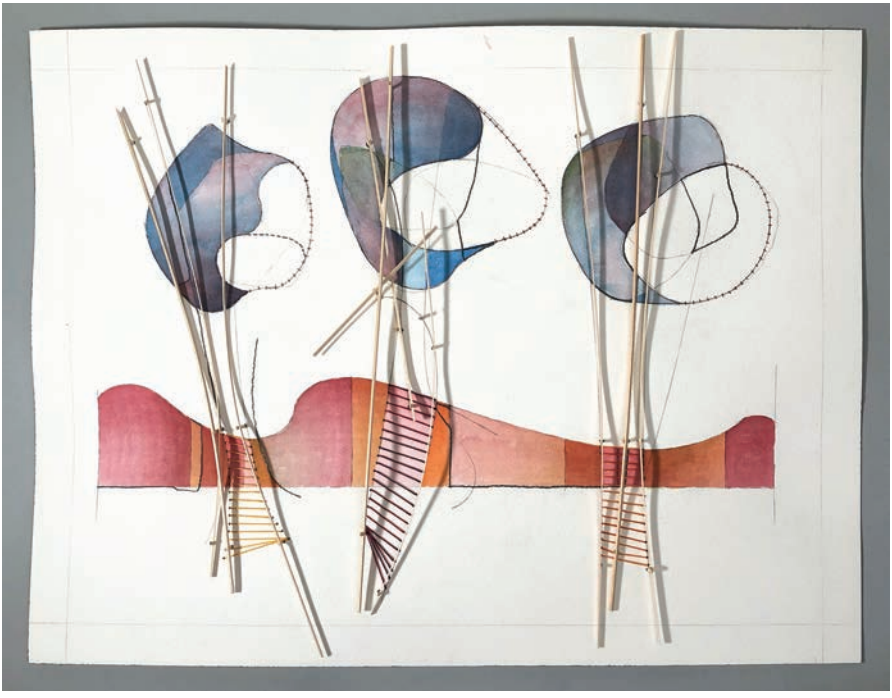
VISITATION

Perhaps it was our carpet,
the color of vast deserts,
that lured the black beetle
with elegant orange Fabergé
designs. For all I know
it teleported from Tunisia
or the early thirteenth century.
It stayed for days.

Wherever it was from,
whatever time, I'm certain
in the universe of beetles
it was no extraordinary thing to do.
It was my noticing,
the surprise of its beauty,
my urge to have it stay,
that made it a visitation.

Its calm precision, the orange
on such perfect black. The cats
showed studious respect.
I don't know where it went,
but there are tiny fractures
in the rules that shape me.
I think I became more patient;
there was no promise of return.

JOHN HUMPHRIES



THE EFREET AND TIED TO BLOOD

CREW SCHIELKE

REACH FOR THE SKY

I'd left Sean in the car; engine running; front end facing away from the cul-de-sac; towards a shady side-street; about half a mile from an on-ramp to the Parkway. The plan seemed well-thought-out to me.

I'd told him not to drop cigarettes out of his window. "Use the ashtray, dummy. Remember how Dirty Harry spotted the perps parked by the bank?" I pointed. "A pile of butts on the street right under your window is a dead giveaway. Try not to draw so much attention to yourself."

"Be cool," said Sean. "Don't worry about me. Just go do your thing. I'll be ready."

"You'd better be." I looked at him real hard.

"Good luck, asshole."

I cut through the path we'd used as kids. From the top of the big rock, I could see the members play hole thirteen. They couldn't see me through the trees. I wore a dark green hoodie and black jeans. Figured this would help me blend into the foliage. For a while I just waited, and watched a foursome play through; I didn't want to move in on a group of relatively fit looking guys, armed with clubs. There'd be easier targets soon enough.

I found where I'd written my name on the big rock when I was ten. We'd spent many summers playing in these woods. Someone had scraped a heart around my name and Sean's. There were all sorts of bottles, wrappers and other trash in the woods. It troubled me how people refused to live in harmony with nature. *That's why I'm doing this*, I told myself, keeping an eye out for snakes. This was where I'd once seen one. *I hate snakes.*

Finally, a twosome of obese women teed off on thirteen. They seemed perfect: in a cart, no caddie, oblivious.

Low-hanging fruit.

They must've put some distance between themselves and the group behind them. No one on the twelfth hole's green yet, or even approaching it. The coast looked clear. By the time their cart rolled up to the hundred-fifty yard marker, a stone's throw from where I was waiting on the big rock, I pretty much had them all to myself, at least for a small window of opportunity: a few minutes to work in peace.

But I wasn't ready. My mind was not quite right yet. Distracted by the garbage—or maybe by the sight of my name on this rock, with the stupid

heart around it—I was the victim of nostalgia, and paranoid about snakes. Still, I had to do this. Must prepare.

Get into character.

One of the women had short, dark hair and wore a pink sweater. She'd hit her yellow ball near the tree line.

Lucky break for me.

She was right there. I was making excuses—wasting time. I knew the other lady. Caddied for her last year.

Mrs. Tulane, I think her name was, maybe?

The pink sweater pointed in my direction. Said something to Mrs. Tulane. I couldn't make out what it was, but there was electricity in her voice. Her fear brought me to life right away.

Showtime. Ready or not. Here I come.

I put on my ski mask and burst out of the tree line waiving a replica handgun. "Morning, ladies. Get over here by the cart! Let me see your hands." I was careful not to raise my voice, but still sound harsh.

They both held out their hands like they were showing me their nails.

Don't they watch fucking TV?

"Reach for the sky," I said, appalled at how much I sounded like the *Toy Story* cowboy. They didn't seem to mind and complied with my command with terrified alacrity.

"Take your gloves off. Put your wallets, cell phones, and jewelry in the bag. Wedding bands and engagement rings, too." I tossed a white pillowcase at Mrs. Tulane. "And you bitches better pray you have some cash on you!" I said in my most menacing voice.

"Sergio?" said Mrs. Tulane. "Is that you?"

Fuck me.

The ground shifted. I raised my left hand to my mask, and pinched the wool between my latex-gloved-finger and thumb, confirming it concealed my face.

How'd she know?

My right hand, also in a latex glove, pointed the fake gun at Mrs. Tulane's flaring nostrils. I pulled back the hammer with my thumb. It actually clicked, and stayed in place, like a real gun. But the cylinder didn't spin. She didn't seem to mind this, either. Her eyes widened.

Scared stiff. Good girl.

"I recognize your voice, and your gait, son," Mrs. Tulane said. Her calm voice contrasted markedly with her body language.

I could actually see her pulse beating in her pudgy throat like she was having trouble swallowing.

"You don't have the do this, Sergio. Please make a better choice."

Her fat friend in the pink sweater said, "Marge, shut up. Please. Don't

provoke him."

We locked eyes.

The pink sweater whimpered: "Just do what he says."

I made my choice. Pistol whipped Mrs. Tulane across her face. The solid thud felt good. *Very satisfying, actually*.

She stumbled back against the cart, and collapsed on her face and knees, clutching the grass.

I turned a savage gaze on the pink sweater, uncertain how much came through the mask. "Fill the bag with everything you have, or I'll blow both your fucking heads off!" I threatened in a whisper, aiming the toy gun back and forth between them. A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed there was still no one on the twelfth green.

Amazing grace, how sweet it is.

"Let's go!" I hissed.

Mrs. Tulane raised her head off the ground, still on her knees. A gash near her left temple was gushing. They both dropped their valuables into the pillowcase. Nice wad of cash, too.

I tore my makeshift bag of loot out of the pink sweater's hand. "Thank you."

The pink sweater said, "Make your escape, while you still can, you damned, dirty hooligan!" She didn't look scared anymore. Just angry.

I didn't like the way she'd spoken to me. So I pointed the pistol at her face, scowling.

She tensed up—fear-flushed and teary-eyed.

After three seconds, I relaxed my face into a smile, enjoying the sight of her torment.

Her ears turned red.

I pulled the trigger.

Click.

It took a few seconds for the crotch of her tan pants to darken with wet. She started crying.

I laughed, then took her advice, and sprinted back to the old trail through the woods.

Captain of the football team, all-state track and field star three years in a row, the fifteen-hundred had always been my best event. I could still move like a gazelle.

When I arrived at the cul-de-sac, Sean and his car were gone. Only a pile of six or seven cigarette butts on the pavement evidenced where my getaway vehicle had been. I dropped the gun, latex gloves, and mask down a sewer drain, stuffed my pockets with essential loot: cash, a string of pearls, two diamond rings, and two gold watches, put the rest back into the pillowcase, and tossed it down the sewer drain, too. I started walking to the

bus stop as nonchalantly as I could.

Who wears pearls to play golf?

I heard the sirens coming from behind me. Turned to see red lights as a police cruiser tore down the main drag. The bus stop was only about a block and a half away. I checked my impulse to bolt. The park was just off the road to my left. But running would give me away.

Might not be necessary.

The siren's wail changed, grew louder and stretched out, as the black and white Crown Victoria flew by. I let out a sigh of relief an instant before its tires screeched. White smoke rose from the asphalt where the cops skidded to a stop. They U-turned.

Right away I could smell the stink of burnt rubber. I leaped over the guardrail separating the park from the street, slid down an embankment of pachysandra and disturbed a garter snake. In my haste, I just flung the nasty creature off my foot without a second thought.

Normally, I freak just thinking about snakes.

I followed a stream that ran through the park. Under a bridge's stone arch, I jumped in where the water was only ankle deep and twisted my ankle. I limped over to a culvert built into the foundation of the bridge. It was just big enough for me to crawl into. Not sure where this tunnel led, I had to go in head first, and supine on my back to keep my mouth and nose above the deepening water. About ten feet in, my nose scraped against the slimy stone ceiling of the dark tunnel. I contemplated just staying there, to wait for the coast to clear. But I heard more sirens, footsteps, and panicked shouts.

Someone called out, "I saw him go into the stream under the bridge."

Fuck. Was that Sean's voice?

I had to fill my lungs and submerge to continue, trusting I'd find a way out on the other side. I reached with my hands into the dark. My escape tunnel narrowed. Surrounded by blackness, my fingers grasped many slithering, writhing, slinking shapes, like snakes. They wrapped my arms, legs, and face, in scales, biting me, over and over again. I tried to scream and inhaled the filthy water. In a panic, I sat up and slammed my head against the tunnel's stone ceiling. Somehow, I managed to scoot out of the tunnel, back the way I'd come, and emerged, wrapped in a frayed coil of black electrical wire. Dazed by the sunlight, I crawled straight into the arms of the police, who must have been attracted by the sound of my gagging and coughing, as I vomited out the putrid water.

SUSAN NIZ

PRAIRIE WORK

I walk fatly through field
Like a freckled, yellow-green pear
With my apple daughter
        Running ahead, my hips circling
        A slow, steady pace
My chest relieved of the weight of her limbs
As she was carried last year
When green shoots pointed a finger
Through decay in a meadow too far
To reach with the heaviness of the baby
In my arms

She points to a clutter of birds
Swallows, like icons of angle,
Who dumpster dive in edifice grasses
Torment field-working mice
Who harvest seeds, as squirrels hastily plant trees
For our future
While bees canvass with sticky yellow fingers
For the change
        They want to see in the world

We hide and seek
        On two sides of the same, safe
Silent bark

GS MURPHY

BARN 96

CHILA WOYCHIK

A RURAL JUNE: WEEK ONE

"We live in all we seek."
- Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*

1. One thing my farmer knows is tractors. That's a Massey Ferguson, he'll say, or New Holland front assist. His favorite is the John Deere because that's what his family had, and that's what we have. Loyalty runs deep hereabouts when it comes to sports and tractors, but especially tractors.

2. This coyote problem proliferates. They run, jump, kill, and drag away our chickens, cats, turkeys, even lambs, at times, to feed their hungry pups. Just like the cats attack birds at the feeders. Just like the shrike impales less aggressive birds at those same feeders. And just like cars hit our cats or chickens crossing the road (there's a joke there somewhere, but no). A merry-go-round of death and dismemberment, and we call it, simply, rural living. A bare hillside implies too many things. It means overgrazing and a clay underbelly in new rains. Seeds start slowly; life blows away in the turning of days.

3. At nearly six feet tall, I still must hoist myself up to sit on the seat of this truck. Step on the running board, spread the legs, lift one in, then the other. When my hip finally gives way, what then? Every wave from an oncoming vehicle on these byways seals my resolve: if I have to, I'll crawl.

4. What is beauty, someone asked. How do we feel it, form it? Beauty is symmetry and boldness, randomness and reticence. Beauty rests on the faces of babies and along the lines of decades-old wrinkles. In photos of the rising flood waters, last evening's sunset, in a calf's sad eyes when bereft of its mother: beauty flecks along the lines of life.

5. "Who has those photos?" the email asked. "Dad in the war, after the war. Who has those?" See? We're living off the bones of someone else, a hazy background to wander through, old pictures creased and yellow.

6. Trying to liberate a thicket of poison ivy borders on credulous insanity. Easier to rid the sky of clouds or the dirt of its dirtiness, of worms (though the latter is getting closer to reality with our farming practices in the Midwest). Some fields no longer harbor earthworms—an entire ecosystem has been threatened. Yet the ivy creeps and creeps and creeps.

7. We begin to love the coyotes' yipping, geese honking overhead,

and cattle lowing in time with nothing. We begin, on these back roads, to cup the miracle of wildness and drink so deeply we fear we'll drown in a stark sea waiting. Eventually, day swings shut. The moth of silence tumbles earthward, smears its dust on night's shadowy ground. Is the wind heard in a valley of rattling bones? Silent as a ringing bell: the myth of quiet country dies in slow disbelief. God, it's noisy here!

LUCAS JACOB

A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

Everything dried out: his carpet,
dampened by a rain that had come
and gone before he'd recognized
that the sound against the screen
was more than the rattle of wind
he'd heard for uncounted hours;

the skin on the backs of his hands,
rubbed nearly red and now free
of the sweat he'd found there when last
he'd acknowledged his body;
the air that had been a blanket draped
over the day. So this, then, was how

quickly the waters parted,
how easily the blood turned to dust.
In the arid night, it was all
backward: the tides awaited the call
of the sun, the clouds shrank in the soft
waxen light of a cold waning moon.

AVERYELL KESSLER

BEHIND THE GARAGE

Jackson, Mississippi, 1959

I learned a lot about life behind the garage. Deep, dark and oily, it was a place of intrigue. Our garage was a typical two car, wooden behemoth, nesting behind our Laurel street home and a good fifteen yards from our back door. Spare bicycle chains and clothesline rope hung from the walls, as well as a tin wash tub, a collection of rakes and saws, and a display of license plates from the last seven years. We had only one car, a black Chevy sedan, so the vacant space was used for rainy day roller skating, hop scotch, and storing Daddy's push lawn mower and wheelbarrow. But behind it, a secret garden!

It had only a narrow patch of grass between the back wall of the garage and our neighbors' fence. Not a thing like Mary and Colin's lovely hideaway, but to me, it was a private sanctuary, a childhood nirvana free from adult eyes. My friend Martha and I found it early on and made it our clubhouse—no grown-ups allowed! She was a seven; I was six.

Martha had an older brother and knew the ways of the world. I was an only child and needed advice. She taught me the difference between gold and white honeysuckle and how to bite off the tips and suck out its sweet juice. I learned how to survive my first day at school, step around rowdy boys and avoid slimy mounds of spinach in the cafeteria. Together we spit watermelon seeds, dug up roly polys, and captured lady bugs in mason jars. We watched tree frogs and ruby throated lizards, touched spider webs glistening with dew, and saw grasshoppers lolling in the sun. Happily, no snakes! Before summer ended, we learned about heat lightning, made kites out of sticks and newspaper, and recognized the earthy smell of rain falling on dirt.

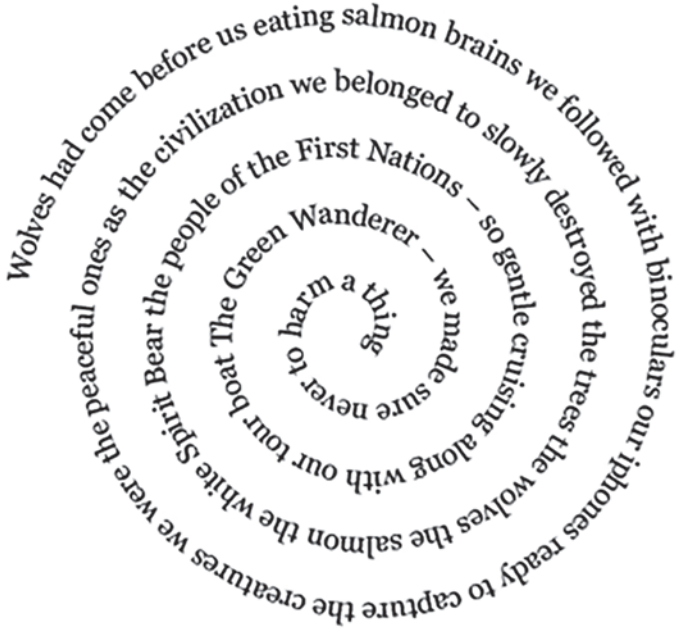
Our hideout was also a place for serious discussions, to work out our childhood theology, question how Noah got all those animals onto the ark, and ask why some people thought boys were wonderful, when we both knew they were loud and disgusting. Although the subject of babies never came up, we dismissed outright the idea that a stork dropped us off. "Something happens," Martha whispered. "My brother knows, but he won't tell."

We moved when I was twelve, and I've never been back to the Laurel Street house. I wonder if my secret garden is still there, if that sweet place of

gentle silence survives, and little girls are telling secrets in the soft summer heat. I hope that every so often, children will step outside to catch bugs and taste honeysuckle. Maybe they'll run through the sprinkler or wave sparklers in the midnight sky. I want them to search for four leaf clovers in the yard, blow bubbles, eat grape popsicles, and let mud ooze between their toes. I hope they'll rake seeds out of watermelons and spit them over the back fence. Most of all, I wish they'll hide behind the garage and try to figure things out.

DOUGLAS MACDONALD

GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST BC



KEITH MOORE

VENETIAN CAROUSEL

She awoke to the sound of rain. It fell gently, quietly rolling down the muddy pane of her bedroom window. It was summer; the air was heavy and thick. Strands of hair, damp and unwashed, stuck to her face.

Empty beer bottles and a dirty ashtray lined the sill. She leaned over and raised the window as drops of rain echoed faintly on the aluminum roof. Through the glass she could see the mountains, a towering range of overgrown timber and shrub. Low cloud cover, dark and gray, hid the tree line's jagged peaks and bluffs.

She reached into the ashtray and lit the remains of a used cigarette. It was crushed and crooked, its butt marked with a trace of lipstick. Her smoking had increased since her latest attempt at rehab, but she was more concerned with the discoloration of her trailer than her health; nicotine stains streaked the ceiling and walls.

Climbing out of bed, she switched off the fan that sat on the floor. It puttered to a stop as she made her way to the kitchen. Amongst a handful of half-empty cans of warm, flat soda, she found a bottle of aspirin. She swallowed two with a handful of water from the faucet. An overripe banana, bruised and blackened, its insides soft and sticky, sat on the counter. She tossed it into the sink after a couple of small bites.

She leaned on the table. The light blue polyester polo shirt and black trousers that hung on the back of the kitchen chair were wrinkled. Her name tag dangled from the shirt's front pocket. She had grumbled about the misspelling of her name—only one 's', she explained—but was still waiting for a replacement.

She hated that she had to wear a uniform. It was hot and uncomfortable, and her ex told her she looked like a fool, but she needed the money. He was the one who got her the job operating the carousel at the local mall.

"It's called a 'Venetian Carousel,'" he told her, handing her a joint. "I think it's from Europe or somewhere. You collect the money for the tickets and hit a couple of buttons. Stop, go. It's easy. Don't fuck it up. I had to pull some strings."

It wasn't her first job at the mall, a cavernous complex of crumbling concrete and plaster that sat on the outskirts of town. She manned the cash register at a juice bar while working part-time at a discount clothing store.

Neither job lasted long. There had been a misunderstanding with the thrift shop owner—something about misplaced merchandise—and she was told not to return. She quit the juice bar on her own.

Her uniform was stained with coffee from the day before, but she didn't have time to clean it. She had called in sick once already and didn't want to be late. Work was hard to find since the factory shut down and her career at the mountain resort was short-lived; an impromptu drug test proved positive.

Grabbing the keys to her truck, a white-striped 4 x 4 pick-up, she headed for the door. Sweat formed on her brow as she walked into the saturated, immovable air. She climbed into the front seat and started the engine.

The rain fell heavier as she lit a cigarette. Cracking the window, she lifted it to her lips and inhaled. She sat for a moment before wiping the condensation from the windshield.

§

Abandoned one year by a traveling carnival and brought inside to increase foot traffic, the carousel, weathered and beaten, sat at the entrance to the food court. It was white, its gold trim cracked and peeling. Atop sat faded pastel-covered panels of Italian landscapes, rudimentary paintings of rivers and boats, gondolas and villas.

The saddled mounts, once brightly colored, wild-eyed horses adorned with rhinestones and jewels, dangled mid-gallop from silver posts. Replica bridle bits sat in the mouths of some; long, flowing manes sat on the necks of others. The wooden platform rotated in time with the calliope sounds of an old, scratchy record.

The ticket booth was small and cramped. There were a few magazines that sat on the desk—celebrity gossip rags and fashion catalogs, mostly—and a transistor radio that picked up the local country music station. A box of cleaning supplies sat on the floor next to a garbage can full of grease-stained paper plates and cheap plastic forks and knives, disposable food court tableware.

White light bulbs bordered the door. Some flickered intermittently; others didn't work at all. There were stickers on the windows, too, advertisements from area businesses, including the cleaning service she once worked for.

A trio of color-coded buttons dotted the control panel—a green go button, a red stop button, and a black power switch. A written history of the carousel, discolored and torn, was attached to the inside of the door with masking tape. She looked at it every morning before she mopped the platform or picked up a stray food wrapper or soda cup.

"Handcrafted by fine Venetian artists," read the description. "Reproduced from the original Italian models of the 1800s."

She would smooth her hand over the drying tape and wonder what it would take to leave the country. She had never been out of state, but decided Italy would be her first trip. When I save enough money, she told herself.

§

She rode a horse once, a real one, at a county fair one summer. It was shortly before she dropped out of high school. Her father had died and her mother was drunk. Stuffing a few belongings into a backpack, she ran away from home. She hitchhiked along a rural country road before stopping at a produce stand to ask for a piece of fruit. There, in the distance, on a nearby ranch, she spotted the Ferris wheel.

The ranch was surrounded by prairie, acres and acres of long, thin grassland that rustled gently in the warm wind. She walked through the dry vegetation until she came to a clearing, a swath of land peppered with dilapidated amusement rides and ramshackle food stalls, cheap, hastily assembled structures built by traveling carnies and local farm hands.

It was dusk. She wandered the grounds as the fading sun, orange and round, sank beneath the distant chain of ragged mountain tops. The colored lights that framed the concession stands and game booths glowed softly in the approaching darkness.

In the background, beyond the pop-up tents and portable toilets, stood a faded red barn. Its black twin doors opened to a corral, home to a stable of horses that nibbled quietly on patchy tufts of crisp, brown grass.

She approached cautiously. Dropping her backpack to the ground, she carefully rested her elbows on the fence, a tattered combination of rotting wood and sharp barbed wire. She was surprised by their size; the animals were tall and muscular.

She softly whistled to the large mare that stood in front of her. Its coat was brown, its hair black. On its back sat a hand-woven horse blanket, an aqua framed saddle cloth covered with stepped triangles and pointed arrows.

A bearded man emerged from the barn carrying a bale of hay. He ambled over and stood next to her. He was short and stocky with white hair; a beige Stetson hat with a creased crown and rolled brim sat on his head.

“Her name is Carolina Queen,” he said. “Beauty, ain’t she? Not sure about the name, though. We ain’t nowhere near the Carolinas. It was my wife’s idea. You know how it is.”

She smiled, but kept her gaze on the horse.

They stood next to each other for several minutes without speaking. He noticed the sleeping bag attached to her backpack.

“It’s gettin’ kinda dark,” observed the man. “But it looks like we might have time for one more trip around the pen. What would you say to a quick ride?”

She looked at him and nodded.

The saddle and helmet he pulled from the barn were dusty and worn. He placed the saddle on the horse while she adjusted the helmet's chin strap. The instructions he provided as he lifted her onto the mare—do this, be careful of that—went unheard; she could focus only on the distance between her and the ground.

She gently touched the horse's mane. It was thick and coarse, like straw. For a moment, as she made her way around the corral, she imagined herself a character on one of those old western television shows she used to watch when she was home sick from school.

As the horse made its paces, she could hear the faint laughter of children amidst the sounds of an old Wurlitzer piano. She looked up at the Ferris wheel as it rotated high in the darkening sky.

"You ride real good," the man said to her after a couple of turns around the corral. "The horse likes you. You ought to come back when the carnival leaves town. We give lessons on Saturday mornings."

But she didn't. "We don't have money for that," her mother reminded her when she returned home the following day.

That night, while lying in the open prairie, she imagined Carolina Queen was hers. She pictured herself high atop the mare's back dressed in a blue, button-down western shirt, one made of denim, its fringe sleeves hanging loosely by her side.

She envisioned slipping her leather boots into the stirrups, squeezing her legs and thrusting herself forward. They moved as one, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, over the prairie, through the long, tall grass, into the shadows of the mountains, until no one could find them.

She thought of that summer's day each time she climbed into the carousel's ticket booth.

§

She was tuning the radio when the boy's foot got caught. It was twisted in a stirrup and he hung upside down, his tiny frame gently rising and falling to the rhythmic sounds of the organ-based steam whistles. Only when he passed by the ticket window did she notice him. He looked funny, she thought for a moment, the way his dangling brown hair brushed against the floor.

It was after the boy's head glanced off the platform that she pushed the stop button. The carousel slowed as she watched the boy's mother, a heavyset woman in blue jeans and a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, her long, curly hair swollen from the humidity, struggle to push herself over the low, yellow-colored barricade, grab him by the arms and lift him onto the horse.

The boy was crying, his hands clutching the top of his head. His mother held him close and whispered in his ear, doing her best to calm him.

The others on the carousel—a young girl and her father, and two teenagers—looked around in confusion as the ride came to an end.

"What happened?" one of them asked. "Is it over already?"

Two older men walked over from the food court. Both were drinking coffee.

"Is he ok?" one of them asked, pausing for a moment to sip from his cup. "We saw the whole thing. He fell right off that horse."

"He might have a broken ankle," said the other man, pointing to the boy's foot. "His foot was really twisted there for a second. Could be a concussion, too. His head hit the floor. We saw it."

A few shoppers gathered around the carousel as she stood and opened the ticket booth window. She smelled Chinese food from the food court.

The patrons put down their bags and began to ask questions. She couldn't tell who said what exactly; the words came at once, one quickly tumbling over the other.

What happened? Does he need a doctor? Is she in charge? Should she call someone? Why isn't she doing anything?

The mother lifted her son off the horse and carried him to the barricade. As she placed him on the ground, she looked toward the booth.

"What is wrong with you?!" She asked. Strands of loose hair dropped to her forehead.

"Why didn't you stop it sooner?" the mother continued, wiping the hair from her face. "Didn't you see him? He's lucky he didn't break his neck!"

Suddenly it was quiet except for the sound of the radio. A man's voice could be heard promoting the town's annual custom car and bike show. Cars, food, and fun, he said. Prizes, music, and trophies, too.

She slowly closed the window and sat at the desk. Reaching into her bag, she grabbed a cigarette and put it in her mouth. She looked at the written history of the carousel taped to the door.

Italy would be her first trip. When I save enough money, she told herself.

SCUDDER PARKER

ROCK HARVEST

When I'm digging potatoes
and the fork hits rock, I dig for rock.
The logic of it seems clear to me.
Susan, whom I have accused
of conducting "non-linear conversations,"
leans back on her gloved hands
and smiles.

There are clutches of bold reds,
blues camouflaged against dark loam,
gold and pink Augusta—cherished
and familiar.
But I am seized
by the grey subsoil, streaked with rust, dense
with shattered stones and smooth shapes
brooding in them.

When I clank and probe
and a boulder announces itself,
Susan says it's time for her to go pick
winter squash. "Good idea," I say as I reach
for iron bar and shovel.
Some work becomes
its own insistence.

That's how farmers built
walls that weave across our hills.
Every year a new stone crop nudges sunward,
passive, yet insistent. Above ground
they grow beards of moss and lichen, shelter
small creatures, meditate
as we forget them.

These are fields you can finally
plow without stopping every
twenty feet to curse, and walls that never keep
a creature out. Next summer, the soil will be
a little deeper. Twenty years
from now, someone else
may garden here.

I pause, watch Susan gather squash.
She has already picked up the potatoes;
it's her way of being gracious.
We both know what it is to dig and worry
at a stubbornness the mind
takes hold of
that calls out to be dislodged.

MAX KING CAP

FIFTY-NINE INCHES

Characters:

CAP: A black American man, an Army deserter, awaiting execution in a Canadian prison for the murder and cannibalism of his Gold Rush partner, Sam Magee.

JAILER: A man of indeterminate race, the JAILER and executioner of CAP. He is eager to do his job well. It is the first time.

SETTING: The jail in Canada where CAP awaits execution by the JAILER.

TIME: First weeks of the 20th Century.

ACT 1, SCENE 2: The Jail

(This is one scene from a larger play.)

CAP: *Yes, your lordship*, I said, when he asked, *did you eat him?* The judge nodded his head. When he asked if I cooked him. I said, again, *yes, your lordship*. Again, the head nodded understandingly. But I said, *no, most definitely, no,* when he asked if I killed him. Apparently, he found *that* part unconvincing. He frowned. I thought judges ain't supposed to do that. Let's you know that they've already made up their mind. The cooking part, he didn't have a problem believing that. I guess it made sense to him that if you're gonna eat a man it's best that you cook him first.

JAILER: That does make sense.

CAP: So. What's the next leg of the trip? When do they transfer me to the… place where…? Where the execution will be…executed?

JAILER: No, no. We're not sending you all the way down to Whitehorse. We can hang a fella just as good in Dawson as anyplace else. It's just me.

I'll be doing the job. Those fellas that brought you are on their way down to the border now. They are just as short of deputies there as we are here, you know, on account of all the uninvited guests. Guests who have a habit of misbehaving. But you know all about that, don't you? Americans mostly… Swedes, Germans, English—who act like they still own the place—Spaniards, I mean real ones, from Spain. And then your type. Not many, but enough.

CAP: (*Looking around*) You certainly don't stand on ceremony. No chaplain. No professional…

JAILER: No, it'll just be me. And you, of course. You're the guest of honor. Of course. These occasions used to be public. Hangings were very popular, my father told me about them. This was back in British Columbia. Very big affairs they were.

CAP: You and I will be plenty.

JAILER: A lot of people think they ought to go back to the old way, that this one should be a major public spectacle on account of you being a…who you are.

CAP: A novelty, a man you don't see every day.

JAILER: It was a lot different back then. Very big affairs. People would start crowding around hours beforehand to get a good look. The whole square in front of the jubilee clock. You had to get your spot early so most people would bring their lunch. And beer.

CAP: What would a picnic be without beer? It wouldn't be a celebration. This is a special day. Let us give it the neck-breaking reverence it deserves.

JAILER: People would bring a lot of beer so they wouldn't run out. You didn't want to lose your place on account of having to fetch yourself more beer. But then, they moved the whole thing inside the jailyard. I don't know why they did that. Putting on airs, I suspect. Didn't want us Canadians to look like savages, I guess.

CAP: People will talk, won't they?

JAILER: The walls of the jail yard are pretty high but the scaffold was almost as high as the wall. Still, you would have to get up even higher. Standing on the roof of the tannery was a good spot. Climbing a telephone pole was a good one. But those were taken first and you had to be careful. A person could break their neck. That's true. Not here, though. Somebody did, back east in Toronto, wrong person broke their neck. So, to keep people from peering over the wall they dropped the height of the scaffold, to only five feet off the ground. Folks couldn't see in then.

CAP: Rather diminished the excitement, that spicy drama.

JAILER: (*Raising his eyebrows*) Of course, they had to dig a hole below the drop, otherwise the condemned would break their legs instead of their neck. Then they'd have to haul him up and do it again. Hang a man with two broke legs? That would just be uncivilized.

CAP: And people would talk.

JAILER: Used to be you could hang a man for just about any crime, even some you think ought not to be crimes. Stealing turnips. Personally, I can't stand turnips. Steal as many as you like, I say. Now, it's just murder, rape, and treason. And hardly anybody ever commits treason. Funny. The hole is sort of like a grave. You'll see it before you climb the stairs.

CAP: Hilarious. I'll be sure to have a peek at your metaphor.

JAILER: What?

CAP: Your metaphor. Your grave metaphor.

JAILER: What are you talking about?

CAP: It's a genuine grave, a hole for the dead. It's also grave; dire, serious, solemn.

JAILER: Ain't you a clever dick…you got some brains in that big head of yours. I'll have to take that into account when I calculate your weight. How much do you weigh?

CAP: Enough to keep my feet on the ground.

JAILER: For now. I have to ask because there's a chart.

CAP: Pardon?

JAILER: They have a chart, you know. For hanging.

CAP: A chart for hanging.

JAILER: I have to read it.

CAP: Like lessons? In school?

JAILER: Since this is my first one. Hanging.

CAP: We didn't have that in school.

JAILER: It's called the standard table of drops. It's pretty exciting.

CAP: So is *Treasure Island*. I read it three times. Have you read *Treasure Island*?

JAILER: Of course, this is the 1892 edition. I was told they were making a new one, to be more accurate.

CAP: To kill them deader.

JAILER: Kill them quicker, anyway. You got to measure the rope precisely.

Make it too short and they just hang there, wiggling and dangling and choking. Could take as long as twenty minutes. And if the rope's too long, hell, it might just cut off that big head of yours.

CAP: In the south, when they hang a colored man they cut off the little head, too.

JAILER: That's disgusting.

CAP: I agree. A regional habit, but very popular where I come from.

JAILER: Where is it you come from, anyway?

CAP: Alabama. But I got out as soon as I could. Went north. Got some schooling, joined the army, deserted, went to the Klondike, busted out, then—I met you. That's my life in a nutshell.

JAILER: Were you a slave?

CAP: No. My mother was. I was born in '75. Ten years after the end of the war. She made me read the Bible…

JAILER: Skipped over that thou shalt not kill part, did you?

CAP: Quit vaudeville for the jail business, did you? We learned to read together. Then I taught her, and my sisters.

JAILER: And you read *Treasure Island*.

CAP: I read it to them.

JAILER: (*Picking up the newspaper*) I read the newspaper. I learned to read from the newspaper.

CAP: Any news?

JAILER: Indeed, there is. You are the news.

CAP: What does it say?

JAILER: Says you are "a cannibal fiend."

CAP: May I have a look?

JAILER: Don't get so shirty. You ain't the only one can read around here. Just because I haven't read *Treasure Island*. It says *Murderee Identified as Samuel L. Magee from Southern United States*.

CAP: Tennessee.

JAILER: *Shocking Act Committed in Gold Fields*

CAP: Go on.

JAILER: *Victim Considered Murderer His Fiend…Friend*

CAP: When does the story start?

JAILER: Here it comes. *Comrade Cooked and Eaten on Abandoned Barge*

CAP: Is it nothing but headlines?

JAILER: I'm getting to that. Here it is. *Mounties confirmed beyond doubt that treachery and wicked murder took place upon an abandoned barge, sadly named the Alice May, and RCMP officers of many years and brutal experience confessed to have hardly before seen such wicked abomination.*

CAP: So much for experience.

JAILER: *Another American, a negro in fact…*

CAP: And apparently in fiction, too.

JAILER: (*Louder*) *Another American, a negro in fact, had committed not only the brutal murder of Magee, but dissected him as one might a Christmas goose and devoured the only recently animated human sinew* (*He pronounces it Sin-New*).

CAP: Sin-Yew. The recently animated sin-yew. (*The JAILER shoots him a cold but brief stare but CAP doesn't see it.*) Is that the only newspaper you get around here?

JAILER: *The pair had made a pact to endure, thick or thin, the hardships of the gold fields but the dusky comrade proved a false friend in the end and Magee paid with his gold and his life.*

CAP: There was no gold! We didn't find any gold. We failed.

JAILER: *The fiend, who styled himself a captain—affecting pretense as is common among their sooty brethren—was in fact named the rather predictable Ulysses Washington.*

CAP: He thought it clever to call me Cap because I was in the army.

JAILER: And you let him call you that?

CAP: Because he figured out I was deserter. He held that over me.

JAILER: So, he chose you.

CAP: We…chose each other.

JAILER: And you told the Mounties all of that.

CAP: Yes.

JAILER: And they didn't believe you?

CAP: No, they didn't believe me. Why would they even care?

JAILER: Well, people care about you now. They are fighting over who gets to hang you. The Canadians want to hang you for murder and the Americans want to hang you as a deserter.

CAP: But now, it seems, that pleasure falls to you.

JAILER: They say that your first hanging you remember forever.

CAP: My recollection will probably be shorter.

JAILER: Here's another story from down below, about one of your kind.

CAP: Klondikers?

JAILER: Says here some fella, little African pygmy, killed himself.

CAP: What else does it say?

JAILER: You're so smart, read it yourself.

(*The JAILER hands the newspaper to CAP then removes a coil of rope from the wall and attempts to perform lariat tricks. He is not very good at it.*)

CAP: I heard about this fellow.

JAILER: Friend of yours?

CAP: He was in a zoo. They had him locked up in a cage with the animals. At one of those world's fairs.

JAILER: I always wanted to see one of those things.

CAP: (*Reading*) *Congo Attraction Pygmy Dies by Own Hand*

JAILER: Gun in the mouth, that's the best way to go. Can't miss.

CAP: *From World's Fair to Zoo to Carnival*

JAILER: Hanging is quick too. If it's done right.

CAP: *Lonely and Homesick "Otto Bingo" Shoots Self Through Heart*

JAILER: I'm gonna do you right. No worries. How much do you weigh?

CAP: *The Final Straw—A Crooked Promoter*

JAILER: I figure you…165.

CAP: *Who Mistreated and Swindled Him*

JAILER: (*Unfolding document from pocket*) Add an extra five pounds for that the big head of yours.

CAP: *The little man stolen from Africa, whose real name was Ota Benga, has ended his sad life in America by self-murder in Lynchburg, Virginia. Only 32 years old, Benga died forlorn and friendless, a pistol to his breast, forever pining for his jungle home across the sea.*

JAILER: One-seventy. That comes to four feet eleven inches, exactly.

CAP: I'm taller than that.

JAILER: No, that's how far you drop…into the metaphor. See I remembered.

I try to learn something new every day.

CAP: Glad I can help with your social uplift.

JAILER: Another thing you can help me with using that big old brain of yours. Why so many colored people named Washington? (*He begins to tie a noose.*)

CAP: To replace their slave name. After emancipation.

JAILER: What was your slave name?

CAP: I never had a slave name. I was born a Washington. Family chose a name that had respect, had power.

JAILER: *Affecting the pretense that is common among your sooty brethren.*

CAP: I'll say this. You are a quick learner.

JAILER: Course, nobody mistook you for the president.

CAP: No, not me. But some, they passed for White.

JAILER: Not many. I suspect.

CAP: More than you'd think. Like you. You get away with it.

JAILER: (*Stopping his rope play*) What the hell did you just say?

CAP: Passing for White. (*Continues*) I recognize a Métis when I see one. Like colored folks passing for White. They might fool white folks…they don't fool us.

JAILER: (*Snarling*) You think you are so damned smart.

CAP: I just have a lot of experience with Indians. Always appreciated them. Felt bad rounding them up and moving them on. That's why I deserted. That and they wanted to send me to the Philippines to fight some more colored folks who never did me no harm.

JAILER: Well, I ain't no Half-Breed.

CAP: Sorry, my mistake. Your grandmother then.

JAILER: Damnit, I ain't no Jakatar, no Bois-Brûlés, no Bungi. You better watch your mouth.

CAP: (*Snarling*) Or what? You'll kill me.

(*They remain silent, staring at each other. The JAILER holds the rope threateningly. CAP appears defiant.*)

JAILER: Well, a least I wasn't no slave!

CAP: And I wasn't either!

JAILER: (*Angrily*) Well, what was your family's name before you changed it,

Mr. Washington? What was *their* slave name?

CAP: Magee.

JAILER: Magee?

CAP: That's how I found him. They sent us over to Skagway, border patrol, L Company—24th Infantry. Keeping those drunks from killing themselves and each other…He didn't recognize me but I sure knew who he was. That is when I slipped away. Nobody wanted to team with that loudmouthed son-of-a-bitch so I made myself available.

JAILER: You planned this all along.

CAP: From the very beginning. Why wouldn't I?

JAILER: So, you been lying all this time.

CAP: No. Just the one lie. To the judge. He asked if I killed him. I guess I did. But I ate him first. I gave him a tourniquet. Cut off his arm. And ate it. I made him watch. I made him beg. I made him eat some too.

JAILER: You're more savage than the damned Indians.

CAP: Takes one to know one.

(*A long pause as they consider each other and what has been revealed.*)

JAILER: (*Shakes his head, then speaks slowly*) You want a hood?

CAP: I'd rather experience the fall.

(*The JAILER removes CAP from the cell and cuffs his hands behind him. He then shackles his feet.*)

JAILER: Right this way.

(*The JAILER moves CAP slowly across the room but halfway there he quickly places the hood over CAP's head and hustles him toward the gallows.*)

JAILER: (*Bitterly*) *I ain't no goddamned Indian!*

BLACKOUT

(*Sound of gallows trap door.*)

END

ALEXIS AVLAMIS

FLOWING THOUGHTS

CARLY FLYNN

WILDFLOWERS

my father is walking with a stolen cigarette box
tucked in his sock
he's fourteen
his eyes wide
fists forming in his pockets
his brothers are trailing him
he hears them panting as they catch up
their torn tennis shoes smacking the pavement
as they whirl their heads around
checking that their father's bedroom window
is still dark
as they turn the corner toward the levee

my father doesn't smoke anymore
my sister is fourteen
and she and I are in the pharmacy
selling out our small-town charm
blending blush shades on our cheeks
and brown shadows on our lids
to keep our faces like city women

my sister wasn't always old enough for makeup
I'm fourteen
behind Uncle Bob's house
and we bury the baby bird that's fallen
from their dying oak tree
he's blue
so we pluck blue wildflowers from the weeds
and leave them above the tiny bump
shaped and patted by our petal-soft hands

MARY SPADONI

NIGHTHAWK

A cup of valerian root tea grows
cold as I stare at the spinning ceiling

fan, counting the rotations for answers.
In the dark corners of my unconscious

I remember how we slept in sunset
and built glass ships in blue paper bottles

until shadows formed on the sundial.
I beg the moon to let me disappear

into the universe of endless stars—
instead he dons a hat, twirls his mustache,

winks and coyly says not tonight, sweetheart.
He takes me for a spin, asking ten cents

a dance. But sister, I can't spare a dime.
So I play at armchair astrologer

charting my course to see where I went wrong.
I shine fluorescent in the open fridge

door, a Pandora's box of yesterday's
Chinese food and expired deli meat.

I have been reduced to an asterisk
and an ampersand.

LAUREN DAVENPORT

QUIET MONSTERS

Although he was far too old for treats, Finn had offered to let him finish the blunt.

It was Halloween, but the air was sugared like late July. It smelled of peaches, overripe.

They'd downed some vodka at James's dad's apartment: they'd left school before chemistry, killed the afternoon listening to eighties music, eating Pop-Tarts, and smoking.

It was time to pick up Batgirl.

James appreciated Batgirl, whose moniker came not from heroic deeds, but from an effusive amount of eye liner. She didn't talk much. They'd met at a Synics concert, both underage, and quick to jump in the pit.

"You alright man?" James, rooting for his MetroCard, tossed some matches on the table, slapped Finn on the ass, waved that he'd found it, signaled for the door.

"All good, I'm good."

There was the usual line up of ghosts and zombies, but this year the silly, sweet costumes seemed to dominate. Hope in hopeless times? Zeitgeist was always easier to understand in hindsight. Weed sales were soaring. His own intake was on the rise.

They passed a couple of cupcakes, some fairies, and a basketball player who was sobbing. James checked his watch. Early for tears.

On the way to Central Park, James grabbed some candy off a distracted pirate. Snatched it from his hand. Finn got the whole thing live. Best part was when the kid realized he'd lost his bounty. What was he going to do? James was 6' 2", a senior, king of kings so the little pirate sulked off. The post had viral potential. Finn smirked.

They sat on rocks, scrolled vids, smoked the rest of what Finn brought. They decided to hit the playground.

The sky was purple now and James was thinking about what it must look like from outside the city, where the stars were visible.

Finn stood on the swings, walked both sides of the see-saw, climbed to the top of the monkey bars, jumped from the top of the play castle, rolled in the wood chips, and appeared to pass out.

Batgirl didn't say much. He'd put his hand up her skirt soon and get

some relief. He liked listening to her short, surprised breaths. It was time for a break. A respite from his tired and disappointed father, his angry and tight-faced mother, from Mr. S and his impossible chemistry class, and even from Finn, who he sometimes wanted to kiss, and sometimes wanted to punch and watch his nose gush.

The skyline twinkling with the expectation of tomorrow. Batgirl reached for him. They were too old for Halloween but too young to not feel cheated. Her mouth tasted of caramel. Tasted just right.

Finn, awake from his midnight snooze sat up and howled, a great werewolf yelp that cut through the night. Someone in another part of the park returned his cry. Soon they were all howling, releasing the demons, the quiet monsters, ready for whatever it was that was next.

JOHN HUMPHRIES

LOOK UP VERONA

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

SHE WALKS CROOKED

A hundred tons of chunk-spewed
plastic fall from the maw
of the garbage truck. Stench
of cotton candy heavy in the air,
burnt popcorn, burnt marmalade.
The bulldozer compacts, compacts,
compacts, never seems to gain
headway.

There is no other sound
in the world. The parade is endless,
endless. We must ask ourselves
how we can free the pheromones,
discover the cure for chemical
dependency, fill in the blank spots
on the atlas of the orange's peel.

TARA CRONIN

VISITOR 2-4

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

CLARIFIED BUTTER

I still can't understand
why there is okra in your
garden yet every time I
try to add it to a dish
you refuse, say it's slimy

I try to concoct
a reasonable cognate
with a little curry leaf
some garlic
and a scallion or two

when you whisper "ciao, baby"
the goddamn Béarnaise curdles

and I have to toss it all
into the Disposall again

and start this recipe over
in a different kitchen

LUCAS JACOB

DEVOTIONAL

Without once hatching a chick that would withstand
the fury of the Texas summer sun
or the blue jays that decorate the courtyard,
the same fat starling nests every year
in the bronze plastic planter hanging over
my balcony rail. Every May I am sure
that she will not come back this year, certain
that last year's hatchlings died before Easter,

as I remember cobwebs and desiccated
insect husks clinging to my fingers
when in winter I took the planter down
and lifted out the remnants of the nest.
Every May I am wrong about the timing
and about the persistence of the bird.
She returns and seems somehow to have built
her home overnight, reminding me

that I have not paid enough attention,
that days have gone by without my having
opened either the glass door or myself
to the morning air. That the will is not
a creature of fortune, but of habit.
It asserts itself not that it be honored,
particularly, come a spring morning
the color of a bleached egg shell,

but that it at least be noticed, understood
as a bringer of song, a means for hearing
again a note of hope when the spreading light
settles down to day and we are ready
to hear it, its gentle trill like the sound
of a water whistle blown against
the rising heat that would seem to threaten
any new life needing somewhere to begin.

OFELIA MONTELONGO

FROM PARIS TO HOME

You were in Paris, but now you are back at your childhood home in Mexico. You swam a river, maybe the Seine or the Yaqui, which took you back in time.

You look at your house and it's exactly how you remember it. The living room is full of jam-packed bookshelves filled with books that you never dared to read before you were eight, but you asked your dad multiple times if he had. One of the walls is decorated with large portraits of you as a child not smiling. You never smiled as a child, you remember, at least not for photos. You sneeze because the dust of the old house gets in your nose, but you keep going.

A pile of photos on a table calls your attention. You look at them but can't remember when they were taken. You are young in the photos with frosting on your face, your hair in a ponytail. A flash of memories comes back to you. One of the photos was after everyone pushed you into the cake singing *mordida, mordida*, bite, bite. You imagine the taste of chocolate cake in your mouth and remember you blamed your brother for the incident.

The hallway wall is still filled with wooden framed diplomas showing off your and your siblings' achievements, there are so many that some of them reach the floor. You wonder if they were worth it. All that time invested in studying, in fields you didn't really care about. All those nerdy contests you entered, just because you were told you needed to be the best. You look at the oratory trophies in a shelf above the dusty books and you realize yours are the smallest, and your oldest brother's are the tallest. You sigh because you never really wanted to win. You just wanted to survive.

You keep walking through the hallway, feeling the cold tiles on your feet and find your bedroom open and you see the *literas*, the bunk beds, where you and your baby sister used to sleep. You lie on your old bed and see the scribbling on the wooden boards above you, where you wrote. "I was here," "remember forever." You think about all those times you put your legs up and kicked your sister's bed. All of those times you yelled at her to shut up. All of those times she told you not to be scared. Your room still has your oldest sister's table with cheap jewelry that you weren't allowed to touch. Below the table's worn reddish tablecloth, you see a shoebox full of memorabilia, including movie tickets, a seashell, old prepaid telephone

cards, dried rose petals, and many other little-faded papers. You put it all back without even dusting it off and walk out of there.

The house library still looks the same with its piles of books, newspapers, and your dad's coin collection. You remember when you tried to read the *House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende for the first time when you were nine. You remember not getting it at first. You remember when you pushed your sister through a broken glass because she didn't want to give you a red balloon. You remember when your father found your manuscript and asked you why didn't you say anything about wanting to be a writer; you remember the silence.

You go to the kitchen and see your mother teaching your younger self how to warm up a tortilla. You take the last piece of *queso fresco* from the fridge and you eat it with your bare hands. You see a *bandeja* full of wet clothes on top of the washer and still with your *queso* in your mouth, you take it and go to the patio.

You start to hang out the clothes on the *tendedero* so they can dry faster, but the roosters start pecking your feet. You look at them. They are still snarky, chubby, and full of feathers. They used to be yours. You smile and pick one of them up. You used to feed them when they were little chicks. You feel its little belly full of raw rice and random items including the shape of your sister's earrings. They used to eat your sister's cheap jewelry out of her ears. Some of their brothers and sisters died in your hands when you bathed them and dyed their feathers with pink paint or left them in the sun so they can lay an egg. You say to yourself you were five and that you didn't know.

Still on the patio, you finish the *queso* in your mouth and you hear your mom's voice in your mind telling you if it rains you need to bring all the clothes back inside. You don't say anything because you know she can't hear you, it's only in your mind. You find the palm tree where you carved your name. It's still there. It says you will never forget, and somehow you already did.

You wake up neither in Paris nor Mexico, but in Maryland where you live in a carpeted and pet-free home and realize that the house in your dreams is gone. Your childhood home in Mexico may still be standing, but the photos, the diplomas, the trophies, the books, the memorabilia, the *queso*, the roosters, the palm tree are long gone and there is nothing you can do about it, but move on.

ROMANA IORGA

WHY I LIKE HOT SHOWERS

Forgive me, for I have sinned.
It's been more than a day
since my last confession.

I am engulfed and ablaze,
arms outstretched to embrace
this liquid fire, my face

thrown upward in rapture,
serene as St. Theresa's.
I've already thought

of the symbolic qualities
of ablution and have
nothing more to add

to the volumes
crowding library shelves,
but one thing: This morning,

for a brief moment, I slipped
out of my skin and into
the pelt of rushing water.

I know now what it feels like to be
one with the penitent,
my vaporous self

gaining substance as it touches
flesh, as it blends
with the smooth pearls of sweat,

falls heavily onto the tiles,
and downhill from there
into the ever waiting, roaring gut

of a hellish drain.

TARA CRONIN

VISITOR 2-6

GREGORY VON DARE

PLAGUED

Characters:

PROFESSOR FRANCISCO ALLENDE de SABOR y NUEZ

PEPITA GONSALVO

An apartment in Buenos Aires, present day.

It's a sweltering summer night in this modest fourth-floor apartment. A fan moves the air around but it's still outrageously hot and humid.

PROFESSOR FRANCISCO ALLENDE de SABOR y NUEZ sits in a vintage wooden chair, his gnarled chin raised to catch any hint of a breeze. He's wearing a stained and sweat-soaked undershirt and oversized boxer shorts. On his feet are worn leather sandals. He's covered in sweat. The professor is about 55 years old and thin. He favors a white moustache and goatee. His skin is dark brown and tight around the sinews. He breathes heavily.

At his feet is an aluminum case, strangely high-tech in this musty room. The case is about the size of a shoebox, but has a strong handle on top and a robust combination lock on the front. The PROFESSOR turns his head to the left and speaks softly. (Both the PROFESSOR and PEPITA have strong Hispanic accents.)

PROFESSOR: Pepita…? (*Long pause*) Pepita? My heart, are you awake?

(*A dark, sexy and mysterious young woman, PEPITA GONSALVO, walks out of the darkness and stands behind the PROFESSOR. She's wearing only a light, satin slip over a nude body and it shows. PEPITA is very 'raw' but classy. She likes to shock so the off-color is mostly for effect. She's not crude or gross. PEPITA presses her insouciant belly against the back of his shoulder. The PROFESSOR smiles.*)

PEPITA: What's in the fancy box, papi?

PROFESSOR: A dragon.

PEPITA: Give me a cigaro.

PROFESSOR: No. It makes you discourteous.

PEPITA: Give me a cigar old man, or I will hold my knees tight together. And you will go mad with lust.

PROFESSOR: Smoking makes you discourteous and it makes your teeth turn yellow.Which in a beautiful young woman is an abomination.

PEPITA: You have some Cuban cigars here, eh papi? Some Cohibas with the export label? Maybe I stick one in my *gato* for you. Get it smelly and soft... eh? Like that American woman did for her Presidente. (*She licks her lips*.)

PROFESSOR: In the desk. The top drawer. Where I keep my pistola.

(*She kisses him on the cheek, then turns and walks back into the darkness. In a moment she returns with a Cohiba cigarillo*.)

PEPITA: You got a match, papi?

PROFESSOR: Don't call me that. I'm not your father.

PEPITA: You're old enough. God knows.

(*The PROFESSOR digs in his pocket and finds a pack of paper matches. He gives it to Pepita and she lights her cigarillo*.)

PROFESSOR: Did you see the sunset tonight, my heart? So magnificent. It looked like the whole world was on fire. As though a thousand volcanoes had burst forth from the Earth and thrown their blazing flames into the sky.

PEPITA: So poetic tonight, papi. Is it the brandy?

(*A pause*.)

PROFESSOR: They are not going to renew my contract for next semester, Pepita. I will be dismissed publicly. Humiliated. I will never teach in Argentina again.

PEPITA: Because of me?

PROFESSOR: Yes. My heart. Mui claro.

PEPITA: Because of....

PROFESSOR: Si. Must you even ask?

PEPITA: That's crazy! You are the number two Turgenev scholar in all Latin America. You have tenure. They can't just fire you.

PROFESSOR: They can. They did.

PEPITA: (*Sadly*) Papi couldn't keep it in his pants.

PROFESSOR: Please, Pepita. Must you be so cruel?

PEPITA: There's no escaping the truth papi. You can go far past the moon and it will still catch up with you. What if I move out, eh? I can find a flat

somewhere. We can sneak around. Meet at midnight in unknown places. Some dark, romantic rendezvous. I will wear a disguise with false hair and a huge bosom. No one will recognize me, no one. Come on, papi, smile a little for me.

(*The PROFESSOR breaks down and howls. His life has been shattered. He cries like a wounded, tormented soul.*)

PROFESSOR: All my work, my reputation, my prospects. The years of study and dedication. All gone in a moment! Jesu! They caught us…

PEPITA: Yes, papi.

PROF: In the reading room of the University library!

PEPITA: Yes…!

PROF: And you my underage student.

PEPITA: Yes, papi. You were big like a bull that day. I think you liked the excitement. The danger. It made your heart beat fast and that made your pesqueso hard as iron. You made love like a Centaur, a roaring savage. You cried out when you came like a man transfigured. You were a hero, papi. A warrior.

PROFESSOR: I was a warrior, ha! And then in walks Dr. Conchita Marie, Dean of Women, with three Franciscan nuns. And me with my pants down around my ankles and you with your naked ass up in the air…

(*He laughs so hard that he coughs, almost chokes. Finally he settles down.*)

PROFESSOR: That old nun turned so red that you'd think she had swallowed a kilo of Chili powder. Ha ha ha…

PEPITA: (*She sits, straddling one of his legs.*) I couldn't keep my hands off you, papi. After the way you lectured that day. You were the most brilliant, the most inspired man I had ever seen, ever known. You glowed with knowledge and compassion that day. I had to have you. I didn't care if it was in the Dean's office, on the ramada, on the roof of the college, or in the nuns' chapel!

PROFESSOR: (*He quickly crosses himself, kissing his thumbnail at the end.*)Ai no, don't say such a thing. (*Pause*) My God has abandoned me.

PEPITA: 'Cisco, what kind of Socialist are you? You're turning to God, now?

PROFESSOR: In the old days, when my paper about Turgenev's "Faust" was the envy of Buenos Aires, I abandoned the faith. I saw clearly the hypocrisy, the foolishness. The generations who had believed the lies and myths. The billions of pesos we had sent to Rome, with what in return? A box of Novena cards? It seemed to me that Latin America would never become free to move

into the future unless we put those foolish beliefs into perspective. Put them behind us. The Catholic priest has done more damage to this continent than any conquistador!

PEPITA: That's my old papi. Speak the truth! Shout it out.

PROFESSOR: But no, my heart. Not your old papi. No centaur, no hero. Just a wrinkled aging man feeling the shadow of his mortality creeping up the wall. (*Pause*) I've been thinking that perhaps on my deathbed, I could wait till the ultimate moment and then suddenly, just as it was all slipping away, tell God that I believed in him, that I accepted him, that I loved him as a small boy loves his big strong father. But this seems…so dishonest.

PEPITA: You are a complex man, 'Cisco. Do you think that God will forgive you fucking me, without any protection at all, in the Library of Buenos Aires University? Will he forgive you for sticking your pesqueso into my softness and bellowing like a wild bull.

PROFESSOR: He forgives everything. Even my indiscretions with a cynical young woman.

PEPITA: (*She pats him lovingly on the head.*) Will he forgive me for leaving you today? For abandoning my poor old papi?

PROFESSOR: (*Tiredly*) Yes, he will. I know he will. He will forgive us for all our sins—for ten billion deaths! So long as we love him truly. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

PEPITA: (*Fearfully*) What's in the box, papi?

PROFESSOR: I told you already—a dragon.

PEPITA: I insist you treat me like an adult. Tell me what is in there.

PROFESSOR: (*He sighs, looks at PEPITA and then away.*) You remember my cousin the Cardinal, Augusto? The one who lives in Rome?

PEPITA: Oh yes. The Priest who couldn't stop staring at my ass when I wore the short skirt. That old hypocrite.

PROFESSOR: Augusto is part of a plot to kill this new Pope. There is much anger about him in Rome. Too much compassion, too much love for the poor. The Cardinals are outraged. They have infected him with a special sickness. A man-made one, bought from the Russians. It will take a month, then he will suddenly and horribly die and they will elect a new Pope, a more traditional Pope. One who is not so kind and generous to the lower classes.

PEPITA: So what is in the box?

PROFESSOR: Now that they have infected him, they need to get rid of the evidence of their crime. So they have sent the disease to me. I am asked to

take care of it, and I am going to turn it loose on the world.

PEPITA: No!

PROFESSOR: Si! I will do it.

PEPITA: To what end; what good?

PROFESSOR: To cleanse the world, my child. To make a new beginning. The ones who are left will inherit a big beautiful planet. They will have to band together to keep from dying out, and if they cannot, then nature will put an end to us and start again. Perhaps with the toucan!

PEPITA: This is crazy talk, 'Cisco. You can't want to do this awesome thing; this mortal sin.

PROFESSOR: I can. I will.

PEPITA: Ai, que loco! Now I need another cigaro!

PROFESSOR: You know where they are.

(*PEPITA vanishes into the upstage darkness.*)

PROFESSOR: I will go to Santiago park. It will be a hot summer day, people everywhere. Exposed skin. Lovers laughing and caressing each other. Singing. I will open the box and let the dragon out. Mea maxima culpa!

(*PEPITA returns holding a big, old revolver. She points it at the PROFESSOR, holding it with two hands like one of Charlie's Angels.*)

PEPITA: I'm sorry, papi. But I can't let your madness kill the whole planet. Kill those billions of people you have never met. It is a sin against life. It cannot be.

PROFESSOR: I must do this.

(*He begins to reach for the case and she shoots him. BANG! The PROFESSOR slumps down in his chair. Shot in the chest and bleeding. He tries to cover the wound but hot blood floods out around his hand. He smiles at PEPITA, even though he feels much pain.*)

PROFESSOR: The case...the case my little one. It is empty!

PEPITA: (*Horrified*) Papi!

PROFESSOR: (*Struggling*) I poured acid into the container. It is harmless. I could never do such a thing. Not for God, not for humanity, but for you! For my little love. Bless you little one. Bring the gun to me.

(*She hands him the pistol. He takes a handkerchief from his back pocket and wipes it clean. He grasps it firmly in his right hand. Making sure the fingerprints register.*)

PROFESSOR: There! Now go. Go.

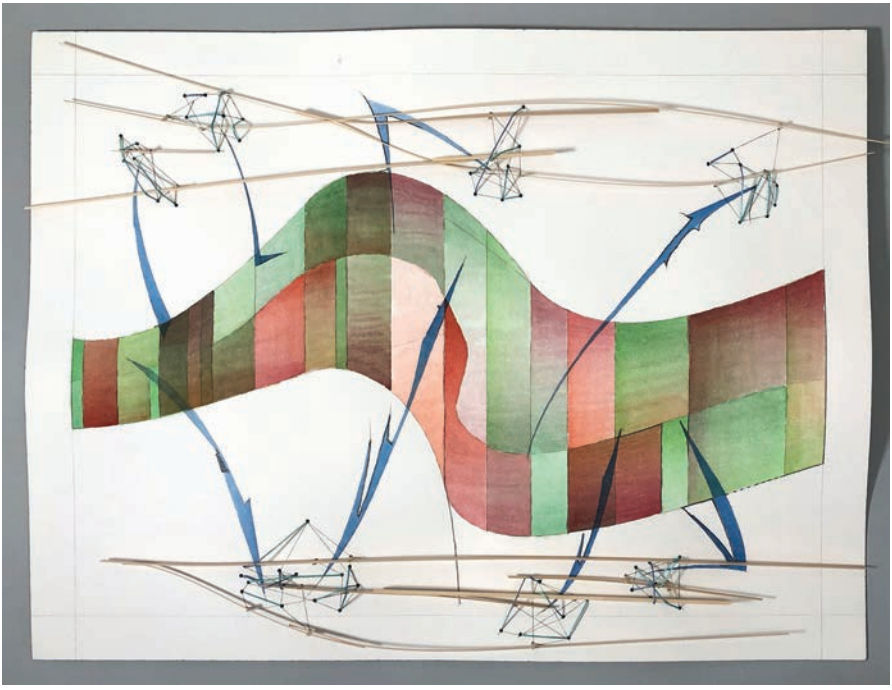
(PEPITA takes a long moment, looking at the PROFESSOR. Then she silently turns and walks into the darkness. The PROFESSOR slumps forward. The gun falls from his hand.)

PROFESSOR: (*Softly*) For my sins, dear God. For my most terrible sins.

BLACKOUT

END

JOHN HUMPHRIES



ANANZI AND THE LEOPARD

ALICIA DEFONZO

PODCAST: FRANCE IN JUNE

My narrative nonfiction collection retraces my grandfather's tour as an Army combat engineer in WWII Europe: He fought at Normandy, Battle of the Bulge, the bridge at Remagen, and liberated concentration camps. Typically, my writing incorporates reportage, historical data, letters, travel writing, and oral storytelling; however, I have recently transformed my work into a podcast in order to truly embody the art of oral storytelling in voice and cadence. Historically speaking, soldiers rarely discuss combat, so how can we know their experience? In order to preserve history, to preserve the truth about war and its impact, we need veterans to speak, and we need to listen.

The podcast uses raw audio clips from interviews with the protagonist, my 85-year-old grandfather, who openly admits to never discussing the war because: "No one ever asked." His narrative scenes set during the war are then read by a combat veteran. To be clear, there is no acting, as there is no need, allowing the dramatic actions to speak for themselves. For the debut episode, "France in June," I take a bus tour to the Normandy beaches for the 65th anniversary of D-Day. I quickly realize I know little about the war. The braided narrative then flashes back to the Invasion of Normandy, following my grandfather Del as he supplies munitions to fellow combat engineers on Utah Beach. Del watches as the infantry drown and are mowed down by gunfire. The Navy and Army Air Corps conduct military maneuvers that Del believes killed both GIs and Germans. The listener is left to question the truth and what we remember as truth. To capture the combat experience, I impressed upon my brother, James DeFonzo, to read Del's scenes. James served in the Marine Corps in Ramadi, Iraq. Perhaps if one GI could speak, then another, then another. Upon close of the podcast, I interview my brother about his tour. As we reflect on both stories, the podcast reveals that the soldier's tale seems indifferent to time and place, and thematic resonance lies in how deeply connected the past is to the present.

My grandfather passed away in March 2018. As I said at his funeral, "No matter how hard I try, I will never be able to recreate the presence he had in a room." But I'll sure as hell try.

The podcast is available at: https://www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/5628

TARA CRONIN

VISITOR 2-8

ELANCHARAN GUNASEKARAN

HOUSE HAIKU: FREEDOM

"House Haiku" is a daring experiment that I have randomly worked on every few years of my writing career that has spanned over eight years. It was only a year back that I put all efforts into creating a modern and experimental form that would speak to people of our generation and those after in the far future. "House Haiku: Freedom" is one of the earlier tracks produced.

Poetry and music have had an ancient relationship. As such, mainly longer poetry forms such as classical epics, mainstream music, spoken word, poetical exchanges in storytelling, and theater have received widespread audiences and reception. The shorter poetry forms, however, such as the haiku have had minimal contact with music. "House Haiku," as the name suggests, combines house music with haiku recitations. Why house music, you may ask? House is flexible and infuses various instruments. House is genderless, is for all ages, and is home to the haiku, with its uncanny ability to bring out the musical essence of the haiku's written/spoken form.

In "House Haiku: Freedom," the music embodies the need to run free: to unshackle our limitations and breathe the excitement of travel, adventure, and the unknown. You will find the familiar and unfamiliar—natural and alien—sounds that resonate with your inner spirit. These sounds urge you to break boundaries and borders, gently nudging you to step out of your comfort zone and seek.

"House Haiku: Freedom" can be viewed in full at: https://www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/5627


HOUSE HAIKU- FREEDOM


THESE CHAINS, ARE ILLUSIONS


THE HUNGRY DON'T SLEEP

KIT CARLSON

BURNING QUESTIONS

"In 2016, 50.2 percent of Americans chose cremation, up from 48.5 percent in 2015. The trend will continue over the next twenty years, with the projected rate of cremation reaching 78.8 percent of deaths by 2035."
–The National Funeral Directors Association

Always, some ash is left. Always, some greasy flakes cling to the inside of the plastic bag after I empty it into the garden hole. I am the priest, the pastor—it is my task to do this right. But I can't, because always something sticks.

We commit her remains to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Lift the bag and carefully set its mouth in the opening of the foot-deep hole the sexton has dug in black and loamy garden soil. Pull the bag away and ash pours out, shards of unground bone shine white in summer sun, and a light dust rises out of the hole, swirling in the wind. Then the trowel, a spoonful of heavy dirt, to hold it all in place until the words are said.

But always some ash is left, some bit of that body that doesn't want to let go, some crust that resists depositing. I quickly hide the bag in the black plastic crematory box so the family won't see, won't worry that there is something left of their beloved dead one, something that won't go down, something that won't stay still. Later, I will take everything upstairs to the sacristy, and after I hang up my robes, I will wonder once again what should be done with these, the last few flecks of the person I just committed to the earth.

I will put the bag and box in the trash. Again. I have never figured a better thing to do with them. I will leave feeling guilty—always I feel guilty—about that.

§

"Cremation is the mechanical, thermal, or other dissolution process that reduces human remains to bone fragments. Cremation also includes processing and pulverization of the bone fragments into pieces that are usually no more than one-eighth inch."
–Cremation Association of North America ("All Things Cremation")

It's not really ash, even though we call them "ashes." The proper term is "cremated human remains," not *cremains*, which is a word you hear sometimes, in the funeral business. The remains are pulverized bone, first crushed by long rakes in the retort, then ground fine in a machine after any plates, screws, or dental metal have been lifted out with a magnet. The quality of the remains varies…sometimes all fine, greasy grayness. Other times, bright fragments of chalk white bone shine out amid the gray.

An elderly woman comes to my office with a large plastic, faux-marble box in her arms, the remains of her son. In the early 1940s, he was born with severe deformities—a sin, a shame, a mistake to be hidden away in an institution somewhere in the Maryland mountains, and never be spoken of again. Later came a daughter, whole and healthy, who never knew there was a brother before her. Long decades later, when the son dies and is cremated, the mother confesses. The daughter is outraged—secrets are always toxic to a family, and this one cannot rally.

In her despair, the mother brings her son's remains to me, and the box sits on my office shelf for more than a year while she tries to appease her daughter. "Put him in the columbarium," the mother says at last. There is a wall just outside the church with rows of niches, where his ashes can be placed. His name will go on the slate covering. He will publicly exist at last.

On the day of the committal service, I realize the faux-marble urn is too big to fit in the niche. The ashes must be moved to one of our brass boxes. But there is only one opening in the marbled plastic box, a round hole in the bottom stoppered with a rubber disk, like a piggy bank. The remains float loose inside, no bag, no other container.

In a back room of the church, the parish secretary and I pull out the stopper and begin to dig. It must have been an old crematorium—it was a sloppy job. Chunks of bone rattle against plastic. We use iced tea spoons to reach down, try to retrieve everything, but dust flies all over the sink, the counter, the floor. On our fingers and palms and wiped on our bare forearms. He is everywhere. Hidden away all his life, there is no hiding this man now.

§

"The process of cremation is essentially the conversion of a solid to a gas. The combustion process in the cremator proceeds in two stages—first is primary combustion of the deceased in the main chamber of the cremator. Tissue, organs, body fat, and casket or other container materials burn off as gases and move to a secondary chamber, where they continue to undergo combustion. The bone fragments remain in the primary chamber."

–Cremation Association of North America ("All Things Cremation")

I always ask a family if they would like me to accompany the body to

the crematorium and say prayers as the body is put into the retort. Often, they say yes. Rarely, they choose to join me there. Usually, it is only me, the funeral director, and the crematorium staff. We gather in the waiting room, step around a worn, fern-green sofa and a brass-and-glass coffee table. There are two metal doors set into the white wall—furnace doors.

Open the cardboard coffin, gently anoint the forehead and hands—cold from the cooler—with oil. Take out the prayer book, read the prayers. A moment of silence, close the box, watch as the gurney is raised to the level of the door. Rollers ease the box into the opening, the door is closed. The crematorium employee starts flipping switches, the fan kicks on, the roar of flames begins. More prayers: *Into paradise may the angels lead you. At your coming, may the martyrs receive you, and bring you into the holy city Jerusalem.*

There is nothing left to see, except there is. "There's a body in the other retort," the funeral director says, "Would you like to see what happens?" I do. I don't. I do. I must sign a release that says I will not scream or freak out or run around, that I understand I might feel disturbed or depressed by the sight, that I will not hold them liable for my distress. The forms are preprinted. Do they use them often? Do that many people want to see?

In the back room, two retorts are thundering. The one they open for me has been running about an hour at furious temperatures, between 1400 and 1600 degrees Fahrenheit. Flames shoot down from the retort ceiling, embrace like an orange wave and silhouette a skeletal shape. Flames within the rib cage, flames inside the skull, bones glowing coals. I gasp, freeze in place, can't swallow, can't breathe. I do not scream or freak out or run around. But I look, and I see, and I will never forget.

§

"I have visited independent funeral operations that are conducting over 500 cremations per month, with a large proportion being direct cremations. In some cases, the family never visits the funeral home or crematory, all arrangements are made online, by phone and fax, and the cremated remains are mailed back to the family or scattered by the funeral home."

–Sarah J. Marsden, US Funerals Online

When a person dies, the funeral home removes the body from the home, or the hospice, or the nursing center, or the hospital. Sometimes family members watch, other times they just hear about it from a nurse or social worker. It is becoming rarer and rarer to embalm for a public viewing, so the corpse just disappears—first into a hearse, then a cooler, then the crematorium, then the fire. The family never sees that face again, never touches those hands again.

If I go to the crematorium, I will see the face, touch the hands. As I anoint that face, those hands, I will remember the person I knew when that body was warm and alive. But apart from me, mostly strangers do the touching, the handling, the moving, the loading. Eventually—sometimes as long as a week later, depending on how busy the crematorium is—the cremated remains will be returned, either to the funeral home, or directly to the family.

Often, they come in a sturdy green canvas bag with a reinforced black handle and a logo on the side: *Dignity*. Dignity is a brand of Service Corporation International, North America's largest provider of funeral and cemetery services. Several years ago, Dignity Memorial purchased our town's family-owned and operated funeral home. The funeral directors there do the best job they can, and I respect them as colleagues in the trade. But I struggle with this brand name, Dignity.

I should say particular prayers when I welcome a body to the doors of the church, but it seems ludicrous to say them when the funeral director is carrying the tote bag in one hand and a wreath of flowers in the other. Instead, I hold the church door open and reach for the bag to relieve his load. I carry the bag back to the sacristy, set it on the counter, and remove the black plastic box with the cremated remains.

I use a little knife from the flower arrangers' closet to pry the box open. Then, I unwrap the twist tie that seals the bag of ashes shut. It has a steel dog tag on it with a number, the tracking number that has followed the person from the funeral home, through the furnace, to this box. This is how we can be assured that the remains in the bag are those of the person who died.

I fold shut the bag of remains and lightly push down the top of the box. Over the box, I drape an embroidered square of white cloth blooming with purple and red flowers stitched long ago by women of the parish. This is the pall—a symbol of the white robe worn at baptism. It conceals whatever container might have been chosen, from plain black box to fancy brass urn. It proclaims that everyone is equal in death, and also equal in God's love.

Later, after the service, interment, and reception, when I am alone in the sacristy again, I still must deal with the remains of the remains—the plastic bag, the box, and the Dignity tote. But really, this is what I have to deal with: that this body, the body of a human being, with hands that touched, eyes that sparkled or wept or squinted, mouth that spoke and kissed and sang, a body that was born, grew, danced, made love, thickened, dwindled, died, a body unique and unrepeatable, a body that lived, enfleshed, the very life we just finished celebrating…became just a bag of calcified, crushed bone in a black plastic box in a green canvas tote bag labeled *Dignity*.

§

"The dead don't care."
–Thomas Lynch, undertaker and poet

I should not care, either. After all, my role in the drama is to remind mourners there is more to life than death, that there is more of hope in this than despair, that there stands a promise—a greater life is yet to come, once we slip the bonds of mortality.

And I believe that. So I should not care about the furnace, the flames, or the flakes of human being that blow about the garden and cling to the bag. Cremation—especially direct cremation that bypasses the funeral director's sales pitch—is an affordable slap in the face of a death industry that would eagerly charge thousands of dollars for the privilege of dealing with your loved one's dead body. There's much to be said for this approach.

I miss the bodies, though. I miss the heft and weight, the reality of them. I miss seeing the faces one last time, before the coffin lid is closed and the service begins. The faces of the dead are never the same as the faces they wore living—it doesn't matter if they were embalmed or simply refrigerated. But that is important, too. It is part of making peace with the thing, to see the living gone dead.

I suppose when I am dead, I won't care anymore. Whoever is left after me will do what needs doing. But while I can still care, I like to think of the way burials work in the Muslim section of our city cemetery. They take the body, unembalmed, wrap it in a white shroud, and lay it upon the bare earth. Then they fill the grave.

That's how I'd like it to be done.

REBECCA BEDELL

STRIPPING THE ROOTS

after Jordan Rice

In the laser treatment clinic
Vera strokes her gloved hand
along my jaw. Beard roots

under skin: umbral soldiers
in individual foxholes. Let's go,
she whispers, lowering her gun,

blasting the first swath. Light
like a cigarette burn jumping along
my cheeks and flinching lips.

Red flashes around the edges
of my blackout goggles. I can't think
of anything beyond this room

to distract me from this lucky pain
as the tissue in my goggles softens.
For a year I've come to her room,

removing makeup, T-shirt, bralette,
supine under her quiet latex hand,
braced with all my want.

The usual? she always asks,
complimenting my tits
as they've grown from the size

of ant bites—she alone has seen
the blood craft by which I've terraformed.
On the mustache, each blast

pushes beyond bearable, Vera pressing
two fingers in the gun's wake
where I can feel the skin flushing

as if with sun. She whispers again:
You're doing so well. In the afterburn
of the face, the torso sting an almost

comical comedown. I smile,
get up, dry my eyes. Nature shucked.
In each follicle a soldier,

a loose cinder, swaying on its feet
and looking up, still transfixed
by the rapturous light. My little dead

will take a week to self-exhume.
Now I become my rarest and most
terrific form: the red, mottled

woman, jaw a brutal banner
down the streets of New York.
And who will watch, amid

the human flotsam of Penn Station,
if a red-faced transsexual
speeds past on the escalator? A woman

pulls her three children away—
from me? No,
it is her train that is boarding.

SAMUEL LONCAR

THE KITCHEN WINDOW

After dinner I washed the dishes and watched the world end.
Citrus smells from soapy hands tickled my nose as the clouds caught fire
like a Turner picture. Through my little window above the sink
I saw the sky falling into a Blake poem or some less exotic apocalypse.
Worrying at a stubborn stain I missed the last explosion.
Maybe New York across the water, but I caught only blooming petals
as a wave of rushing horizon swept toward the fast-drying plates.
A murmur crept up my feet as my house and I began a wobbly dance
to the static hiss of 90.3 FM—a funny music that made me think snakes
were whispering on a hot summer evening, a mirage of flicking tongues
through a wall of smoky night smashed my window and my favorite mug
exploded into eager shards of blue. A loaf of bread tumbled off the fridge
while the roof opened to greet the stars and the dance ended in a gentle roar.

CONTRIBUTORS

Alexis Avlamis received an early art instruction from Bennington College, Vermont and later on earned a BFA (Hons) in Painting from the Athens School of Fine Arts. By tapping into a stream of consciousness, he creates dreamlike mindscapes aiming at a Cosmic Unity, where nature and the artifice co-exist symbiotically. Avlamis is a laureate of the International Emerging Artist Award (Drawing and Illustration category), which saw his works exhibited in Dubai and Brussels, respectively. He has attended artist residencies in USA, Finland, and China, has been published and interviewed internationally (*Art21 blog: Inside the Artist's Studio*, Jan 2010), and works may be found in private and museum collections, most notably the Djurhuus Collection, Denmark, and the Henan Art Center's collection in China. He currently lives and works in his birthplace of Athens, Greece.

Joseph Avski has published several books of fiction—most recently, *El infinito se acaba pronto* (Emencé, 2015). A Spanish-language writer from Colombia, most of his works have been translated into English. He received his MFA from the University of Texas at El Paso. He currently teaches Spanish and Latin American culture courses at Northwest Missouri State University.

Rebecca Bedell is a trans woman poet living in Madison, Wisconsin. Her work has been published in Vetch, and the Arts + Literature Laboratory's *ALL Review*. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is working on a poetry thesis and teaching introductory writing.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, Ohio. He has recent/upcoming appearances in *COG*, *OUT/CAST*, and *Up the River*, among others.

Max King Cap, a former firefighter and public relations specialist, is a visual artist from Chicago who now lives in Los Angeles. His work has also been seen in galleries and museums in Vienna, New York, Stuttgart and numerous other cities in Europe and the US. Among several awards he is the recipient of Creative Capital and Artadia grants. He earned his MFA from the University of Chicago and his doctorate from University of Southern California.

Kit Carlson is an Episcopal priest living in Michigan and a life-long writer, with work appearing in places as diverse as *Seventeen Magazine* and *Anglican Theological Review*. She is author of the recent "Speaking Our Faith" (Church Publishing 2018) and she studied last summer with Afaa M. Weaver at the Kenyon Writers Workshop.

Samantha Corbett is currently a visual artist and professor at Syracuse University where she has begun doing research into poetic language in collaboration to her visual artistic practice. She is currently writing about the ongoing struggle of keeping her partner, an immigrant from Italy, in the U.S.

Tara Cronin makes direct photographic imagery using mythological references combined with substances she considers are a basis of our root makeup such as her own blood or reconstituted hemoglobin, or dust. Cronin loves this seemingly stark contrast between the world of the anatomical, and that of the emotional/spiritual/psychological—the world of our daily experience.

Lauren Davenport's work has been featured in *Blue Earth Review*, *Points in Case*, *Cactus Press,* and the *Brooklyn College Review*. She is from Brooklyn.

Alicia DeFonzo is a Fulbright Specialist and Lecturer of English at Old Dominion University in Virginia, where she earned an MFA in Non-Fiction under biographer Blake Bailey. In 2014, she received *The Gettysburg Review* Conference Award in Non-Fiction for her narrative work which retraces her grandfather's tour as an Army combat engineer in WWII Europe. DeFonzo has been published in *War, Literature, and the Arts*, *O-Dark-Thirty*, *Gravel Magazine*, *The Montreal Review*, and *Extract(s)*; she is also a frequent literary guest on local and national NPR.

Carly T. Flynn received her MFA in poetry from Pacific University in 2015 and has since been featured in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Cagibi Literary Space*, and *Down to the Dark River: Contemporary Poems about the Mississippi River*. She was named a finalist in the Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize, and she has work forthcoming in Louisiana Literature. Flynn works as a secondary English teacher and youth minister in Southeast Louisiana where she lives with her husband and son.

Eric Forsbergh's first book of poetry, *Imagine Morning*, was published in 2013, and he won the Poetry Society of Virginia's Edgar Allen Poe Memorial prize in 2013, and again in 2014. He has been published in *The Sow's Ear Review*, *Artemis Journal*, *The Cafe Review*, *Poetry Virginia Review*, and *The Northern Virginia Review*, which awarded him a Pushcart nomination in 2016. He is a Vietnam veteran.

ELANCHARAN GUNASEKARAN is a multidisciplinary artist and poet. He has a strange love for all things poetical and Sci-Fi. He won the Montblanc X Esquire Six-word Story prize 2017. His latest publications are *Gods of the Gonzo* (Analog Submission Press, UK), *Sleeping with Wildflowers* (Alien Buddha Press, Arizona/New York), *The Cosmonaut Manifesto* (UndergroundBooks, New York) and *Dark Revolver* (Roman Books, India/UK). He arts and writes on Instagram: @elancharan or Medium: medium.com/@elancharang.

JOHN HUMPHRIES, originally from Texas, paused briefly on the Ozark Plateau and the Puget Sound, and is now located in the the Miami Valley. During his life travels, he has completed degrees in architecture and fine arts. He paints religions by codifying the ephemeral into rituals. The sacred in myth or nature is coded into a recipe then ritualistically followed, generating a facsimile, invoking the god-form. The code limits the unconceivable. The representation of this code is a religion. Some parts of the ritual are gestures, some drafted lines and curves, and others are constructed pieces of wood floating above the paper.

ROMANA IORGA, originally from Chisinau, Moldova, is a Romanian-American poet living in Switzerland. She is the author of two poetry books, *Poem of Arrival* and *Simple Hearing*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Ruminate*, *Saltfront*, *Borderlands*, and others, as well as on her poetry blog at clayandbranches.com.

LUCAS JACOB's poetry and prose have appeared in journals including *Southwest Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Hopkins Review*, and *Birmingham Poetry Review*. His first full-length poetry collection, a finalist for Eyewear Publishing's Beverly Prize, is forthcoming in 2019. In 2015, his chapbook *A Hole in the Light* was published by Anchor & Plume Press. His day job is as a high-school writing teacher and K-12 writing-instruction consultant. Each April he volunteers with the Poetry at Round Top festival in Texas, directing the event's manuscript-consultation and elementary-education programs.

KORBIN JONES graduated from Northwest Missouri State University with degrees in writing/publishing and in Spanish. He is currently pursuing his MFA in Poetry at the University of Kansas. The poetry collection "SFO," written by Madrid poet Pablo Luque Pinilla and translated by Jones, is forthcoming from Tolsun Books. He works as editor-in-chief and head designer for *Fearsome Critters: A Millennial Arts Journal*.

Nancy Kelley writes fiction and nonfiction for young readers. This is her first play for young adults. She is the author of *The Whispering Rod*, a historical novel for middle graders, highlighting the life of 17th century Quaker preacher Mary Dyer. The book was named a top pick of the Pennsylvania Librarians Association. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing for Young People from Lesley University and lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

Averyell Kessler is a native of Jackson, Mississippi who lives in an aging house surrounded by the requisite white picket fence. She welcomes homeless dogs, wandering cats, and even a family of hoot owls living in the magnolia tree in her front yard. After retiring from the peace and quiet of a lengthy legal practice, she's taken up writing in hopes of finding additional peace and quiet. A dedicated bibliophile, she welcomes books as carefully chosen kin and takes pleasure from the soft scratch of turning pages, the slight aroma of paper and ink. A graduate of Lousiana State University, she is a wife, mother, grandmother, and now writer.

Samuel Loncar is a poet with Japanese, Ojibwe, and Croatian roots. He is a scholar of religion and believes that the sacred can only exist beside the secular, that religion becomes a political issue when one faith is used to destroy another. His most recent collection of poems explores and reclaims the gods of his Japanese grandmother and Native American grandfather. Most recently, he was a participant at *Kenyon Review*'s spiritual writing workshop with poet Afaa Weaver.

Douglas Macdonald has published widely in magazines including *Spillway*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Imperfect Fiction*, *Passages North*, *Santa Fe Literary Review,* and others. In May 2018 he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Ofelia Montelongo is a bilingual writer originally from Mexico. She received a BA in accounting and finance, an MBA, and a BA in English and Creative Writing. She created and led creative writing workshops in Spanish at Palabras Bilingual Bookstore and was the Editor-in-Chief for the literary journal *Superstition Review* during the fall of 2016. Two of her fiction stories have been published by Lux Undergraduate Creative Writing and she collaborated with the artist Rembrandt Quiballo and Four Chambers Press on the chapbook in *Sight II: Literature + Art* with the short story "Tarantulas." She taught Spanish at Arizona State University and she is pursuing her MA in Spanish at the University of Maryland. Her research interests include Chicano and Latin American literature, theory of translation, borderlands, creative writing, and more.

KEITH MOORE is a native New Englander with an advanced degree in literature from the University of Oklahoma. His writing has appeared in *Bluestem*, a literary journal published by Eastern Illinois University, and the *Boston Globe*.

GS MURPHY is a poet and photographer currently living in Geneva, New York. Murphy often writes from a personal, intimate perspective with themes such as family life, motorcycles, firefighting, spirituality, and some nonsensical subjects. Murphy lives with his wife and two very spoiled dogs.

SUSAN NIZ's chapbook is *Beyond this Amniotic Dream, Beard Poetry, Minneapolis*. Her short work has appeared in *Typishly*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Carnival Literary Magazine*, *Crack the Spine*, *Blue Bonnet Review*, *Two Words For*, *Belleville Park Pages*, *Ginosko*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Flashquake*, *Opium Magazine*, and *Summerset Review*. She has been featured in live poetry shows in Minneapolis. Susan's novel *Kara, Lost* (North Star Press, 2011) was a finalist for a Midwest Book Award (MIPA) for Literary Fiction. She has a master's degree in education.

SEUNGKYUNG OH (South Korea, 1992) is a New York based artist who uses nature and fantasy to re-imagine the world in multiple dimensions. She has exhibited at Blue Wolf IBM company, National Juried Printmaking Exhibition, Center for Book Arts, Clemente Art Center, Javits Center, NY, Jersey City Theater Center, has been written about in the *Studio Visit Magazine*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, and *Ink, Press, Repeat: National Juried Printmaking and Book Art*. Her first solo show *SweetBitter Dreams* was on view at the BlueWolf Company in Manhattan in the Fall of 2017. She is a recipient of a Blue Wolf Scholarship, Urban Glass grant in Glass & Image Fusing Frenzy, Korea Women Contemporary Art Special Prize, Korea Women Modern Art Special Prize, Korea Grand Art Special Prize, KNEA Painting Award Grand Prize, and Korean Culture Minister Prize.

MATT PACZKOWSKI's work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Welter*, *Riprap Journal*, *South 85*, *Embers Igniting*, and is forthcoming in *Fiction Southeast*. He currently teaches English at The City College of New York and holds an MFA degree in English from Hofstra University.

SCUDDER PARKER grew up on a family farm in North Danville, Vermont. He has been a Protestant minister, a state senator, a utility regulator, a candidate for Governor, a consultant on energy efficiency and renewable energy, and is settling into his new and ongoing work as a poet. He is a passionate gardener and a proud grandfather of four. He and his wife live in Middlesex, Vermont. Parker has had poems published in *Sun Magazine*, *Vermont Life*, *Northern Woodlands Magazine*, *Wordrunner*, *Passager*, and *Eclectica*.

Crew Schielke, a native of New Jersey, is a second generation attorney and brown belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. You can find him in his secret chamber early each morning spinning tales before he heads off to court to fight for his clients and acquire new material for his first calling.

Mary Spadoni is a theater-maker, event coordinator, fiber artist, and new writer living in Astoria, New York, with her husband and dog. She was recently published in the *Walloon Writers Review* and a forthcoming issue of *Fearsome Critters*.

Gregory Von Dare is a writer and dramatist specializing in forward-leaning theatre and fiction, often with a humorous or ironic twist. He attended Chicago City College and the University of Illinois. While living in Los Angeles, he worked for Universal Studios, Disney, Armed Forces Radio, and Fox TV. He was dramaturg and head of the Directors Wing for the Classical Theatre Lab in L.A. Recently, his fiction appeared on the *Soft Cartel*, *Out of the Gutter*, *50 Word Stories*, *Rejected Manuscripts* and *Horror Tree* websites. Greg is an Affiliate Member of Mystery Writers of America and a member of the Playwrights Workshop at Theatre of Western Springs. He now lives outside Chicago where certain people will never find him.

Chila Woychik, German by origin, has bylines in *Cimarron*, *Portland Review*, *Silk Road*, *Stonecoast*, and others. She won the 2017 Loren Eiseley Creative Nonfiction Award & the 2016 Linda Julian Creative Nonfiction Award. She is the founding editor at *Eastern Iowa Review* and has finished an essay collection which she hopes to get published soon.