

PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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A Note to Readers

As we enter our third year of publishing *Ponder Review*, we have come to appreciate the individuality of the fiction, nonfiction, poetry, art, and drama we have published in the journal, as well as the community it has created for our contributors and readers. While our contributor community grows each year with both the seasoned and published, as well as with emerging voices, we are always excited by the returning submitters who have found a home for their creative pieces in one of our issues and have graced us with the opportunity to explore more of their work.

In an attempt to define *Ponder Review*, we have determined that we wish to remain undefined—not categorized, classified, or characterized as any specific type of literary journal but one open to any high-quality creative work. We have created a home for art and new media, including pieces exhibiting experimental methodology, as well as the more traditional forms of poetry and prose. And we are one of the few journals that publish drama.

Each issue of *Ponder Review* is shaped by a group of different editors. Each issue reflects its world; we cannot and do not want to avoid the influence of current conversations and events. This remains true for *Ponder Review* 3.1. This issue was not driven by an overarching theme; rather, we wanted to give voice to artists and writers whose work made us ponder. Our hope is that their work encourages you to do the same.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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EDYTТА ANNA WOJNAR

HALF SNAKE HALF BIRD

My daughter is sunbathing in the backyard. Through the kitchen window, I see her tanned body sprawled in a lounge chair by the lake, her sunhat brighter than the red Dahlias I have planted in May by the patio. I stop rinsing berries when my phone lights up with a message. *There is a snake in the water*, my daughter texts and adds an emoji of anguish to the photo she snapped. A picture of a snakehead with a sharp beak, droplets of water on its glistening long neck, appears on my iPhone. *It has wings! It's freaky!!!* Exclamation marks pulsate in my palm. *I've seen it before*, I text back, *it's a snakebird*. A confused smiley lights the screen followed by her message: *Wikipedia says your snakebird is an anhinga*.

Instead of slicing mozzarella for Caprese salad, I google anhinga and watch a kettle of birds with long rubbery necks wheel on my six-inch screen, while on the stove a kettle whistles in warning. The kettling of aningas is “an announcement of imminent departure,” I read and look out the window again. I decide that the chicken breasts I am preparing for dinner can use another hour to marinate and fill two glasses with Pellegrino, add ice cubes shaped like stars and drop in a handful of raspberries. By the time I reach the bottom of the stone steps by the shore, the drinks fizz a scarlet color.

When I plop down into a low chair next to her, water spills, staining red the white shorts I am wearing. I sigh and laugh at my clumsiness. She sits up and laughs, too. I tell her I remember the summer night when she was born and cannot believe that my baby is a college student, this beautiful woman with wild purple hair, who can do anything. She stops laughing and gets up. Standing by my chair, she sips water and stares at the horizon where the sky bleeds a palette of reds and a gibbous moon swells. She sets her glass on the table and flings her sunhat on the grass. Rounding her back, she curls up on my lap.

“I smell lemongrass,” I say, caressing her warm, bare shoulders, droplets of sweat pooling on her skin like morning dew. She says she skipped her period, twice, but doesn't want to talk about it now. She pulls my arms tighter around her waist. In the lake, a snakelike neck emerges, and a pair of wings splashes water. I whisper in my daughter's ear that I love her. When a mosquito lands on her hip, I smack it. She jolts and looks up startled. I show her my palm with a trace of blood, and we gaze in silence at the tiny remains.

ALIE KLOEFKORN

FRESH LAUNDRY

From my desk, I watch the dryer exhaust
rise up in bursts through the snowfall.
Matt steps out for a cigarette and returns
smelling like fresh laundry. I see him,
splayed before the steam, he
and the house exhaling as one. Smoke
as steam and steam is smoke and they're both
breath and we pass the whole world
through our lungs, exchange ourselves, fancy
these bodies sieves. Rarely, though, does the drag
come up so clean. I borrow his deodorant
and he becomes my noontime shadow, cricket
in the dark. I could be chopping onions
the way this load draws salt from me.
Your T-shirts are shrinking.
The bottle said drink me.

SUZANNAH SCHRECKHISE



TRANSFORMING KNOTS

DAVID'S CROSSING

When David crossed over, his age was lost. He was eight or nine, whichever guaranteed a cheaper rate in steerage. No birth certificate existed to prove or disprove the claim. Shtetl deliveries were not registered on Polish documents but in the memories of Jewish midwives.

When David crossed over, he traveled with his mother and an aunt, but not his two younger siblings, who'd died of diphtheria the year before.

When David crossed over, they boarded the Rotterdam on a Friday afternoon. It was dark in the hold, but the women knew when sundown arrived. Where in this tinderbox of an ark could they kindle the *Shabbas* lights? A corner was cleared. Bags of wet sand, ballast, were emptied on the planked floor and heaped into a mountain. One by one, each woman embedded a pair of candles in this underwater Sinai. Matches flared. Their hands circled the flickering tallows, then covered their eyes. They intoned the ancestral blessing: "*Baruch, atah, Adonai ...*"

When David crossed over, his mother prayed every night. "Eternal One, do not let us be blown up." It was the middle of the Great War; the seas were mined and the route uncertain.

When David crossed over, circumnavigating the mines doubled the length of the voyage. His family ran out of food. Catholics offered to share pork sausages and lard-laced biscuits. His mother and aunt refused, but, worried about the frail boy, they lied and told him their shipmates' fare was kosher to eat. David got sick to his stomach. He was worse off than if he'd gone hungry.

When David crossed over, it was too crowded below deck for children to run about. They grew cross. Not David, who was used to being still. Before the diphtheria epidemic, he'd gotten polio. His left leg was shortened and withered. When he got to America, his limp would mark David more than his unpronounceable last name or Yiddish accent.

When David crossed over, his mother said he would see the father he couldn't remember, a man who'd gone to America ahead of them to escape re-conscription in the Russo-Japanese war and antisemitism at home. The family owned a general store in a wealthy resort area, a day's carriage ride from Warsaw. Gentile vacationers renege on bills and threatened Jews who tried to collect.

When David crossed over, he did not know he'd soon be conscripted to serve as the man of the house. His father was as absent in America as when

he'd left Poland. When another boy was born nine years after David, and a sister followed nine years on, David sold peanuts at Madison Square Garden and ran errands for the Jewish Mafia to help support his family. His sister later said their father was a fish out of water who never found his place in America. David's brother admitted that the man was an alcoholic. David said nothing. About his father, or anything else.

When David crossed over, he jettisoned his hated first name, Lazar. His friends nicknamed him "Cal," after President Calvin Coolidge, a.k.a. "Silent Cal," and thereafter he was known as Cal to everyone, including his wife. But whenever someone he didn't know asked his name, he answered "David." Having lost so much, he hoarded this remnant of his identity.

When David crossed over, he packed his mental satchel with childhood visions of Yadow: the water pump that never worked; the communal oven where women baked *challah* and iron pots of *cholent* simmered until *Shabbas* ended; the field where boys gathered walnuts and stole pears from the priest's orchard. Old country dreams erased the stench of Lower East Side tenements and the taste of rotten vegetables that the produce man gave his destitute mother for free.

When David crossed over, he too arrived a fish out of water, with no ballast to safeguard his light. The damage was irreversible, freedom unattainable. Like the Hebrew slaves wandering in the desert, the redemption his mother prayed for would not be granted until the next generation.

SARAH EBBA HANSEN

MISSING LOCAL TEENAGERS FOUND SUBMERGED IN FREDERICKSBURG CANAL

May 1972: *The Free Lance–Star*

Imagine this: The herculean strength of the crane, mud squelching
like octopus tentacles, algae draped over the side view mirrors
like Spanish moss. Two bodies bloated in the front seat.
A gingham jumpsuit. Sunday shoes.

They were missing for weeks, presumed runaways
to some far-off place like New York or Haight-Ashbury,
where things were happening, where two teenagers could disappear.
Imagine our surprise when they were here the whole time,
beside the bike path where kids skip rocks and cut class,
three blocks from the high school, the water littered
with cups and straws from Dairy Queen.

The submerged teenagers are an anomaly, a local legend.
It took weeks for the news cameras to clear.
The police wanted to wring out the corpses
to determine the cause of death, dry them under heat lamps
like starfish or sand dollars, but the parents refused.
The car didn't crash. The gear shift was in park.
Nothing makes sense.

We buried them in Oak Hill in family plots,
beside grandparents and cousins they'd never met.
We tried to forget them, to leave them where we placed them.
Come Labor Day, we stepped out of our grief, wore white
to the neighborhood picnic, built a new wall by the canal,
stopped looking for things we didn't want to find.

MACY D. JONES

REAL LIFE DOLPHIN UNICORNS

Characters:

LYLA: A young woman right out college. High school English teacher, at her wits end. Lives with JUNE.

JUNE: A young woman right out college. Professional in an office environment, excellent problem solver. Lives with LYLA.

SETTING: Lyla and June's apartment. Furniture is a mix of Ikea and yard sale finds; shabby but clean.

TIME: Today.

AT RISE: LYLA and JUNE's apartment - living room. In the room, there is a fort fashioned from couch cushions, chairs, and blankets; we see LYLA in her fort, humming a song. JUNE enters.

JUNE: Lyla? I'm wiped. I've had a thousand meetings today that could have been emails, and everyone assumed I would take notes even because of all the tired bullshit reasons people would assume that. I can't bring myself to cook— I'm going to order pizza. Cool with you? You want fancy pizza or cheap pizza. Bank account says cheap, but our new plates say fancy. Fancy pizza with pancetta and ricotta and...

(Sees fort.)

JUNE: Uh, Lyla?

LYLA: Halt! Who goes there?

JUNE: Whatcha doing there, hon?

LYLA: Ruling.

JUNE: Ruling? Ruling what?

LYLA: My queendom.

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JUNE: The living room is your kingdom?

LYLA: QUEENdom, June, QUEENdom. And no, not yet. Right now, it's just the pillaged couch cushions and the blankets. But we are making plans to annex the coffee table.

JUNE: Why?

LYLA: It holds strategic TV remote mines. Those resources are desirable for the queendom of Narwhalia. We will take it by force if need be.

JUNE: No. Why did you build a fort and why are you doing whatever this is?

LYLA: Well June, I am a real-life adult. As such I get to decide what being a real-life adult means.

JUNE: So, to you being an adult means sitting on the floor and talking like a crazy person?

LYLA: One person's crazy is another person's totally sane ruler. I am totally sane here in Narwhalia. So here I stay.

JUNE: I'm confused.

LYLA: Look, it's easy. Out there, where you are, is lame. Here, in Narwhalia, is awesome. It's all dragon cats, and butterfly bears, and dolphin unicorns.

JUNE: Those aren't real.

LYLA: I tell you I've concocted a false reality where I am making plans to attack the coffee table garrison, and the point you push back on is my bestiary full of adorable cross-species?

JUNE: Do you want to tell me about what triggered this?

LYLA: Nope.

JUNE: Why not?

LYLA: Because that conversation is a real-life thing and I'm not doing that anymore.

JUNE: This is ridiculous. Get out here and talk to me.

LYLA: You have no authority over Fort Narwhalia.

JUNE: What if I kicked down one of your walls?

LYLA: That would be an act of war. Our response would be swift and terrible. We would destroy everything you hold dear with dark

magics, passive aggressive post-it notes, and nuclear pouting.

JUNE: Fine. Do you want me to order pizza?

LYLA: Yes. The fancy kind.

JUNE: I'll order the pizza if you come out of your fort and have an adult conversation with me about your day.

LYLA: I'd rather starve.

JUNE: Okay. You don't have to tell me about your day. Do you want to know about mine?

LYLA: Did you meet any wizards?

JUNE: No.

LYLA: Did you fight or befriend a dragon cat?

JUNE: Of course not.

LYLA: Unless your day involved discussing the growing problem of dwarves digging too deeply or how we should address equivalent exchange abuses in alchemy, I do not care. There lame. Here awesome.

JUNE: Fine. Have it your way. What if I entered Freedonia? Can we talk then.

LYLA: Narwhalia, and no. This is not a "bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free" kind of realm. Our borders are closed to refugees from Boringtopia.

JUNE: Boring? Is that what all this is? You're bored?

LYLA: No. Boring doesn't exist in Narwhalia. It was exiled a thousand years ago, bringing an end to the Beige Age, and ushering in the Tie-Dye Age.

JUNE: Did you have a fight with someone?

LYLA: Nope.

JUNE: Did you get a call about your student loans?

LYLA: The Gold Witch has no quarrel with me. I pay my tribute faithfully.

JUNE: Lyla, what happened at work today?

LYLA: This is my work now. Planning the takeover of the coffee table and the seizure of the remote control. It is key to streaming, and streaming is life.

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JUNE: Oh my god, Lyla, did you get fired?

LYLA: I no longer answer to Lyla. My title is Her Supreme Resplendence the High Queen Lyla of Narwhalia, First of Her Name, Reader of Tabloids, Drinker of Soy Lattes.

JUNE: Lyla! Stop this right now. What happened at work? What did you do?

(LYLA crawls further into the fort and begins to hum loudly)

JUNE: Fine. Have it your way.

(JUNE grabs LYLA by the ankles.)

(LYLA struggles with June.)

LYLA: You dare challenge me? I will not be dethroned! I rule the cushions! Unhand me! I will not negotiate with Boringtopia terrorists!

(After JUNE succeeds in pulling her out of the fort)

LYLA: Hi June. When did you get home?

JUNE: You're insane.

LYLA: I was just having some fun.

JUNE: Fun? What the hell, Lyla? What are you playing at?

LYLA: Forts. Did you ever make forts as a kid?

JUNE: Of course. But that doesn't mean you just ignore what is clearly a major life crisis. You aren't a kid anymore.

LYLA: No shit. That's the problem.

JUNE: Tell me the truth. Did you get fired?

(LYLA makes a dash for the fort, JUNE blocks her path.)

JUNE: Take one more step and I will raze your queendom to the ground.

LYLA: You wouldn't dare.

JUNE: Try me. Start talking.

LYLA: I had a bad day.

JUNE: Clearly.

LYLA: By the way, bad days were banned in Narwhalia as well.

JUNE: Lyla, please explain.

LYLA: I didn't get fired. I struggled through my first three periods and then went home sick. They had to get an emergency sub for me. I just...I had to get out of there.

JUNE: It's the first week of school. You've been a teacher all of four days.

LYLA: You don't understand. It was awful.

JUNE: The kids were mean to you?

LYLA: They are not kids.

JUNE: Sure they are.

LYLA: No, they aren't. I am teaching teenagers. Teenagers are like rats. One is fine. Twenty is terrifying.

JUNE: What happened?

LYLA: Nothing! Everything! My first two periods are seniors. They are six years younger than me. Six years! And I'm supposed to teach them? Lead them? I can't even lead my forces in battle, let alone tell some stuck up, pimple-faced cool kids to write a two-page paper on themes present in *The Scarlet Letter*.

JUNE: So, all of this—leaving work, building a fort out of our furniture, enacting a full-on break with reality—is because you are too close in age to your students.

LYLA: It's more than that. Six years is nothing, but they... they called me Ma'am. Ma'am. They call the history teacher ma'am, and she is the oldest surviving confederate widow.

JUNE: You think you're too young, and they think you're too old, so your solution is regressing to your childhood?

LYLA: I didn't skip straight to childhood. At first, I tried out going back to college but then I was that person who only talks about their college days, which is lame. Then I tried going back to high school but that presented the same lameness component, plus I could feel my bad skin coming back, and I felt the urge to write tomes of angsty poetry.

JUNE: I remember your Live Journal well.

LYLA: Moving on. I briefly traveled to myself at twelve, but it was too traumatic. Puberty and awkward trips to buy bras? No thank

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you. But, seven? Seven! I loved being seven. I was awesome at seven. Weren't you?

JUNE: I suppose. But there is a problem with going back to seven-years-old, Lyla. No money. No independence. No car.

LYLA: I do like my car.

JUNE: You can't have it both ways.

LYLA: Not with that attitude.

JUNE: You are an adult. You have a job. A job, I might add, you were so passionate about five days ago. You have to show up and be here in the present.

LYLA: Here lame.

JUNE: It's not that bad.

LYLA: Yes, it really is.

JUNE: What about movies?

LYLA: Once I annex the coffee table kingdom—

JUNE: What about buying new clothes?

LYLA: What about building pillow forts?

JUNE: Happy hour—

LYLA: Cartoons—

JUNE: Professional fulfillment—

LYLA: Swords and sorcery—

JUNE: Real life—

LYLA: Dolphin unicorns.

JUNE: You can't do this. You know that.

LYLA: Just until tomorrow? Tonight, let me be Her Supreme Resplendence the High Queen Lyla of Narwhalia, First of Her Name, Reader of Tabloids, Drinker of Soy Lattes. Tomorrow I'll be Ma'am. Just let me keep Narwhalia here, waiting for me. I need Narwhalia, and I need Her Supreme Resplendence—

JUNE: If you keep Narwhalia, then what about me? I live here, too.

LYLA: Well, if you help me conquer the coffee table, you are welcome here, traveler. And if we expand the north, we also have room for a minifridge.

JUNE: Do I get a title?

LYLA: I hereby dub thee Admiral June Bug, The High Vizier and Scourge of the Coffee Table Clan.

JUNE: What are my responsibilities?

LYLA: You will lead our armies, and order the pizza, and take on the most difficult of duties: remind me to be present when real-life gets to be too much.

JUNE: I agree to those terms. Let's go.

(JUNE and LYLA crawl into the fort.)

JUNE: It's cozy. What now?

LYLA: We make plans to acquire—

(JUNE grabs the tv remote.)

LYLA: Aha! You are a fine addition to the queendom.

JUNE: Do you offer dental?

LYLA: No, but I promise to always pay my half of the power bill and never cut entitlements.

JUNE: Well, that's something, I guess. Do you have a national anthem?

LYLA: Yes. It's the theme song to SVU. Olivia Benson is our patron deity.

JUNE: Well, hail Narwhalia.

LYLA: Hail Narwhalia!

END

ROBIN EISNER



YOUNG WOMAN WITH CLOSED EYES

Robin Eisner would like to thank photographer Kyle Loftus for taking model Gavi's photograph, from which she was inspired to create her digital painting "Young Woman with Closed Eyes."

MICHELLE MCMILLAN-HOLIFIELD

GOD TEARS DOWN MY RELIGION

For Amanda Madru

Take religion and theology off their pedestals
and somewhere there is a hurricane. No one can explain it.
There is no Doppler specialized in spiritual warfare.

So here's what I do when my heart becomes vacant:
fill it with Jesus. You're thinking, *But you just chucked*
religion. Religion is not God. Religion is an obelisk,

an idol snapped in place, faith friable as a LEGO tower. God is God.
I find Him everywhere: the dining room, the kitchen, the ballroom.
He sees the implausible, the impossible, the unimaginable.

He sees the untouchable: the specter, leaning his black mass
against my car; the gauzy thing I call my psyche-in-arabesque;
the hummingbird's ethereal world tours;

secrets speckling my blue heart like poppy seeds;
me lying prostrate grieving out a requiem for my failed affairs;
the spiritual fracturing that began hair-width, now cracked

in half like bone. God tears down my religion,
my old beliefs—that idolatry—and rebuilds: truth
plaid, cross-hatched, over the firmest foundation.

MICHELLE MCMILLAN-HOLIFIELD

CAMERAWOMAN: OFF DUTY, NATCHEZ TRACE,
MISSISSIPPI

I.

Between dusk and dark the light is liquid
pensieve-inked,

lapis filaments against a blackening canopy,
so liquescent as to be untrustworthy.

At first, the deer appears as shadow, mossy,
a night ballerina: lithe, lean, languid.

With foggy tendrils of movement
she is almost mist. You slow, willing her to stay

willing her not to cross in front of your SUV
with its grill so shark-large it could swallow her whole.

You think, *good girl*, as you near, *good girl*
as she shrinks into the dark. You pass.

You pass her and look back, as you would at your own child
to ensure she obeys, as you would your own

to ensure she steps away from the road,
to ensure, as you would your own

that she is clean and healthy and alive.
Before the small thud, you were still looking back

wishing you had your camera, thinking how mythical her breaths,
how enchanting the swish of her tail. But now, now, now

there is a bump so slight, it could have been a dream.
Except it isn't. Because in your tail lights is a speckled babe

you didn't notice, bucking its body against the road
front legs struggling to stand, hind legs melted into the pavement.

II.

You have filmed nature pitted against itself,
the savagery of ravenous appetites: the Komodo dragon, the Canadian
wolf.

Your instinct is always anger
as the predator roars and feeds its hunger,

but you stay still. You know your job. And nature. You film the dying
and grieve later, in your tent, alone, always alone, saying

if you could, you would free the weak, seize the monster by the throat.
In front of you is this kitten of a deer, drowning on the road

straining to right itself. Its thick-tongued mama-cries
leave gaping holes in your chest. Its black nubby nose sprays

mucus and panic down the Trace and when the rangers arrive
you collapse in the street, them yelling at you to get back, *Move*

away from the fawn! Dammit, get back. Ma'am! Ma'am?
Men's voices so watery, so drowned out, so vacuumed.

You cup the babe's chin in your hands, as it wails, it wails, it wails.
It is lost; it has lost its mother! No. Its quiet mama waits

a few feet southward, a shadow tucking itself back into the night
moving away from you, Monster. All the while

succumbing to grief, you howl; you force out these sounds:
Mama's not gonna let you drown.

DANIEL CIOCHINA



READ BETWEEN THE PINES

DIANE MCTIGUE

WATER PARK SHERPA

Sometimes it is hard to shake the feeling that she is in wind-down mode. Forty-three is still young, she reassures herself, but when she wakes up in the morning, random muscles ache. The threat of obesity lurks behind a sleeve of Girl Scout Thin Mint cookies. Her failing eyesight is just the icing on the mid-life cake. She's always had perfect vision, and now there are times she can't accomplish small tasks because she just can't read the small print, or even 14-point font, without her pseudo-stylish reading glasses from the TJMaxx check-out line.

She doesn't want to look like just another worn-out mom at the water park, so she gamely takes four obligatory rides down the water slides with the kids, one on each trail. She peels herself away from the lines to drink a Diet Coke in the only shade she can find, which is in the baby and toddler section. The blaring '80s music drowns out most of the shrieking and whining anyway. She feels at home knowing the words to most of the songs.

The dad at the table next to her looks sheepish, bordering on downright whipped. He is sitting alone among the towels and sippy-cups and an overstuffed diaper bag, reserving his family's place at the picnic table. The table is shaded by a grass tiki umbrella that really ought to reside at an oceanside bar. He isn't bad looking. His hairline is going out with the tide, but he is in good shape and has a strong brow over intense eyes.

His wife and kids visit to unload more stuff on him, including unwieldy pool noodles that refuse to bend to his will. His wife looks as if she might have been pretty at one time—her bleached blonde hair is blown-out and her make-up is well-applied even on this melting hot day—but there is no disguising her meaty frame now.

She is one of those women who gains weight unevenly, with disproportionately noteworthy hips that even the black swim skirt can't disguise. The three kids stand dripping, and the smallest boy's teeth chatter. His sister barks at him to stop touching her bathing suit.

When his wife leaves to take the kids back on the slides, the man surveys the crowd of harried parents and catches her eye for a moment. Then he closes his eyes, leans his head back just a little, and belts out the lyrics to Bon

Jovi's self-affirming anthem, "It's My Life." He sings from a hidden iteration of himself, another circumstance, a stronger stance.

He doesn't stop after a few lines; he sings the entire song. His voice sounds like a professional rock singer, perhaps better than Bon Jovi himself. No one else seems to notice his impromptu concert. She is taken aback by his boldness. She might normally feel embarrassed on his behalf, but he is just too talented for pity.

She wants him to know that she gets him. In fact, it feels terribly important to her. When her daughter comes to retrieve a towel, she comments to her in a voice that she hopes is loud enough for him to hear, "That man's got a great rock voice. He really does." Her daughter gives her a confused look but does not care enough to seek clarification.

The man stops singing just as his wife and kids return. He looks satisfied and only slightly smug. There is no shame.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

LIMBS AND ORBS

Here are countless suns
gathered in the broadcast of day.

The earth has rejected
the litheness of your barrier

freed with shy utterances
the eternity of your girded glory.

In this tumult
of cascading yellow hues

light lingers
on the inhale of your breasts

deepens the bud flush
of your wakened nipples

and brings forth fields
of our invisible daughters—

creatures of fragrance,
a windfall of petals in grass.

Witness the blend of what is
and all that can-never-be

limbs of joyous supplication,
orbs of beauteous detachment

changing shape and intent
under a variegation

of hollow, insignificant stars.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

FIVE SEASONLESS YEARS

Blinking blue ink from an African bloom,
a violet moon feeds the night its tension

as my tongue dowses the trace of your stomach
in this half-light halved yet again.

I thought I could live with you more explicitly
on the face of the visible world

where we once tried to grow gold from flax
in a season we couldn't manage to kill.

Your lips answering my lips are a contortion of grift,
shifting lyric waters mirroring electricity

things consumed by the breath of creation
to be swallowed by the mirth of your spiral ocean.

It was in the old kitchen where molasses had once spilled
with only a broken chair between us—

I had splintered its apron and rails and spindles
because every fraction between us is an increase in misery

and so that you could cool me down with your inventive hands
and teach me that some things are only nearly real.

Such fierce enfolding, I wish I could tap your chest twice
and give you the kind of heart you most need

kissing the daisiness of your toes before they stop wiggling
and the ants return to the memory of molasses

purged with vinegar and bleach
in what will be five seasonless years come December.

LANDA WO

NGAZI

Shadow of despair.
Oh shadow of despair
The past
Is already
Done.

Oh Essungo¹ my brother
The wars and the
Defeats are
ripe.

Oh Cabinda my earth
Could you be anything other
Than a swelling groan?

¹The Cabindan fishmonger whose one eye serves as weighing scales and purse at the same time

ALAN GIRLING

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO TOM DUDKOWSKI?

Five Answers

Characters:

Answer 1 - Toke

RICH

-----old buddies,
mid-twenties

DWAYNE

Answer 2 - Who's Afraid

CHRISTINE

-----recently married,
mid-twenties

BARRY

Answer 3 - Above the Fray

MADELINE

-----business partners
mid-twenties

LARRY

Answer 4 - Truth

STEPHANIE

-----old girlfriends,
mid-twenties

CARLA

Answer 5 - A Miracle

ROSS

-----a couple,
mid-twenties

STUART

Answer 1. Toke

SETTING: Behind a Safeway supermarket.

TIME: The present. Mid-morning.

AT RISE: RICH and DWAYNE are leaning against the building sharing a joint. RICH tilts his head toward the sky with his eyes closed.

RICH: Tom Dudkowski, man! He just flashed by.

DWAYNE: Who? Where?

RICH: Tom Dudkowski! In metal shop. Grade eight. This fat kid. Real smart.

DWAYNE: Ohhh, that loser. Long time ago. Years! Eons! We always laughed at him. Such a geek. Totally forgot about that guy.

RICH: This bud, man, is tripping, like I'm seeing him so clearly now, yeah, in class, and he's doing this freak thing with his finger. Holy Christ was he fat!

DWAYNE: Wow, really. Cool.

RICH: And he's talking all about his finger, says it's some kind of bloody miracle. But he's just holding it in the air and wiggling it around, like he's feeling up some chick.

DWAYNE: Some chick, eh. Awesome. Hey, how's he doing?

RICH: Ask him yourself, man. I got my own scene going on here.

(Rich bursts out laughing and passes the joint to Dwayne.)

DWAYNE: Yeah, yeah, okay, lemme try.

(Dwayne takes a deep toke, closes his eyes, screws up his face in concentration. He sways a little and Rich looks on in amazement.)

DWAYNE: Okay, okay, there he is, I see him. It's not metal shop, it's like we're in grade six art. I think this really happened, man. Everybody's painting, but he's all grown up, ten times as fat, and I go up to him, and I say something—like, “how're you doing, Tom Dudkowski?” Jesus Christ, am I talking to the future or what? But he's exactly like he was, only bigger, in his short pants, his glasses, and I'm looking at the painting— I, I see it.

RICH: Are you fucking kidding me, man? I wasn't serious. I didn't . . .

DWAYNE: No, really, he's there, and the painting . . . I see it.

RICH: Okay, then what's it of?

DWAYNE: Um, I don't know. . . colors. Too many. I don't know where to look.

RICH: Then, can you, like, ask him?

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(Dwayne goes silent, concentrating more.)

RICH: Well, what's his answer? Come on, man, you're freaking me out.

DWAYNE: I did. I asked him.

RICH: And?

DWAYNE: He says it's a painting, a picture of . . . me.

RICH: Yeah, right. Can you really see yourself?

DWAYNE: No, it's all colors, I don't know, just nothing. He says it's me in the painting.

RICH: Aw, fuck you, man. Get real.

(Rich punches Dwayne hard but playfully on the shoulder.)

DWAYNE: Yeah, yeah, fuck me.

(Dwayne throws the joint on the ground, steps on it, and walks away muttering and looking despondent. He holds his shoulder in pain. Rich shrugs and looks back up at the sky, closes his eyes.)

Answer 2. Who's Afraid

SETTING: BARRY and CHRISTINE'S living room.

TIME: The present. Late-morning.

AT RISE: BARRY sits reading a newspaper. CHRISTINE enters excitedly.

CHRISTINE: Guess who I saw today, hon? Put down your paper, okay. This was weird.

BARRY: Who, dear?

CHRISTINE: Remember Tom Dudkowski? From school?

BARRY: Guy who broke his leg at grad?

CHRISTINE: No, no, the fat kid who liked Jen. You know, Jen thought he was after her, but I don't think he actually was. He was just a poor—

(Barry puts his paper down.)

BARRY: Right. Dudkowski. Freaked her out, didn't he? Sick fuck. Where'd you see him?

CHRISTINE: It was the strangest thing. In the parking lot at the mall this morning, I got in my car and suddenly there was this shadow, and I looked, and right at my window was this face and he was calling, miss, miss.

BARRY: Doors locked, I hope.

CHRISTINE: No, I don't know, I didn't think about it.

BARRY: Always lock your doors, Christine.

CHRISTINE: His face was so kind, and sad, and I sort of recognized him, but he was different, so thin now, and kind of, I don't know, unhealthy-looking—

BARRY: Hey. Were you his friend ever? Did you have some kind of relationship with him, or what?

CHRISTINE: No, no, why do you ask? I just thought, this guy is a guy I went to school with, so I rolled down the window and he said, miss can you help me, I broke down, can I use your phone? I could barely hear him, he was practically whispering, so I said, you went to Carson, didn't you? What's your name? And he told me and I remembered. He looked at me more closely and he said, you're Christine Anderson, you were a cheerleader, you were always nice to everybody and you never showed off and you had a boyfriend in grade 12, Barry Templar—

BARRY: Wait just a fucking minute! You weren't even his friend, and he knows you so well, your name, and all about us—

CHRISTINE: Maybe he has a good memory, I don't know—

BARRY: You didn't give him your phone, did you? Where was his car?

CHRISTINE: Sure, I did. He said he broke down. Why wouldn't I help him?

(Barry stands up suddenly. He paces the room.)

BARRY: Because he might be a goddamn psycho, Christine. How the hell do you know he's not? Accosting young women in parking lots, for chrissake—

CHRISTINE: I just had a feeling. I remembered he was different, in a good way. Anyway, this is the really interesting thing. He called someone, then he waited on the sidewalk, and I didn't see any car. I decided to wait too, just to see, and I saw him sit down on the sidewalk and I think he was crying. He was all hunched over and shaking, and in just a few minutes a brown car pulled up and two men got out wearing white windbreakers

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and badges and they helped him up and into the car and they drove away.
I felt so—

BARRY: See. See. A psycho. I told you. There was no car. Goddamn it,
Christine—

CHRISTINE: I felt sorry for him. I wish I could've done more—

BARRY: There's your problem, Christine. Always feeling sorry for all the
suffering creatures of the world. It's not your issue. You can't take all that
weight on you. Anyway, from now on, keep your eyes open, don't go out at
night. Next time you go shopping, let me know. We'll go together. Got that?

CHRISTINE: Okay, Barry, if you say so. But—

BARRY: Good. That's done then.

CHRISTINE: I think you're forgetting how you and I, how we got together.
The thing with your dad, and how you really needed someone. What if no
one cared then? What if—

*(Barry stops pacing. He looks stricken. He sits back down and puts
his head in his hands.)*

BARRY: I thought . . . I told you . . . I thought I told you . . . to never, ever
mention my dad or that time, again. . . . I told you . . .

*(His body shakes a little. Christine sits and places a hand softly on
his shoulder.)*

Answer 3. Above the Fray

SETTING: The boardroom of a downtown skyscraper.

TIME: The present. Mid-afternoon.

*AT RISE: MADELINE and LARRY sit across from each other.
LARRY looks out the window. MADELINE looks at LARRY.*

MADLINE: What the goddamn is it, Larry?

LARRY: Don't you just love those mountains? Now this is what I call
making it to the top: that view, my corner office . . . a smokin' hot business
partner.

*(Larry winks at MADELINE. MADELINE picks up a document,
shakes it in irritation.)*

LARRY: Hey, did I tell you I'm picking up my Porsche tomorrow? I'll let you take it for a spin, Maddy—

MADELINE: Listen to me for a second, will you? Why can't we nail this thing down?

LARRY: Oh that? They're stringing us along, for sure. It's typical B.S. Nothing to be concerned about.

MADELINE: But it's absurd. We know and they know we've got the best proposal, hands down. No one can touch us.

LARRY: Nope.

(LARRY drums his fingers on the table and keeps looking out the window.)

MADELINE: You know what?

LARRY: What?

MADELINE: We could use a Tom Dudkowski about now. Remember him?

LARRY: Dudkowski? Ahh, Dudkowski.

MADELINE: You know what I'm talking about.

LARRY: Engaging in a little lateral thinking, are we, Maddy? Good for you. You'll go far.

MADELINE: Remember how, you know, some people got him to do their homework. Not mentioning any names.

(LARRY turns to look directly at MADELINE.)

LARRY: You took advantage of poor Tom Dudkowski? That surprises me. Then again, you could wrap anyone around your little finger, even a fag like Dudkowski—

MADELINE: Me? I'm talking about you. You got homework off of Dudkowski. It's how you passed Math 11. Wouldn't have gotten into business school without—

(Larry points a finger at MADELINE.)

LARRY: Hey! Tom Dudkowski was a nice guy. And I thank my stars for nice guys. They're useful. Even in grade six I was able to get an extra lunch every day thanks to Tom. The kicker is *he* was the fat one! I think I was doing the poor sap a favor! Anyway, I like nice guys. They give people like *us* moral support. Fuck knows we need it, eh Madeline? Hmm. Don't tell me you're going all pussy on me, are you? You said you wouldn't. Now you're making

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me doubt our partnership.

MADELINE: I'm always open with you, Larry.

LARRY: Spoken like a true pussy.

MADELINE: What's that supposed to mean?

LARRY: Oh, nothing. I just know you don't call anyone a bastard if you're a bitch yourself, no matter if it's true. Pots, kettles, and all that—

MADELINE: So, I should say sorry for reminding you what kind of person you are.

LARRY: Fucking bitch.

(Larry bursts out laughing and turns back to the window. MADELINE stares at him, unsmiling. She mouths the words 'fucking bastard' and smiles.)

LARRY: I heard that.

Answer 4. Truth

SETTING: A piano bar.

TIME: The present. Early-evening.

AT RISE: STEPHANIE and CARLA sit drinking margaritas.

STEPHANIE: Carla, come on! I told YOU, didn't I?

CARLA: Yes, but yours . . . well, yours was one real piece of man meat. Who wouldn't want to be you?

STEPHANIE: There's nothing to be embarrassed about. We're old friends!

CARLA: Okay Steph, you win. But if you say one thing to anyone, even one thing, I swear—

STEPHANIE: Just spill it. Do I have to dare you?

CARLA: No! It was Tom.

STEPHANIE: Tom? Tom who? Was it Tom Deverell? Tom Jordan? Omigod, I'm totally green. Totally.

CARLA: Dudkowski.

STEPHANIE: Tom Dudkowski?! The fat kid? Lord, Carla, you slept with . . . Tom Dudkowski? You let Tom Dudkowski—

CARLA: He was sweet, Stephanie! And really, I haven't met a more sensitive guy since. He really paid attention, really! And if you want to know the absolute truth, he seemed to think the whole thing was some sort of marvelous, magical, mystical experience. He didn't know exactly what to do, but, boy oh boy could he use his fingers!

STEPHANIE: Oh, Carla!

CARLA: Shut up, just shut up. It was because he touched me like I've never been touched and he made me want to do the same for him. He was a virgin, too. Because he was fat and geeky and no one else would look at him, . . . but I did. I knew I shouldn't have said anything. Some friend you are. When you called tonight, I thought—

STEPHANIE: Sorry, it was just that, well, you can see how I might react But seriously, Tom Dudkowski? He was so I mean, did you go out with him? On dates? You and he were never an item, were you, not in public—

(CARLA slams her drink down and stands up. She throws a twenty on the table.)

CARLA: It's time for me to go.

STEPHANIE: Carla. Come on, we're friends I didn't mean it really

(STEPHANIE can't help laughing.)

STEPHANIE: So, then you just used him? For sex? Oh, my God, I'm losing it.

CARLA: Goodbye, Stephanie.

(CARLA marches away.)

STEPHANIE: Oh shit. Come on back, Carla, I'm really sorry. Carla!

Answer 5. A Miracle

SETTING: ROSS and STUART's kitchen and living room.

TIME: The present. Mid-Morning.

AT RISE: ROSS is washing dishes. He sighs heavily. STUART sits at the kitchen table scrolling his phone.

ROSS: Anything worthwhile, Stuart?

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STUART: A couple. They're beauts, but they don't pay much. I'll get out first thing Monday. Don't worry.

ROSS: I'm not. It's just . . .

STUART: I know, I know.

(ROSS walks over to STUART.)

ROSS: I want us to be happy, you know . . . here, give me your hand.

STUART: Another time, Ross. Not now.

ROSS: I just want to show you something.

(ROSS takes STUART's hand and holds his index finger around its base.)

STUART: What're you doing?

ROSS: Straighten this finger. Okay, bend it, curl it right up over mine. Now, squeeze.

STUART: Yeah?

ROSS: Okay, open it again. There. Open and close. This finger, this little nothing movement, is all yours, is all you. Don't you see? It's a miracle, a miracle of life, a goddamn, miracle. Do you know what I'm talking about? Do you *know* what I'm talking about?

STUART: Oh goodness. Yes, yes, sure I do. It's magnificent. The difference between life and . . .

(STUART rises and puts his arms around ROSS.)

STUART: Everything will be fine, I love you. I'll get a job, just you wait.

ROSS: I know. I'm sorry. Go back to your search. I'll do the living room.

(ROSS goes to the living room, tidies up a bit and sits on the arm of the sofa. He looks out the window. STUART comes to the entrance of the living room holding his phone.)

STUART: Ross.

ROSS: These mountains really are fabulous. We're so, so lucky, you know—

STUART: He did it, Ross. Just like you thought he might.

(ROSS doesn't answer, freezing momentarily. He continues staring out the window.)

STUART: Did you hear me? It's here, on . . . Tom Dudkowski.

ROSS: I heard you, Stuart. Come here.

STUART: At least I assume that's what it means. It doesn't say how he did it, I guess they don't . . . I'm really so sorry.

*(STUART and ROSS sit together on the sofa. They touch hands.
ROSS wipes a tear from his cheek.)*

STUART: I saw it too, you know, even when I was out-of-my-mind and wanted him out of your life. Such a troubled soul. Who really understood what he was, who he was? Maybe only you, Ross.

ROSS: That finger thing, in the kitchen. That was Tom, back in grade eight. Showed everyone in the class, in fact, the whole metal shop. All paying attention. Nobody got it, though, nobody understood . . . nobody at all.

STUART: And in grade eight, so young to be so sensitive like that.

ROSS: Somewhere, somehow, I still love him. I have to say it, I'm sorry. It's just . . . he's—he was—a remarkable person. A truly remarkable person.

STUART: Well then, you are too, Ross. So are you.

(Ross looks again at the mountains.)

END

DRAMMING WITH FRANK O'BRIEN

Although he prided himself a man's man, a busted-knuckle brawler and midnight cocksman of near-mythic status, he had a soft spot for Italian loafers. In fact, anytime the brown leather toeboxes got splashed with sour mix or triple sec, he'd stop mid-service, wet a cocktail napkin with soda water from the gun, and dab those shoes of his clean.

He was also the one who taught me about Halfers—whereby a beer is split and clandestinely chugged on the clock—along with the finer points of Service Chicken—a contest of wits and wills whereby bartenders compete to see who can avoid serving annoying customers for the longest amount of time—and while I couldn't keep up when it came to Halfers and though I never once prevailed in Service Chicken (he would feign distraction, deafness, dementia; anything at all) the point lay in continuity of ritual.

Because ritual was important to him. He'd been behind the stick on Friday and Saturday night for years before I showed up, having secured the money shifts through a combination of charm, speed under pressure, and sufficient cunning to see fired those not to his liking. And despite an initial skepticism of me (“I had you pegged for a narc,” was how he put it), over the months a rough trust bloomed between us, and he saw fit to pass down his knowledge of Dramming—an antiquated Scots-Irish term connoting the tradition whereby distillery hands tasted product throughout the workday as a nod to both quality control and morale.

Consider first the Casual Lefty, which turns upon resisting the rookie urge to sneak-pour under the rail, that deadest of dead giveaways. Instead, like a magician who dupes by misdirection, glassware is lined up in plain sight and cocktails banged out with the busy right hand—scooping ice, pouring booze, mixing juices, sprinkling bitters—whereas the forgotten left hand remains busier still. Or the Long Count, the gist of which is to pour not into the mixing glass but rather the shaker tin itself, a reversal to conceal the volume dispensed and thereby turn four-counts into eights and eights into sixteens and sixteens into total oblivion. Finally, the No Choicer, that ballsiest of moves wherein one drinks right alongside the regulars. Should management take umbrage, the regs demanded it, and—assuming said regs have been sufficiently greased—they'll swear on their mothers' honor that the only reason they just dropped sixty bucks on a round was for the joy of doing a shot with their favorite bartender.

Beyond even these venerable techniques, in time he saw fit to share his most sacred of bar wisdoms. And though we disagreed politically (“Any man

who votes Democrat either keeps a cat for a pet or wears pink panties under his Levis,” he said, knowing full well I both supported President Obama and kept a litterbox in my apartment), and while his take on romantic love was determinist at best (“When it comes to women, just remember what Darwin said: Only Dicks Get Pussy”), and despite the questionable ethics of his long-term financial strategy (“Unless you wanna die behind the oak with a blown-out liver, you gotta train the regs to Play Ball,” he said, with Playing Ball being a tacit agreement whereby barflies are egregiously undercharged on the understanding they’ll wildly over-tip: a \$50 tab becomes \$20, and what would’ve been a \$10 gratuity suddenly doubles, resulting in \$20 made and \$20 saved for all involved, sans ownership)—no, as different as we were in outlook and temperament, I cannot now say I didn’t learn from him, or even that these silly-seeming things won’t linger in my memory and perhaps even bequeath a last bitter chuckle on my deathbed.

So a grifter, yes, but a charismatic one. An Irish-Catholic boy from the Windy City who’d somehow gotten lost on his way home from Murphy’s one night only to wash up on the beach in San Diego where the people were soft and life was easy, but where the deep-dish pie couldn’t sniff Lou Malnati’s jockstrap. Get a couple of Heinekens in him and he’d quote Mike Ditka, a few more and he’d reminisce on the days when breakfast meant hot dogs and brews in the bleacher seats at Wrigley. His shaven head was knotted with scars from years working the club scene (“You hop over the rack feet first, grab the douchebag by the collar of his shiny fucking shirt, and then just wail away like the hockey players do”).

Truthfully, though, his wilder days were in the rearview by then. He was still beefy through the shoulders, but well on his way to fat (“The old lady made me give up the smokes”) as well as happily married—to a former coworker, no less, that selfsame old lady whom he’d wooed by requesting she do him the honor of tucking in his shirttail each night before he got behind the stick (“A creepy move, sure, but that’s how I knew she was into me”).

When the time finally came for me to make a move of my own, and I put in my two weeks’ notice, he took the news surprisingly hard—“Of all the rejects and jerkoffs and dipshits I’ve bartended with over the years,” he said, “you were the best of ‘em”—and not a month later, I heard through a mutual friend that he’d done one too many Halfers and gotten fired after a round of Service Chicken reached its logical conclusion. While I suspect that last move was actually a swan song, and although he’s since retired from the bar game for good and become the proud father of two rowdy boys, I’ll always remember him the way he was behind the oak: quick with a one-liner, terrific with people, happy to play the asshole, and tenderhearted on the sly.

He was Frank O’Brien, a barman’s barman if ever there was one.

KATHLEEN WILLIAMSON

SCHEHERAZADE AS MOTHER

The day he takes his first step
my son begins to run,

he sidles up to doors
dashes out when they open,

stories scampering
through his brain,

entice him to pull
up toy train tracks

which become sabers
in his hands.

The tale on my lips
has to transfix him

long enough
to change his diaper.

Sometimes he takes
up my narrative

shifts the storyline and casting—
he becomes a knight,

I, the princess,
his infant sister,

the ever-compliant pea.

ROBIN BECIC



RESTLESS REPOSE

BRANDON FRENCH

A SILLY WOMAN

She had been a great beauty in her day, a statuesque blonde with large, olive-brown eyes, broad shoulders and spectacular teeth, and like a celebrated building that had fallen into disrepair but still retained its aura of glamour, she stood out among the drab and dumpy, mostly female seniors in the Ochsner Lifelong Learning's 20th Century American lit class, I among them. But I did my best to find seating as far away from Gloria as possible, especially when she patted the empty seat beside her and beckoned me with her thousand-watt smile. She reminded me of a cobra who mesmerizes onlookers with her sinuous dance, her powerful muscles and vertebrae contracting until she makes her deadly strike.

In an effort to lower my visibility, I limited the times I raised my hand to three an hour. As a retired UC Berkeley English professor who had already taught, and in some instances written books about the writers we were discussing, it would have been vainglorious to say more. It might also have seemed like I was competing with the teacher, a pleasant, reasonably competent young woman with sparse red hair and no chin. But Gloria exercised no comparable restraint. Everything she read reminded her of something else she had read or heard about or seen on television or in a movie. She presented the similarities, most of them invisible to the rest of us, with ecstatic certainty, waving one of her long, now flabby arms as if she had just unearthed a pair of conjoined Egyptian mummy twins.

The teacher did her best to massage Gloria's assertions into something resembling insight. "Yes, Gatsby's green light might have been an allusion to Joyce's Dublin, I suppose, and it's true that Fitzgerald and Joyce were in Paris around the same time. But do you think Fitzgerald might also have been using the green light as Daisy's beckoning invitation to Gatsby to cross the water from West Egg to her mansion in East Egg where he believed that she awaited him?"

"No, I think it's the Irish thing. They were both Irish, right? Joyce and Fitzgerald?"

I usually sat between Claudia and Natalie, two lively black women I'd befriended in the Music of Motown seminar, but today Natalie was late and before I could stop Gloria, she slid into the empty seat on my right.

"You're so smart," she whispered.

"Oh, well, no," I said, attempting modesty.

“I made a bet with myself. I bet that you were a retired high school English teacher.”

“College,” I murmured. Why the hell did I need to correct the record?

“Then you must have a Masters Degree.”

“Doctorate,” I said. It was disgraceful.

“I’d love to pick your brain,” Gloria said.

I had a disturbing image of her parting my hair with her manicured lavender nails and plunging a lobster fork into my skull.

“Can we have lunch after class?”

Think fast, I pleaded with myself, but I couldn’t come up with anything good. I’m having a root canal this afternoon? I’m helping a homeless man relocate?

“I only eat raw meat at lunch,” I lied.

“Great. I love steak tartare.”

I’ll have to admit that Gloria had led an interesting life. She abandoned her second husband Harold and her 16-year-old son Mansfield (not his) in Boston and took off for Paris with a Frenchman named Bertrand, a passionate lover who wanted to watch her have sex with other women.

“Did you do it?” I asked, uncertain how I’d feel if she said yes.

“Yes and no,” she answered coyly, popping the last bite of raw sirloin into her mouth.

I tried to imagine what yes and no looked like naked.

After that first lunch, Gloria regaled me with offers and opportunities. Movies, plays, dinners, breakfasts, museums, the beach, the zoo, street fairs, and cultural events at the downtown library. I said ‘no’ more often than ‘yes,’ although my dance card wasn’t exactly filled. But it had been a long time since I’d been wooed so passionately, by anyone. And Gloria gossiped entertainingly about her many friends, although she didn’t actually seem to have any. I began to feel as though I’d been kidnapped by a lonely princess who needed a commoner to play with. I also imagined her having a thick address book blackened by the countless crossed-off names of my predecessors.

Gloria gradually unveiled the story of her childhood, a series of harrowing violations which she narrated robotically. Gloria’s mother abhorred sex and offered her beautiful five-year-old daughter to her husband as an alternative. But her mother was also cruelly jealous of Gloria and blamed her for her father’s perfidies. “Why don’t you stop him?” she’d demand to know. “You’re just a little whore.”

Gloria said her mother would regularly lock herself in her bedroom and refuse to come out for hours. “I’d lay in the hallway outside her room sobbing and beg her to forgive me, but she wouldn’t open the door.”

“I think your parents were both mentally ill,” I said.

“Yes, I suppose,” Gloria agreed, “but I loved them so very much. I even ironed my father’s underwear,” she added, as if it were a tender memory.

Gloria wanted to know about my life, too, certain, she said, that it was “just as interesting as” hers. (It wasn’t.) But I didn’t want to disclose too much—depressed lawyer father, neurotic school teacher mother, the divorce when I was nine, an alcoholic stepfather when I was fourteen, my parents’ deaths in their sixties, both from cancer, my endless education, and a string of lovers but no marriages. Enough! I had the uneasy feeling that Gloria would hold whatever I told her hostage, using it to own me in some nefarious way.

As we were walking to our cars one morning after a two-hour impressionist painting seminar, Gloria’s face darkened like a storm-threatened sky. “My mother used to tell me that I was stupid,” she said. “That’s why our Ochsner classes are so important to me. They’ve showed me how smart I really am.”

Oh, Jesus, I thought. I couldn’t bear to look at her, my harsh assessment of her intelligence seeming unforgivably cruel. But it didn’t alter my opinion. Gloria loved the process of learning but there was almost no evidence that she actually learned anything. One time at lunch, she regaled me with the wonders of her existentialism teacher, how he ‘blew her mind’ (I pictured an AK 15) with his brilliance.

“What does he say about existentialism?” I asked. “I’m curious to know his take on it.”

“Oh, there’s so much—” Gloria crooned, looking past me as if the teacher were standing behind me in the restaurant. “I ...I just can’t put it into words.”

Little by little, my impatience with Gloria grew. I hated how she’d tell me what she wished I would say, or the way she wished I would say it, as if she were trying to program a robot.

“Maybe you should send me a script, Gloria. You can be my screenwriter, and I’ll read the lines.”

“I just wish you’d speak to me more lovingly,” she said. “You can be very harsh, Jackie.”

When I told her I hated *La La Land*, a movie she’d recommended with gushing adoration, Gloria grilled me like a defense attorney, determined to convince me of its merits. It was as if a difference of opinion threatened the mind meld with me that she craved.

Why was I so angry lately, she wanted to know. Why didn’t I return her phone calls? Her emails?

“I do return them,” I said.

“But you take your own sweet time.”

“Yes! Because it is my own sweet time. My! Time!”

“Okay, okay,” she said. “I’m sorry I’m such a pain in the ass.”

But this was merely a preview of coming attractions. One Wednesday afternoon, I received a frantic phone call from Gloria in the Beverly Hills

jail. She'd been arrested at Neiman-Marcus for shoplifting a pair of emerald earrings. Shoplifting! Could I call her son Mansfield in Connecticut and ask him to wire \$500 for the bail bond?

"Why don't you call him yourself?" I demanded.

"Puleeeze, Jackie."

"I despise her," Mansfield told me after he agreed to Paypal the money. Even before I could say thank you, he hung up on me.

I never told Gloria what he'd said, of course. I was sure she already knew how he felt.

This shoplifting episode made Gloria's dependence on me even more evident, which increased my anxiety exponentially. It reminded me of an old French film, *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, in which a man rescues a homeless man who's fallen into the Seine and finds himself responsible for the fellow's life from then on.

"I've been diagnosed with bipolar disorder," Gloria explained as I was driving her to her car, which was still parked in the Neiman-Marcus lot from the day before. "Shoplifting is one of the symptoms of mania."

"You mean you've done this before?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "But not for several years."

The light turned green but the car in front of me didn't move, the driver no doubt texting. "It's green!" I shouted, honking my horn. "That means go! Not Irish."

"Are you making fun of me?" Gloria asked, her eyes wide as owls.

"What are you talking about?" I said, suddenly recalling that Gloria was the source of my little Gatsby joke. "Of course I'm not."

The next month was uneventful. After a psychiatrist testified to Gloria's medical condition, she got off with a year's probation. But the day after Thanksgiving, I received a phone call from Gloria's neighbor Merriam informing me that Gloria was in St. John's hospital. Apparently, she had overdosed on Lorazepam (which Gloria persistently mispronounced Lorzapan), fallen asleep at the wheel and crashed into the rear fender of another car. For the next four weeks, the doctors tried to detox her from benzos and get her regulated on a potent antidepressant cocktail. They also persuaded her to submit to a course of electroshock therapy, which left Gloria even more addled than usual.

"I'm having a terrible time remembering things," she said, fiddling anxiously with the tie on her bathrobe.

"Maybe that's a blessing," I said.

The end of our relationship arrived not long afterward, for a reason as silly as Gloria herself. I hadn't heard from her for four days in a row, so I called her neighbor Merriam to do a welfare check.

"Oh, she's fine," Merriam said, "but now she has green nails."

“Green nails?” Was that a symptom of some new medical problem?

“I told her to act her age and stop trying to look like a teenager, so now she’s not speaking to me.”

“The green is from nail polish?” I asked, cracking a smile.

“Yes, and now her fingers looks like lizards.”

One hour later, I received an irate phone call from Gloria.

“You had no right to call Merriam,” she said.

“I was worried about you,” I said, caught off guard by her indignation. “What do you mean, I had no right?” I felt myself suddenly heating up like a tea kettle.

“Merriam is a meddler and I don’t want her involved in my private life,” Gloria said.

“Then why the hell did you give her my phone number a month ago when you ended up in the hospital?”

“That’s not the point.”

“It is the point. That woman seems to genuinely care about you, Gloria, and there isn’t a long line of people who do.”

“How dare you say that!”

“I’m just telling you the truth.”

“Fuck you,” Gloria said. The vulgarity sounded odd coming from her. Whatever Gloria was, she had never been vulgar before.

“Same to you,” I said and hung up on her, surprised to notice that my hands were shaking. You should be relieved, I told myself. Good riddance, I said.

Months passed. Classes ended and new ones began. I was especially fond of the one called “Politics, Schmopolitics!, which was packed with seniors needing to vent. But Gloria didn’t show up for this class, nor my two others, “The Play’s the Thing,” and “Bette Davis Eyes.”

As I was leaving for the day, I spotted Dylan, the program administrator, on his way to the men’s room.

“Hey, D, have you seen Gloria Dennis lately? I haven’t run into her since the summer.” The truth was I thought she might have died. Had I secretly believed that she couldn’t live without me?

“Oh, she’s fine,” Dylan said, “flitting around the hallways just like always. Want me to say hello for you?”

I hesitated for a moment, caught between relief and dismay. Those unforgettable white teeth flashed at me like high beams.

“No,” I said, feeling my face turn red and hot as a bad sunburn. “No, no,” I added with more force, as if, despite everything, there was still a possibility of my saying yes.

BRIAN D. COHEN



ZEPPELIN

P.V. BECK

INTIMATIONS

Fox stretched out on the plains
under clouds that move so slowly she can hear the cranking of
the interstitial machine,
a lonely sound.

Fox dreams that in fields far away birds are falling from the
sky—

electromagnetic waves warp their internal compass
leaving them to drop dead on stormy nights at the feet of tall
towers.

The stuttering pulse of the human pace grabs everything,
makes the oscillation of a deer's eye seize the wrong horizon and
forget old migratory paths,

sends geese fluttering in haphazard figures above city lights.

Lying on the sleeping earth

Fox feels the world turning round and round in rhythm to a
wilting flower.

The hour is late the birds have flown

and one by one petals drift away from their slight anchor in the
ground.

ALEXANDER WEIDMAN

GREEN RIVER, WYOMING

Beliefs open up out here like sinkholes. They swallow you. Come out here for the perception of privacy, the perception of freedom, for the open air, and next thing you know the government is bombarding your house with radio waves, changing your brain chemistry, making you want to kill your wife. The sheriff had seen that one before. The holes out here are deep, deep, deep.

He's driving out to another one tonight. A real one, that is. An actual hole, out near Green River.

He got the call about an hour ago. A couple kids fell down a deep crack in the earth, some snaking underground branch of the river, nearly impossible to get into and even less possible to get out of, which is to say, they were already looking for corpses.

The evening sky mirrors the land, dull oranges and tans, dust in the air, dirt, no clear lineation. The sheriff takes a right off the interstate. For a while it's a dirt road to nowhere. Then he comes up on the scene.

There's a local deputy, his lights rebounding off the rocks and stubborn flora. The sheriff gets out. The lawmen look at each other. *It's a shame*, they say, *a damn shame*. They shake hands. "Show me," the sheriff says. They walk carefully. The deputy mutters to himself, like he's reciting instructions on how to get there. They hear it first.

It's a low rushing. You could confuse it for a breeze. Water, way down, you hear it more in your feet. The opening is only a couple feet wide at its widest, and going down it twists and turns so much you'd think someone would have to wiggle their way through it. You'd break a leg stepping in it before you fell all the way through. "Now how in the hell?" the sheriff says.

The sheriff gets back in his car. He tells the deputy his lights aren't necessary anymore and drives to the house about a mile further down the dirt road. It's a shack more windswept and barren than the land. There's another deputy there. They greet each other similarly.

"How'd it go?" the sheriff asks.

"The boy says they were running around out there when his brother and sister fell in. At first he told his parents they'd been snatched up by wolves or something, some kind of dog. I didn't quite catch what he was describing. Couldn't tell you why he said that. Then he tells 'em they fell into the earth. Tells 'em he heard them fall all the way down. Then nothing. Took

him hours to get home. Supposedly happened around noon. They'd never seen the hole before."

The sheriff nods. More strangeness, he thinks.

"They're Native?"

"Yes, sir. Says they're Tukudeka. Sheepeater."

In the house a small man and woman, old and weathered, sit on the couch. Their expressions are flat. The other boy is leaning against the wall by a window. He's about 12, tall for his age, well-built, old Nike sweatshirt. You could tell he spent a lot of time outside. Healthy boy, strong boy. All the more strange they didn't know about the hole. The sheriff takes his hat off.

He talks to the old man. At one point the old woman brings coffee, and the sheriff says "Thank you." The boy stands by the window the whole time. The sun disappears beside him as they talk. The man explains to the sheriff how the earth shifts out here. "It's never settled, never certain. It could be that our eyes simply trick us. They never tell the whole story. But it's more than that," says the old Sheepeater. "It's a conflation of worlds. The ground giving way to the water, falling through the ground as if through the sky, the river like a snake, buried, a thing that eats, strikes even. It's all mixed up," the old man says, shaking his head. "The Gods are no longer separate. The hierarchy is confused. It's all mixed up. The boy and girl were called Alex and Maria."

The sheriff sighs. Back outside he puts his hat on. CPS is going to have to get involved. Certainly not because of how the old man thinks, though it won't help him any against a bureaucracy, but just because that's the way things work. He drives back to the hole.

The dive team is a while coming. The sky turns black in that time. The sheriff and deputy train their car lights on the hole. They watch as a diver puts on his wet suit and scuba gear. "Don't make a difference diving day or night for this one," he says. "It'd be dark down there anyway."

It's around 11pm by the time the diver starts crawling down. Over the radio they can hear him cursing. He doesn't like this one. Before he went in he stood over the hole and said, "Boy, I don't like this one." Then he's quite a while. The deputy and sheriff stand together but don't say much. The dive team monitors things. Every now and then the diver gives them an update. The stars are bright. The sheriff tries not to think; it doesn't help too much.

Then things get quiet for too long. The sheriff notices. He walks over to the team and asks what's going on. They tell him they're not sure, maybe something's wrong with the comms, but the vital monitors say everything is fine. For all they know he's still searching, just without the ability to communicate. It's not too uncommon the team says. The sheriff doesn't like it.

The deputy walks over. "What's going on?" he asks.

"Communications are down."

“I saw something,” the deputy says.

“Jesus, what?”

“I don’t know. An animal. Over there.” The deputy points into the dark.

“Just an animal?”

“Sheriff, something’s wrong. Everything just went down.”

“What do you mean?”

“No vitals, no signals, no ultrasounds. It’s like nothing’s there.”

“How?”

“We’re not sure. It’s like things have been turned off.”

Something moves outside the circle of light around the team.

“There it is,” the deputy says.

“Jesus-Lord.”

In the darkness the sheriff sees a figure moving towards them. The deputy draws his gun. The slapping of wet feet can be heard. The body stumbles into the dive team’s light. It’s the diver.

“What the...?” the deputy says.

The dive team runs over and pulls him into the van. They immediately work to get his gear off. The diver mumbles and shivers. The sheriff and deputy just watch. They wrap blankets around him. He’s incoherent. He mumbles about things, things that he saw. He mumbles about how deep the hole is, too deep, deeper than possible, about lights that shouldn’t have been down there, lights everywhere, about underground tunnels, about secret military bases, about the Denver airport. The dive team has to take him to the hospital. He doesn’t stop mumbling.

At one point in all the commotion the sheriff thinks he sees the older boy standing in the lights of the patrol cars, standing over the hole. He looks and thinks he sees the older boy looking into the hole, as if something could be down there, as if anything he could recognize could be down there, as if everything isn’t just incoherent. But then when the sheriff looks back and shouts, no one is there.

SCUDDER PARKER

FIRST LOVE

For John

You and I were busy, fifty years ago
exploring our ways to love. The road
we take today over Stannard Mountain
used to be unplowed in winter, and like love,
an adventure in any season. Its metaphor
was different for my father. Since it was

the shortest route between two places
where our family lived, it stood for good
sense and valor in the face of danger—
the danger he acknowledged. We drive it
this late September day of our renewing
friendship, creep along, slow to find our way.

Fall colors seem still muted, not yet
at peak. Today's road is "improved,"
as Vermonters say. But we know how
a few years of neglect could leave it gullied
and impassable. We have both seen small
victories won, then rapidly undone.

Spring of our junior year, we drove
from Hardwick to our bereft North Danville
farm. The house had burned; the cows were gone.
But this was our great adventure in your father's
Model A. We came the long way (Route 15,
through Danville) to stay in the surviving cottage.

The prairie road to North Danville Village
was a sea of ruts that spring (and every spring).
The high narrow wheels rode through like Jesus
walking on the water. We said we could conquer
anything. We lit a fire, hiked, cooked meals,
companions in the sagging double bed.

Your gentle investigation of my body
sweetened me. It was the first time I let
myself feel cherished. You touched the moles,
the curves, the prairies of my skin.
This, I thought, was what friendship could be;
but I pulled back when you wanted me.

The valley opens before us. So much color
waits in this Northeast Kingdom! Burke Mountain
already hinting at November purple. I say
“I’m sorry I didn’t love you the same way.”
You pause. “I’m just glad to have my friend
again.” We let our sadness fill the car.

You say you were thirty-four and still
pretending. Then you set yourself free.
Your mother taught your first lover
how to cook your favorite casserole.
She thought that he was good for you.
She always sort of knew, the way mothers do.

That summer I fell in love with Kathy Hancock
her music, mind, and slender body.
My parents asked why you and I spent
less time together. “I think he’s a little
jealous of Kathy.” Blank looks, surprise,
then panic erupted behind their eyes.

At least they didn’t punish us, but fear
took over. That courage my father honored
seemed to pause, step back, turn remote
and formal. They talked to a psychiatrist,
warned the other children, sought comfort
in some confidence that I was *normal*.

They feared the suffering they hoped I would be spared. At best the church would stand by, silently, if not, like some, ratify the lash of each day's casual cruelty—all that was left for you. I saw how belief holds hands with that more ordinary sin, relief.

I ask if you remember when we hit 100 on the road to Woodbury just out of town. Your father owned the Ford dealership; you always had a car to get around. "I don't remember that specific day, but I drove fast a lot, mostly alone," you say.

Now you just keep driving slower. Cars pull up, honk, swing out to pass. I imagine them muttering "Old leaf peepers!" Even with affection and good intent we let fifty years of silence flow between us. That's how the injury prevails. Decades harden like cement.

As we drive, we find our way to talk. You ask about my sister, what it feels like growing old. Slowly, it seems our families pile into the back seat, desperate to share with us, each other, full of their own stories, familiar, and untold.

You want to see the farm. My mother and stepfather died last summer. The cottage where we slept (still where it stood) has returned to emptiness. My brother greets us; his friend, Tom, is turning an old maple (one of those that line the road) to chunks of firewood.

His blue battered tractor's bucket is near full. You say, "Ford ... good choice." I joke that you might try to sell a new one. "No way," says Tom. "This here is my last tractor!" You say, "The new ones are great." It feels like we could pause here, past in present, and just talk all day.

We drive to Peacham, where my grandfather and his second wife (who left her partner, Marian, to take up her new life) are buried up among the massive pines. We get out. You call me as we search the lichened stones. You say what I am thinking: “Another thing it’s better not to do alone.”

GILLIAN LOOP



COSMETIC

LISA MECKEL

YOUNG RIDER

When you rode that pinto pony,
 strands of your honey hair
lifted in the breeze.

 Under a thin white shirt,
wide shoulders outlined against the sky,
 well seated, your body rose and fell
in rhythm with your pony
 as you gripped its sides with your thighs.

Riding in line behind, I held you in my gaze,
 when you turned to check on us,
I felt a flutter within.

We reached Cornell Peak, where the air cooled our sweat,
 the sheen of it still on your face,
your thin shirt clung to your chest,
 pinesap filled our breath as it oozed from the trees
in the mountain heat hovering around us.

We dismounted to sign the record book and seek
 the deep distant view of the valley below,
saw farmlands green and flaxen like quilted squares,
 a black train small as distant trailing ants
puffed across the land below.

I turned to sign the ledger encased in metal covers,
 your sunburned hand held down the page
as I wrote my name, the hairs on your arm laced with mine,
 and when I looked up you smiled at me. I blushed.

At dusk we descended deep into the valley,
 returned to the campsite,
under the watchful moon together
 we rubbed down and stabled our horses.

[PR] Spring 2019

Alone, I walked to my tent, your memory
fairly burst within me.
For many days I longed for you.

ROBIN BECIC



THREE-PART HARMONY

DEBORAH CULMER

THOUGHTS ON BRITTEN'S "WAR REQUIEM"

There are sounds that destroy words—
klaxons and alarums,
the deadly punctuation of gunfire,
the click activating an IED.

This is a truth:
Nothing rhymes with a scream.

But someone will carry beyond the berm
the awful meters, the unthinkable rhythms
that say "I did not do this for you,
or for my country. I did this
before it could be done to me."

Listen most closely
to the silence that falls between the notes,
between the words.

DEBORAH CULMER

STORM

Our eight limbs entangled
we spun a web of no words.
Above, an ocean bird
pierced its cry
through ore-grey skies.

The waves heaved
and the heavens met them low.

We watched the shadow-puppet trees
writhe outside the glass globe we made.

This kinetic day, this electric morn,
this spinning time into which
we are perpetually born.

Eight limbs curled in upon themselves.

We are web-worn.
We are tree-entranced.

The pierced sky hanging low,
we rise to spin
into another
storm.

ANNELL LOPEZ

NOOSE

Before I drive to see you for the holidays, I have to find a way to drop ten pounds. Then I need to purchase an outfit that will make those ten pounds look like twenty. I need to buy some sensible heels that won't blister up my feet. I know you'll ask me to twirl around so you can inspect my body—you always do. If I wear black, it'll be too obvious. You'll make some snide remark about how I'm dressed for your funeral. Can't have that.

I have to buy a better foundation that will cover up the cystic acne sprouting from my chin. I have to pray that I don't get any more breakouts before my visit. Otherwise, you'll say something along the lines of, "Do something about it—that's why you don't have a boyfriend. Your clock is ticking, honey." Maybe you'll ask me, in your broken English and thick Dominican accent, why I'm breaking out to such degree given that I'm in my thirties. You'll probably deduce it's my diet. Before we know it, you'll recommend the Cabbage Soup Diet or the Military Diet, or the Master Cleanse, or even a seven-day water fast. You'll smack your lips and shake your head with pity lamenting the misfortune that's befallen me. "Such a pretty face," you'll say. You'll remind me you never had problems with your skin, or your weight, or your hair, and my countless issues are obviously the genetic imprint of my late father. Bless his soul.

Before I cross the George Washington Bridge from my Palisades condo to your run-down rent-controlled apartment in the Heights, I have to fix my hair. I have to straighten it because my curls look like a bird's nest and it's probably the reason why I can't find a boyfriend. At least this is what you'll tell me, amid that dry cough that's slowly killing you.

Before I come see you, I have to think of some good news to share. I'll have to play up that trip to New Orleans or that date I went on with that nice white professor from Livingston. You'll tell me that at this point it doesn't matter what he is; you'll settle for a 'black' if that means he can get me pregnant before it's too late. Dear Lord.

I have to practice to smile and nod in agreement even if my insides are churning. Can't let my face spasm; you'll be expecting a wide grin spilling over with exuberance. If I can't pretend to be happy to see you, you'll think I want you dead. You'll think that I don't love you. Except, I do. I just want you to disappear long enough for me to breathe, but that won't happen until you're gone for good, will it?

Once I get there, I'll pity you, the real you; the one with the frail body reading El Especialito while sitting on a cheap sofa still wrapped in plastic. The one that lights candles for me and in her own misguided way, wishes me the best. I'll look at you and feel the sutures of this gaping wound opening up, begging you to come in.

YASUAKI OKAMOTO



3:30 AM

SOPHIE AMADO

LIFE LEFT AJAR

In transit, I ruminate on the summer when my friends first started procreating. Their baby boys' time stamped by doctors from the moment breath was inhaled, cries exhaled. Or perhaps they are clocked into life the moment their heads appear out of the womb that has been their nine-month vessel. How their eyes close because everything is too overwhelming and weird and not at all the way they were alive a minute prior to that time stamp taken. As I think of time stamps marking the start of life, I look out from my bus seat at urban windows. I realize that the time stamps may not mean anything to anyone except to the people who know those babies. Later on, the time stamp will mean something to the people who befriend, or love, those babies who will all too soon grow up to become men who will break hearts and collect paychecks. Likewise, while looking out from the bus at windows, I realize that if I pick one specific window to fixate on, it looks like an ordinary window to me, but through which is someone else's entire world.

During this summer, I was not procreating, but rather I was in between graduate school and my first full-time job. Waiting day-to-day for application rejections and acceptances, I felt as though I was about to walk through a door through which I could not walk back, much like my friends who are now mothers. During one particular week in August, in this interim period of my life, I said goodbye to a friend who was also someone I had dated (though we only dated for a month and during this time we did not fall in love). We were walking through designated doors, mine being that I wouldn't be able to see him as easily anymore, and he walked away from his life in the city where we both lived and through a new door to Brooklyn. I had to remind myself that he wasn't dead, dying, or moving to Norway, but he was just a 2 ½ hour plane ride away instead of a short bus journey. And as I walked away from him and he from me, I realized we had already walked through a door of no return before, meaning that I had already started seeing him less and less as a man I dated and more as a friend, not an ex, who moved away. As we said our respective farewells before his move, I realized I was also saying goodbye to who I was back when I'd first met him. I didn't want to go back to that time, but also wasn't sure I wanted to be where I was in the present: graduated with a master's degree, waiting for companies to set up interviews with me and men to court me, as antiquated as that may sound. During this summer, I was also

bartending. While I knew I wouldn't be a bartender forever, the doors that lay ahead seemed marred; the present was all I could be but content with, as one often has to render. This wasn't graduate school where you could look towards the next semester ahead of you and plan accordingly. This was life outside of an academic blanket. This was life adjusting itself with a door left ajar waiting for me to walk through it.

The bus I was riding took me to a friend's apartment, his specific window, a friend who was also in between graduate school and landing a full-time job. He is Greek, and I have Sephardic relatives who hail from Turkey. Once at a party, we started talking about Sephardic and Greek foods; our mouths watering as we both described a Mediterranean treat I call bourekas and he calls spanakopita—the same dish with two different names. So, we decided to get together and bake some. He was telling me about why Greeks and Turks hate each other, but he and I have no animosity for one another because we live in America. We have that ancestry running through our bloods, but that didn't stop us from making the same pastry with different names, a collaboration of sorts. It's then I started thinking about displacement. Like how many refugees or illegal immigrants must feel so displaced today, without a way to turn backwards or in some cases forwards. In between two doors. I thought about how I was barely Turkish, but the only reason there is some Turkish blood in me is because my Jewish relatives were displaced out of Spain (which has its own version of this pastry called an empanada) during the Spanish Inquisition and had to flee to Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey. How unnecessary displacement is because everyone alive has the common denominator of being a human being, yet we've put up inequality blocks based on race, prejudices, and wealth.

Then the timer went off, the time stamp that announced that our bourekas-spanakopita-empnadadas were ready, and there we were, human beings with the same molded bodies with different bloods and different stamps that mark our own lives eating a Mediterranean delight, both with doors we would soon have to confront. How displaced and jarring it felt being between those two places, but how different our doors that lay ahead are from other people, like immigrants or mothers. How many times do we walk through doors of no return? And how many people are walking through those ports, marking first breaths or signing visas, without any of our notice because we are looking at our own potential paths taking up space in the mind? How having these paths on our minds doesn't make us selfish necessarily, but it does take up our focus. And if everyone else in the world is focused on their own doors, can we ever unlock doors for those who need keys?

ALLEN C. JONES

A DISTANT SOLAR SYSTEM CALLED THE HEART

In 1979, as Pluto slips inside Neptune's orbit,
a boy brings a surprise for his first teacher.
A girl is jealous. This registers on no instrument.

Driving up the mountain, the pumps failing
on Three Mile Island, the boy eyes the sun,
certain he is superhuman. The girl laughs.

While 600,000 tons of oil leak into the Gulf,
a generation steps into the classroom. As the Klan
kills protesters in North Carolina, the girl races

ahead, and just as Sony invents the Walkman,
she betrays his secret: he brought flowers. Ali
finally retires as the boy pulls the girl's braid.

The teacher asks, Why are you so angry?
The boy wants to explain the vertigo of hope,
its massive gravity, how he's seen the blue heat

of a star collapse, his best friend consumed.
But already he knows the imagination is silly,
only girls cry, and flowers are not important.

He believes that planet orbits never change.
The outside world agrees, burying radiation,
ignoring its spills, calling Ali out of retirement.

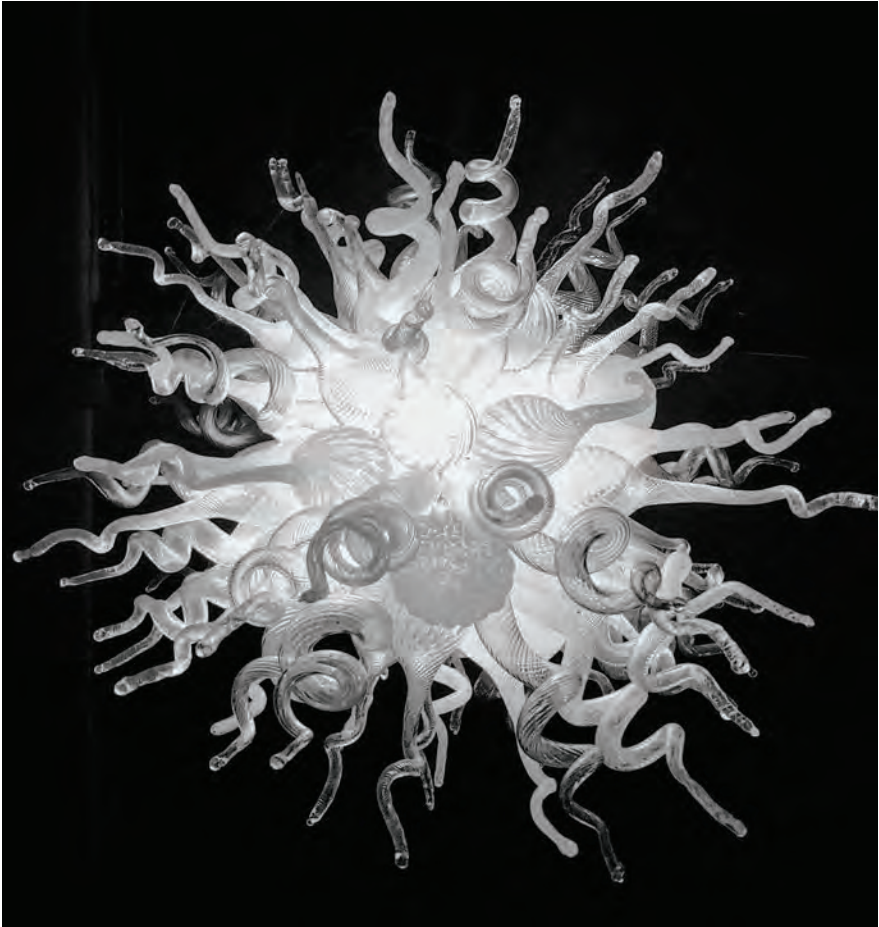
Decades pass. The boy sees the girl at a funeral.
They greet like strangers, mention distant news.
A man dragging another to death behind a truck.

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Unfathomable that we have learned nothing.
The boy holds out slender nameless hands
and wants to weep, amazed at the flowers

still blooming there. The sun is dangerously
bright. Pluto moves past Neptune.
It will not return until long after his death.

SEAN JOHNSON



THE EXPANSION OF LIGHT

SIMON LOWE

OUR BABIES

We are in the South of France with our babies. Our babies cannot talk but find alternative ways to disrupt us. They scupper our plans, our fun, our lucidity. They are expert at scuppering. I, for example, would like to sit by the pool and drink a beer. Ideally, I would do this alone but equally I would not mind if one of our friends joined me. So long as there is an agreed embargo on baby talk. But I cannot sit by the pool and drink beer. Our babies will not let me. They demand our attention, consume every aspect of our diminished selves. None of us mind this much at home, in our baby-orientated houses. We expect it at home, we are prepared. But in balmy climes, in a villa in the South of France? It's a hard pill to swallow. It's a pill shaped like a golf ball. We feel our babies have crossed a line. We understand they do not know what it means to holiday in the South of France, to use up our hard-earned money on the misplaced hope of sunshine and joy. But still. Our babies have disappointed us. They have escorted us to the edge of sanity, yanking our hair and defecating along the way.

I feel especially bad for Joseph and his wife. They were never convinced about babies in the first place. They waited a long time. They drank every last drop of freedom before choosing to join us. They planned to try for three consecutive months and if nothing happened, so be it, no big deal. But something did happen. And now they are with us, wondering if it was in fact a successful roll of the dice. I must admit, their baby is worse than most. Or, to be fair, he is the worst of our babies. Ordinarily I enjoy hearing Joseph relay his difficulties because it suggests my baby, and in turn my life, is not so bad after all. But after sharing the experience of Joseph's baby, I regret their poor luck. I will be more sympathetic from now on, less gleeful that's for sure. I do not believe Joseph will offer his baby up for adoption or anything like that but he admits he would like to travel back in time, when they were weighing up their options, and reverse the decision. He genuinely wonders, with this baby of his, if he can ever be happy again.

I suggest we work as couples, babysitting each other's children, freeing up periods of time to relax in ways similar to those in the good old days. There is little enthusiasm for my idea. I retreat to the bedroom

and sulk. Our baby is asleep in our bed. This is the most pleasant of surprises. I regard it as a rare opportunity, a unit of time to capitalize. I rush to find trunks and a towel. I smile when I hear the toppling, chiming cries downstairs knowing I will not be required to perform any shushing or cradling for at least an hour. My little darling is at rest. Surely ours is the best of all our babies. I grab a beer from the laundry room and, in my excitement, nearly walk into a glass panel on my way to the pool. My wife appears holding two babies, one in each arm. There is a third in a buggy, a fourth rolling stupidly on a mat by her feet. I ask where the others are. My wife tells me they are out, at a nearby bar. We are babysitting, as per my suggestion. She hands me a baby and shrugs. I can tell from its forceful squirming I am in charge of Joseph's baby. The worst of all our babies.

WILLIAM DORESKI

DYNAMITE ALWAYS BRIGHTENS
A DUMBFOUNDED WINTER DAY

On the road to the marsh I find
a stick of dynamite, blasting
cap attached. It must have fallen
off a truck. I toss the stick
into a snowbank, retreat
two hundred yards, trigger it
with telepathy. The blast
spews a world-class snow-cloud.

As if a page of music unfurled
in a single huge chord, the noise
astonishes the innocent ear,
leaving a memory of bells.
Nearby trees shrug off their rime
like elegant women undressing.
In a yard a quarter mile away
a pack of retrievers goes crazy.

How did I will such omniscience?
A truck dawdles in spew of fumes
and pulls up beside me, driver
grinning with stainless aplomb.
With honest beer-breath he reports
that the crew heard the blast and cheered.
Dynamite always brightens
a dumbfounded winter day.

The truck maunders on, spewing
a beer can or two. How casual
can explosions be? The ice
on the marsh may have rippled
in sympathy. Maybe an owl
stirred in sleep. Already the dogs
down the road have finished barking
and returned to playing in snow.

TRES ROEMER



SMOLDER

ELIZABETH CHILDS

ARCHIMEDES

She loves them, she does, but the magic wears thin after a while. In the heat of it, she often forgets that moment when her babies opened their eyes, those crinkling sounds when life flowed in. Because she does so much, she gives so much! And no one listens.

Take today. She told them over and over! And what did they do, the second she left, after she sat and babied them for weeks and fed them bits of food out of the palm of her hand and cleaned up their pulpy white droppings, as soon as she left—

because she had to

because the Owl made her

because she hadn't been in the Secret Garden all summer

and he said, Alice, you must go outside, Alice—

what did they do?

They opened the window.

She knows what they did. She can picture it—them gripping and pulling with their pointy paper beaks and flapping their college-ruled wings, and all tens or hundreds of them must have beat and chirped at the glass until the window slid up, and that outside air rushed in.

But it wasn't what they wanted, was it? That air isn't nice. It's muggy and wet and hot, and it sticks in your hair, and it fills the deep wrinkles in your skin, and, well, they know it now. Just look at them. Their white edges that she folded so crisp and straight are swollen and soft with humidity. She had spent hours pulling long pieces of Red Heart Soft Baby Steps yarn from the blanket she knitted years ago until only the light blue 'A' remained, and the rest of it was unraveled. She had hung them up along the wall and kept the best ones, only the very most perfect paper birds. Then they go and ruin it all.

How long was she gone? Ten minutes? Before it started pouring and the Owl wiped rain off his big round glasses and pulled his long coat around him like wings and said, All right, everybody inside, back to your rooms. He flapped at the sadder ones who shuffled along whispering to themselves. Gertie made a run for it out the garden gate, toward the Enchanted Forest, but he caught her with his talon-like fingers and said, No, no, this way, honey. The nurses collected their soggy shoes on the way in and wiped up the tile in the hallway, and they said, Alice, your room is upstairs, sweetie, like they thought she had forgotten again.

Then she comes back and sees rain soaking the windowsill, and she has to slam the window shut and sop up the huge mess those birds made. She told them that morning, Okay, you can get off your yarn during the day. I trust you. But I want everybody back in your spots at night time. Too much freedom, obviously.

She would take it all back if she could, but it's not that easy, is it, when you're in charge of four hundred and sixty-three birds, and is it her fault that when she kissed the tops of their heads that they opened their eyes and blinked at her? Oh yes, only paper, but she had awakened them. They coo and tilt their heads to stare at her, and now she's responsible.

Alice thought before that her breath might be magic, but the birds confirmed it. The first time it happened she was lying on her stomach with the top of her head pressed against the cold gravestone, and she was breathing on the grass and the flowers and on that tiny stuffed owl that her baby loved so much, the one that had been sitting there alone in the rain and the sun and the snow watching over him for all those years, and she thought, for a second—

that the leaves were a little greener—

and the roses were a bit less shriveled—

and the mildewed owl stretched its wings and said to her—

Archie is perfect now. It didn't hurt too much.

Alice said, It wasn't my fault! It wasn't my fault!

The owl said, Maybe not. But I will watch over him anyway.

Alice said, I tried. I did! I kissed him so many times!

The owl said, Don't you know? Only Disney princes can awaken things that way.

She ran her fingers along the name and the dates, and when she turned back, the owl was still and the grass was dead and the flowers smelled of death, and she thought she had imagined it. But now she knows for sure.

She must be careful what she kisses.

Now there are so many to tend to, and she wants to stop making them, but there is just something about a new bird stirring in the palm of her hand. So exhilarating, so fulfilling to create life!

One time she made one and kissed it, and it yawned and stretched its wings before she realized one leg was too short, and she had to crush it up into a ball and throw it away, and it screamed as its bones crunched in her hands, and oh, that was terrible, terrible. She learned not to do things in that order.

Do they keep her awake at night? Yes. Even though she tells them to be quiet (and bless their hearts they do try—they don't chirp or sing or anything), she can still hear birds shuffling and ruffling their feathers all night long. Sometimes she wants to just throw them all outside and see how

they like it in the wild, and then maybe they'd be grateful and not so damn noisy and messy all the time.

But she loves them, she does, she has to admit it. Sometimes they curl up to nest in her graying hair, and in the mirror, they look like big bugs caught in a spider's web. It makes her laugh because Cinderella's animals helped fix her hair and made her a dress, but these birds never do that for her. But when their little claws grip her index finger and they whisper their songs in her ears, her heart swells, and she remembers what it is like to love something. She knows all of their names—Snow White, and Sweetie, and Sweetie 2, and Maude, and all the rest. She knows that Aurora and Featherbrain don't get along and she tries to keep them separated, but sometimes she wakes up and their strings are tangled up together again. She says, Stop it, both of you. Do you need to go to time out? Just nobody touch each other.

And when they are all driving her crazy, she is glad for Archimedes, because he is perfect. She feels terrible for him, she does. She had wanted a baby bird, and so she made him tiny—so very tiny!—but now everybody picks on him and pecks at him and won't let him play. She gave him a good name to make up for it, but none of the birds seem to care about that.

No people care about that, either. Once she snuck him out of her room and showed Gertie at lunch, but Gertie only said, God told me to save my corn kernels in my vagina. He needs them to repopulate the earth. Alice covered Archimedes' ears and said, Don't say 'vagina' around the baby!

When the Owl came by her room with the magic beans and the little cup of potion, she asked him, Do you think Archimedes is a good name?

He said, I understand why you like it so much.

Alice said, But is it a magical name? Will it protect him?

The Owl scratched his chin and said, Do you mean Archimedes, like Merlin's owl in that Disney movie? I suppose he's kind of magical. He's an animal that can talk. But tell me—who does this name need to protect, Alice? You are safe here.

Alice said, You don't understand. You don't understand anything! And she hid Archimedes under her covers so the Owl wouldn't see him.

The Owl said, This is a lot of birds, Alice. And she spat and said, I can watch over them myself, thank you very much.

One time she woke up while it was still dark and those other birds had taken him off his string, and they were breaking him, breaking him with their beaks and their claws and their wings and things, and she yelled, Stop! Stop it now! That's not nice! She snatched him away and smoothed out the wrinkles they had made on his belly, and he looked, oh, just perfect again.

Poor Archimedes!—she said it loud enough that all the other birds heard—

You can sleep in my bed with me.

She left the window half open that night and let the wet, icy wind blow through the room, and the birds twisted and shivered on their yarns, and in the morning their wings were frozen stiff. It was days before they could fly again. They learned their lesson. She was sure of it.

But he is still lonely, and he cries on her shoulder and nuzzles the folds in her neck every night, and she says, It's okay. It's okay, baby. You're my very favorite, you know. Don't mind those mean old birdies. She draws little red hearts on his wings and colors a rainbow on his tail, and that makes him smile. But he never seems to grow, even when she gives him the best of the food and puts him in front of the window so he can get enough light.

She does her best, but sometimes she looks around at their cramped living quarters, paper feathers shed everywhere, and wonders, are they happy, here with her? Someone told her once to let go of the things she loved, but is that really responsible? They can't eat nature, of course. They are on a very strict diet, and at breakfast she has to fill the pockets of her robe with extra scoops of oatmeal and scrambled eggs until they hang heavy around her knees. Nobody tries to stop her. She sneaks back to her room every morning to feed them. She does it because she loves them, she does. If they ever got outside, well, one big rainstorm and—mercy! That would be it for them.

That's why she gave them just one simple rule: Don't open the window! And now look what they did, Archimedes. Now someone is missing! Who is it? Davey? No, no, he's over in the plant. Pinocchio? Maybe. Wait, no. Pinocchio is dead. Flew into the wall a few days ago, poor thing. She searches and counts and names everybody—Here Millicent, Here Janine, Here Juicebox. They all look at her and then step a little bit away, but why? Why are they worried? It's okay, sweeties. The window's closed. Mommy's here for you. But they still won't fly to her, and they shuffle across the windowsill and huddle in corners when she comes near. Why are you afraid, lovelies? What happened? Even Archimedes, why are you hiding, baby? Come out from under there. What did they—

No. No! No no no no no no no.

She pulls back her covers, where a red heart on a wing is peeking out, and there's just one wing, and her baby is nowhere.

She knows in an instant and her heart rips, but she calls for him anyway. Archimedes! Archimedes, where are you, honey? She throws things aside, searching, searching, and birds fly out of the way. She doesn't need to look, though, not really. The rain is done and she peers out the window, three stories down, and a bit of rainbow paper lies crumpled and drowned in the dirt.

She grabs a string of birds and says, He's there. Look at him! There he is. She makes them look, and she cries, Whose fault is it, who did it, you tell me you stupid birds, or I swear, I swear, I'll kill you all.

They don't say anything. Her hand shakes and she drops the string and those birds shuffle sideways toward the door. The rest click their talons and climb nervously back to their spots on the yarn, and they turn their eyes away from her and her brain is on fire! She hates them. She hates them all! They take up all the room and eat too much and shit everywhere, and she creates them and pets them and names them and feeds them, and how do they repay her? How do they thank her? What do they do?

Her hands close around the nearest one, and she rips and rips and screams, and birds flap in terror and caw and the air is full of musty feathers as she tears them all apart. She does not stop, does not stop, and she stomps them and grinds them and breaks them and screams,

He was just a baby! He was just my baby! How could you? How could you? What did you do?

She does not stop until the room is quiet with no chirping and no breathing and only beaks and feet and heads on the floor and on the bed and under her fingernails and everywhere, everywhere. In the mirror, her cheeks and hands are bright red with papercuts. There are bits of birds stuck in her hair, and she picks them out, and like ashes, they fall and settle softly around her feet.

And she thinks of him, his tiny body ruined, and she runs down the hall, past the orderlies and the nurses, and will they let her out by herself? She's not supposed to be outside by herself but the Owl only shakes his head and puts up a hand and says, Let her go. So they don't stop her and she runs, runs, mud on her legs and thistles in her feet, and she scoops him up and wipes away the dirt from his eyes. He is wet and limp, and the rainbow on his tail is blurred and seeps to the edges, but she brings him close to her ear and he is alive! He is breathing, but just a bit, and she clutches him to her chest and kisses his soggy face.

The air in her room is still and stuffy. She tiptoes among the broken bodies on the floor. She lays Archimedes on her pillow and then grabs the dead birds in a hundred rough handfuls and lets them fly out the window and says, See, baby, they won't hurt you again. All gone. Just you and me now. All better, all better, all over, sweetheart.

She lays her head next to him and watches his chest rise and fall, and he opens an eye and tries to chirp and she says, Shh, shh, just rest.

But she can't help but see that he is broken. He's stained and smashed, and will he ever be the same again? He does not look like her baby, not anymore. She only keeps the very most perfect paper birds. And he's hurting, he's in horrible pain, she can tell. His legs are crushed, one wing torn off, his

beak is missing, and his head doesn't sit quite right anymore. She cries and says, I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm so, so sorry. It will be quick, I promise. It will not hurt too much. He understands, she knows he does. She holds him in her cupped hands, and he feels stronger and drier already, but she has to do it now. She's done it before, and it was terrible, terrible, but it was for the best. She kisses him and covers his head with her hand so he won't see her when it happens, and she won't see him, and he flutters and quivers under her palm. She brings her hands to her chest, closes her eyes, and in three, two, one, she will do it.

Three.

Two.

One.

She holds her breath. But he chirps and his wings tickle, and she can feel his tiny feet tapping, and she can't, she just can't. She opens her hands, and he rubs his head against her thumb. And look, her room is empty! There are no other birds here, and no owls anywhere, no one will know! And maybe she likes him better this way anyway, and those smudges all over him do look like some little boy's finger painting, don't they a little? You can't throw those away, of course, and if anybody comes to check, he's so small, she can hide him quick and no one will ever know she kept him like this.

And Alice thinks the Owl might give her some tape, and maybe a tongue depressor, if she combs her hair and asks very nicely, and then she can heal that wing. She looks around, and she finds some other bird's beak that she missed and she thinks it's a little big, but it will fit him okay. She will share her magic beans and her potions with him, and they will both be so happy, all fixed, all better.

She crawls into bed, and Archimedes sleeps with her. She whispers his name over and over, like a spell—Archimedes, Archimedes. She lays him across her chest and leaves the window open a crack so the breeze can dry his wings during the night, and he nuzzles his head into her neck, and his feathers tickle and wake her up, oh, so many times, but she loves him, she loves him, she has to admit it.

ROBIN SCOFIELD

HILL COUNTRY BLUES

On a cloudy day, the sunlight has dripped
into the yellow gaillardia and lemon mint.
Wind ruffles the dying live oaks
this autumn, a season of slow death,
as fallen branches morph into serpents.
My father there on the sad heights
of his old age, ravaged body and soul
by Lewy body dementia: white globs
in his brain matter rob him of his dignity.
It is November, the heat is gone, but
the sumac and maple have not yet turned,
and I don't know that he will
last through the soft winter.
Sun slants through clouds.
Then, they cover the sky again.
Such a ray this morning,
that it is not dark, only cloudy.
Brown-eyed Susans nod in the wind,
how short is their season,
combining the light and the dark?

CONTRIBUTORS

SOPHIE AMADO just graduated with her MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing at Columbia College, Chicago, where she taught undergraduate writing and rhetoric. In 2014, she received a Fulbright grant to Madrid, Spain to teach English to high school students. She also holds a BA in English and Spanish from the University of Iowa.

ROBIN BECIC has a BFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. She is currently exploring watercolor and acrylic on YUPO paper. She is enthralled by the effects of paint on the YUPO surface. In letting go of pictorial logic and local color, she has the freedom to develop her subjects. Initially, she gives up some control and lays paint down on the surface. Working this way allows the water media to show its personality on the surface, color, and texture. She has her own idiosyncratic approach to the work. Artmaking becomes the dialogue between herself and the viewer in this creative journey.

P. V. BECK'S poem "Intimations" is from "Fox Went Out," a cycle of poems on the metaphors of seasons, the loss of wild places, and the unspooling of patterns in nature. Her essays on the fool, ritual clowning, language, and trout have been published by *Parabola*, *North Atlantic Press*, and *Seal Press*. She is the author of *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, first-person readings from North American indigenous groups; *Oremos, Oremos: New Mexican Midwinter Masquerades*; and the YA novel *Sweet Turnaround J*. She lives in the mountains of northern New Mexico, where she is also a musician, artist, monitors the effects of climate change on migrating birds, and works on habitat restoration in her watershed.

MATTEO BONA was born in Asti (Piedmont, Italy). He studied at the Public Scientific Lyceum Francesco Vercelli. He is currently studying foreign languages and modern literatures at the Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale. He published his first poetry collection, *Oltre la Poesia—Anche la creazione muore* in 2015 and *Il senso del nulla* (English, *Nothingness Sense*) in January 2018. In July 2018, he published *Preludi* (Montag Editore), a collection of stories dealing with the problems in contemporary existentialism. At the end of November 2018, he published *Le feritoie d'alabastro* (Ofelia Editrice). Also, in 2018, he published a graphic project for *Cold Mountain Review* called "Die Vernichtung" and won the Appalachian State University Readers' Choice Award for this project.

ELIZABETH CHILDS is an emerging writer and an Anselm Society member artist. Her work will be published for the first time in *Ponder Review*. She was a finalist for the Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards and studied English Literature at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. She lives in Colorado with her husband and two small children where she enjoys reading, writing, yoga, good food, complaining about the trials of a writer's life, and reminiscing about a childhood spent in the mountains. Visit her author website at elizabeth-childs.com.

DANIEL CIOCHINA was born in Portland, Oregon as the first generation of his family to be born in the US. After exploring South America, Europe, and the States, and surveying the characteristics of society, human interaction, objects, and the symbolism they share, he conceptually weaves these experiences into his pieces and creates contexts for different relationships between personal and physical space and object function, all while playing on the reflexive reactions we have learned as moments for reflection and altered perspective. So far, his work has been published in *Sheepshead Review* and Canada's *NUNUM* literary journal, which feature his sculptures and photography. Today, he continues to work in his studio in Oregon, preparing for his exhibit "Project Object."

BRIAN D. COHEN is a printmaker, painter, educator, and writer living and working in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. He founded Bridge Press to further the association and integration of visual image, original text, and book structure. His books and prints have been shown in over 40 individual exhibitions, including a retrospective at the Fresno Art Museum; have been exhibited in over 200 group shows; and are held by major private and public collections. He was first-place winner of international print competitions in San Diego, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. His essays on the arts and education have appeared in *Art in Print*, *HuffPost*, and TED Weekends.

DEBORAH CULMER is a poet and teacher by the seaside in Santa Cruz, California. She studied poetry with John Clellon Holmes and James Whitehead years ago at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. As life happened, she wandered in and out of her calling but has come back to it this past decade. She is involved with the Santa Cruz Poetry Project, teaching poetry to women and men incarcerated in county jail facilities. She is also a musician, a glass artist, and a dabbler in the visual arts. She is happy to be continually submitting to acceptance and rejection—as in life, so in poetry.

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WILLIAM DORESKEI has published three critical studies and several collections of poetry. His poetry, essays, reviews, and fiction have appeared in various journals. He has taught writing and literature at Emerson, Goddard, Boston University, and Keene State College. His new poetry collection is *A Black River, A Dark Fall*.

ANN S. EPSTEIN writes novels, short stories, and memoir. Her novels are *On the Shore*, *Tazia and Gemma*, and *A Brain. A Heart. The Nerve*. Her other work is published in *Sewanee Review* (winner, Walter Sullivan Prize), *PRISM International*, *Ascent*, *The Long Story*, *Saranac Review*, *The Madison Review*, *Passages North*, *Summerset Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *The Cop-perfield Review*, and other journals. Her website is: <https://www.asewovenwords.com>.

BRANDON FRENCH is the only daughter of an opera singer and a Spanish dancer, born in Chicago sometime after The Great Fire of 1871. She has been (variously) assistant editor of *Modern Teen Magazine*, a topless Pink Pussycat cocktail waitress, an assistant professor of English at Yale, a published film scholar, a playwright and screenwriter, the Director of Development at Columbia Pictures Television, an award-winning advertising copywriter and Creative Director, a psychoanalyst in private practice, and a mother. Sixty-seven of her stories have been accepted for publication by literary journals and anthologies, and she's been nominated twice for a Pushcart. She was an award winner in the 2015 Chicago Tribune Nelson Algren Short Story Contest, and her short story collection, *If One of Us Should Die, I'll Move to Paris*, was just accepted for publication in 2019.

ROBIN EISNER is passionate about connecting the sciences and the arts. For 25 years, as an award-winning health and science writer at ABC News, Newhouse newspapers, and Columbia University Health Sciences—among other venues—she covered complex medical news, always with the humanity of patients in mind. She also highlighted, in mostly understandable language, how researchers expand knowledge of our world. Today, as an artist, she tries to explore personal and objective realities using visual methods. Born in New York City, she now lives in North Carolina with her husband, a short story writer.

ALAN Girling writes poetry mainly, sometimes fiction and non-fiction, and sometimes plays. Lately, he's had trouble distinguishing one from the other. His work has been seen in journals and anthologies, heard on the radio, at live readings, and even viewed in shop windows. Such venues include Blynkt, Panoply, Hobart, *The MacGuffin*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *FreeFall*, *Galleon*, Blue Skies, and CBC Radio among others. He is happy to have had poems place in four local poetry contests and a play produced for the Walking Fish Festival in Vancouver, B.C.

SARAH EBBA HANSEN is a poet and nonfiction writer from Virginia. She received her BA in creative writing from the University of Mary Washington where she was awarded the Academy of American Poets 2016 College Poetry Prize. Hansen is currently an MFA candidate studying creative writing at Virginia Tech.

PHILLIP HURST currently lives and writes in Oregon. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Cimarron Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *Green Briar Review*, and he won the 2012 Frank Waters Fiction Prize. Over the years, he's worked as a bartender and teacher throughout the American West.

SEAN JOHNSON was born in Houston, Texas, and attended the University of Houston where she majored in education and minored in art. Although she has always been a writer, her interest in the visual arts began in 2014. Since that time, she has been a featured live painter, exhibition artist, and vendor at Block Market, Black Girl Excellence, Survivor Seminar, Midtown Arts Center, and a host of other events. Her paintings have been published in *The Hunger*, *Homology Lit*, and *Boston Accent Lit*. She has recently taken up photography at the urging of her niece and loves making a moment last forever.

ALLEN C. JONES was born in a little white house just off Highway 12. He was raised in a community based on the teachings of Gurdjieff. "A Distant Solar System Called the Heart" belongs to a series detailing that community and its eventual unraveling. He lives in Norway. He always wonders how a single person can live so many lives. He ponders the possibility of return. His work appears in *Fiction Southeast*, *Razor Literary Magazine*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *(b) OINK*, *Slipstream*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Pilgrimage Magazine*.

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MACY D. JONES is a theatre scholar/practitioner living in Baton Rouge, LA. She holds Ph.D. in Theatre History from Louisiana State

University. Her original works have been produced for LSU's 24 Hour New Play Festival and the Mid-America Theatre Conference Playwright Symposium. Her dramaturgical works include the world premiere of *Femi Euba's Dionysus of the Holocaust* and *Swine Palace's* regional premiere of *Clybourne Park*. She serves as the Artistic Vice President for the Red Magnolia Theatre Company.

ALIE KLOEFKORN grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and lives, works, and writes in Boston, Massachusetts. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Paper Napkin*, *The Penn Review*, *Into the Void*, and other publications. She is currently nursing obsessions with Billie Eilish and Tommy Pico.

ANNELL LOPEZ is a short fiction writer. Her work has been featured at the NYU Spring and Fall Literary Readings and WRBH Reading Radio. She has participated in the Words & Music Writing Conference in New Orleans and is an alumna of the Cagibi Literary Hudson Valley Writing Retreat. Her fiction has appeared in *Crack The Spine* and is forthcoming in *Abstract Magazine*. In her free time, Lopez tours independent bookstores across the United States and documents her bookish adventures on Instagram.

GILLIAN LOOP began her education as an art major, but a naïve fear of poverty led to a career in fashion, comprised not only of form and construction but also of logo, textile, and storyboard design. In the wake of NAFTA's effect on the garment trade, Loop established a career in technology, initially in sales and eventually as a project manager. She continued to create art and was awarded ribbons in local fairs. However, 2018 marked the start of her art career. Textile design informs her work, which utilizes printed elements derived from labels, packaging, and magazines to create typically irreverent but sometimes earnest artwork. A dual perspective, one detailed and the other a more generalized image or theme, is consistently evident.

SIMON LOWE is a British writer and the author of the novel *Friday Morning with Sun Saluki*. His stories have appeared in *Storgy*, *Firewords*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Visible Ink* and elsewhere. He lives in Hertford, UK.

MICHELLE MCMILLAN-HOLIFIELD is a recent Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Her work has been included or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Stirring*, *The Collagist*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Windhover*, among others. She hopes you one day find her poetry tacked to a tree somewhere in the Alaskan wild.

DIANE MCTIGUE is a mother of three, and currently living in the Philly suburbs. She is a former (and probable future) lawyer. She is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Boston University School of Law. Diane enjoys writing as a way to tame random-motion thoughts, and in recent years has published small pieces in a print book, a magazine, and online at *Chaleur Magazine* and *Wanderlust Journal*. Her best moments are spent with her husband of 27 years, family and friends, and their two standard poodles at the 21st Street beach in Surf City, New Jersey.

LISA MECKEL'S poetry has been published in *Rattle*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *Mirboo North Times*, *Pennsylvania English*, and many other journals. She is a three-time winner of the poetry prize at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and was a presenter for *The Big Read* honoring Robinson Jeffers. Meckel is currently assembling a collection of her poems for publication.

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YASUAKI OKAMOTO was born in Japan and has lived in England, Spain, and Canada before settling in New York. Okamoto has won the Yasuo Kuniyoshi Award for Printmaking 2018, the Edward G. McDowell Travel Grant 2014, the Xavier Gonzalez and Ethel Edwards Travel Grant 2013, the Lawrence Littman Scholarship 2012, the Mary Birmingham Award 2010, and more. He has exhibited work at the Affordable Art Fair NYC, the National Academy Museum, the Corey Helford Gallery, Artexpo New York, Spectrum Miami, the Agora Gallery, the Art Revolution Taipei, etc. His work has appeared in magazines, newspapers, and public and private collections, most notably the Sylvia Wald and Po Kim Art Gallery New York, the Williamsburg Art Historical Center, and more.

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

RICHARD KING PERKINS II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, Illinois, with his wife, Vickie, and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart, Best of the Net, and Best of the Web nominee whose work has appeared in more than 1,500 publications.

TRES ROEMER, born in Bryan, Texas, is a New York-based artist and graphic designer. He received his BFA in communications from SUNY Purchase, an AOS in graphic design from Pratt Institute, and has participated in residency programs at the Rhode Island School of Design and the School of Visual Arts. He has exhibited his work in solo and group shows at Dayton Contemporary in Dayton, Ohio; the Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park in Hamilton, Ohio; the School of Visual Arts and the Bowery Gallery, both in New York; Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York; and Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona.

ROBIN SCOFIELD is the author of *Flow*, which was named Southwest Book of the Year by the Border Regional Library Association, *Sunflower Cantos*, as well as the chapbook *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *The Texas Observer*, *Theology Today*, *ONTHEBUS*, *The 2River View*, *Pilgrimage Magazine*, *Cimarron Review*, and *The Warwick Review*. She has poems appearing in *West Texas Literary Review*, *Phantom Drift*, and *The Ocotillo Review*. She writes with the Tumblewords project and lives in El Paso, Texas, with her husband and Belgian Shepherd dog, Winston.

SUZANNAH SCHRECKHISE is a 2D and sculpture artist. She holds a BA in art from the University of the Ozarks and was a 2018 Artist INC fellow. In the last year, her art has appeared in over 60 galleries, including shows at the Woman Made Gallery in Chicago, the Topanga Canyon Gallery near Los Angeles, and the Ceres Gallery in New York. She has shown her work in several other national and state exhibition venues, and she received the Best Sculpture Award for her piece “Falling to Pieces” in the 2018 Artists of Northwest Arkansas exhibition. Her work is also featured in the international juried art magazine *Studio Visit*. Schreckhise is currently co-publisher for the art magazine *The Idle Class*.

ALEXANDER WEIDMAN is 24 years old and lives in West Virginia where he works at a cooperative. He likes to run and has work forthcoming in *Red Earth Review* and *Soft Cartel*.

KATHLEEN WILLIAMSON won the runner-up prize in the SLAB Elizabeth R. Curry Poetry Contest and was a winner in the Poetry in the Pavement project in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Her work has been published in *Newtown Literary*, *The Healing Muse*, *Inkwell*, and *The Westchester Review*. She serves on the board of Saw Mill River Audubon and leads its Nature Book Club. She is a founder of Films on Purpose, where she curates a film series about social issues. She takes classes at the Writers Studio and Hudson Valley Writers Center and lives in Pleasantville, New York.

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LANDA WO is a poet from Angola, Cabinda, and France. His work has previously appeared in *Cultura*, *Cyphers*, *Nashville Review*, *Nebo: A Literary Journal*, *Mojave River Review*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Pomona Valley Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Santa Ana River Review*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, *Star 82 Review*, *The Penny Dreadful*, and *The Cape Rock*, among other publications. Selected by Roddy Doyle as the winner of the 2007 Metro Eireann writing competition, Landa wo has won a number of awards, including the Eist poetry competition and the Féile Filíochta international poetry competition in Ireland.

EDYTTA ANNA WOJNAR emigrated from Poland and now lives with her husband in northern New Jersey. She is currently pursuing an MFA at William Paterson University. Her poems have appeared in *Paterson Literary Review*, *Narrative Northeast*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Adanna*, and other journals. She is the author of the chapbooks *Stories Her Hands Tell* (2013) and *Here and There* (2014), both published by Finishing Line Press.