PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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Cover Art by Claire Lawrence • "Rays Over the Atchafalaya Swamp"

A Note to Readers

As the submission deadline comes to a close, our inboxes fill with submissions from authors, artists, photographers, and new media creators not only from across the country but also from all over the world. There is an initial dread that comes with the realization that our small, yet dedicated group of editors must come together and agree upon which pieces will be selected to be featured in the pages of Ponder Review. This is no small task as there are so many entries that are deserving to be seen and read by lovers of spellbinding stories everywhere. Unfortunately, like all literary journals we can only make room for a handful of pieces for this issue.

As we get to work selecting the pieces that will grace our humble pages, we grasp what an honor it is to be tasked with such a difficult job, because we see first-hand the common thread that binds us. We bear witness to thoughtful commentaries about pain, love, loss, and joy, coming to us from people separated by thousands of miles, that you would assume share very little in common.

In the pages of this issue, you will come across stories about people desperately seeking to connect. You will read about the existential crisis and profound alienation that comes with thinking about ending your own life, as well as the one that comes with discovering the body of a loved one who has already done so. Some pieces will be odd, if not downright absurd. Some will be drenched in melancholy, while others will ignite the fighting spirit. As the culture wars rage on and people are tagged with being a member of one tribe or another, it may be difficult to find any common threads that bind us, but we hope as you ponder this issue with us that you will discover that we are all linked, no matter how much distance is between us, or what god you pray to, where on the economic ladder you fall, or what sexual orientation you are. It is our hope that this issue of Ponder Review reminds you, as it did us, what it is that makes us all human.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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SYLVIA JONES

STRAIGHT PEOPLE ARE THE REASON I CAN'T READ

social cues
their subterfuge, a brash impetus
crass, shrewd, and masked

in scientific ridiculousness
a choir of mouths
swiveling in unison like ghetto pterodactyls—singing

at me in a kamikaze tenor
down a dig site
split into laser like seconds

riffing off of throwbacks
from the 1980s
before I was alive

back when
AIDS just meant
"gay cancer"

TALYA TATE BOERNER

LAST CALL AT THE DAIRY FREEZE

Characters:

Lillian: Waitress | 19-year-old | smart yet somewhat directionless.

Martin: Diner | middle-aged | outspoken & witty | handsome in his day.

Brenda: Diner | middle-aged | irreverent | married to Martin.

Sue Anne: Diner | middle-aged | thoughtful | childhood friend to Martin and Brenda.

Setting: Late on a summer night at the Dairy Freeze in Hillsboro, Texas.

At Rise: Waitress wipes down counter and prepares to close. The bell above the door makes a tinkling sound as three customers, all wearing funeral garb, enter.

LILLIAN: Welcome to Dairy Freeze. Is this for here or to go?

MARTIN: *(Carries a grocery sack. Sets it on counter.)* For here…ladies?

BRENDA: I'll have a chocolate-dipped cone.

SUE ANNE: A small diet Dr. Pepper for me.

BRENDA: God, Sue Anne, live a little. You're such a party pooper.

SUE ANNE: Excuse me, but I thought we were on a diet? Remember?

BRENDA: Yeah, well, everyone knows calories don't count after funerals, right?

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN chuckles while pressing keys on register.)* I don't know about that, but I do know that soft serve has fewer calories than regular ice cream.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA is pleased to hear this news.)* Really? You hear that, Sue Anne?

MARTIN: I'll have a large Coke. And I need three paper plates if you can spare them.

LILLIAN: We don't have paper plates. We have these baskets. *(LILLIAN pulls baskets from beneath counter and offers them.)*

MARTIN: Even better.

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN begins making drinks. Hands Coke & Dr. Pepper to SUE ANNE and MATIN.)*Can I be nosy and ask what you're planning to do with those baskets?

MARTIN: They're for Doug. I'll show you. (*MARTIN smiles and reaches into the paper sack. He pulls out a brass urn and slams it onto the counter.)*

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN startles and take a step backward.)* What the?

MARTIN: Lillian—that's your name, right? *(MARTIN points to nametag)*

LILLIAN: Yeah.

MARTIN: Well, Miss Lillian. Meet our friend, Doug. We've been friends for longer than any of us care to remember. As of a few days ago, he moved into this urn. It's cozy, don't you think?

LILLIAN: Cozy for sure. You know what they say. It's all about location, location, location.

MARTIN: That's a good one, Lillian. You should be in real estate.

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN rolls eyes while making dipped cone.)* You sound like my mother. That's what she always says. (Hands cone to Brenda.)

BRENDA: We mothers know a thing or two. Oh sweet Jesus, Sue Anne, did you ever see such a perfect cone? It looks just like the picture on the wall. All those swirls and a chocolate curl on top.

SUE ANNE: Stop torturing me.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA takes a big lick of her cone.)* Life's too short not to order a dipped cone at the Dairy Freeze.

MARTIN: *(MARTIN lays a twenty on the counter. LILLIAN starts to make change.)* Keep the change.

LILLIAN: Really? Wow, thanks.

(Diners grab the closest table. LILLIAN begins wiping down table nearby and eavesdrops on diners.)

MARTIN: Here you go, Doug. We'll put you in the middle of the table so you can watch your last party unfold.

LILLIAN: Are you having a party for your dead friend? That's sorta sweet.

MARTIN: *(Smiling)* That's one way to look at it.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA enjoying her cone.)* Doug always liked dipped cones.

SUE ANNE: He loved being the center of attention.

MARTIN: *(MARTIN pulls silver flask from coat pocket)* Lillian, you don't care if I spice up my drink before we toast to our recently departed friend, do you?

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN shrugs and nods toward back room)* The boss is in back. He won't notice.

(MARTIN pours whiskey into coke.)

BRENDA: Give me some of that. *(BRENDA snatches flask and take a swig directly from it.)*

MARTIN: Well, I'll tell you one thing, Brenda, this diet you're on is the type I might be able to stick to.

BRENDA: (BRENDA shrugs) Oh, hush.

SUE ANNE: There wasn't much of a crowd today.

MARTIN: Well, I'll tell you one thing, Brenda, this diet you're on is the type I might be able to stick to.

BRENDA: (BRENDA shrugs) Oh, hush.

SUE ANNE: There wasn't much of a crowd today.

BRENDA: *(Enjoying cone like it's the best thing ever.)* Surely you weren't surprised.

MARTIN: No crowd at all. *(MARTIN speaking to urn.)* Sorry pal, I hope you weren't upset by it.

SUE ANNE: Well, I thought a few more people would be there.

BRENDA: Not me. I'm surprised anyone came.

MARTIN: Including us.

LILLIAN: Hey guys, I hate to rush you, but we close soon. Let me know if you want to order anything else before I close the register.

MARTIN: Last call at the Dairy Freeze. I love it.

BRENDA: We'll be long gone by then.

MARTIN: Yeah, we best get this show on the road. Take one of these baskets, courtesy of our new friend, Lillian. *(MARTIN passes a basket to each person and notices LILLIAN watching him.)* Would you care to join us?

LILLIAN: *(Looking both embarrassed to have been caught and extremely curious.)* Oh, no, I'm working. *(LILLIAN continues watching while pretending to work.)*

SUE ANNE: Well, I for one thought it was the perfect service. Short and sweet.

BRENDA: With none of that depressing church music. Doug always hated church.

MARTIN: Doug hated everything. Lillian, could we get some spoons?

BRENDA: Jesus, Martin, this is the Dairy Freeze in Hillsboro not the Houston Country Club. You have to serve yourself.

LILLIAN: Oh, I don't mind. I have some in my apron. *(LILLIAN extends a handful of plastic spoons to MARTIN then remains standing next to him.)*

SUE ANNE: Shouldn't we say a few words to mark the occasion?

BRENDA: What, like Thanksgiving? Take turns saying what we liked about him?

SUE ANNE: I guess.

BRENDA: That won't take long. *(BRENDA, pauses to think.)* Here, I'll go first. *(BRENDA holds cone toward urn at center table as though toasting with it.)* Doug, you were a liar your whole life. I, for one, am glad you're gone.

SUE ANNE: God, Brenda, why don't you tell us what you really think.

BRENDA: He shouldn't have been such an asshole his whole life! You know I'm right.

(LILLIAN looks uncomfortable but continues watching.)

MARTIN: My turn. *(MARTIN stands, stares at ceiling to gather his thoughts, clears throat.)* Here lays Doug, all ashes and bone. Soon forgotten, thank God he's gone.

BRENDA: That's hilarious. Mean, but hilarious.

SUE ANNE: What a poet you are, Martin.

MARTIN: *(MARTIN, grunting, twisting tightly sealed lid, opening urn.*) Damn, they seal these things tight.

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN, gasps and glances at audience with a shocked expression.)*

MARTIN: *(MARTIN begins dividing ashes among three baskets.)* Here you go Brenda, a little for you. Sue Anne, some for you. You sure you don't want to help, Lillian?

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN takes a step back.)* I...Um...No.

MARTIN: Dig in everybody.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA chuckles)* We're looking for a bullet.

LILLIAN: What? ... Are you? ...You aren't going to eat him, are you?

BRENDA: (BRENDA chuckles) We're looking for a bullet.

LILLIAN: Oh...(LILLIAN looks relieved then confused.) Huh?

MARTIN: We've known Doug since fourth grade. All that time, he's claimed his dad shot him in the ass during a hunting trip when he was a kid. Said the bullet was still lodged in a bone. That injury was his excuse for never doing anything but complaining his whole goddamn life.

BRENDA: And bragging. Ever since we were in junior high, he thought he was God's gift to women.

SUE ANNE: He did have confidence to spare.

BRENDA: He was lying. We know it and plan to settle it once and for all.

MARTIN: Yeah. If he died with a bullet in his ass, we figure will find a fragment of it mixed in with the remains.

LILLIAN: Where'd you say you were from?

BRENDA: We didn't. Did we?

MARTIN: We grew up just outside San Antonio. We drove over for Doug's service this afternoon in Fredericksburg. We're on our way to Memphis.

BRENDA: We got strapped with disposing of his ashes. He wants to be sprinkled over Elvis's grave.

MARTIN: He was obsessed with Elvis. Thought he could croon just like the King.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA rakes through ashes with a spoon.)* Right out of college he got a job as an Elvis impersonator on a cruise ship out of Miami. A college grad working on a cruise ship. What a waste of time.

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN leans over closer table to get a better look.)* Speaking of a waste of time. I don't think you'll find a bullet in there.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA, raking through her basket and laughing.)* Lillian, I don't think you've been listening. We know there's no bullet. His whole story's a lie.

SUE ANNE: I've never seen human ashes this close up. I thought there might be a smell, like charcoal. *(SUE ANN holds up spoonful and sniffs.)* But there's no smell at all.

LILLIAN: No, I mean, the bullet would melt, wouldn't it? And don't they grind up everything at the end? I read about it in a book.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA holds up spoonful)* Are these tiny pieces of bone? It's sort of like coarse salt. Martin, can you believe Doug has been reduced to this?

MARTIN: It happens. Especially when you drink and smoke all day. So, Lillian. You seem like a smart girl. Why are you working at the Dairy Freeze in Hillsboro, Texas?

BRENDA: Martin, leave her alone. You don't know anything about her.

MARTIN: I know a lot about Lillian. She's practically a real estate guru. And evidently she knows all about cremation. She doesn't think we'll find a bullet. Right, Lillian? Go ahead, have a seat. Tell us all about yourself. *(MARTIN motions to the extra chair then scoots it toward her.)*

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN rolls eyes, chuckles, and sits on the edge of the chair.)* Well, I graduated from high school a little over a year ago. I took a couple of business classes at the junior college but decided to take a gap year. Since I need money, I'm working here. That's my sad little story so far.

MARTIN: A gap year? You hear that Brenda? She's taking a gap year. Just like Mitch did. Lillian, our son, Mitch, took a gap year in Europe. Cost us a butt-load of money, and when he came back, he'd turned gay.

BRENDA: Oh my Lord!

MARTIN: It's the truth.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA holds up a tiny piece of something)* No, look!

MARTIN: Well, I'll be damned. Let me see that thing.

LILLIAN: That can't be a bullet.

SUE ANNE: What else could it be?

BRENDA: I never would have thought it. Not in a million years.

LILLIAN: You do know metal tends to melt under high heat. Right?

SUE ANNE: Poor Doug. All those years we thought he was lying.

BRENDA: Poor Doug? With or without a bullet, he was still a royal pain in the ass.

LILLIAN: (Leans closer) It's just a pebble or piece of bone.

MARTIN: (MARTIN holds the fragment up to the light) Damn. If this really is a bullet,it opens up the whole issue of nature versus nurture. Was Doug born an asshole or did he turn that way because his dad shot him in the ass? What do you think, Lillian?

LILLIAN: I think I need to close up for the night. *(LILLIAN, clearly frustrated, scoots chair backwards and stands.)*

SUE ANNE: *(SUE ANNE yawns and looks at watch.)* It's nearly midnight.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA, sounding disappointed and tired)* I guess we're done here anyway. Plus, I think we've overstayed our welcome with Lillian.

MARTIN: *(MARTIN, reaches for empty urn)* Nah, Lillian's okay. She's a real sweetheart. Thanks for your hospitality.

LILLIAN: No problem. It's been interesting. *(LILLIAN flips door sign to "closed".)*

SUE ANNE: Memphis is, what, seven hours away? Are we still driving to Dallas tonight?

MARTIN: *(MARTIN begins trying to pour basket of ashes back into urn and spills some.)* Well, this won't work. How are we going to get all these ashes back into the urn?

(LILLIAN removes apron and puts it behind counter, watches diners, rubs forehead.)

BRENDA: Maybe we should just forget the whole thing.

MARTIN: Good idea, honey. I vote we call it a night and say goodbye to Doug right here at the Dairy Freeze.

SUE ANNE: You mean not go to Memphis? Can we do that?

BRENDA: *(BRENDA stands)* Sure. We can do whatever we want.

MARTIN: *(MARTIN grabs urn)* Sounds like a plan. All in favor?

(BRENDA raises hand. SUE ANNE is hesitant but raises hand. They begin gathering trash and ash-filled baskets and walk toward garbage can near exit.)

MARTIN: *(MARTIN shoves basket of ash into garbage.)* Well, goodbye buddy, it's been real.

BRENDA: *(BRENDA shoves her basket of ash in. Lid swings back and forth.)* Rest in peace, Doug.

SUE ANNE: See you on the other side, friend.

LILLIAN: *(LILLIAN distressed, approaches them.)* What are you doing? You can't do that! After all that, you're just going to toss Doug's ashes into the trash can?

MARTIN: It's late, so, yeah, I guess we are. Anyone want to hang on to the bullet? *(MARTIN to LILLIAN)* If that's what it is?

BRENDA: Hell no. I'm done. With that thing around, Doug would haunt me forever.

SUE ANNE: *(Sadly)* I'll pass.

(MARTIN presses his hand against trashcan lid, but LILLIAN yells and stops him before he drops it.)

LILLIAN: No! Give it to me. You can't throw away Doug's bullet too.

BRENDA: *(Chuckling incredulously)* A minute ago you said it couldn't be a bullet. Now you want to keep it as a souvenir?

LILLIAN: That's beside the point. What about his last wishes? What about Graceland and Elvis?

BRENDA: The point is, Doug should have been a little nicer if he expected us to drive all the way to Memphis.

LILLIAN: But I thought you were his friends.

MARTIN: We are.

SUE ANNE: Since fourth grade.

BRENDA: What does it matter now? He's gone.

MARTIN: Take it from us old folks. It's true what they say. Dust to dust. *(LILLIAN shakes her head and sighs. MARTIN clutches urn and holds door open for ladies. BRENDA and SUE ANNE walkout.)* We'll get out of your hair now. And Lillian, don't let your gap year stretch out too long.

LILLIAN: No, I won't. *(They leave. LILLIAN looks closely at the fragment in her palm, wraps it in a napkin, and pokes it in her pocket. Stage goes dark. Audience hears the sound of the bell above the door make a tinkling noise as LILLIAN leaves the Dairy Freeze.)*

KELLY “NATIVE CHILD” BROWN

SPONGEBOB & JUICE BOXES

As an artist, Kelly “Native Child” Brown’s goal is to create a body of work that recognizes the beauty of struggle and growing from pain. Every thorn has a rose, every rose has a thorn, and they work together to create something stunning. She thinks of her work as letters—which explore the intersections of motherhood, trauma, depression, and survival—that she would write to her daughters. “My hope is that readers will not only get a glimpse into my pain and truth but also a glimpse into my triumphs,” Brown said. “SpongeBob & Juice Boxes” can be viewed in full at: https://www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/6330

CREATIVE NONFICTION

EDWARD SAGE

I'LL BE PREPARED NEXT TIME

One Possible Beginning

I could begin with the bags of bedding I threw away. With the eight packages of tilapia at the bottom of the freezer or the two hundred empty boxes stacked in the attic or his glasses placed with care on the shelf beside the ladder. I could begin with my entering the house, using the key he'd given me, locking the door by mistake because he had left it open. I could begin with the scent that had always been there but was now stronger, or with my moving forward and turning the corner to see him so still, towels packed around his neck, his dangling legs resting on a rung of the ladder. I could begin with the 911 dispatcher saying, "If there's a chance he's alive, try to cut him down!" I hung up on her and then I raced past his body again—glancing at it—trying to gauge the rope—looking around for a butcher knife or a pair of scissors. I could begin with cleaning out the car and finding the receipt for the rope; the cashier's name was Chelsea. Paid in cash. I could begin with wrapping up the remaining rope and how I kept it in the garage and later sold it at the estate sale. The rope dust and shavings on the red velvet couch cushions. In the washer, my uncle's dingy underwear still damp. And then there is what we brought home: a pile of blue sponges, stewed tomatoes, cans of tuna, black pepper, bottles of pinot noir. I could begin with the coming home early from work because his girlfriend hadn't heard from him. And how I stopped for gas on my way. And the snacks and water I made sure to take with me.

I could begin with the four detectives in sunglasses and my first time ever sitting in a police car. During the interview I was asked to show my last texts to my uncle. The officer read them all aloud into the audio recorder and the rush of guilt knowing, "Clearly, clearly more could have been done." I could begin with my call to work and being told it was taken care of and being told later how heartbreaking my call had been. I could begin with his girlfriend showing up. And how hard it was to even want to hug her. The young officer who simply stood with us, who kindly told me, "These things take a toll on officers, too." And how that he'd die I loved knowing that. And then I asked him what he thought about, "How long since . . .?" And he said, very matter-of-factly, "Oh, he's been dead awhile." And I was so grateful might have stumbled upon his last breath. It hadn't seemed so, dried blood beneath his nostrils, no

twitching. It looked like a "done deal." But I would never know for sure.

I could begin with the funeral director, how I thanked him for not selling me more than I wanted: Cremation $579. Five death certificates $100. Everything ready by Friday. I could begin with Kate's agony and how I just wanted her to take care of the children. I could begin with his neighbors hugging me. And their children seeing me scream. I could begin with realizing I didn't like Joe as much as some. But I asked him to move here when he said he might and I told him I loved him. He'd say it back sincerely, but weakly—as if he wasn't accustomed to saying it but he always seemed to sort of like it. I could begin with my private wish but not realizing suicide was possibleuntil I saw the weight of his body hanging so still—the stillness so big; all that weight pulling down on the rope. I had never seen that anything like that. It was like having new eyes.

The Bolt

It was a Sunday when I retrieved the bolt my uncle had installed in an attic beam. The coroner's report had arrived on Saturday, and it mentioned the bolt and a drill. The deliberate planning was hard to grasp and take seriously. It felt fictional, something a character would do in a story. It was oddly mundane. There were fibers trailing where the rope had run from the living room up through the attic entrance. And then the rope was wrapped several times around the beam and bolt.

By this time, the house had been cleared out except for the staged furniture. Everything had been given away or sold and the realtor had hired a deep cleaning service. In Washington state, a suicide does not need to be disclosed to prospective buyers. I had a measure of guilt about this, but itwas overwhelmed by my desire to unload a tremendous emotional burden. To hear about the bolt in the coroner's report was enough to keep me awake the rest of the night imagining would-be buyers sensing phantoms and shadows. They would declare aloud that, "This house is so cute and exactly what we're looking for but . . . something . . . just . . . isn't . . . right." And then they'd walk through a cold pocket of air as they entered the garage, they'd look up, see the bolt, and their intuitions would be affirmed. They would make no apologies as they high-tailed it out of there and left me strapped permanently to the scariest experience of my life.

And so, I had to go back there. I took a small step stool, so I could reach the cord that pulls open the attic door. The ladder unfolds to rest on the garage floor. I took one of Uncle Joe's flashlights and climbed into the empty space. The report hadn't mentioned the ten washers my uncle had included in his makeshift gallows. The hardware was so loose it made the work seem sloppy; this final do-it-yourself home project was shoddy at best. But who am I

to judge: it did the job. I was keenly aware that my uncle's hands were the last to touch these devices. I put everything in my pocket. All that remained was the hole through the beam. I crossed my fingers that at least one of the buyers wasn't a certified private investigator.

The Hanging

Once upon a time I was a person who had never seen a dead man hanging in a garage. Then, one day, I was. And so, once upon a time I was a person who saw a dead man hanging in a garage. It was my uncle. One day and every day, I thought about my dead uncle hanging in a garage. And so, once upon a time I would never see bodies the same as I had before. This includes my own body. Because of this, I now have trouble taking joy in things for a very respectable reason. And so, once upon a time I cared a little bit less about my well-being because I saw a dead body hanging in a garage, and it was my uncle. Because of this, it is possible I will increase the odds of dying earlier than I otherwise might have. Because once upon a time, I used to take better care of my body because I saw it as something to take care of because I had never seen my uncle hanging dead in a garage. Because of this, I eat more food than I ever have before. Because of this, my stomach is getting bigger than it's ever been before. Because of that, I have had to buy bigger jeans for bigger stomachs that belong to people who eat more food than they ever have before because they have seen their dead uncle hanging in a garage. Every day, I wear my new big jeans and feel a little more comfortable in my new fatter body. Because of that, I keep eating more than I ever have before and my new jeans keep getting tighter and tighter. And this makes me chuckle, but not in a joyful way. It makes me chuckle in a rueful way. Once upon a time my uncle chuckled loud and clear and whenever he could but now he doesn't because once upon a time he decided it was better to hang himself by a rope in his garage until, finally, I found him.

And Uncle Joe's body was different, too. He was my Dad's only sibling, and I saw him hanging in that homemade noose. It was quick and grim. His method of choice triggered a bevy of inabilities in me and quite a few missed opportunities. In spite of my PTSD and the ensuing now depression, I can probably rest assured that I will never see another relative hanging dead. What I'm trying to say is, too bad, because I would be ready. I'd be ready to not run so quickly in small desperate circles, gasping for air and yelling at the dispatcher. I'd be ready to do whatever it takes to stand silent with the body and maybe, hopefully, touch it. Grab an arm or a leg, hold a hand, stroke a cheek. Maybe even hug it, depending on the position of everything. When I imagine forcing myself to stand in the presence of the body, letting myself survive standing in the presence of something so terrifying, I think maybe the body would weigh its actual weight and my uncle would be his actual height and the color of the garage, and the ladder

and the rope would be the color they are supposed to be. And I think maybe I'd be better off. Instead I am left looking for every possible angle, every possible slant of light, just trying to see what it is I actually saw.

KIMM BROCKETT STAMMEN

GOTCHA!

All I ever wanted was a bigger nose. Something with authority. Something with hauteur.

When I found a specialist who said yes, she supposed she could give me more nose although it was the opposite of what she usually did, my insurance stepped in and said whoa, elective. Worst word in English. A word full of clattering and clicking sounds, like administrators in too-high spiky heels, like the keys of my sax when they need to be oiled.

So I'm still a small-nosed recluse. I live with my parents in a square-housed, dirt-drive suburb outside of Rochester, NY, a place with three seasons: hot, frozen, and slush. I come out late on the weekends for the jazz clubs, the places with stingy managers and small painted-black plywood stages where the chairs never sit quite level. I stand the whole time anyway, a short mixed-race guy with a bari sax hanging like a brass coffin from the strap around my neck. I spread my legs for purchase and I roar and tangle through the tunes, and in those choruses I am a giant. My notes taunt the melodies, making them come out of hiding and then leap back again, out of sight and earshot, behind a chord change or a drum fill. I have this idea that if my nose were bigger I could get more air in, faster, and fill up the cavernous insatiable saxophone. Be not just a giant but a real fire-breathing one. The doc told me that was nonsense, the other horn players told me too, that air intake has to do with lungs and diaphragm, not with noses. But people are always trying to tell saxophone players about what is and isn't nonsense.

If we listened, we wouldn't play saxophone, right?

I tried to go to Mexico, where I thought maybe a big, cheap nose was waiting for me. But the airline said I would have to put my sax in the cargo hold, and I was afraid of getting it back in a rattling boing-ing collection of broken posts, keys, screws, and springs. With a bell that would only be good upside down, for a cap in the rain.

I saved up and I said, I'll buy a seat for it, and they said OK, lovely, but when I got on the plane I couldn't get the seat belt around it—the case is four feet long, solid as a Mafia bodyguard and less bendable, in fact not bendable at all—and they said I would have to put it in a closet. I said fine, lovely, but I'm not paying for a seat then. Why should I pay for a seat they won't let me use? Of course, they wouldn't give me back my money, and I hate conflict which is why I generally stay home instead of getting myself into small enclosed places with a whole lot of mostly white people telling me what I can't do,

and I got a bit anxious, and with that and my tiny tan nose and my twists it ended with me getting kicked off the plane, with my arms around my instrument and the whole main cabin booing. Whether they were booing me or the security guards I don't know. But I bet if I'd had a more aristocratic nose they would have upgraded me to first class.

In any case, I did not get to Mexico. I did get invited to play the Montreal Jazz Fest, which if it's not a big fucking nose is at least a big fucking deal. I called up some guys I hadn't seen in years and arranged some Quebecois sidemen. I figured I'd make the six-hour trip with my parents' car, as its trunk is big enough for the bari. And then it occurred to me, maybe they've got big noses in French Canada. For sure, they do. That snooty heritage and all, those nasal vowels. But it turned out when I got there that they also have National Health, and I went through a lot of wrangling and waiting in lines and on hold on the phone with static-y Cajun music in the background, before I figured out that it would take six years on a waitlist and a change of citizenship to get more cartilage stuck onto my face. I bagged it and just did the festival, which turned out to be awesome if you want to know the truth, and the poutine and the fireworks and the sublime accents made up for my six panic attacks.

If you really want to know why I think I have the wrong nose for my face, I'll tell you. You're a reader who's been hanging around long enough to prove loyalty, and loyalty deserves introspection. I saw in a book recently that it's called body dysmorphia, this feeling that the body you've got isn't the right one, or isn't the right size, or isn't perfect enough, or just isn't yours.

It isn't that. And it isn't anything to do with my father. Although if you ask my mother, she'll say she knows me damn well, and it is. But she also says that the whole decade of the 1970's— when I was born—was my father's fault, including disco and bad funk tracks and her bouffant orange hairstyle, not to mention the bus that he happened to be in when it crashed and our other car that exploded that wasn't even a Pinto. My mother loves him, what he was, and she stays and is miserable. She stays so she can blame him; she would blame the moon on my father if she could. But she doesn't need to, I hate my father already.

It is true that my father has a petite nose, like mine. Truer, I suppose, that mine is like his. At any rate, small. I know this because my mom has photos of him on the hallway wall, playing at the Blue Note, the Savoy, all those places. He's in the back there, behind his upright, long big-knuckled fingers teasing those strings. His nearly purple-black flat nose disappearing into the darkness of the full-face shots, even in the profiles. Black background, his black kinky hair, the spotlights light up only the sheen of sweat on his forehead, the glint in his eyes as he tilts to the calling mouth of his instrument.

Why I hate him, though, is that I have to learn about him from photos on the wall. He's there, in the back room of the house in Rochester, in the dim, listening to Mingus and eating, with the one hand that he uses, the sandwiches mom brings him. He never ever comes out. Never touches his bass, won't play tunes with me, won't let me come in. I understand the hiding cause I got it from him, and you'd think I'd sympathize, but I don't. Seems like I didn't inherit nothing good from my dad except music, and maybe that balances it all out.

But in any case, this isn't about him.

Yeah, and don't tell me this is about race, either. I'm mixed, so I'm the one who tells you whether or not this is about race. It's true that my mother, along with her freckles and orange hair, has quite a large English schnoz of which I've always been jealous. She says she'd give it to me if she could, which is a typical mom thing to say.

It might maybe be about my mom. How she got mixed up with some jazzer long ago who got smashed up in a tour band bus crash and never played again, and now she spends her time griping and making sandwiches and offering what she can't give. He won't play, even though they got his right arm working good and its fingers can pick up and grip those squeezy exercise balls like nothing. He won't make a sound even though he could run up and down a scale with each note popping up clear and sweet if he wanted, and the other hand working passable as long as you don't mind the plucking not being what it was once. He won't try, even though mom made them jerry-rig a kind of tall standing chair, which was a new thing back then, that they had to measure him and his bass all over the place for. He just said "nah," or something like, and whenever he talked to me, in my growing up years—when I was starting to freak out and to panic and to play—he kept his good hand over the side of his face that was scarred, and that pristine nose peeking out from behind it. Damn defeatist small nose.

I'd pretty much given up on any change ever happening to my face protuberance, when I met a woman. Rosa, from the cafe downtown where I play some Thursday nights. She had rings all up her ears and a stud in her tongue and the way she walked—oh! She was taller than me, and every time she came close by, I'd hyperventilate. But a few weeks ago I worked up my courage and set down my horn and said, "Hey." She took a break and we talked, I don't know about what now, I was buzzing and throbbing, my heart pounding and freaking out like Ornette Coleman in the heat of a solo. And then up came some brother who throws a punch and I'm down. She's yellin' at him and there's blood on my shirt, and the upshot was for about a week I had a huge throbbing nose wad and I couldn't play for the pain, and Rosa was all over me with apologies and a lot more, and sayin' she's not going back to that crumb. But she did, of course. She said, "You're a great guy," when she left. And I thought about the meanings of that word, great, and how one of them is big and another is revered and I thought, well shit. The swelling died down, and when my small nose emerged from the red and blue pulpy mess I

was glad to see it, sort of. I welcomed it back, appreciating it for what it at least does do, which is keep me and my music alive. I guess that's great in a way, if not big.

It feels actually, like the rest of my nose is out there somewhere waiting for me. Waiting for me to grow up, to find it, to come and grab it and say "Gotcha!" like the old silly children's game my parents used to play with me. They'd show me the tip of their thumb between index and third finger, make me grab and reach and lunge for it, and laugh, laugh— back in the time I dimly remember when they laughed together—and then pretend to stick it boldly back on the cradle of my face.

If I had the right sneezer—no, if I had a real schnozzola, I could go out more, maybe meet someone good. Someone like my mom who'd stick by me. Someone like you, who at least reads to the end. Someone besides jazz players hunkered down on a different dim stage each night or holed up all day long eating sandwiches, haunted by what they once were. If I had a proboscis with power I could tell people what I wanted and to give it to me right now, and they would comply without fuss or excuses about "elective," or long lines or antsy guards or sucker punches, or racial shit that makes me want to go huddle in dark rooms. I could simply look down my nose, and see everyone from a gigantic height as if they were little wiggling ants, waiting to be burnt in my fire-breathing flame. And I could play—man, I could play like no tomorrow, play the Savoy or the Blue Note or the other big New York clubs, the flash photo bulbs popping and the fans going crazy, without ever having to stop and draw breath.

SCOTT FERRY

WHEN I WAS 22

My father and I skied together for the last time.
That year I no longer had to remain mostly sober
for swim team, lived in a filthy cocaine and hemp

saturated house in Isla Vista where half of the occupants
imploded their way out of college. I stained my dreads black,
thought I deserved to feel my limbs dissolve with my aspirations.

I had worked so damn hard since age five pulling my body
through chlorine for hours, following a straight black line,
playing honors student, mouthing roles.

But you, Father, were slowly dying of a type of blood cancer,
and your cheekbones protruded, voice breathed weakly
through words. You took a half a codeine every morning

to mask the malaise. You could still ski,
but you complained *I have to stop every 200 yards*.
Skiing brought the light back into your laboring skin,

it always had. I see you shooting sparks out of your face
even thinking about the coming winter, calling me
in my college apartment, securing dates.

You would start running in October,
wax the Volkls, walk in your Langes,
the illness reduced to a few chemo pills in plastic boxes.

And you kept calling me and I kept downplaying
your survival with flat monosyllabic responses.
I skied with you one run a day and decided your pace bored me,

went off to puff on my pipe between the pines,
sat begrudgingly next to you at lunch,
mostly eating, not speaking much. You even said

that I was *lousy company* on the car ride home.

I dribbled my selfishness all over your final active years.
I'm sure you expected something quite different:

your son waiting at every rest spot with the joke
about the man with the apple-sized head
and the beautiful female genie,

recounting together
how you taught him to ski between your
legs while he was still in diapers, and the day

he learned parallel and began to speed away from you.
Not this drugged ungrateful blob.
I admit this is true, yes, and I am so sorry.

So, Father, listen, I can finish this. Can you hear me?
The guy in the joke asked the genie
How about a little head? Not funny?

The photograph of you and I holding our skis
in front of the Open Road camper, me four,
all in red, you in brown looking the proudest

I have ever seen you, that picture smiles at my family
every day from our kitchen wall.
That is how your granddaughter knows you.

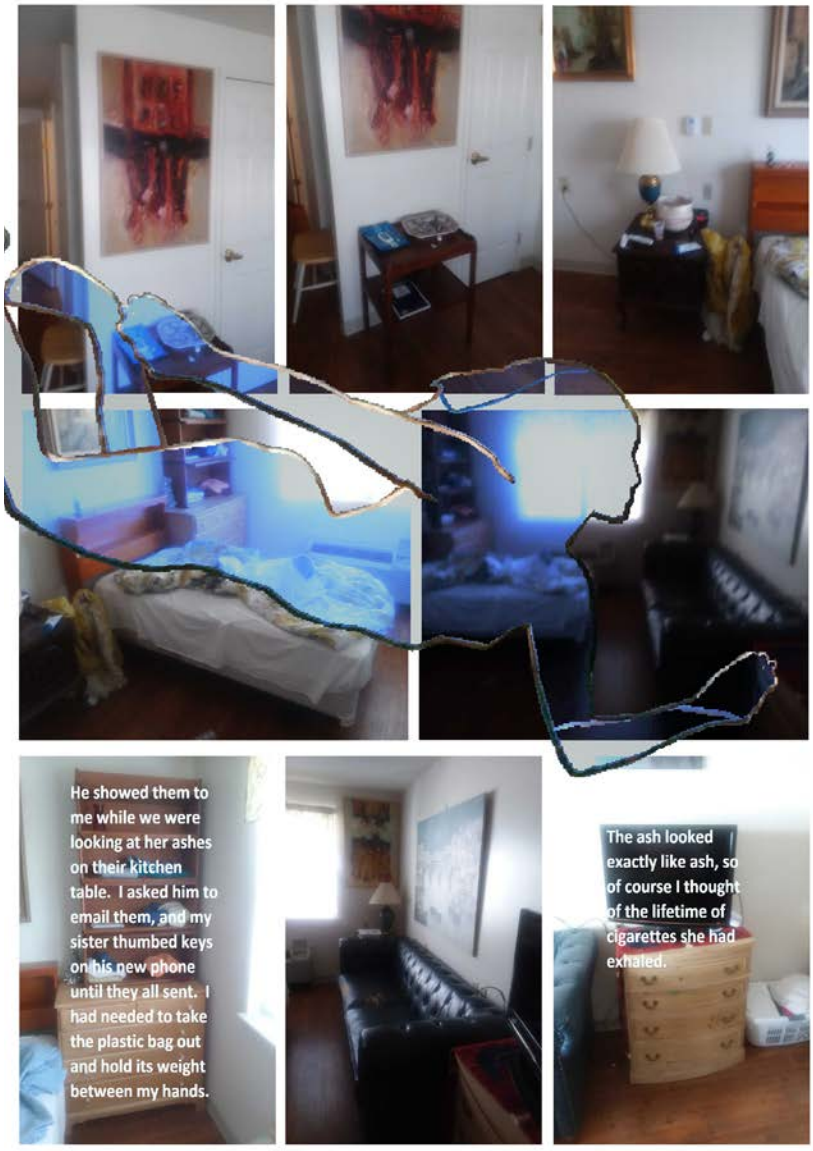
She skis just as fast as me now.
Hopefully I have a few more years before she races
out to where I can no longer reach her.

CHRIS GAVALER

VISUAL MEMIOR: THE SWIMMERS

Chris Gavaler's "The Swimmers" is arranged in a three-row layout with a rotating point of view of his mother's bedroom shortly after she passed away from Alzheimer's. The repeating figure of the swimmer is repurposed from an unrelated photograph that Gavaler digitally stripped to contour lines, then superimposed over the layout with different filters to become the interior of each body. "I don't particularly believe in souls and afterlives, but the disconnection between the words and images appears to make room for that possibility," Gavaler said.


After the funeral home
picked up her body,
my brother-in-law
took snapshots
of the room, in case
something went missing,
like the TV or the paintings.


He showed them to me while we were looking at her ashes on their kitchen table. I asked him to email them, and my sister thumbed keys on his new phone until they all sent. I had needed to take the plastic bag out and hold its weight between my hands.
The ash looked exactly like ash, so of course I thought of the lifetime of cigarettes she had exhaled.


I shouldn't have been surprised when someone said the white specks were bone,
obviously not pebbles, not sea shells.

E. R. LUTKEN

FOURIER TRANSFORMATION

"…technique that decomposes or separates a waveform or function into sinusoids of different frequency which sum to the original waveform."
–Collins English Dictionary

Hollow echoes, furious dissonance in a windowless world; the Unit where I squandered hours, days, years, dragging from one pained face to another, squirming in the wake of anxious cries, hiss of ventilators, raspy suction pumps, shoes squeaking on linoleum floors, scrambled phone-talk, staccato whistles of alarms. The worm tunes rattle my brain until somehow, Mr. Breitenmeyer emerges from the tangle of cumbrous wires and burbling tubes. I bend towards his ramshackle figure, put stethoscope to chest, my ears tuned for rubs, snaps, gallops, blowing murmurs, crescendo, decrescendo, weighted sum of periodic functions. He smiles, begs pardon for his insurgent body, growling abdomen, lungs mumbling decay. He will die soon and he knows it. But the rhythm of his pulse still sings; seasons, tides in every round of systole and diastole, like lapping waves, a low plainsong in clear translational symmetry. Alongside his even breathing, all pointless noises disappear. The steady pulse, the tide proceeding, not resignation, serenity.

IONE SINGLETARY

FOR THOSE WHO NEVER WERE

Only one of you even developed into
something recognizable on the ultrasound,
but your tiny pinpoint heart never started
the rhythmic pitter-patter we listened for so hard.
The blood stopped pushing through you,
the moving shadows still and black.
I let my body expel you naturally,
unlike the others.

I never saw them—
just a plus on the pregnancy test,
a figment of my imagination,
a twenty-minute surgery,
a bottle of pain pills,
a good day's rest.

But you were different, took your own time.
Weeks of waiting, I began to think
there was nothing left to come out,
but you amended me. The pain
took me by surprise, then the blood
came—thick, stringy, dark.
For three days you made your lack of
presence known.

Now years have passed
and it's all faded, tucked
away in webbed corners.
But on occasion, when the sky
is slate, and I crave self-punishment,
I like to go back, imagine you
survived, formed into a viable
fetus, were born, developed
a personality, grew up.

Perhaps you would have been
my only daughter. I longed to fix pigtails,

buy fluffy dresses and training bras,
share make-up tips. You might have been
a poised ballerina or a scientist
breaking boundaries. So many possibilities,

but my body wasn't good at carrying babies.
Of five miscarriages, you were the last,
before my miracle second boy
fought his way through, a child
we never thought we would have.
I'm lucky I suppose, but I still yearn
for Barbies, baby dolls, princess movies,
and pink nightgowns.

MARCH 28, 1941

for Virginia Woolf

When I read your suicide letter,
it was as if I could have written
those lines myself.

I shan't recover this time.

On that day in March,
all Leonard had left
was your walking stick
floating on the River Ouse.
It was almost a month
before your body was found,
bloated, graying,
matted hair stuck to your face.

I can't go on spoiling
your life any longer.

You were so ready,
so determined, I doubt
you even kicked instinctively,
just let the stones drag
you down into the quiet,
where no voices could be heard.
What a relief, to be suddenly
lightened, unburdened,
lifted while simultaneously sinking
into the cold blackness.

If anyone could have saved me
it would have been you.

I wish I were so strong,
brave enough to go sinking,
to release those who love me
from the struggles of living with me,
to fill my pockets and let go.

HISHAM BUSTANI

MAIA TABET, TRANSLATOR

PAPER ON TABLE NEXT TO OVERTURNED CHAIR

I haven't yet tried true exile, the kind that takes you far from familiar places and known people. I imagine that it's no worse a predicament than the one I'm in already because I can't think of anything harder than feeling alienated among the intimate strangers of my daily life. When I look in their faces, I see nothing but blank pages, unmarked but for the number at the bottom, like the dates on a calendar, one blank page-day identical to the next except for that number.

Why am I supposed to celebrate such a life?

What a stupid question. For the few years since becoming woke, I've been certain of two things: the freedom of human beings and their responsibility for their actions. I find it ridiculous when people blame others for their shortcomings, like when someone says, *Oh man, it's your fault I got angry*. And I can't but laugh in the face of those always cussing others out for their own flaws—*Goddamn so-and-so who made me forget (or fight, or kill, or...*)—as though by faulting others they're off the hook—so that they're mere innocents, wretches, or ignoramuses. Victims led by destiny and fate to the inevitability of the Preserved Tablet, the divine decree: it was meant to be, it was written.

Now,

after all that's happened, I acknowledge that we are condemned to life; I have to recognize that not only are we not free in choosing freedom, as some existentialists would have us believe—even though I've always thought that was an oxymoron—but we are also not free in that we have no choice in the matter of being born.

"This is what my father inflicted upon me."

But still, I ask: has my life made a difference? Will my death? Am I any more significant than an insect? Does an insect not make a difference? What about its death? I don't know. Life will dissipate, and these questions will no doubt remain unanswered.

I wonder what was going on Tayseer al-Sboul's head when he pressed the trigger? Or what mythical courage inhabited Khalil Hawi when he blew his head open on the balcony of his Beirut apartment? Were these acts of ultimate self-denial? Were they the epitome of courage, or the height of cowardice? There were five of us in the group: three guys and two girls. When asked to prick our fingers with a pin in order to determine our blood group at the university biology lab, not one of us had the courage to do it: each of us pricked the other's. How then can human beings—who are afraid of the tiniest pinprick

—mete out self-punishment that is irreversible? That has to be courage.

Or resignation.

What kind of cowardice would drive such extraordinary, albeit rare, individuals (whether at the threshold of a talented life or at the height of their gifts) to bail out in this awful way? Is there not also some shortfall involved in their inability to successfully resolve whatever crisis they were facing?

People say that our mental and cognitive capabilities are critically heightened when facing really tough times, so how is it that the suicide-in-the-making was unable to overcome his predicament when deeply immersed in the kind of circumstances that pertain most keenly to thinking and the mind? Where then was Pavlov? Had Tayseer not heard of Pavlov and his dogs, or of positive reinforcement?

And yet:

Are we supposed to turn into salivating dogs every time we hear a bell or the footsteps of the guards approaching? Are we supposed to find a solution to every problem, like a scientist expects to in accordance with his experiments? The harder it is, *the easier it gets* ... Just that mechanically? Not likely.

Personally, I refuse to become a Pavlovian dog.

I refuse to even salivate. I'll destroy the bell and bite the foot of that saliva-addicted scientist. I have a right to draw outside the lines, to scream, to cry, and to cackle with laughter. And also, to cuss and blaspheme. And to die.

The other world. That unknown.

I often feel an urge to know what happens after death. But it appears that the only path to such knowledge is ... death itself.

I'm the logical product of human history. Ever since the dawn of consciousness, we have been asking the same unanswered question, because it's a one-way street. Now I want to know, and I want to go down that road. What's here for me anyway?

Let me make a list: wars, massacres, plagues, rape, lies, thievery, deception, oppression, torture, exile, hypocrisy, sickness, hunger, racism, military coups, pollution, and on, and on...

You might retort: science, love, music, art, poetry. OK, then: is all the poetry in the world worth the life of an African child who has starved to death when the earth is producing many times the amount of food necessary to human survival? Is all the love in the world capable of making up for the damage inflicted on a girl who has been gang-raped by blonde soldiers that crossed the oceans for "Iraqi freedom?"

What is tragi-comical, if not downright disgraceful, is that the species that has wreaked such terrible devastation continues to exist and to "progress" inexorably, while a huge number of species and organisms— many of them more powerful and far grander—have become extinct. And the waitlist is long.

Humankind's response? Inhabit the earth, we were commanded!

Funny … Not!

As for me, Frayj—,

a stupid marginal that's never written anything for the sake of it other than these lines—I declare my rebellion against it all. From A to Z. My poor, limited, brain can't stand anymore of this. It can't tolerate the Qana massacre or the shelling of the 'Amiriyyah shelter; not the Hiroshima bomb, or Agent Orange; not the ruling party's power grab or what is happening in the jails of the mukhabarat. And not my father, or hers.

I may not marry her: I'm Christian and she's Muslim.

Religion: Christian. That's what it says on the back of my ID card. Even though I don't believe in God, I am branded just like the slaughtered calves at the municipal slaughterhouse. All of us are, from the day we are born. No sooner do we draw our first breath and utter that first cry than we smell the odor of seared flesh—the branding is done not only with ink but with fire. The skinned calves have it better: ink is used to brand them, and only after they are dead, not before they see the light of day.

From the moment of emergence as a member of Homo sapiens, we become: Black, Sunni, Jordanian, Catholic, Asian, Indian, Palestinian, Shi'i, Kurdish, Greek-Orthodox, Arab, Turkish, White, Red, Amazigh. And when one of us is a combination of these, the effect of the branding is just multiplied.

To the slaughterhouse?

Never. I will rebel against it, against them. Against all those trying to turn us into carbon copies of themselves. Against all those trying to feed us through the assembly line, and stamping a serial number on our backsides so that they can complete the annual inventory. And I will rebel against myself too. Why not? Who says I don't oppress myself? Who says I'm not sitting inside someparadigm fashioned by someone else, or by me, in order to accommodate others?

Yes, I will step out.

When you read these lines, I will have begun my first real adventure towards the unknown, without branding seals, or IDs, or skin color. Going forward, nothing will convince me to submit. I simply won't be here. My new friend, the angel of death 'Izra'il and I will be more than halfway there. I leave to you "your" earth and your "lives" to spread corruption as you see fit. As for me, I'm tired of all this.

NOTES:

"This is what my father inflicted upon me" is attributed to Abul 'Alaa' al-Maari, the blind 10th century poet, philosopher, and writer, known for being a skeptic and freethinker who invoked reason as the only real source of truth. It is said that he wanted his epitaph to state that his life had been a wrong done by his father and not by himself. (Translator's note.)

Tayseer al-Sboul (1939-73) was a Jordanian poet and writer who committed suicide in the flower of youth. His most significant work is a novel entitled *You as of Today*.

Khalil Hawi (1919-82) was a prominent Lebanese poet who killed himself two days after the beginning of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Operation Iraqi Freedom was the codename for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that ushered in the 10-year American occupation of the country.

In Jordan, and other countries, government regulations require slaughtered animals to be skinned and branded with an ink stamp at the abattoir. (Translator's note.)

SARAH ILER

BETA

PIA TAAVILA-BORSHEIM

NORWEGIAN KRONE, 1891

My grandfather once gave me a silver coin
worth two *ore*. On one side, a rampant lion,
crowned, and on the back, the number two,
encircled by a wreath of linden leaves.

I carried this coin in my pocket every day,
going out and coming in, while playing,
or reading in the town library, while
waxing my skis or meeting classmates to sing

every evening in the pine-ringed square.
I would slide my hand down to feel its rigid
edges, its slight markings raised in relief.
It smelled of his tobacco, his cologne.

It never slipped out, even as I hung, upside
down, in the tree I'd climbed, swaying
in the breeze off the fjord, nor when leaping
from rock to rock below the jagged cliffs.

The year stamped on its face was 1891,
the year of his birth. I give this coin now
to you, wrapped in purple tissue paper,
tied with an orange ribbon. As you move

about, as this coin jangles with its mates,
rubbing themselves smooth and shiny,
think of me. Touch its gleaming surface.
Finger its impressions. Keep it safe.

PASSAGE

Bury me above the birch line,
where the pale bark curls
and the round leaves curve to serrated points.

Bury me below the towering pines
where the ragged cones fall
and icy needles hang heavy on the bough.

Or let my bones blanch in August sun,
pulled out from shore in bits
of lace-like foam, so light. Only then

shall I be at peace, this longing
brought to bank, lying still at last
under drifting snow, the lakeward winds.

CHARLES MALONE

BEAST MACHINES

after Lisel Mueller

We stand awkwardly in our bodies
looking at the painting of the big lie.
While I am unable to find a figure,
she is certain there is man, but
our friend asks if it is a man or *the*—
We are all sure there is no woman
in the lie. She loves how sweet
and personal the painting is,
how it knows, and how she knows
it doesn't know and that its sweetness
is a sugar-coating, robin's egg blue
and glued to animal skin and bone.

This is what we take in: It is a field
of white or black, clumped paint
thick like snow or soot or love
just a few points of color among gentle
marks of palette knives and a signature
carved back to the canvas, unreadable.
We forget, for the whole time that we
are looking at it, the whole time we
argue and interpret, we are wholly
alive, the hard floor pushes up through
our hips to remind us of this, to nudge us
to a room full of paintings of dead animals
from the Dutch school of the 17th century.
The frames have been treated with beeswax.
I cough and it echoes coldly through the gallery.

EDWARD M. COHEN

SOUP FOR BREAKFAST

Characters:

Lenny: 17 years old, newly bearded.

Don: Late twenties.

SETTING: A Manhattan apartment in the 1950's, obviously too small for two. There is a single bed on which two men are sleeping, a hot plate on top of a mini-fridge, a sink filled with dirty dishes, clothes all over, records, books, cans of food. Early morning.

AT RISE: LENNY, 17, creeps out of bed, feeling his newly growing beard. Then he dials rotary phone, whispers, always looking to make sure DON is asleep.

LENNY: Hello, Ma? I know, but I figured you'd be up...Nothing's wrong, only I know how you worry and I figured...What do you mean, where am I? I'm at my buddy Vincent's house in New Jersey.Where should I be? Oh Ma, everyone at NYU spends spring break away from home. Why should I be different? I do not sound different. I'm calling from the basement so I don't wake everyone up and maybe there are funny echoes...They have a finished basement, Ma.... Everybody in New Jersey has a finished basement. Why would I lie about a thing like that? For crying out loud, Ma. I didn't call to argue so don't make me regret it! *(There is a rustling on the bed which scares LENNY.)* I've got to go now, Ma...I hear them upstairs, Ma...Vincent's mom is calling me for breakfast! I'll be home tomorrow! *(HE hangs up and rushes to bathroom. DON, late twenties, rises from bed. HE has obviously heard every word, slips on a robe, calls to Lenny.)*

DON: What are you doing in there, checking your beard? It'll grow on its own! *(HE flicks on radio. Eddie Fisher's "Wish You Were Here" fills the air. DON heats water on hot plate.)*

LENNY: *(Bolts out of bathroom)* What's that?

DON: What's what?

LENNY: That song.

DON: “Wish You Were Here?”

LENNY: *(Flicking off radio)* I don’t want to hear it!

DON: It’s only been number one on the hit parade for thirteen weeks. It’s going to be difficult to avoid. *(DON lights a cigarette and looks for a coffee cup in the debris.)*

LENNY: Using the radio to avoid every moment of silence is an addiction fostered by an alienated society.

DON: There are no clean cups.

LENNY: Another bourgeois rigidity. Stop drinking coffee. You’re chained to conformity.

DON: I like the radio in the morning.

LENNY: And don’t smoke before breakfast!

DON: Also, I love that song. *(HE washes a cup at sink, humming “Wish You Were Here.”)*

LENNY: It happens to have been our song.

DON: Whose?

LENNY: Me and Rosalind.

DON: Oh, the Virgin Queen.

LENNY: Don’t call her that!

DON: My mistake. It was you who was the Virgin Queen.

LENNY: Don, please...Let’s not start again. *(DON turns from sink with clean cup, spoons coffee into it.)*

DON: And I suppose it was Rosalind you just called? *(LENNY slumps. DON pours hot water, whistling “Wish You Were Here.”)*

LENNY: Stop whistling. You know I can’t stand your whistling.

DON: I'll make some breakfast.

LENNY: Your whistling is like masturbation. You cut yourself off from me and retreat to the pleasures of your own body, your own sound, the breath pulsing through your own mouth.

DON: Thank you, Sigmund. I'm sure your analyst would be proud.

LENNY: Whistling is your way of returning to the breast.

DON: What would you like?

LENNY: I don't care. Anything.

DON: You're a big help.

LENNY: Your attitude kills my appetite.

DON: I'll make some soup. This coffee stinks.

LENNY: Soup for breakfast?

DON: Now, who's chained to conformity! Tell me, Dr. Freud, which of the two queers in this room is the one more pressured by bourgeois convention? The one who can't eat what he wants, love who he wants, fuck who he wants, be who he wants unless it is approved by his Master Psychoanalyst?

LENNY: My analyst is not my master.

DON: Oh yeah? Did you tell him the truth about where you are spending Intercession? Do you tell anybody the truth? Like, for instance, me? *(Beat. DON's eyes bore into Lenny.)*

LENNY: I called my mother. Big deal! *(DON flicks on radio in disgust. The news report is heard but neither reacts. LENNY sulks, DON searches for something, first casually, then furiously; crashing through pots and pans. The silence between them lasts as long as is emotionally valid.)*

ANNOUNCER: The assault on Old Baldy, the bloodiest thus far in 1953, came just a few days before the Reds made a surprise offer to settle the Korean conflict. Thus, the Commie right hand struck while the left held out an olive branch. This pattern of conciliation disguising aggression is part of the Kremlin strategy. It's evil meaning seemed clear. Three days after the fight for Baldy started, the Reds attacked Bunker Hill, which was held by units of glory

laden U.S. Marines but the leathernecks could take care of themselves while the Communists lost thousands of men for a gain of almost nothing. After five grueling counter-attacks against full buckets of enemy grenades and heavy fire from the "Red" mortars, the Marines got back on top.

LENNY: *(When LENNY can stand it no longer, HE shouts over radio.)* What are you looking for?

DON: There's no soup.

LENNY: Did you check the bathroom? God knows where anything is around here!

DON: There's no soup!

LENNY: You're nuts. Look under the bed. *(DON seems paralyzed. LENNY hops to floor and finds a can of soup. HE waves it aloft and triumphantly turns off the radio.)* What's this?

DON: That's not soup.

LENNY: It says soup. Campbell's Soup.

DON: It's Cream of Mushroom soup. I use it in tuna casserole. You wouldn't like it alone.

LENNY: *(Tossing can to DON)* Who says I wouldn't?

DON: Have you ever eaten it?

LENNY: There's lots I never ate before I met you.

DON: *(Smiling, despite himself, as HE turns on hot plate.)* Oh, shut up.

LENNY: You're absolutely right about my conformity. I'm glad you pointed that out. Breakfast is a special meal. A new day, a new world. Our breakfasts will mean that forever!

DON: I'll make it, you son of a bitch, but I know how you are about trying something new so if you dare say, "Yuck!" I'll murder you!

LENNY: We'll move out of the city. I hate it here and it's too crowded in this damned apartment.We'll move to a cabin in the country where we can walk through the woods, hand in hand. Who cares who sees? And, every morning,

we'll bake fresh bread so the aroma fills the air!

DON: Lenny, stop dreaming.

LENNY: And real butter. My mother always serves oleo.

DON: *(Giggling despite himself)* Mine, too.

LENNY: And Smucker's Preserves. Ever taste Smucker's? It's new.

DON: And could we have real coffee? I despise this fucking instant.

LENNY: No more tuna casserole, either. From now on, it's fresh vegetables and red meat so we grow strong to take on the world!

DON: Oh baby, I love you so! *(LENNY embraces DON from behind as HE opens soup can.)*

LENNY: We'll eat naked in the sunlight and dance in our living room, cheek-to-cheek, because there will be no neighbors to stare in the windows and we won't care what anybody thinks because we'll be free! Free! Free! (*The condensed soup lands in a blob in pot.)* YUUUUUCK! *(DON whirls about in shock. LENNY is equally surprised by what he has done but HE can't help giggling.)* Sorry... *(HE backs away from DON, afraid, apologetic, as DON's outrage grows.)*

DON: You are the most inhibited, conventional bastard I've ever met! How dare you despise the
bourgeoisie? How dare you? We're going to battle the world hand in hand! Like hell we are! You don't have enough imagination to inquire into a soup if it's new! That's how courageous you are. How are we going to dance cheek-to-cheek when you have to call your mother every morning and lie about what's going on?

(LENNY twists on bed, entangled in sheets, helpless with laughter. DON picks up pot of soup and tosses it on the floor, starting to weep. HE races to turn on radio to cover his sobs. As WOMAN ANNOUNCER is heard, DON calms down and LENNY stops laughing. LENNY sits up and stares at DON, trying to find courage to say something.)

WOMAN ANNOUNCER: During its annual Continental Congress in Washington, the Daughters of the American Revolution announced that they had accepted proof that Private Benjamin Doud born May, 10, 1761, was a direct ancestor of Mamie Doud Eisenhower. The first lady was welcomed into

the D.A.R. and 4000 of the Daughters went to the White House to greet their newest member. It was the biggest White House reception since the inauguration and marked the end of a rift between the White House and the D.A.R. which started when Eleanor Roosevelt resigned after the D.A.R. refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in their Constitution Hall.

LENNY: *(LENNY rises and crosses to DON, flicking off radio.)* I'm sorry. It just slipped out, that "Yuck."

DON: You're conning me with dreams about breakfasts forever and tomorrow. Intercession ends and you go back to your mother's Corn Flakes, no matter what I do.

LENNY: I keep making mistakes. I haven't had as many affairs as you have.

DON: Once you dump me, I'm sure you will.

LENNY: Once I dump you, I'm through with this crummy life forever.

DON: Gee, thanks.

LENNY: Oh shit...sorry...Nothing comes out right any more. I can't seem to say what I want.

DON: What is it that you want, Lenny?

LENNY: I don't know...

DON: What?

LENNY: (After a beat) I just want to be normal...

DON: So, you'll get engaged to some Rosalind to impress your analyst and make your mother happy and you'll end up one of those haunted married guys who hang around tea rooms.

LENNY: (Attacking back) You're upset because I called my mother. You think the only way to keep me is by cutting off all my other attachments.

DON: Aha! Castration anxiety!

LENNY: Oh, is that an example of the vitriol that passes for wit in the homosexual pathology? I've been reading about it in Abnormal Psych!

DON: Bitch!

LENNY: Whore! (Beat. THEY both regret what they've said.) I'll stay if you want for a couple more days. I'll cook up some story for her.

DON: No, thanks. I know you can't wait to get home, to start pretending that this was some dirty little aberration. So, you'll laugh a little louder and act more butch and remember don't cross your legs when you sit! It's very femme. But I've got news for you, sister. That stupid beard makes you look faggier than a Times Square hustler!

(Now, it is LENNY'S turn to be wounded. HE heads back to the bed. DON, too, is shocked by what he has said but he cannot give in to his guilt now.) And I'll listen to the radio all day if I want! (HE flicks radio back on. MALE ANNOUNCER is heard during long silent stillness between them. LENNY curls into ball on bed. DON smokes as regret overtakes him.)

MALE ANNOUNCER: Senator McCarthy matched words this week with a whole shelf of fiery-eyed pinko authors. McCarthy's Senate Investigation Subcommittee was looking into charges that pro Communist books had been placed in the 150 overseas libraries run by the U.S. State Department. Today's most uncooperative witness, Samuel Dashiell Hammett, writer of mystery stories, said he thought that, quote, it is impossible to write anything without taking a stand on social issues, end quote, but he refused to say whether he is or ever was a Communist.

DON: Now, it's my turn to be sorry...

ANNOUNCER: Three hundred copies of Hammett's book are on the shelves in seventy-three of the libraries.

DON: I really am sorry. I don't know what made me say all that.

ANNOUNCER: McCarthy asked, quote...

DON: C'mon, Lenny.

ANNOUNCER: "...if you were spending, as we are, over a hundred million dollars a year on an information program allegedly to fight Communism..."

DON: Don't shut me out.

ANNOUNCER: "...would you purchase books by Communist authors and distribute them throughout the world?"

DON: It's tough enough to make a go of this.

ANNOUNCER: Replied Hammett, quote...

DON: Lenny, please,

ANNOUNCER: "...well, I think if I were fighting Communism..."

DON: ...if you're mad at me, you're right...

ANNOUNCER: "...I don't think I would do it by giving people any books at all."

DON: But don't shut me out. Please. I can't stand it. *(Slowly, LENNY sits up and stares across room at DON.)*

ANNOUNCER: A more cooperative witness was Negro poet Langston Hughes whose books are spread through fifty-one of the libraries.

DON: Shout. Throw something. Do anything you want. But not this. *(During following, LENNY crosses to Don. DON remains still, afraid but not flinching.)*

ANNOUNCER: He readily admitted that he had followed the Communist line for many years, but insisted that he had turned away from it in 1950. When McCarthy asked if he thought his Commie-line books should be on our shelves throughout the world, Hughes exclaimed, "I was certainly amazed to hear that they were. I would certainly say no."

(During above, LENNY reaches DON and socks him hard in the gut.)

LENNY: That's for the crack about my beard, you fucking lousy faggot!

(DON slides down wall, the wind knocked out of him, in tears. LENNY turns away, starting to weep, himself, as ANNOUNCER continues.)

ANNOUNCER: Joe McCarthy has not found out who was responsible for putting pro-Communist books on U.S. anti-Communist bookshelves. Nor has any spokesman for the old administration come forward to explain why it was done. But the Eisenhower administration has already acted. Books by known Communists are being cleared off the shelves...

THE LIGHTS FADE

CHRISTINA KLEIN

MISSING A MOMENT THAT NEVER HAPPENED

JOHN SCHAFER

DEAD ON MY HEART

Donnie was a fuck up. That's what she knew, and everybody had said. He died on a one-way dead end street across from an overflowing dumpster. Somebody had put a bullet in his head, and a gun in his hand and nobody knew who. Sheila had been his girlfriend, then lover, then girlfriend. They had gone on like that for five years, off and on, never really breaking up or ending it, unable to be apart or together, joined at the heart by a used rubber band, always snappin' back to each other.

They had tried to make it look like a suicide but had done a piss-poor job, she thought. When they stuck the gun on him, they had put it in his right hand. Donnie was left-handed. Anybody who knows anything knows if you're gonna put lead in your head you do it with your good hand. Her Dad had taught her that.

It was easier to think about how and why, things she may never know, than what she did know. She shifted on the wooden bench and studied the fresh dirt on Donnie's grave. It was dark brown starting to fade; soon, it would go brown, then tan, and finally a gray. Sometime between tan and gray fine blades of grass would pop through, like the first whiskers on a teenage boy's chin. It had been a week since they had put him in the ground and this was her fourth time here. She was already trying to forget all the bad things he had done. She attempted to keep them pushed back in her mind, but they sprang forward automatically when she thought of him—like a flinch after someone has slapped you: the fights (too many to count), the abortion, his cheating, his drinking, the pills, his job as a runner for a drug dealer; all of them standing there as if eagerly waiting to bust out an exit door she would soon open. Why was that she wondered? "Why?" she said aloud as if an answer would come back. There were no answers and she wept. All the good things he had done and been did not step up; they were off to the side somewhere, buried under a shit pile of whys, and how comes. But she knew they were there, that they had existed, in her mind she knew and with effort she could drag them up. How they had talked for hours when they first met, how he had held her hand on their first date, and asked if he could kiss her. The times after they had dated for a few weeks, he'd call and say, "You know we're fallin'." His smile that filled a room, his voice with its perfect timbre, the laugh so catching that even now she smiled through the tears thinking of it. He was her kisser, her lover, like no one had ever been. He was exciting and generous.

She cut it, stopped it there. Why did he have to be both? Why couldn't

he have been either good or bad so she could have embraced his memory or forgot him? Instead, she was torn and bleeding. She knew it was life or had been, and there were no absolutes or certainties other than the ones you create for yourself. But in between knowing that and living, it was the shadow-land and that's where she was, on a bench alone. She shook her head and looked away from the grave and to the expanse of the cemetery. If you did not look down, it seemed to be a beautiful green field intermittently dotted with trees. All the headstones were plaques flush to the ground. The yellow brown brick wall that enclosed it was laced with ivy. A thought sat next to her then. It looked like a park, a park for the dead. Maybe, after dark, they all came up to play, to party and introduce themselves to each other. If that was it Donnie would sure be in his element, she thought and almost smiled. Maybe if she came back after dark, maybe then she would have a chance to say goodbye. The thought ran off and she cried some more and said, "I'm sorry, Donnie." Immediately her jaw jumped, chattering as if she were cold. It happened like a reflex every time she said his name. A counselor at the community center had told her it was her body's response to grief, as if grief were a living entity inside of her and his name was its cue to come out. Her jaw stopped clacking and she shuddered. She hadn't said goodbye and their last good time had been a month before, playing pool and laughing with friends. They had gone back to her apartment after and made love. Over the next month it was the usual arguments and fights about everything from his pill habit to what they may or may not do for her birthday. The last one, four days before he was killed had been particularly bad. For a week she had turned the argument away, like a religious zealot who knocks on your door. No one had to know of it, maybe no one ever would. She could keep it in her, walled away in a compartment in her heart, one floor away from the grief. She looked back at Donnie's grave, at the slightly rounded mound of dirt.

The wall collapsed then and through her sobs the argument came crashing back in.

"You're dead on my heart, you're dead on my fucking heart." He had been pilled up and hadn't called in days, had blown off plans and she had not trusted him in years. But she could almost feel him flinch through his haze on the other end of the phone when she said it. It had cut to the bone and through, just like she intended. It went to a phrase they had shared since their first days together, through the bliss of their first year and the ups and downs and gutters of the following four. They had written it on birthday cards, Valentine cards and the notes that came in little envelopes with flowers. It had been whispered and said in more ways than you could count, "You're on my heart." It had been said to soothe, to raise a smile, to reunite. She had used the one thing left that was untouched by all the shit, all the badness and bludgeoned him with it. He got quiet then and said, "Okay," and "Goodbye." When he called back two days later he was sober but sounded exhausted. He said he was going to detox (for the hundredth time), that he was gonna get straight. She didn't give him any encouragement. It had been used up long before. He never mentioned what she

had said, choosing, it seemed, to ignore what neither could. He'd said, "I love you" and she said it back automatically, but with nothing behind it.

Her sobs slowed. Then stopped. She wiped tears and drippings from her nose on the sleeve of her jacket. She took out her phone and lit up the screen, and stared at the picture behind the icons and apps. It was still there. The picture of them sitting atop a picnic table at a barbeque, his arm thrown over her shoulder, pulling her close, both smiling. She checked it constantly, afraid it would disappear somehow. She woke up twice a night to check. Her eyes filled once more and when she looked up, an old woman was walking toward her, she moved around the flat headstones and stepped the fine line between the graves like a tightrope walker, slowly, but never looking down. Sheila hoped she wasn't going to sit. In her numbness, she didn't know much but she did know she wanted no one sitting next to her. For a moment, she thought the woman might go down a row to her right, but she only stopped, looked down at a plaque, said a few words, smiled, and then came toward her. She slid her phone back in her jacket pocket. The woman arrived out of breath and sat down heavily at the far end of the bench next to the wrought iron arm. Sheila slid a few inches the other way, and for the first time in over a week felt something other than sadness. She was annoyed. There were at least five other benches that she could see, why the hell did the old women have to sit here?

"I always sit on this bench under this tree." The woman's statement came so tight to Sheila's thought that it spooked her and made her insides jump. She was short with heavy legs and wore a dark green coat over a matching dress. Her thick pancake make-up seemed to ride over her face when she spoke like oil on water. Her lipstick was a dull red and matched the small circles of rouge on her cheeks. The old woman didn't look over. She rubbed her wrinkled hands together, slowly rolling one over the other, they never left her lap. Sheila glanced at her own hands, then looked back to Donnie's grave, then past it to the ivy-covered wall. She was blank, seeing nothing as she stared. It was a relief being empty. That's all she had been doing, feeling, and it was torture. Now as she stared at the wall, it melded in with the grass in a dreamy haze that seemed as close to a vacation as she had ever taken. Somewhere deep in her, she wished she could stay in the soft oblique blur. She pulled out slowly, holding on as long as she could. She didn't know how long she had been tranced but felt revived. Sheila said the word before she realized she had said it, but didn't regret it when it was gone.

"Why?"

"Because it's as far away from that sonofabitch I was married to as I can get and still be here," the old woman answered as if there had been no time lapse between the statement and the question. She kept rubbing her hands and staring out, then a slight smile divided her mouth, and her face brightened. "But I also like to say hi too little Ray over there. He was only fifteen when he passed." Sheila looked over toward where the old woman had stopped and said a few words earlier.

"How did he die?"

"I don't know. I never knew him."

She let out a sigh and pulled up the collar on her coat, then her hands went back to her lap and she started rubbing again. "But he was only fifteen. How bad could he have been?" She paused and looked at Sheila for the first time. Her eyes were blue and clear, but seemed off somewhere far away. Sheila had an overwhelming feeling it was somewhere better. "I like to think he died of some tragic disease after a gallant fight, instead of from a drive-by gang shooting." She paused and pursed her lips and her eyes came back from where they had been. "I'd like to think he would have been a good man. Maybe not a doctor or a lawyer, but a good solid man who would have treated people well, who would have helped his wife on and off with her coat and dressed up like Santa for his children." She looked out at little Ray's grave. "I like to think that. I like to think he would have been a better man. A better man than ones I have known." She nodded as if she were doing an internal approval. "Yes, he was young and deserved the benefit of the doubt." She nodded again with finality then went back to staring out. Sheila kept looking at the old woman, unable to pull her eyes away. Finally, the woman slowly stood and looked at her. "I am sorry if I intruded. Like I said, I always sit at this bench." Sheila wanted to say it was okay. She wanted to ask her to stay, to sit next to her for a week. To be there. But she only nodded, and the woman gave her a taut smile and stepped away. She stopped after a few feet and seemed to take in air, then stared at the ivy-covered wall. "We're stronger than them, you know. Always have been." Then sighed, gave a soft grunt and continued. Sheila watched as the woman did the same tightrope walk that had brought her. She saw her stop by little Ray's stone and say a few words, then bend and touch it. She straightened and continued toward the big iron gates at the entrance and finally through them.

Sheila sat there for a long time thinking of the old woman and what she had said. Eventually she looked over to little Ray's grave, then slowly over to Donnie's. She closed her eyes and balled her hands into fists. She found his smile and then his laugh in her mind. She relaxed into the bench, letting it support her back and trunk. She swung her legs slightly, released her fists, crossed her arms, and held them. They were his arms and his smile as they laughed their way through their first year and their last good night. That's what she had and it was as good as it was ever going to get for them.

SEAN MADDEN

PROPOSITION

On our way back from swimming at the rec center,
you suggested we go on hiatus. It was August, and
everyone around us was consciously uncoupling.
You said we owed it to ourselves. You said:
"I want you for always, Green, just—not yet."

Stopped at a red light, full moon on the rise.
I thought we were happy. You thought I'd be flattered.
Didn't I know that not everyone's worth waiting for?
And it's true; I was well-practiced in patience.

I could have agreed to it. I *could* have, but—
I was against the idea. In the freestyle of our life
together, I'd imagined us side by side,
lap after lap, mile after mile,
our strokes easy and evenly paced.
What breath was there to catch?

You gave up on trying to convince me
when it seemed your logic would never sink in.
Our goodnight kiss was cold and chlorinous,
and our fate—already determined, I figure,
like a tide table, carefully numbered.

And yet I wonder, as I net autumn leaves
out of an old friend's pool, as the sun goes down
on a decade without you: if we'd have made it,
really made it, you and me, had I just trusted
your judgment, and gone along
with your proposition.

THOMAS COMPTON

MICRO-SHORT FILM: A GOD DREAM

"A God Dream" is a micro–short film that looks at a relationship of convenience. Shot and produced by Thomas Compton, the film explores how two unnamed lovers, portrayed by actors Jet Summan and Georgia Neath, look vulnerable in the broad daylight of a Birmingham, UK park.

"A God Dream" can be viewed in full at: https://www.muw.edu/ponderreview/new-media/6331

KAMIL TANGALYCHEV
TR. FROM RUSSIAN BY DEAN FURBISH

DANTE
Данте

Out of eternity, open doorways creak
Inaudibly.
Whose footsteps in the grass?
Throughout my province Dante's
shadow
Roams amid the dying hamlets.

Shattered glass of library windows
Near the village council.
What's that light inside?
The wind in tragic silence
Leafs through *La Divina Commedia*.

The wind once knew the *Comedy*
By heart,
But then forgot it in the wilderness . . .
I'm accompanying Dante today
In villages devoid of souls.

And here there's neither hell nor
paradise.
Divine silence
Weeps in gloom . . .
Above Florence, the moon is burning,
Mirroring our village moon.

Из вечности распахнутые двери
Скрипят неслышно.
Чьи шаги в траве?
В моем краю тень Данте Алигьери
Блуждает средь угасших деревень.

В библиотеке возле сельсовета
Окно разбито.
Что за свет в окне?
Комедию божественную ветер
В трагической листает тишине.

А ветер знал комедию когда-то
Всю наизусть.
Но позабыл в глуши…
Сегодня я сопровождаю Данте
В глухом краю, где нету ни души.

Здесь нет уже ни ада и ни рая.
Божественная плачет
Тишина…
А над Флоренцией луна сгорает –
Как наша деревенская луна…

JUNKMAN

A sullen junkman rumbles through
The village with a heavy cart.
My village – slowly disappearing
As the junkman and his horse depart.

My Russian homeland vanishes –
A once-great nation breaks apart.
Tomorrow we shall see the junkman
Take my land forever on his cart . . .

Старьевщик

Грохочет угрюмый старьевщик
В деревне тяжелой арбой.
Деревня моя исчезает -
Старьевщик увозит с собой.

Россия моя пропадает,
Ветшает великий народ.
И Родину завтра старьевщик
С собой навсегда увезет...

LAURA G. GOETZ

KARPAS

To avoid fainting every time I stand up,
The neurologist prescribed salt pills.
Instead, I get creative with salt water—
My own daily *Pesach*.

Each morning I think of the research demonstrating
DNA tags that meant survival in slavery causing hypertension in African-Americans
Intergenerational trauma embodied
And inherited as health disparities.

Each morning I drink the tears of my own enslaved ancestors,
And wonder about the persecution I carry in my crevices.
More so, what traditions were dropped by those refugees
Fleeing with pockets of flat bread?

What could it mean to follow their trail of crumbs?

GWENDOLYN JENSEN

I WAS BORN OVER THERE

I was born over there,
in that space between those hills.
My mother gave me to the world
as its creature. I was born
and grew into a body, hard,
muscle-hard, thin and tough,
as durable as a barnacle,
with no claim to anything,
except a past I had not earned,
excepting life.

I walk outside that body now,
unfolded from that place, and dis-
associated. It is no longer
the circumference of my
humanity. It's like a field,
an abandoned oozy field,
perhaps it is the one my cat,
my Toby cat, once roamed the night.
And still the snakes and little frogs
search out the dawn.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ERIK LEWIN

GAME OF HORSE

It was the mid-1980s in the summer. My folks had a little bungalow in upstate New York. It was a glorious time of scarce parental supervision, when kids could explore safe places like the woods at night, underground tunnels, and deserted railyards.

The bungalow kids spent the weekday hours at a nearby camp. It wasn't much of a resort; more like a dirt field with a lone cabin at the end of it, overridden with graffiti etchings—mostly of the crude, sexual variety, the sort whose cultural prominence caught on at gas stations. At our prepubescent age though, that shack was a modern-art mural, so we'd hang in there and wrestle, talk about girls, and make up our own games. There were no phones, screens, or gadgets at that time, so we were pretty good at working with nature's earliest human invention—imagination.

We went on a field trip one day. All twelve boys stepped into the camp's navy blue van, helmed by our counselor, Mike, a twentysomething with a thick 'stache and tight shorts who led us to the exciting destination: a dude ranch with horses.

I had zero experience with horses, nor was I particularly keen on getting any. I'd always resisted the urge to ride a carnival mule, having felt a vague sense of unease about it, nor was I ever drawn to tales of Black Beauty. It was an odd activity choice for a bunch of boys and inside the van, there was a chorus of dissent.

On arrival, I took stock of the so-called ranch; it featured a ramshackle hut and a dusty, wooden corral full of horses standing around, dumbly chewing hay. Two ranchers came out to greet us. They did not inspire confidence; in retrospect, they were probably liquored up, had sunburnt, leathery skin, and wore wide-brimmed hats and buckles with whips. When one approached and opened his mouth, I noticed a front tooth was missing. A tattoo of Betty Boop glistened on his right forearm.

"All right, kiddies, less get liiiiiined up!"

The horses were led from the corral in a single-file line by Boop's partner, who pushed each kid up to straddle a horse's back. My buddy Paul was a few horses ahead and already sitting up in the saddle, grinning triumphantly. Paul had a doughy chin with a cookie-stuffed belly as heavy as his horse, and the poor animal now sagged under the weight of its new master.

Meanwhile, I was dead last, feeling a little squeamish, watching all the other kids mount up. It was finally my turn, and Boop approached to get me

situated on the last horse.

"All right, kid, you got yourself the nutball of the bunch," he said, spitting out a gob of chewing tobacco. "He ain't for visitors, but y'all brought more riders 'an we expected."

"Why isn't he for visitors?" I squeaked.

"He's a racehorse, but they made him quit 'cause he was actin' up." Boop saw the blood drain from my face. "Aw, iss all right, kid, I'll be right behind ya."

A racehorse? This guy didn't bother to ask if I'd ever been on any horse, let alone a bipolar one forced into early retirement. My horse even looked scarier than the others. Nutball's right eye was permanently half shut, so its open slit was very narrow and sinister.

In just a couple minutes on the trail, everyone was moving at a faster pace than me and Nutball. We had already fallen behind the pack. This drew the ire of Betty Boop, who took to whipping my poor horse.

"You no-good mule bastard," he shouted, bringing the leather whip down. "Damn idiot!" Another whip. Each time, Nutball bucked, and my balance was forced to shift. I held onto the reins and kept my feet in the stirrups, but it was hard to concentrate with this rancher yelling drunken slurs at my horse and beating him. We were out of earshot of counselor Mike, so I was left to deal with this bizarre situation all by myself.

The trail wound its way into a shaded wood, a canopy of leaves high above. The breeze grew cooler, and Nutball slowed to a near stop. This encouraged Boop to employ his discipline with even more fervor, bringing down several fresh lashes. Suddenly, Nutball bucked harder than before and took several long strides ahead. I was instantly up the trail alongside Paul.
"Dude," I said breathlessly, "this rancher is a maniac. He's beating my mentally ill horse. Poor Nutball," I said, softly petting his mane.

"Aw, he looks harmless," Paul said, stroking Nutball's head.

"Git back here!" Boop shouted, riding toward us.

At this, Nutball's mouth opened and bit down on Paul's hand.

"Yeowww!" Paul yelped.

"C'mere, you no-good…" Boop caught up and snapped the whip.

But that was it—Nutball's last straw—he was off like a shot, like his kidney caught fire, flying past every horse at a full gallop, his powerful limbs pushing until we were clear out of the woods into an open field, my little feet now out of the stirrups, my arms around Nutball's neck for dear life. He finally slowed after what felt like an eternity, and I fell on my knees to kiss the mud and horseshit like it was holy ground.

The rest of the guys were so far behind that I waited by the van for almost an hour; that's how fast Nutball covered that ground. He must've been a legend at the track. There must be a moment of silence for him every day.

"Where were you?" I shouted at Boop. "You were supposed to be right behind me!"

He spit up another goober of chewing tobacco. “Aw, you din’t need me, kid! I’d a jus’ slowed ya down!” He chortled, the other rancher cracking up too, both doubled over on their horses. Mike the counselor simply dusted me off, loaded us into the van, and drove Paul to the ER.

The event has since faded into memory, but when I think of it, the only thing that flew by as fast as Nutball did that day was my childhood. At the time, those summers stretched out long as taffy, but that was an illusion. In retrospect, they sailed past at hair-raising speed, now long gone.

When young, it’s a blissful unawareness of one’s fleeting mortality that seems to slow time. Once we age, mysteriously, we can no longer delay an onrushing flow of existence.

I’ve been thrown many times by loss and disappointment, but I always managed to get up again, though I would never get back on an actual horse. Nutball was too tough an act to follow.

CHRISTINA KLEIN

VELVET

BETSY HOUSTEN

PAPER DOLLS, ‘95

In the woods,
laced into steel-toed boots
and thrifted tops,

we drank vodka
from Snapple bottles
and pretended to make out

for the camera.
In any gang there’s one girl
who needs the night

to not end the most.
Like the negatives
I’d copy for them later,

my shadow self
rattled in its envelope.
I wanted to sew us together

by our hands
until the Jersey moon
could not tell us apart,

crashing through underbrush
like drunk hunters
not worried about giving

ourselves away. By morning
my body’d be mine again,
snipped, jonesing.

TO EVERY DENTIST I WILL EVER HAVE

I am going to curse, then I am going to cry, then I am going to explain why I'm cursing and crying. I've lost a lot of bone and two molars: the first *after* an old root canal splintered it, the other yanked out without my consent because the abscess would otherwise not heal, or so said the emergency dentist after he pulled it. A deep wrenching and then hollowness, wild phantom nothing, and still I thanked him, Novocain-numb like a gift from a kinder world. As a girl, I had five bad wisdom teeth and a post-op infection that locked my jaw for days. There's corpse sewn to my gums, dead flesh from the euphemistic tissue bank for my second gum graft after I chose tissue cut from my palate for the first and nearly bled out hours later, home alone and terrified, promising my body anything if it would only survive. My lower left lateral incisor's loose, stumbling in its socket like a drunken limb and I don't care if you think it's the cause, I'll never get rid of my lip ring and I will not tell you why. Splint the rebellious bitch to its neighbors. There's no getting back what we've lost. So many hands before yours in the ghost story of my mouth. How hard it is to stay open.

STEVE CUSHMAN

SKATEBOARD

My son and I are on the sidewalk in front of our house. It's two days after Christmas, and he's trying out his new skateboard. I hold his hands and pull him along. After a few minutes, he says I've got this, so I let go.

The first five, ten feet, are fine, and then he starts to fall forward, and I reach for him, but there's no way I can catch him. He hits the sidewalk hard. I expect a twisted arm, broken wrist, bloodied nose, maybe even a concussion. Instead, he jumps up and laughs, says, that was fun.

But my heart is pounding, and all I can think about is last summer. Him on his bike and me running behind, holding the seat. I looked up to watch a girl in green shorts jog by (mind you, this was summer, and her shorts were short and her legs tan and that's all the excuse I have) and let go of him for no more than a second, or two, long enough for me to lose my grip. And for some reason he jerked the handlebar, lost his balance, and crashed onto the sidewalk.

He was silent for a second and then stood and screamed and his forearm was bent in a way no bone should ever be. I looked up, and the girl was gone, but he was still there, crying, screaming, holding his arm, so I picked him up and ran home, tried to think of what I'd tell my wife. All I could come up with is, sorry, I'm so sorry, I slipped, he slipped. A crash. His arm. None of it enough to explain the mess I'd made.

He's back on the skateboard now and rolling along fine without me. I run beside him, hold my arms out in case he wants to take them for balance. Every once in a while, he reaches out for me. He's forgiven me for the bike accident. He's forgiven me for being his father. It's as if he's resigned to the fact I'm his. He's mine. And we're in this together.

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

It's early December, and my neighbors are stringing Christmas lights on the front of their house. The wife is up on the ladder while the husband is standing below, holding the ladder. I ask Julie what sort of man lets his wife risk life and limb while he stands on safe ground? Oh, she says, don't be so hard on him, maybe she insisted, maybe she loves heights, and he let her climb the ladder. I don't buy this until Julie hugs me from behind, whispers they aren't all as brave as you into my ear. And then I know I'd let her climb a ladder or have anything she damn well pleased.

DANIEL GARNER

CROSSINGS

JENNIFER BOSTWICK OWENS

VIEW FROM A PROMONTORY

This time I choose to go in by myself to ask for a trail map. Because he is black and I am white, I am forever slightly on edge about acceptance and discrimination when we arrive at a new location, whether restaurant, lodging or information desk. With the Northeast experiencing a heat wave, the air is hot and muggy like Tennessee, and gnats swarm around my mouth and nose. A sheet of paper taped to the wall inside the ranger's shack warns hikers to check for ticks, and I feel crabby.

"Do you have a lot of Lyme disease out here?" I ask.

The young guy says, "We do."

The old guy differs, "Not a lot."

Back at the car, my husband and I spray our shoes with repellent in a dusty gravel parking lot.

"We don't have to stay long," I say, adjusting expectations. The trail through the trees looks ordinary and overgrown.

In our mid-50s, married for close to three decades with now-grown daughters, we've spent the week making our way by rental car along the southern shore of Nova Scotia. This is the third summer we've left the heat of home to explore a little piece of Canada. So-called "anniversary trips," our short sojourns are efforts to leave behind routine and responsibility to share in something new.

Among stands of spruce and fir, we come upon an empty house from the 1800s, where we read historical markers and peek in at windows. Built for a successful fisherman with a large family, the weathered wood structure is not large by modern standards. From the wraparound porch, we investigate several rooms, envisioning husband, wife and children preparing vegetables, mending hook and line, eating pan-fried cod by candlelight, sleeping two or three to a bed. Our sense of time shifts to a larger scale, and we are no longer rooted in everyday reality. Across the trail, eroding headstones in the family cemetery mark three generations of drowned fishermen. As we continue on, past modern camp latrines, our imaginations swirl with ships, sons, wives and daughters from 200 years ago.

Emerging from the trees at a coastal headland, we climb enormous rocks jutting into the Atlantic. From this perch, the vista is striking: in the lower foreground a stream flows into the sea, and beyond that an immaculate beach surrounds a shallow, horseshoe-shaped bay, fir trees in the distance. It appears a beautiful, finished creation.

Across the inlet, a young couple and baby picnic and nap on a dune.

Again, space and time shift, elongate, conflate. The small family seems far from us—worlds away—in a landscape where natural elements dominate: boulders, ocean, dunes, bay, sky and the rhythmic crashing of waves.

We take off our sneakers, roll up our pants and step into the cold, mottled water, full of swirling plums and browns. We cross, stepping carefully on rocks where the water is deeper. Man, woman and baby disappear. The vastness and variety of the natural world draw us in, and wordlessly we begin to wander, each on our own.

For thousands of years ancient peoples camped and fished here. And for thousands of years the sea has eroded this craggy shore to form a bay. Out in the ocean, like primordial hairy beasts, massive rocks sit covered in dark, wet sea plants. I awaken to see that we humans are a part of something strange, surreal, extraordinary.

In the chilly stream where I wade, deep blues and burnt purples flow around pools of turquoise. Specks of light jump and sparkle on the surface. Rivulets carve the sand, forming plateaus with sharp, defined edges that, in shadow, look like broad calligraphy strokes, like Japanese ink painting, against putty-colored slabs of sand. Sliced lines, jagged curves: the water creates a map and a language. These bold marks, these changing and impermanent hieroglyphs, engrave the packed wet grains of granite underfoot.

My husband and I meet up on firm tableland.

"How long should we stay?" he murmurs.

"A while longer." I am entranced by this living text.

In silence, we follow raccoon tracks at our feet until they fade where the tide washes them out. Semicircular lips of foam creep forward in small waves along the beach. Ripples indent the sand.

I can see the gift of life—the exquisite tension between human experience, mortality and eternity—and even begin to understand that of death, of being released from the efforts and industry of our years on earth. I clasp my husband's large warm hand.

The water inscribes the coast, as it has since the last ice age, in a shimmering act of renewal—a process in which we are all participants, creating our own brave marks and patterns.

JESSE SENSIBAR

DEAD MAN'S LUNCH

Characters:

Mikey: A man in his 30's. Tow truck driver in a high-visibility safety vest.

Officer Ellis: A man in his 30's. Highway patrolman.

SETTING: Truck wreck on the side of a highway. Semi-darkened stage. Semi-truck lying on its side. The undercarriage is facing audience. At Stage left are MIKEY (lighted) and OFFICER ELLIS (lighted). A full body bag (unlighted) is next to them on the stage. Flashing yellow strobes off of stage left. Flashing red and blue strobes off of stage right. Sounds of slow moving traffic.

AT RISE: MIKEY sitting in chair facing audience, a small lunch box on ground next to chair. Inside lunchbox are a few sandwiches cut at an angle and a can of peaches with pull top and cookies. Body bag is close by (acts as looming third character). OFFICER ELLIS comes from off stage and walks up to MIKEY.

OFFICER ELLIS: Thanks for getting the road open so fast, Mike. Always glad when you show up, 'specially when I've got a mess like this. Any time I have something this bad I always ask dispatch to call you guys.

MIKEY: You're just lucky that this whole damn trailer didn't bust wide open when I started sliding' that fuckin' thing across the pavement loaded like that; you know them things aren't built for that anymore. We'd been out here for fuckin' hours pickin' up all that dog food. Hours. Fuck. You'd a had to call D.O.T to bring a damn snowplow out here to open this fuckin' road up. I'd had every wino in town out here shovelin' dog food for days. But I got this fucker in the safety lane now. It'll be alright. There ain't much more I can do about uprightin' this big bastard until my second truck gets here unless you wanna shut down the whole fuckin' highway for me.

OFFICER ELLIS: No, let's not do that. We can wait. It'll be fine. As long as I can have one lane open for now we're OK. Traffic's not too heavy yet. D.O.T. already has the Arrowboard truck out.

MIKEY: *(Stands up and waves arms)* Hell, open both of 'em up for now if you want, let'er rip. They're sendin' Allen down with that other truck. And you know how long that's gonna' fuckin' take. Turtle motherfucker. Hope he's brung hisself enough Pepsi.

OFFICER ELLIS: And cigarettes, don't forget about Allen and the cigarettes.

MIKEY: Oh yeah, have to have something to do with his other hand while he's out here standin' around on my wreck watchin' me work. He might as well just stand there on the shoulder of the road an' jerk off. Then you could arrest him for me; put him in your backseat so at least he'd be outta my fuckin' way.

OFFICER ELLIS: Not Allen. He'd be smoking and spilling soda back there. I'd get all kinds of grief from my Sergeant and Becky can't stand the smell of cigarettes right now. She's got morning sickness bad.

MIKEY: Not if you cuff him up, he wouldn't. Yeah, cuff him up nice an' tight.

OFFICER ELLIS: You wouldn't want me to do that to Allen.

MIKEY: Shit. You jest try me. *(Pause)* No. *(Pause)* No I wouldn't. Allen's a good guy, just slow; so fuckin' slow. *(MIKEY sits back down. He reaches down and opens lunch box.)* And he just don't have a monkey ass clue what to do on a wreck like this. He's been driving a wrecker since '86. You'd never know it by how he acts out here. Goddamn.

OFFICER ELLIS: What's that?

MIKEY: Looks like lunch I'm hoping.

OFFICER ELLIS: Lunch?

MIKEY: Yup, sure 'nuff. Let's see. . . sandwich. . . 4 cookies. . . apple. . . oh goody my favorite, cling peaches in heavy syrup. Hot damn, this must be my lucky day.

OFFICER ELLIS: You brought lunch out here at 5 AM? It's not even light out yet.

MIKEY: Nope. He did.

OFFICER ELLIS: Who did?

MIKEY: He did. *(MIKEY gestures to body bag)*

OFFICER ELLIS: Mike Harris, you mean to tell me you're eating a dead man's lunch?

MIKEY: Well yeah, but I'll share. No reason to get all butthurt about it. Hell, I'll even let you have the cookies if you want, jest don't get near my damn peaches.

OFFICER ELLIS: Mikey, that's not the point.

MIKEY: I know. You got a can opener? Otherwise I'm gonna hafta' climb back into that damn thing and find his.

OFFICER ELLIS: Mikey, for Christ sake, you cannot eat a dead man's lunch.

MIKEY: Why the hell not?

OFFICER ELLIS: Well, because you can't. It's just not right. I mean, here he is, lying right there beside us, the life crushed out of him, in that body bag, and you're just gonna' sit there beside him and eat his lunch?

MIKEY: Well, yeah. Can't do nothing else 'till Allen the Turtle gets here. Got all my chain laid out an' ready to go. Now all's I need is his truck to hook on the other end.

OFFICER ELLIS: But, but. . .

MIKEY: You sure you don't want some of this sandwich? Looks like meatloaf. With catsup and mustard. Bet it's homemade. All cut in half nice from corner to corner. Hell, that's just like my momma used to do. Somebody made this here lunch with love. You don't want all that love and care to go to fuckin' waste now do you?

OFFICER ELLIS: I think I'm gonna' be sick.

MIKEY: Why?

OFFICER ELLIS: Meatloaf. Catsup. *(Pause)* You didn't have to help put him in the bag.

MIKEY: Sorry 'bout that officer, guess I'll just have to have this whole sandwich for myself. How 'bout them fuckin' cookies? I got to eat all them too? Or are you gonna' be able to pick your feathers up out the mud and help me? Shit, maybe Allen'll want some cookies. Maybe turtles like cookies. I know they eat dead people, I seen it in the movies.

OFFICER ELLIS: Shut up.

MIKEY: What, you don't think I'm funny today?

OFFICER ELLIS: No, I think you're a goddamn vulture today.

MIKEY: Me! A vulture? Today! Shit, what about every day? You're goddamn fuckin' right I'm a vulture. Course I'm a vulture. Matter a fact I'm a big ol' fuckin' Turkey Buzzard with a red nasty long neck an beady eyes, just floatin' around over the highway, waitin' for twisted steel an death so's I can come on down an make a livin'. Like the man said, fuckin' buzzard gotta' eat, same as the worms, or sumpin' like that. What the fuck you think a wrecker driver is? I ain't like you. State pays you to come on out here an help people. Fuckin' "Serve and Protect" and all that good guy shit. But me? Fuck, I'm out here makin' a livin' off everyone else's misery and misfortune, or did that thought never cross yer fuckin' mind?

OFFICER ELLIS: Humm. . .

MIKEY: Goddamn right, huh? *(Pause)* What's his fuckin' name?

OFFICER ELLIS: Who?

MIKEY: Who the fuck you think? Who we been talkin' 'bout? *(MIKEY gestures toward body bag)* My goddamn lunch date here, that's who.

OFFICER ELLIS: *(OFFICER ELLIS pulls a notebook from his pocket. He checks the notebook.)* Johnston, Bruce. Bruce Johnston. But you're not supposed to know that. We haven't notified the next of kin yet.

MIKEY: That's Johnston with a T?

OFFICER ELLIS: *(OFFICER ELLIS checks notebook again.)* Yes.

MIKEY: No Shit! Hey, this wreck is out of Payson ain't it? I thought that's what it said on the door of this piece of shit.

OFFICER ELLIS: Yes. B&H Trucking out of Payson. That's who it's registered to.

MIKEY: You got an address on the Johnston guy? *(Pause)* Maybe. . . *(Pause)* Rural Route 3 Box some fuckin-thing or other I forgot?

OFFICER ELLIS: *(OFFICER ELLIS checks notebook again)* How the hell did you know that?

MIKEY: His mommy wrote it inside his fuckin' lunchbox.

OFFICER ELLIS: Really?

MIKEY: Fuck no!

OFFICER ELLIS: Well then how. . .

MIKEY: He's my brother-in-law.

OFFICER ELLIS: *(Pause)* Aw bullshit Mikey...

MIKEY: No, really he is.

OFFICER ELLIS: *(Pause*) For real Mike?

MIKEY: Well yeah. I mean, I ain't seen him an' I sure as fuck don't care to now, but I think that's my ex-wife's ex-brother-in-law you got zipped up in this here bag. Which pretty much makes him my brother-in-law, don't it?

OFFICER ELLIS: Well, I guess, in a roundabout kind of way. If you're not just blowing smoke up my britches. Which I'm not sure about yet, but I plan to find out.

MIKEY: Hey now, hold on a fuckin' minute. You ain't tellin' your wife none of this. She took real good care of me at the ER last time I cut my finger off. Real good care. Best nurse I ever had up there. Gave me all kinds of Morphine. They had this finger back on for I even knowed it. Didn't feel a fuckin' thing. She thinks I'm a nice guy. She even said so. You know how many people think I'm a nice guy? Not very fuckin' many, I'll tell you that. So don't you go ruinn' it for me Ok? Jesus, I thought we was friends.

OFFICER ELLIS: We are friends.

MIKEY: Then you'll keep your mouth shut.

OFFICER ELLIS: Yes.

MIKEY: You fuckin' promise?

OFFICER ELLIS: Just don't ever eat my lunch.

CLAIRE SCOTT

DAEDALAS

There he is. The mythical Daedalus. Right here in Lucas, Kansas. Population: 393, unless Sydney Salter has had her baby or old man Prescott has passed. You can catch him reading the Weekly Record on his porch each Sunday. Wednesdays he shuffle-walks to the store for skim milk, wheat bread, and strawberry jam. Frayed coat, scuffed shoes, slumped shoulders. His story stalled that afternoon over the Icarian Sea. He doesn't talk much. A simple *buongiorno* or *buonasera*. Every now and then you sense him drifting off, thinking of his son who dared to try. A flash of fire, a plummeting flame. He turns back to his cottage where he soaks his feet in Epsom salts, eats toast and jam with his tea. Sometimes he can hear the rustle of wings in his closet.

DANIEL GARNER

NEW ORLEANS

WENDY TAYLOR CARLISLE

PREFERRED

Love, tell me the story your hands tell,
your breath tells, explain

your bent shoulder, your cocked knee.
Tell me your truth, sing me your myth.

Adored and ignored was mine.
I talk about it endlessly—

dark barn afternoons and greaser boys,
old cars, her temper and my smart-ass

replies. Maybe I was a nuisance,
certainly a nuisance but some rainy

afternoons, her best-liked,
her preferred. I cannot know what

Mother feared in me, for me.
Why was she so relentless?

MICHAEL CHIN

MONITOR

I got obsessed. It's not weird. Look it up.

You carry a growing ball of life inside you for ten months, and you fall in love. When he's outside of you, you recognize that the world is a big, dangerous place, and you want to protect him from it. It's called maternal instinct.

Ricky said I was crazy, three weeks in, when I still wanted to hold Joseph all the time, and when I carried the bassinet from room to room so I could keep an eye on him when I got the laundry together or dusted or did the dishes. I started kissing Joseph's forehead twice—once over each eyebrow—before I set him down because I wanted him to know I loved him. It evolved into something I had to do. Call it superstition, but crib death happens, and Joseph never died after I'd kissed him twice, so who was I to stop?

Ricky claimed I was torturing the kid when I insisted on having Joseph in a carrier, even when I vacuumed, even though the noise made him cry.

But, I didn't trust Ricky. Not that he'd do anything malicious, but that he got too wrapped up in playing on his phone and not paying enough attention to our son, and I caught him not kissing Joseph's forehead before he put him down.

I'm not crazy.

Ricky bought the monitor. He prepared a federal case about it. Showed me the reviews that the Howdy Kid! brand was best beloved on all the parents websites and tried to sell me on how I could watch Joseph from another room while he napped peacefully, and maybe he'd learn to entertain himself or self-soothe if I wasn't with him all the time.

Ricky said it like spending time with my son was a burden.

Still, I was tired.

I was tired from carrying Joseph so much—four months, and he was up to fifteen pounds, and I wasn't sure if I were getting stronger from the exercise or weaker for the exertion. So it was that we plugged in the camera next to his crib, and kept the receiver plugged in to charge it any time we weren't using it on-the-go in the house.

Time marches on, and you start to trust someone a little more again, within limits. I let Ricky take some shifts with the monitor, and let him hang out with Joseph on their own for increments of time while I slept or picked up groceries.

I was so tired.

I was watching the monitor—staring, really—when the crib was

suddenly empty. There was some sort of motion in the lower corner of the screen as if Joseph had somehow climbed out to the floor, and I could see the top of his head. The kid wasn't nearly mobile enough to have gotten himself there, though.

I sprinted back to the nursery.

Joseph was there, in the crib, snoring softly on his side. I picked him up and held him tight. He only woke enough to rustle in my arms but fell back asleep, cheek pressed to my shoulder.

It had to have been a glitch on the monitor.

Or I was losing my mind.

I didn't tell Ricky about the monitor. I'd stopped telling him about little things, like Joseph turning himself from one side to the other lying down, or the way he stared at the ceiling fan in the kitchen as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. Ricky came home from work tired. I get it. Ricky had been tired after eight hours in the office even before we had a baby.

It was a few days later when I looked at the monitor, and there was no crib at all — just two boys, maybe seven or eight years old.

Another glitch—the receiver had to have connected up to someone else's camera.

Except I recognized one of these boys. Something in his cheeks and the shape of his mouth.It was Joseph.

I know it sounds crazy, but a mother knows her son, and I could tell straight away that he was the smaller of the two boys, the other chubbier, a little taller.

The bigger boy punched his arm.

I was outraged. I carried the monitor back toward the nursery, ready to tell this brute to keep his hands to himself.

But, in the monitor, Joseph didn't seem upset at all. I stopped outside the nursery door and watched as the bigger boy offered his shoulder to Joseph to punch him back.

Time passed. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but at the same time felt like minutes, maybe hours. The boys both rolled their t-shirt sleeves up over their shoulders and studied each other's bruises with the sort of dumb-boy fascination I never understood but remembered clearly from when I was their age.

When I opened the nursery door, Joseph was still a baby. Still asleep.

I tried to figure out how to broach the topic of the monitor with Ricky, so I wouldn't sound like a crazy person, and so he'd believe me. I decided he'd need to see for himself. Let him come to me and wonder if he was losing his mind. Then I could be the one to reassure him. We'd be on the same page again—maybe the first time since we got pregnant. Equally lost, equally wary of our mental states. There was a comfort in sharing that.

I left him with the monitor, Joseph snoozing in his crib, Ricky plopped on the couch while I boiled water for spaghetti.

But I never heard Ricky bolt to see if Joseph were gone, and he never showed up in the kitchen, monitor in his shaking hand, to ask if I saw the same thing he did in whatever future-scape it might have revealed this time.

Was I crazy?

No.

Ricky was asleep.

I threw both plates of spaghetti to the floor. A crashing sound. A mess of glass shards, marinara, and noodles, and Ricky asking What the hell? And my yelling back, Do you know how dangerous it is to not watch a baby?

Joseph was crying. The little lights on the top of the monitor—the gauge for the volume of a baby's screaming—rushed past the mid-point, produced when the across-the-street-neighbor gunned
his motorcycle all the way into the red zone. It was a full-blown explosion of emotion and need.
I rushed to be with Joseph.

I was seeing the future in the monitor. No matter if it were only me seeing it. And though I recognized it as dangerous that I couldn't actually see Joseph in the present moment in the monitor, if I were seeing his future, it meant he hadn't died, so things couldn't be so bad in his unmonitored crib. I saw him shaving. Reckless, uneven strokes of the razor against a thick layer of shaving cream. He looked too young to need to shave even, but I imagined that boys craved that rite of passage the way Iwas desperate for a bra before I had breasts.

I'd come to see more than a picture on the monitor. It's hard to explain, but the experience was more immersive, less like watching a movie than living a dream in which I could understand things I had no reason to, experiencing more than the sights and sounds, more than even the smells or tastes but entering Joseph's headspace long before I registered that I shouldn't even have been able to see blood-red in the black-and-white picture from the monitor.

He'd cut himself. A lot of blood, but I could tell he felt it was more of a nuisance than a serious hurt. He wadded up toilet paper and worried about whether the cut would be visible by the time he got to school.

The toilet paper, too, turned red, soaking up my boy.

Ricky and I were having sex again. It was a step. For him to want my post pregnancy body enough to initiate. For me to give up my full waking attention to Joseph for even those few minutes.

Ricky smelled cleaner than me.

I wasn't sure when I'd last showered.

He fell asleep when he was done.

I picked up the monitor.

I saw Joseph's room. I could recognize with certainty for that point in the wall where the shade of blue paint shifts darker because Ricky bought two different colors and thought they were close enough and always promised to fix it, and I knew he never would.

The room was different, though. No crib. A full-sized bed. And that teenage boy smell I'd almost forgotten about from my brother and the boys I dated in high school.

Joseph was the oldest I'd seen him at that point. Probably his late teens, maybe a senior in high school. His shoulders broad, his hair gelled. There was a girl with him.

I couldn't hear them, but I could sense bits of each of them. He wanted her. She wasn't so sure. He moved in very close to her. He hugged and lifted her in the air. She giggled about that.

He threw her to his bed.

He was rough.

The girl put a hand to his shoulder. It looked like she meant to push him away or at least slow him down. He kissed her hard, bulling his tongue between her lips, between her teeth, penetrating as far as it would go.

I tried to tell him to stop.

Ricky came home late one night. Late enough, I couldn't wait any longer to eat and opened a can of chicken noodle soup, even though I knew he'd be mad if he'd had to work late, and I'd gone ahead with dinner without him.

I told him he had to call if he was going be late like that.

He came back stinking of Jack Daniels, tie loose around his neck. I asked where he'd been and he asked what I was getting so worked up about. He said he'd told me he had a happy hour, and I pointed out he was more than an hour late. Going on three hours. He said he was sorry, but rolled his eyes when he did it, and I thought for sure we were going to fight, but he plopped down on the couch and fell asleep instead.

Joseph woke in the middle of the night, while Ricky was still out on the couch. The kid was down to getting up just once in the wee hours of the morning to feed. A blessing.

Half-asleep, I carried his monitor with me to the nursery, and the feedback howled when it got too close to the camera. I got Joseph out of the crib and carried him out to the kitchen to fix his bottle. He drank it all—he'd grown into a good eater—and then settled on my shoulder where I tried to burp him, and he fell asleep.

I saw Joseph bigger than me. Probably seven or eight inches taller and certainly stronger. A little older still than I'd seen him in his room with that girl. I looked thin—a relief that I finally lost the baby weight, but thinner than I'd like. Frail. The way sunlight filtered in through the window, it had to be late afternoon or early evening.

He yelled at me, and I yelled back. I could hear the sharp edges, but I couldn't make out the words. I stood in my bare feet, and he wore tennis shoes with mud caked on them. Maybe that's all it was. A mother-son quarrel about keeping the house neat and leaving footwear at the door. I could live with that. But that wasn't it.

I stopped arguing. My lower lip was trembling, my eyes watering. I

was fighting it. But Joseph wouldn't stop yelling. This wasn't one fight. It was a lot of fights. The culmination of a lifetime up to that point, maybe twenty years.

I touched a hand to his arm, but he swung it wildly like he might hit me, and whether he meant it or not, I could feel all the fear and anger, but most of all, the sorrow bubbling from his eyes.

"Please stay."

He left.

I fell to my knees, sobbing loudly enough that he had to hear me, even from outside the house. Maybe he'd come back to me.

Joseph had his head cocked, turned over his shoulder, looking at the monitor in my hand, sucking on his three middle fingers, eyes drooping. I hadn't noticed him wake. But had he seen what I'd seen? Ricky still hadn't offered any sign of anything strange when he looked into the monitor. Maybe it only showed things to me. But if someone else could see through the screen, could transport in time, wouldn't it be my son?

He belched and flopped his head back down against my shoulder, asleep again.

I held him there and then balanced him against my body as I rinsed off the bottle pieces in the kitchen sink. It was still dark there. The sun was coming up on the opposite side of the house.

I carried Joseph back to the nursery and kissed his forehead twice before I put him back in the crib. He still smelled so sweet.

ANN-MARIE BROWN

TOWARDS A NEW ICONOGRAPHY

CREATIVE NONFICTION

COURTNEY HILL GULBRO

ON TETHERED WINGS

The air is a little cooler, a little clearer, on Monte Sano, "mountain of health." Rising 1,650 feet above sea level, 1,000 feet over north Alabama's glittering city of Huntsville, this foothill of the Appalachians is a part of my family. As with kin, I want to stay, and I want to go.

I've tried to leave it many times. At eighteen, I married and moved downtown, then to Georgia, and back to Huntsville at twenty. My parents held the fort on the mountain; I could travel about and still call it home.

Later my journeys took me to live on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, then to the Pacific Northwest of the United States, on to Europe and Asia. But always, always, I was pulled to this mountain. Home.

Oddly, I've always felt as though I'm perching. With the many moves in my life, a lot of places felt temporary. Now, in this house on the mountain for ten years and counting, I don't even make the effort to put nails in these hard walls—tricky without cracking the plaster. I just hang a few pictures in the places where others' artwork and photos made this house their home. Still perching—even on Monte Sano—even at home. Ready to leap across the country, around the world, like before.

My father's family first came here in 1929 to spend summers escaping the heat in town. Back then the ice delivery truck had to drive the last leg in reverse to be able to push its weight up the climb. A few years later the family moved up permanently. "There's nothing better than to sit on the stone wall surrounding Twelve Pines," my grandmother often said of the first property she and Granddaddy owned. Despite building other houses on the mountain, the bungalow among the pines was like heaven to her.

Daddy was the mountain's first paper boy. He told me about riding his bike from one end to the other—a two-mile crest sparsely populated at that time—and the occasional crash going down a hill too fast. Over the years he pointed out land that he knew as a large farm, now home to two churches and several houses. With him I've walked the neighborhood filled with mid-century ranchers that, during his childhood, held an encampment of Civilian Conservation Corps workers here to build the state park and rock walls that grace it. Sitting in the living room where I live now, Daddy pointed out a spot in the front yard where a bootlegger hid bottles behind a tree.

A creek running behind the house where I grew up was the Rio Grande to Daddy and his friends when they played cowboys and Indians as children;

the surrounding woods were a make-believe Wild West. By the time I came along, that creek was to be feared as snake-ridden. Now it's barely a trickle, the land shuffled by development over the years.

On walks I pass houses where I was nurtured by my grandparents' hugs and homemade cobbler. I notice families moving in where five decades ago I spent the night with school mates. New neighbors are in the place where my sixth-grade teacher lived with a tree growing up through her enclosed front porch and out of the roof. The tree is long gone, the roof filled in. But I can still see that tree as it was back then.

Lining the boulevard across the top of Monte Sano is a sidewalk, now cracked and old, but in in my mind's eye it's brand new white concrete, a trail of blood dotting it from when Charlie knocked the wart off my finger as he ran by in a hurry to get home after school.

Many mornings as I stroll a section of the road through the state park, now crumbling and closed to traffic, I remember begging my mother to drive that "short-cut," even though it took longer. The woods were just so soothing. They still are.

A little further down that windy road, in the summer of 1961, the neighbor who was to be my first-grade teacher, died in a Sunday morning wreck. Seven years later, near that same spot on the back side of the mountain, I was one of the many mountain kids in an overcrowded school bus that flipped and killed one of us, hurt the rest. We still carry that shared trauma in our hearts and our bones.

I learned to drive on these curvy roads up and down Monte Sano and feel as though now I could maneuver them blindfolded. The dense fog that comes when the clouds waft low doesn't keep me from sensing my way around the larger curves spaced comfortably on the front side, or the sharp hairpins on the long back road.

When that fog cloaked the mountain many nights of my childhood, I gazed out my bedroom window to see the comforting glow on my grandparents' porch across the way. On other nights, from that same bedroom I listened for my boyfriend's car to reach the top on his way to pick me up for a date.

One of the two churches up here cradled my family in joy at my wedding, and in sorrow at the funerals of my mother and father. Over the years it nurtured our collective spiritual path.

My family is now gone from this mountain. My grandparents died almost 50 years ago, my mother close to four decades past, and Daddy six years gone. My sisters don't live here anymore.

I'm the lone guard of the Hill family on Monte Sano.

Does it still fit? I don't know. But the pull is physical—my heart is attached to the dirt, the tall trees, the singing birds—descendants of those I listened to as a child. Long-ago loved pets buried here and there across the neighborhood, now part of the dirt, feeding those trees, holding those birds.

So, it's also the present. Across the mountain we dine around each

other's tables, talk books and politics, bring souvenirs from far-flung travel, celebrate birthdays, all in the circle of my dear Monte Sano friends.

But then there's this: My whole life I have felt responsible for my family. From a recurring childhood dream—in the 1956 blue two-tone Mercury parked at the cemetery, my sisters flank me in the backseat; Mama and Daddy out looking at graves. The car starts to roll, and I jump to the front to put on the brake. Rescuing us.

From the conflicts between my older sister and my father—I felt compelled to help them see each other's side.

Over the years, every time I left on one adventure or another, I sensed I was leaving Daddy— abandoning him—especially after Mama died. I was intensely aware that he— the family—wanted me home. They told me that often enough. Perhaps it was their way of saying they would miss me. And of course, they would, but that doesn't mean they wanted to keep me from following my heart. Surely. Still, I felt guilty for leaving them.

Now, somehow, I feel responsible for keeping the family on the mountain. It's not a specific building that's home; it's the mountain itself. I live blocks away from the house I grew up in. If I leave this mountain, our family will no longer have a home. Irrational, I know. They've got their own homes elsewhere—some on earth, some in heaven.

Perhaps that tug, that pull to stay, is that *I* won't have a home if I leave. For now, I remain, yet I still perch, ready to take off again.

CONTRIBUTORS

TAYLA TATE BOERNER draws on her childhood to deliver readers back to a simpler time when screen doors slammed and Momma baked cornbread for supper every night. Boerner, a fourth-generation Arkansas farm girl, has been published in *Arkansas Review*, *Fourth River Literary Journal*, and *Deep South Magazine*. She writes regular columns for *Delta Crossroads* and Farm Bureau's *Front Porch* magazine. Boerner believes word-of-mouth marketing is a powerful thing and trusts her debut novel, *The Accidental Salvation of Gracie Lee*, will someday find its magical way to the big screen via Reese Witherspoon's desk. *Last Call at the Dairy Freeze* will be produced and performed by Five & Dime Drama Collective as part of their Fall Performance Series in Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

ANN-MARIE BROWN is a Canadian painter working in encaustic and oil. Over the past few years, she has worked in Helsinki, Sofia, Paris, and Montreal. She is currently hunkered down in a small house on the west coast of BC in the company of rain and bears. Check out her website at www.annmariebrownpaintings.com.

KELLY "NATIVE CHILD" BROWN is a licensed therapist, word warrior, award-winning poet, Anishinaabe kwe, mother, wife, survivor, and slam master of Colorful Women Slam, Inc. She spends her days bridging the gap between conservative and radical feminism and volunteering on the speakers' bureau of various nonprofits dedicated to educating the community about and ending domestic violence. She incorporates poetry into her activism, therapy, and everyday life. A Detroit native, she is proud of both her American Indian ancestry as a member of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe and her African American ancestry. She blends both worlds into her poetry and is working on her first spoken word album, *Letters to My Daughters*.

HISHAM BUSTANI is an award-winning Jordanian author of five collections of short fiction and poetry. English language translations of his work have appeared in such places as *The Kenyon Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Poetry Review*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *World Literature Today*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly*. His book, *The Perception of Meaning* (*Syracuse University Press*, 2015) won the University of Arkansas Arabic Translation Award. He received the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Fellowship for Artists and Writers in 2017. He serves as the Arabic fiction editor of *The Common*.

WENDY TAYLOR CARLISLE lives and works in the Arkansas Ozarks. She is the author of five chapbooks and three books, most recently *The Mercy*

of Traffic (Unlikely Books, 2019). Her work appears in *pacificREVIEW*, *The 2River View*, *Artemis*, *Barzakh*, *Cider Press Review*, and others as well as in the recent anthologies *Untold Arkansas* (Et Alia Press, 2018), *50/50* (*QuillsEdge Press*, 2018), and *Fiolet & Wing* (Liminal Books, 2019). For more information, check out her website at www.wendytaylorcarlisle.com.

MICHAEL CHIN was born and raised in Utica, New York, and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He is the author of two full-length short story collections: *You Might Forget the Sky was Ever Blue* from Duck Lake Books and *Circus Folk* from Hoot 'n' Waddle; his third collection, *The Long Way Home* is forthcoming in 2020 from Cowboy Jamboree Press. Chin won the 2017-2018 Jean Leiby Chapbook Award from *The Florida Review* and *Bayou Magazine's* 2014 James Knudsen Prize for Fiction. Find him online at miketchin.com and follow him on Twitter @miketchin.

EDWARD M. COHEN's plays have been produced at the O'Neill Theatre Center, Playwrights Horizons, Theatre at St. Clements, Florida Studio Theatre, University of Tel Aviv and Sarah Lawrence College. He has been a member of the Actors Studio Playwrights Unit and New Dramatists, a fellow at the Edward Albee Foundation, and recipient of grants from the NEA and NYSCA. For many years, he was associate director of New York's Jewish Repertory Theatre.

THOMAS COMPTON is a graduate of the University of Birmingham, a filmmaker, and a writer. Taking projects to the Edinburgh Fringe and producing documentaries for theater companies, he is always trying to find the most unique and authentic stories.

STEVE CUSHMAN earned an MFA from UNC-Greensboro and has published three novels. His first poetry collection, *How Birds Fly*, is the winner of the 2018 Lena Shull Book Award. Cushman lives with his family in Greensboro, North Carolina.

SCOTT FERRY helps heal our veterans as an RN. His recent work can be found in Cultural Weekly, KYSO Flash, and Swimming with Elephants. He was a finalist in the 2019 Write Bloody Chapbook Contest. His first collection, The only thing that makes sense is to grow, will be published by Moon Tide Press in January 2020.

DEAN FURBISH is a literary translator who lives in Raleigh, NC. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his translations of Yevgeny Vinokurov. His translations of Russian short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Conduit*, *International Poetry Review*, *Metamorphoses*, *Poetry East*, *Poetry New York*, *Quarterly West*, *Regarding Arts & Letters*, *Two Thirds North*, *Xavier Review*, and elsewhere, while forthcoming in *The Raintown Review*. He is a biology professor emeritus who has led student travel groups to French Canada and Russia.

DANIEL GARNER, while at the University of Virginia, worked collaboratively with other artists at Eunoia, a creative community he developed in Charlottesville, Virginia. Garner now lives on an operating family farm and photographs pieces representing misinterpretation, wandering, and negative space.

CHRIS GAVALER has published five books of fiction and comics scholarship and is an associate professor at Washington and Lee University, where he serves as comics editor of *Shenandoah*. His graphic work appears in *Sequentials*, *Aquifier*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Ilanot Review*, *The Sonder Review, Two Cities Review*, and *Redivider*.

LAURA G. GOETZ is an overly enthusiastic medical student, writer, photographer, biker, runner, and research dork, with a penchant for cooking without recipes and referencing Audre Lorde, Donna Haraway, and *Buffy*. Currently based in New York, her goal (as both an artist and a doctor-in-training) is to help people feel seen. Her prior training includes an MS in transgender hormone therapy and a BS in biochemistry and gender studies, focusing on interdisciplinary scientific research informed by individual embodied experiences. More of her poetry and photography can be found in *Intima*, *Siren*, *Vitality*, *Reflexions*, *Broad Recognition*, and *La Madrugada*.

COURTNEY HILL GULBRO is a counselor and counselor educator who now writes memoir and personal essays. After living and working around the world in places such as Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands; Germany; Japan; Arcata in northern California; and Lake Tahoe, Nevada, she's back in her hometown of Huntsville, Alabama, with her husband and two cats. She loves to follow trails in the woods. Her essays have appeared in places such as *Nature Writing* and *the Same*.

BETSY HOUSTEN is a queer writer and massage therapist who earned her MFA at the University of New Orleans. She makes her home in Brooklyn. Her writing appears in *Autostraddle*, *Rogue Agent*, *The Hunger*, *Lunch*, *Bone & Ink Press*, *Little Red Tarot*, and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for Best New Poets, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart Prize. You can find her at www.betsyhoustenwrites.com.

SARAH ILER grew up in Virginia and Greenville, Illinois. She currently resides in Roanoke, Virginia, and works as a social worker. She spends her time outside work pursuing the practice of art through writing, photography, and drawing. She also enjoys reading, watching stand-up comedy, spending time outdoors with her dog, Rumi, and participating in foosball tournaments. Iler's work appears in issue two of *The Stirling Spoon*, and she has two poetry fragments in the online journal *Passaic / Völuspá*.

GWENDOLYN JENSEN retired from the presidency of Wilson College in 2001, after many years in academia. *Birthright*, her first of three poetry books published by Birch Book Press, was published in 2011 in a letterpress edition (with a second printing in 2012). Jensen's second book, *As If Toward Beauty,* was released in 2014. Her third book, *Graceful Ghost*, is a letterpress edition and was published in 2018. The print and online journals where Jensen's poems and translations have appeared include *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, and *Salamander*.

SYLVIA JONES thinks in line breaks. She is currently an MFA candidate at American University, where she serves as a poetry reader for *FOLIO*. Her writing has appeared in the Black Mountain Press, In *Parentheses*, and *Poictesme*. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her girlfriend, Agata, and their buff tabby cat, Theo.

CHRISTINA KLEIN is a painter and sculptor from Fairview, Kansas. Christina's current body of work focuses on researching and documenting the changes in rural communities. Her process begins with the meditative process of playing with materials, sewing canvases together using recycled fabric, mixing textures, and creating shadows with the seams that stretch across the surface. She builds upon the narrative of loss and change by using recycled cardboard, fabric from couches, and other sources to build soft sculptures that resemble domestic structures from homes. Klein received her MFA from Florida State University and recently completed her Fulbright fellowship at the Academy of Fine Arts, Nuremberg.

CLAIRE LAWRENCE is a storyteller and visual artist from British Columbia, Canada. She is a world traveler and finds that every place has a unique light and color signature. For example, the northern light in British Columbia falls on damp, verdant cedar forests. The colors released tend to be homogeneous bands of green and gray, whereas "Rays Over the Atchafalaya Swamp" explores how each shaft of light cuts through the humid air and disperses layers of color over the slow-moving, stagnant waters. She believes there is beauty in the dying and decaying life cycle, along with the promise of regeneration and renewal.

ERIK LEWIN is author of the humorous coming-of-age novel, *Son of Influence*, and has published many essays in prominent outlets like *Real Vegas Magazine, GNU Journal, Literate Ape* and more. A former criminal defense attorney, Erik practiced law in New York City and Los Angeles, until changing career paths. He is working on a second book, *Grief Monster*, a personal story of losswritten as a sweet and sardonic guide to helping others cope with grief. Erik also performs stand-up comedy in venues around the country and currently resides in Las Vegas with his fiancé and their two cats.

E.R. LUTKEN grew up in the South, spending much of her time outdoors. She moved inside, studied medicine, and worked as a physician for many years, initially in urban emergency rooms, then for a short span overseas, but most of those years were spent as a family doctor in the Navajo Nation. After that, she rebooted and taught 7th-12th-grade science and mathematics in rural Colorado for a few years. Now she spends her time studying math and science, reading, writing poetry, fishing in the swamps of Louisiana, and exploring the mountains of New Mexico.

SEAN MADDEN is an analyst at the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. His story, "How the Lonesome Engine Drivers Pine," was a finalist for Alternating Current Press's 2018 Luminaire Award for Best Prose. He is also a co-recipient of the 4th annual John Updike Review Emerging Writers Prize. His work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Blue River*, *Waccamaw*, and *Dappled Things*. He holds an MFA from the University of Kentucky and lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada with his wife and sons. Visit him at www.seanmadden.org.

CHARLES MALONE grew up in rural Northeast Ohio, headed west to the Rockies, came back to the Great Lakes, and has loved all of it. His chapbook, *Questions about Circulation*, is out with Driftwood Press as part of the Adrift Chapbook Series. He edited the collection *A Poetic Inventory of Rocky Mountain National Park* with Wolverine Farm Publishing and has work recently published or forthcoming in *Hotel Amerika*, *The Best of Boneshaker: A Bicycling Almanac*, *Sugar House Review*, *Dunes Review*, and *saltfront*. He now works at the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University coordinating community outreach programs.

JENNIFER BOSTWICK OWENS has published nonfiction in *The Evansville Review, The Nasiona*, *Mothering* and other magazines. An active member of The Porch Writers' Collective in Nashville, she coaches graduate students in writing at Vanderbilt and has taught undergraduates in California and Tennessee. She loves dogs, ping pong, photography, great essays, and picture books that show cultural and ethnic diversity in positive stories. Now that her daughters are grown, she volunteers to read to preschoolers at a Title 1 Metro Nashville public school.

EDWARD SAGE has been an English teacher in Greshsam, OR for the past 22 years. Happily married, he and his wife Kate live in Portland, OR with their two beautiful children: Oliver and Lillian. His poetry has appeared in *ZYZZYVA* and *4th Street Journal* under his former name, Ed Varga Jr. and in *Verseweavers* and the *Portland Review* online as Ed Sage. Although he once wrote poetry almost exclusively, things have changed. Of his piece in this issue, he says, "The relationship between men and our bodies is so often wrought with shame

that proves toxic to ourselves and those in our lives. This is an underlying theme in a good deal of my longer form writing. This particular piece hinges on a traumatic event involving my uncle and some opportunities he gave to me through it."

JOHN SCHAFER is a writer and actor who was born and raised on the North Side of Chicago. He was a member of the Latino Chicago Theater Company and earned a degree from Illinois State University. As an actor, he has appeared in a number of films and television shows. His screenplays for *The Unconcerned and Bruised Orange* have been produced. His short stories and essays have appeared in *Guernica*, *Amor Fati*, *Medium, Short Story*, *The Kiss* (W.W. Norton 2018), *Palooka*,Tangent, and The Writer's Compass. He's just finished Transcendental Blues, a novel in three parts.

CLAIRE SCOTT is a recently retired psychotherapist who is enjoying having more time to write, taking long walks, and trying to stay ahead of the weeds. She is excited to be spending more time with her five grandchildren who are scattered around the country. She is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam*, and *The Healing Muse*, among others. She is the author of *Waiting to Be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry.*

JESSE SENSIBAR is not afraid to die, but he is terrified of dying alone. He spends his time writing and promoting the art of storytelling. You can find him in the dying Ponderosa Pine forests surrounding Flagstaff, Arizona or in the barrios of Tucson, Arizona. His work has appeared in *The Tishman Review*, *Stoneboat Journal*, *Waxwing*, and others. His fiction was shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award and the Wilda Hearne Flash Fiction Prize. His first book, *Blood in the Asphalt: Prayers from the Highway* (*Tolsun Press*), was shortlisted for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. Visit him at jessesensibar.com.

IONE SINGLETARY graduated in May 2019 with her MFA from The University of the South at the age of 50. She is a single mother of two boys, ages 14 and 10, and a servant of two queen cats. She lives in Nashville, TN, where she is an associate professor of English at a community college and a member of The Porch Writers' Collective.

KIMM BROCKETT STAMMEN's writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Typehouse*, *Rosebud*, *Crack the Spine*, *Atticus Review*, and other publications. She was a second-place winner in Typehouse's 2019 Short Story Contest and was shortlisted for the Eyeland's International Short Story Prize. She holds an MFA from Spalding University.

PIA TAAVILA-BORSHEIM grew up in Walled Lake, Michigan, and now lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia, with her husband, David Borsheim. She received her BA and MA in American Literature from Eastern Michigan University (1977, 1979) and an interdisciplinary PhD (1985) from Michigan State University with areas of qualification in English, sociology, and philosophy. She is a tenured, full professor and teaches literature and creative writing at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. In 2008, Gallaudet University Press published her *Moon on the Meadow: Collected Poems 1977–2007*. *Finishing Line Press* published *Two Winters* in 2011, and a chapbook, *Mother Mail*, from *Hermeneutic Chaos Press* was released in January 2017. *Love Poems* is out from *Cherry Grove Press* (2018). She has just finished a full-length manuscript of poems titled *Above the Birch Line*, newly accepted by Gallaudet University Press.

MAIA TABET is an Arabic-English literary translator living in Washington D.C. Her translations have been widely published in journals and literary reviews including *The Common*, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, *Words Without Borders*, *Portal 9*, and *Banipal*, among others. She is the translator of Sinan Antoon's *The Baghdad Eucharist*; *White Masks and Little Mountain* by Elias Khoury, and the co-translator of the winner of the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, *Throwing Sparks* by Abdo Khal. She recently completed her translation of Hisham Bustani's *The Monotonous Chaos of Existence*, which features this story.

KAMIL TANGALYCHEV is an award-winning Russian poet who lives in Saransk. Author of 15 books of poetry and essays, Tangalychev is People's Poet of Mordovia and a regular contributor to*Literary Russia*. An ethnic Tatar, Tangalychev's poetry exudes the culture and natural world of his homeland steppe. Recipient of the Gratitude Award from the World Congress of Tatars, Tangalychev'spoetry has been translated into other languages of Russia: Moksha, Erzya, and Tartar. Neoclassical in style in the rich tradition of Russian poetics, Tangalychev's poetry reveals surprising metaphors while addressing transculturally transcendent themes in a contemplative, engaging manner, including storytelling and legend spinning.