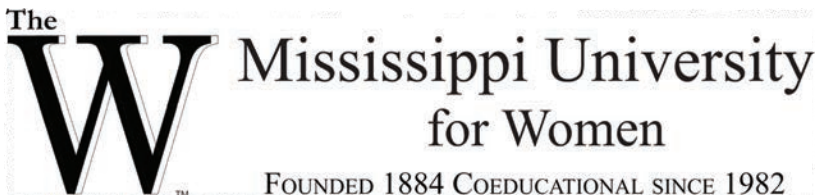


PONDER REVIEW

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PONDER REVIEW

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Cover Art by Linda Eve Diamond • “Small World Meditation”

A Note to Readers

This issue, we are celebrating our alumni—a dedicated handful who have come back to work on volume 6, issue 2 as readers and editors. Putting together a literary journal is a team task; we could not put out a quality journal without many eyes, hands, and voices behind the scenes. A special “Thank You” to our alumni editors: Jacqueline Clowney, Melissa Goodnight, Alec Hawkins, William Kessler, Karol Lagodzki, and Carrie Penrod. At the W, no alumnus is really “gone” once they graduate; they remain either in spirit or return for frequent visits to literary events (these days, most often via the Remote Living™ standard of Zoom). We can’t keep them away and they wouldn’t let us even if we wanted to. So, thank you, alumni.

Since its inception, the editors at *Ponder Review* have considered how environment—natural, social, political, theoretical—drives our submissions and shapes the narrative of disparate pieces into a cohesive production. Each of the following selections in art, fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and drama is a single striking note in a larger tune playing across these pages. If you listen, you may hear the same as we do: grief, longing, wonder, anger, and hope. What is revealed is a song about relationships, distance, and recovery.

We feel, as many do, exhausted by the pandemonium outside our doors, but we stand firm in our belief that words and art can heal more of the damage done to our world than they have caused. If art and literature are still being created after *all of this*—and our submission pool says it is happening—it just goes to show how tremendously powerful the act of creation is and how necessary writers and artists are to a healthy ecosystem.

Sincerely,

The Editors

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NICHOLAS DELLORUSSO

THROUGH THE CHAIN OF LENGTHENING DAYS

The two of us then perched on your stoop
staining pomegranate across our laps.

How long it has been since I knew you:
Barefoot bandit blasting blanks from a cap

gun at passersby before, by the dads,
each plastic revolver was taken. Who,

they asked, did it? But they knew the truth.
And of course, we wouldn't ever rat,

leaving as evidence only those blue
used up rings of ammunition we had.

LINDA EVE DIAMOND

SMALL WORLD MEDITATION



TIGER PHILLIPS

ARCHIVED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

I've been told there was a time when simply having an email account was a status symbol. Which domain you used, how many little messages or alerts pinged per day, per hour. They made a movie about it. About how the construction of a corporate business destroyed a lovable indie bookstore just around the corner, the tension of which led to an online meet-cute that drove the entire romance. Not sure what to make of that.

My only association with this technology is through a series of mildly irritating jolts in my pocket. An Amazon shipment has left the shipping facility, due in two days. An automatic payment for an unnecessary subscription has debited my account, the balance of which I will also soon receive in a notification. And promptly delete. Dozens more from mailing lists I never consented to. It's merely a nuisance I handle with immediate dismissal.

A death by a thousand, tiny vibrations.

Sitting at my neighborhood bar, the original consensus remains the majority opinion. I'm the weird one. My friends are spending this particular drink comparing their personal mountain of ignored notifications with each other, the four digit red flags peppering their screens. Alerts that they will only acknowledge with each other in the form of a silly competition. Like a reverse game of golf where the prize goes to the most careless, the most neglectful of their responsibilities.

My studiousness is mocked. The person to my left has 3,487 unread email notifications alone, while their screen is dotted with other ignored, app-specific notifications. Like for workout regiments started in earnest and promptly forgotten. Perhaps one or two language courses for a New Year's resolution of years gone by to learn something fun and romantic, but not particularly useful. Like Farsi. Or Portuguese.

In the midst of this bragging, my friend leans over and draws my attention to a folder below my clean inbox. A folder unnoticed after a decade with this technology incessantly jabbing at my left thigh. Did you forget about your archive? They ask.

The embarrassment. It is revealed to all that in my haste to live a digital life free from unwanted clutter, I had merely archived that which I meant to delete! Safely hidden for later that which I wanted to be rid of entirely! The drafts of love letters second-guessed and never sent! The coupons codes

needed to start those hobbies I will definitely, absolutely, I swear, get to (eventually)! To think of the horde I sent to limbo rather than grant a true and permanent death!

I am filled with horror and hang my head in shame. My friends no longer believe my stoic approach to the endless tidal wave of modern correspondence. I have been labeled a fraud, a hopeless sentimental. No matter how quickly I delete the archive folder, one forgotten and irrelevant email at a time, shoveling through an avalanche of my former life, my former self, the damage is done. I am in the running for the digital Dunce Cap of my own making.

I reach the final email and abruptly stop. This isn't junk, but sent from an old email address as forgotten as the recently deleted items of this secret folder. The subject line is blank. There's an attachment. My past self did this intentionally; this was not a mistake or a half-measure. I can hear my heart beating.

There is an uproar from a few seats down. I use the distraction to open the attachment in private and discover a photo taken by someone standing a few feet above the edge of a gently running river. The edge is lost in overgrowth, disappearing suddenly into water. The bottom right corner shows a portion of a rotten log, a tree that sometime before graciously fell over to become a bench for day-trippers and skinny-dippers. In the center of the frame, with her ankles in the water, is a nude woman with a shock of curly, platinum blonde hair. She is frozen in a classic pin-up pose, standing slightly at an angle to the person taking the shot, her back arched with her hands meeting on her thighs. Her breasts are pushed forward and she meets the eye of the camera lens with a coy half-smile. A tuft of pubic hair is visible through a narrow gap between her forearms. In the top corner of the photo is the edge of a sandy island in the water. The bar, its patrons and their noise, fades to black. I fall into the memory.

The scene took place the summer after my freshman year of college, a humid and stormy few months spent in the heartland of Virginia, deep in the throes of semi-requited love. This particular afternoon was a celebration, though for what I cannot remember. Save for this one photo opportunity, our phones and any connection to the outside world were left on the bank with our clothes as we spent hours drifting with, and swimming against, the current. When we tired, we would air dry with our bare backs on the damp sand. When our energy returned, we made love on the edge of the river, took a few laps to rinse off in the fresh water, and returned to the sanded honeymoon suite to recharge and begin again.

Lather, rinse, repeat. Swim, nap, orgasm.

The clinking of glass brings me out of my requiem. That was the last day we were together. The last moment of happiness shared between two kids

who didn't know what damage the future held. Even now, if I look closely enough at her expression, I can see something else in her eyes, something only I could notice. Sadness, longing for a different life than the one with the naked man holding the camera. Or maybe I'm imagining things because I know how the story ends. Maybe I see a self-fulfilling prophecy at work. My hand hovers above the screen for a short moment before my thumb finds the icon shaped like a trash can. Gone from the archive folder, gone forever.

Existing only in my head, the memory of that day is whatever I want it to be. The technology, the external memory drive, tarnishes the truth with the brute force of evidence. Like the neglected past-due bills and long history of impulse shopping. In my head, the fluidity of the past is safe, optimistic. In my inbox, it is unyielding and inevitable. If life is what you make it, I'll make it a blissful delusion.

BOBBY BURNETT LEE

FAWN ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

as a child I knew better than to follow
my mother who now closes in on the end
in a hospital in the pines in East Texas but
in the end you're a kid when mom crosses the road
or stays out nights at a time leaving you behind to fend
and feed your brother what choice do you have you child
you broken boy child on the side of the road as if in sleep
were sleep turned stiff and dappled with blood or light as your mother
paces the cedars nearby or perhaps they are pines she will wait
for a while for you to follow or rise she will wait
for a while and then will move on

WHY THE FOREST

I go for the medicine
although the forest is no medicine no more
than it is poison for those
who understandably fear it what have I done
with this life but stack one unseeming stone upon another
and occasionally unstone the well-intended stacks
of others all while knowing there's more all while suspecting
that life exceeds these pissant operations
these half-hearted affairs with full-hearted mothers
who were never objectively mine to disappoint
in the first place I go
to the forest for the denuding alternative and to have my separateness
revealed to me for the delinquent roadside peepshow
it is although by whom I mustn't tell

DANIEL EDWARD MOORE

CHARISMATIC GIFT OF WEATHER

After months of waiting for the yard
to paint bleary eyes with petals,
the tree's liturgical voice transformed
a woman's lips of praise into
a charismatic gift of weather.

Like all good mothers driving spikes
into the feet of gods,
roots became faithful, stronger than wind,
so children's shadows,
heavy as hell could heaven
the red rhododendrons.

When flowers suckle the nipples of clouds
in an elegiac sky,
does this mean we're ready
to leave like we came,
naked, weeping, outside the cave?

*If love could save the tree,
she said, maybe grief
would clap like stones
applauding the intervention.*

JENIFER FOX

DRINKS



CREATIVE NONFICTION

LORI WHITE

AMULETS OF GRIEF

I'd been preparing for grief long before it found me. I took classes, read books, sought the help from professionals the way I did for taxes and home repair. I wanted to prepare myself for the damage that awaited me, convinced I couldn't withstand the loss. Which is why I stopped the man parked beside me to ask him about the decal stretched across his rear window. The raw grief splayed across the glass in bright blue letters struck me most, a public acknowledgement of something so private. A pair of gold angel's wings framed the boy's name, a halo hooked atop the J:

Junior

April 5, 2005 – March 23, 2015

We will see you soon.

The man opened his jacket and showed me his T-shirt, a replica of the decal printed across the chest in the same bright blue. Only then did I realize today was the one-year anniversary of young Junior's death. I nodded as though I understood. The man was probably Junior's father, though I didn't dare to ask.

I followed him into the restaurant, where he joined a group already gathered around two tables pushed together, mourners wearing the same T-shirt, assembled to celebrate Junior's life on the day it ended with bread bowls of clam chowder and plates of fried fish and chips.

I ordered my food and took a seat just outside their circle, close enough to watch as I picked at my basket of fries. Beyond the restaurant's bank of windows was the ocean and its long stretch of beach. This must have been Junior's favorite restaurant. I wondered if I had ever met Junior, if he went to the elementary school in my neighborhood, perhaps walked past my house on his way each morning. Was that bright blue his favorite color? Did he do his homework after school or did he play *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty* until dinnertime? They passed around pitchers of beer and took turns telling stories I couldn't make out. I assigned roles to the rest of the gathering: the mother, the grandmother, two men the same age as the father—an uncle or a cousin, maybe.

Perhaps this was how I should tackle my grief: expose it to the world, an announcement of the loss I bore proudly, devoutly; embrace my grief rather than bury it. I could have T-shirts made, one for each person missing, enough

to fill a dresser drawer. I could have decals printed for each window on the Prius I inherited from my parents, where flakes of their DNA remained on the dashboard and between the seats, their fingerprints still on the steering wheel, under my grip.

How could I make this work? There was no one left to sit at my table and tell me stories.

My grief was invisible. No one could see it on my face, in my dress, the way I carried myself through the day, tense shoulders and knotted gut while doing the shopping, the cooking, the tending to dogs and laundry. No one knew that the rings I wore belonged to those now gone, or that their clothes hung in my closets and their trinkets sat on shelves and tables and counters in my house. In my office, portraits of the missing were hanging on a wall beside my desk. Their obituaries were saved on my computer, samples of my writing to which I never signed my name.

My grief lay quietly until nighttime, just under the living crust until I fell asleep. I dreamed about their last seconds—the dark circles around my mother’s eyes, my brother’s gaping mouth, my father’s sink into silence, all three slipping away to the sound of hissing oxygen. They died in their own beds, in the rooms where they’d risen each morning to greet the day. I sat beside them and whispered messages to urge them forward. After they were gone, I refused to let them be moved until I was ready, and even then, I followed the strangers who carried away my dead as far as I was allowed. Just before their bodies disappeared—two into the ground, one into the air—I was their final witness, to ensure all was accounted for.

The Jewish rituals of shiva direct the mourners to withdraw from life. Grief must be reconciled in private, circumscribed to the home of mourners for a structured period of time. Children are allowed one year to grieve a parent’s death, one month for a sibling, cousin, or friend. I’ve clocked one year for my mother, five for my father: I should be done. My brother’s allotted one month has stretched into sixteen—and counting. These limits are meant to restrict the mourner, to prevent an overindulgence in grief. According to my religion, I’ve had more than my fill.

§

In American society, like in Judaism, mourning is confined to private spaces for a prescribed period of time—in most cases, two weeks of bereavement leave. At the end of this period, mourners are expected to join the living again, to get on with life. Their grief is not welcome in public spaces, especially the workplace. When two weeks aren’t enough time, mourners search for new ways to express their pain. These practices emerge in spontaneous memorials scattered across public spaces, physical tributes that seek society’s recognition of the deceased and, more important, of those

still grieving.

Once a private ordeal, grief now demands recognition beyond the grave and headstone. Mourners construct mobile expressions of their grief with car decals and T-shirts. They build sacred memorials along public roads and highways, bodiless markers that honor the dead daily, outside of traditional cemeteries and mausoleums, gated landscapes restricted by our quotidian journeys to work and school and home again.

These physical memorials shape the narrative of the disembodied and ascribe meaning to the lives lost and the lives still grieving. The names and images of loved ones become tattoos, where the living body carries the remembrance of the dead. Voices are preserved in phone messages and live photos and social media pages, forming a virtual life—or afterlife—to comfort mourners.

My brother's voice is saved on my phone, in a minute-long video I've never shared. He's lying in his hospital bed, flanked by two women who stroke his forehead. I'm watching from the foot of his bed, perched at a distance, a momentary observer behind the lens, my brief respite after eight long days at his side. He tries to speak, but his labored breath stops him after two words—*I love....* The women take his hands and lean in closer, waiting for more, hoping for more, until finally I break the silence with—*Me!*

For the past eight days, I'd been reminding my brother of my newly exalted status to *The Best Sister in the World!* as I shot syringefuls of morphine under his tongue.

In the video, my brother peers in the direction of my voice and tries to laugh, then the camera pans away as I fumble for a bottle of lotion on the dresser to smooth his flaking skin.

§

Spontaneous memorials bring material expressions of grief into public spaces after the body has vanished. They situate death in landscapes normally reserved for the living, transforming the relationship between private grief and public tribute, uniting bodiless remembrances with contemporary life. They offer a substitute for the life that was lost, a stand-in for the physical being who has disappeared. The memorials inject death into our present world; they take root in the memory of the living, reminding us to proceed with greater intention and care.

What can I construct to signify my grief to passersby? What can I place at my front door that explains to the mailman and the UPS guy and the Girl Scout from down the block why the woman inside cannot—will not—answer their knocking?

When I do leave the house, I study the outside world for examples. Fresh flowers appear each week in a five-gallon bucket tied to the base

of a traffic signal on my way to the grocery store. Bicycles—often painted ghost-white—stand along the mountain roads and suburban streets I drive, harbingers of the danger ahead, the blind curves and the merging lanes that have stolen cyclists on their way to school or work or a Sunday ride to the beach. Wooden crosses border long stretches of the two-lane highway I travel through the Mojave Desert, where skiers and fishermen, anxious to get to the High Sierra, misjudged the headlights of oncoming traffic and slip across the double-yellow line to pass an eighteen-wheeler. And in my neighborhood, teddy bears and heart-shaped balloons cling to stop sign posts, marking the narrow difference between the grassy parkways and the painted crosswalks drivers too often overlook. Where cats dart out from under parked cars and basketballs dribble into the street, chased by an inspired three-point shooter. These are the daily reminders I ponder on my way back home through quiet, tree-lined lanes, where neatly clipped lawns are dotted with signs that command: “Drive like your kids live here.”

§

I prefer to grieve in private. In the past year I’ve racked up four deaths in nearly as many months, a record, even in pandemic times, that feels almost embarrassing to admit. Fellow mourners apologize to me, say they have nothing to complain about in comparison to what I’ve lost.

Who will I be if, one day, my grief is finally satisfied?

My brother, the first death, now resides in my living room, on a console table by the fireplace, in a box topped by his black rain hat, beside an enameled cannister with his beloved dog’s ashes. He’s been here for over a year now—most of him, anyway. After my mother died—the second death—I dug a hole between my parents’ graves and poured in a cupful of their son. Then later that summer I bagged three handfuls and tossed them—him?—on the mountains we skied and hiked as kids. The rest will go to Northern California, in accordance with his wishes to be scattered along the Pacific’s craggy coast. The dog as his companion was an afterthought, after emptying his house, an addendum that would, no doubt, have met with my brother’s approval.

I’ve several excuses for delaying this trip: the pandemic, the weather, the dread of letting him go, even though I rarely visit him in that corner of the living room, less than two steps from my usual seat on the sofa, flanked by living dogs of my own, where I scroll and sip each morning before breakfast. His box gets dusted every two weeks, his rain hat shaken out, a framed picture of him—dog in his arms—swiped and reset on the table.

When I miss my brother, I put on his old hospital scrubs from med school and an Obama T-shirt I found while cleaning out his closet. I eat my meals off of my parents’ blue and white china, pour my drinks at their bar.

I wear a pair of ragged pink pajamas from one lost friend when I want to laugh in my sleep. Another friend's ribbon bookmark holds my place until I have one of those nights when I can't close my eyes. The dead live on in the disembodied memories I've collected, spontaneous memorials I create—and recreate—to soothe my pain.

I wonder if Junior's family continues to celebrate him each year at the same restaurant, on the same day. Perhaps, like the car decal, probably faded and peeled away now by the Southern California sun, the tradition has been replaced with something quieter, more private, more internal. Perhaps it's enough to remember the boy in smaller measures—his Lakers jersey framed and hanging in the living room, his aging Xbox on the shelf below the TV.

Maybe, like me, his family has found enough comfort in believing time will bring us together again. *We will see you soon.*

Until then, we slowly rejoin the world of the living.

DAN WIENCEK

HUNGER UNNAMED

Hunger is a hill of mouths
Broken bread that breaks you in return
Libraries wasted away, words detaching
Like hair from a scalp

Hunger uninvited, hunger given a seat
The path that swallows its own tail
From fast to feast and back again

The weather is emaciated, fed on
A thin milk of wildfire dust
A bell goes off in the distance and
The room inverts, outside becoming in

There are never sufficient words
To name all that we would devour
No hearts know enough to offer
What we crave at our core

Hunger unspoken, hunger endured
The gnawing that reminds us
No one is born to be full

The banquet is a pulse of breath away
One slender mirage of sustenance
Invariably followed by another

JUDY KLASS

BUG RESCUING

CHARACTERS:

JOAN: In her mid-twenties to mid-thirties, attractive but intense, with some dark depths that announce themselves around very sunny people.

MICHAEL: Around the same age. Attractive, generous, and pleasant, and trying to acquire some dark depths of his own—or to dispel the need for them with laughter.

SETTING: Poolside, at the Sandbar Resort and Spa. On a beautiful tropic isle.

TIME: The present.

AT RISE: JOAN sits by the pool in a one-piece dark bathing suit. Near her are dead or half-drowned bugs SHE has rescued, drying on the cement. SHE spots a new bug in the water. SHE dips a long, dry branch carefully into the water, fishes out the bug, and gently deposits it on the cement. SHE uses a smaller twig or a blade of grass to turn the bug right-side-up.

(MICHAEL enters in swim shorts, carrying a beach towel, and watches her. SHE is intent on the new bug. At last, HE addresses her.)

MICHAEL: Hey.

JOAN: *(Not looking up)* Hey.

MICHAEL: I couldn't find you in the room, or the lobby, or out on the courts. I figured you were sick of the beach. So, I suited up, and hoped you were here. *(A beat)* What'cha doin'?

JOAN: Rescuing bugs.

MICHAEL: Oh yeah?

JOAN: Yeah. It's something I used to do when I was a little kid. We didn't have a pool, but my parents' best friends did. But I didn't really like their kids—they were older than I was, and obnoxious. So, when we went there, I'd rescue drowning bugs from the pool, before the filter got them, and dry them out on the patio. It made me feel like a god.

MICHAEL: How so?

(HE sits down a few feet away from her. SHE shrugs.)

JOAN: The basic sense that I was reanimating them and returning them to life. Like Dr. Frankenstein. That life was mine to bestow and take away. The sun would beat down on the insects, and they'd lie completely still, but then they'd dry out and breathe, and at last they'd extend their feelers and move their legs—and I'd take the credit for it. It was me, not the sun, that was filling them with energy.

MICHAEL: Lazarus bugs.

JOAN: Yeah. I enjoyed bringing them back.

MICHAEL: Mmm. You must have been a pretty strange kid.

JOAN: I was as nerdy as they come. I warned you when you first met me. I know how to present myself socially now, when I want to. It's entirely an illusion. I'm still a hard-core nerd at heart.

MICHAEL: You're so proud of that. It's a crucial part of your identity.

JOAN: In this place it is.

MICHAEL: Why this place in particular?

(At last, SHE looks up at him.)

JOAN: I knew we shouldn't have come here together, Michael. I warned you not to take me.

MICHAEL: Look. I told you how it would be. The first couple of days we've got those meetings, the presentations, we have to look busy—and now comes the time people get to relax.

JOAN: That's not it.

MICHAEL: You don't like the Caribbean?

JOAN: I love the Caribbean. I didn't ever think I could casually waltz over here in the dead of winter—

MICHAEL: You see?

JOAN: And I'm grateful to you for bringing me for free. But I should have trusted my niggling sense of—

MICHAEL: Anti-corporate snobbery?

JOAN: I was going to say foreboding.

MICHAEL: You know, this resort is not where I necessarily would have chosen to come. But I had to be here, it's not just some tax write-off nonsense, we've gotten some good work done—and in the down time, I wanted to be

with you.

JOAN: But you're—happy. In this culture. I feel that you're at home here.

MICHAEL: I seem to be enjoying it more than you.

JOAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL: Should I feel guilty about that? Should I hang my head in shame?

JOAN: No. It's nobody's fault. It is what it is.

MICHAEL: What is what what is?

JOAN: If two people are incompatible and they realize it, there doesn't have to be a bad guy.

MICHAEL: How are we not compatible? We'll never come to this place again. Next conference that comes up, I'll go off alone, and send you a postcard. But since we're here now, why can't I enjoy it?

JOAN: You enjoy the squash, and the tennis and the swimming, and the gym, and the lazing at the beach, and the golf—

MICHAEL: Yes.

JOAN: And the guys from the office, the new people you're meeting, the couples. You're having fun with them, the people we meet in the dining hall, and the seedy lounge singer, you want to dance, you want to play the party games—

MICHAEL: Some of it. I like some of the people. Some of the stuff is tacky, but what the hell.

JOAN: You enjoyed lobster night. And luau night.

MICHAEL: Yes.

JOAN: I feel like I'm trapped on the Love Boat, but it's on land.

MICHAEL: I used to like to watch the *Love Boat* when I was a kid.

JOAN: Okay.

MICHAEL: And *Fantasy Island*. So there.

JOAN: You're entitled.

MICHAEL: And I used to enjoy the Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge commercials. I thought it looked like a wonderful place. I wanted to be grown up, and in love with somebody, and go there.

JOAN: Don't believe the hype.

MICHAEL: So, Joan—do you just not believe in being happy? Having fun?

JOAN: I find this place—obscene, somehow. It's like—going to Haiti Club

Med, or something.

MICHAEL: No, it's not. Even I would never do that.

JOAN: Okay, whatever.

MICHAEL: I don't understand why you have to go through life sneering and being sour about everything. Getting disgusted with me if I happen to be conventional in some ways, and I like to have a good time.

JOAN: Come on, Michael. You lose patience with me too.

MICHAEL: When we're meeting new people, or having lunch with the vice president, and you're all grumpy and anti-social—

JOAN: If I excuse myself and say I want to lie down. If I don't want to enter the limbo contest, or do the stupid pet tricks or whatever that cheesy MC was trying to get us to do last night—

MICHAEL: I just think you could be a little more gracious about it. Smile a little, make your voice less harsh, take the sting out of what you say to people. Including me.

JOAN: Michael. You're in a fast-growing business.

MICHAEL: True.

JOAN: To have the career you want to have, you're going to need—a Wife. With a capital W. To host dinner parties for you—

MICHAEL: Not necessarily.

JOAN: To go to lunch with the vice president, yes, and the client, and laugh a tinkly little laugh, and bond with the client's wife—

MICHAEL: Where do you get this stuff?

JOAN: You're going to need a woman all the other guys feel comfortable with, right? To show them you're a regular guy, you're a team player, you've passed all the personality profile standardized tests—

MICHAEL: You have such a caricatured view of the world I live in.

JOAN: Okay, maybe. Maybe I do. But what you definitely do *not* need is a certified freak like me, okay? Because there's just too much sunshine here, and the drinks are too pastel, and everything tastes like coconuts or pineapples, and the luxuries are too luxurious, and everybody is warm and carefree and friendly—and right now all I want is to be back in my studio, spattered with paint, with lots of clutter, no sunlight, working on the series I'm doing—

MICHAEL: You're in art withdrawal, we knew that might happen.

JOAN: A series of paintings which, when you see them, will strike you as

pointless and grotesque and utterly unhealthy. Now, what am I doing here, and what am I doing with you? It's mean of me, to be here with you.

MICHAEL: I like your unhealthy art. It's made me interested in art the way I never was in college.

JOAN: But you wouldn't want the people around you to see it.

MICHAEL: You're wrong. You're completely wrong. I'm proud of it. Well, maybe there are a few pieces—

JOAN: You see?

MICHAEL: That it took me some time to get used to. So, we don't start people off with those ones. People from my world. But I am proud of you, Joan, proud of what you do, and maybe a little intimidated and envious.

JOAN: I don't want to intimidate you. You make me feel like this snob, like you say, and it's not like I think either my way or your way is better. I know you think I do...

MICHAEL: Show me the bugs.

JOAN: What?

(MICHAEL gets on his hands and knees, and crawls over to where her bugs are.)

MICHAEL: Introduce me. And tell me what they are.

JOAN: People will be weirded out. This woman came by and when she saw what I was doing she let out a scream. And the staff are giving me dirty looks when—

MICHAEL: If they kick us out then they kick us out. Show me your bugs.

(JOAN is surprised, but she goes along with it.)

JOAN: Well, the giant ant is self-explanatory.

MICHAEL: I see what you mean about them extending their feelers.

JOAN: Yeah, she's going to be okay. I like how they clean and polish up their antennae, like a mouse washing its face and whiskers, or something.

MICHAEL: She?

JOAN: Of course. Most ants you're gonna run into are females. Soldier ants. Worker ants. Same with bees. It's only in animated movies that they make them all male, because they figure boys can't identify with female characters, but girls had better start early and learn to identify with male ones—

MICHAEL: Okay, bypassing the feminist rage, what's that over there?

JOAN: Some kind of lacewing. It's pretty, isn't it?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

JOAN: But it's had it.

MICHAEL: Yeah, you can tell. It's just limp. Wilted.

JOAN: Sometimes they start out that way and then they rally and surprise you. But sometimes, dead is dead.

MICHAEL: (*Pointing*) And that one?

JOAN: That's the one I just fished out. Some kind of beetle.

MICHAEL: So, they got cockroaches at the Sandbar Resort and Spa. Charming.

JOAN: I don't think it's a cockroach. It crawled out of the grass, probably. There are a lot of black beetles out there, Michael, and they're not all cockroaches.

MICHAEL: How does it look to you?

JOAN: Well, I had hopes. But it's lookin' to me like it's gonna stay dead also.

MICHAEL: Like our love. Right?

(SHE shrugs. HE moves away from her and dandles his feet in the water.)

MICHAEL (CONT'D): Or maybe it'll be like that O'Henry story. What's the one where the ivy leaf stays alive, through the storm? One last leaf of ivy on the wall, so the sick girl looking out the window doesn't die?

JOAN: It's not real ivy. The starving artist, who likes to do abstract work nobody buys, paints it on the wall, his one realistic painting, and then he dies in the cold, but the sick girl *thinks* the ivy leaf is real, and it saves her. That's the twist ending.

MICHAEL: That's right.

JOAN: That's why it's an O'Henry story.

MICHAEL: Okay. Now, what were the odds we would both know about that arcane little number? I mean, would you concede that that's a reasonably obscure thing for us both to know about?

JOAN: Yes. It's reasonably obscure.

MICHAEL: And does that or does that not keep happening to us? That it turns out that we both know about, or care about, these bizarre-o, obscure things?

JOAN: It happens sometimes.

MICHAEL: And what does that say to you? I mean, even if I do like this

resort, guilty as charged, if I enjoy the company of some of my colleagues, even if I am a *Love Boat*-watching, *Fantasy Island*-watching whore, even if I do spend my days back in the city in the evil, boring corporate world, and I happen to be good at what I do—what if I want to spend my free time with you?

JOAN: But you were never anti-social. You were never a nerd.

MICHAEL: But what if I like nerds? Could I maybe be an honorary nerd?

JOAN: Michael, I spent years at that bratty prep school. And they polished me up against my will. I learned to smile warmly, and have a firm handshake, and all these pleasant little social skills—and I still hate them. It's not me.

MICHAEL: So, I'll try not to make you act that way.

JOAN: But just being around all this Pollyanna, forced happiness—makes me grouchy, makes me withdraw. And that will only hurt you.

MICHAEL: What if I'm a masochist? Ever think of that?

JOAN: You're sweet, and you try to be good to me, Michael. But I embarrass you, I can feel myself doing it. And my messy apartment and studio horrify you. You're neat, and you're practical, and you're punctual, you're organized—

MICHAEL: But I make corny, nerdy jokes sometimes. And I never liked *Baywatch*! Do I get points for that?

JOAN: We need to think ahead.

MICHAEL: Not at all. You're being too practical and organized. Come stick your feet in the pool.

JOAN: What?

(HE pats the edge of the pool beside him.)

MICHAEL: Come sit next to me and dandle your feet in the water. Come on. You can be miserable the whole time, I promise.

(HE pats the place again, continues to coax her. SHE sighs and sits next to him.)

JOAN: I do like you, but—

MICHAEL: Shhh. That's it. *(HE wraps the towel around both their shoulders.)* Now, the thing for you to keep in mind is that you *hate* this. It sickens you. I'm behaving like a frivolous frat boy, here. You must not have fun. *(HE makes a silly, grim face.)* Do you hear me, Joanie? Don't smile! There's mayhem and destruction all over the world, and we're all going to die someday, and it's going to be painful and horrible, *so do not have fun.*

(SHE almost smiles, looks away.)

MICHAEL: Aaah, watch that, you almost smiled there. You gotta be careful. Now, look in the water. See those feet down there?

JOAN: Yes.

MICHAEL: Okay now, watch out, 'cause my big old feet are going to nibble on your puny little feet, and try to eat them. But life is very sad and serious, so don't smile!

(His feet move through the water and go after hers. HE makes chomping noises.)

MICHAEL: Mmmmm. Munch, munch, munch. Lovely little feetfish, mmmm.

(SHE laughs, wriggles, moves away.)

JOAN: Ow, get off!

MICHAEL: Okay, now, let's really embarrass ourselves. Let's see how much we can splash.

(HE splashes her with some water. SHE puts her hands up.)

JOAN: Stop it.

MICHAEL: *(Imitating her, high-pitched voice)* Stop it! That's undignified, what do you think this is, a spring break movie? *(Regular voice)* Okay, so let's look like idiots in front of everyone at the pool, we're hard core nerds now, come on. Let's *really* splash.

(HE starts thrashing his legs in the water.)

MICHAEL (CONT'D): What, are you embarrassed, are you *that* hung up on conventions? Pull your weight here, Joan!

(SHE splashes too. HE makes a series of silly noises as they drench themselves and get water all around them.)

MICHAEL (CONT'D): *(Silly voice)* Oh, no, I've lost control, I'll never win the yuppie of the year award now!

JOAN: *(Slacking off)* Wait. Michael, wait, wait.

MICHAEL: What? It's too late to turn back!

JOAN: No seriously, the bugs. I think we're getting them.

(MICHAEL stops kicking. JOAN takes the towel.)

JOAN: Lemme just dry off so I don't drip on them.

(SHE crawls over to the bugs and inspects them.)

MICHAEL: How are they?

JOAN: They're doing okay.

MICHAEL: How's the black beetle doing?

JOAN: Okay.

MICHAEL: Okay? (*HE crawls over to see.*) He's moving?

JOAN: Yeah. It's moving a leg.

MICHAEL: But I probably painted that leg on, right? Like an ivy leaf? To fool you?

JOAN: No, he's gonna be okay.

MICHAEL: Well, there you go. You see?

JOAN: No.

MICHAEL: That means there's hope for us.

JOAN: (*Skeptical*) Because a cockroach moved its leg.

MICHAEL: You said it wasn't a cockroach.

JOAN: Because a bug moved its leg.

MICHAEL: I think you should paint these guys. Do another unhealthy series.

JOAN: I've thought about that. I loved books about bugs when I was a kid. Entomology. I used to study the drawings of them.

MICHAEL: You could have this giant ant washing its feelers, facing off against this mouse. Or, that's too healthy—facing off against a giant rat, washing its face. On the other side of the canvas. Just saying hello to each other.

JOAN: I don't think so.

MICHAEL: Or you do a series. A person putting on makeup, maybe brushing her hair in a mirror. An ant primping its feelers in a mirror. A rat cleaning its whiskers in a mirror—same pose each time.

JOAN: I wouldn't paint that.

MICHAEL: Well, I would. And I can't. So, you paint it for me.

JOAN: (*Reflective, sad*) What is it you think you see when you look at me, Michael?

MICHAEL: Hey. Now, don't you patronize me, Madame Grumpy. What say we put your friends back in the grass, the live ones, and then go back to the room. And take a nap—or whatever comes up.

JOAN: (*Mildly amused at the pass*) Uh huh.

MICHAEL: And if I'm very good, maybe you'll dance with me a little tonight? And then later, we can stay up and discuss global warming, or land mines, or refugee camps, or anything you like. Okay?

JOAN: I'm some kind of rebellion for you, I guess.

MICHAEL: You're a bug-rescuer. You're a powerful goddess. You're right that my world can be kind of dull. I need someone who can look past all that when they look at me. If you can do that, then we've got a chance. Hmmm?

JOAN: Hmmm.

MICHAEL: (*Carefully picking up bug with his fingers*) I've got the beetle. You can move the ant.

JOAN: (*Surprised*) With your fingers?

MICHAEL: (*Lofty*) Real nerds always pick up bugs with our fingers.

(*HE waves it in her face for a moment, and deposits it in the grass. SHE picks up hers with her fingers also and does the same. Then SHE goes back for the lacewing.*)

JOAN: I feel the lacewing should go in the grass too.

MICHAEL: That's right. Let's show a little respect for the dead.

JOAN: Maybe you're a stranger guy than I thought, Michael.

MICHAEL: Hard-won praise. Have we got a deal about tonight?

JOAN: (*Hesitating*) About the dancing?

MICHAEL: (*Seductive*) I'll ask them to play "La Cucaracha."

(*SHE shakes her head as they go off.*)

JOAN: Yup. Getting stranger all the time...

(*As the LIGHTS GO DOWN, a few furious bars of music play: "La Cucaracha."*)

END

ELIZABETH BROOKS

NGC 2014 & 2020 (WOMAN OF GALACTIC FLAMES)



ELEPHANT TRUNK NEBULA (SPACE DUST GODDESS)



E. R. MURRAY

CALDERA

PAGE GAGE

Using your mother's typewriter has potential, you think; the chance to initiate some kind of reconciliation. You remember the tap-tap of its keys more fondly than your mother. So, at least it's a start.

RIBBON SPOOL COVER

You hadn't expected it to be frustrating. So slow and tedious. The keys jamming, the paper threading wonky, the times you don't quite hit hard enough and leave a gap where a letter should be. You'll be lucky to get a haiku, never mind a letter, typed without mistakes. As for the tap-tap, it's not so marvellous when you're reduced to two-finger typing and your brain draws word-blanks, unable to match the cleaving sentiment that continues to pour.

CARRIAGE RETURN LEVER

You visit in the afternoon when you know the others won't be there. 'What the fuck are you doing here?' your mother asks. 'Your brother told me you've nabbed the typewriter already. I'm not dead yet, you know.' 'I'm writing you a letter,' you do not say. You stay for an hour watching your mother watch the TV.

BACK SPACE KEY

Later: Dear mum, —

You are proud of landing all the letters in the right places, at managing a comma instead of an apostrophe mistake. Then you wind the page out, scrunch it into a ball, fling it against the wall, and start again:

Mum, —

RIGHT MARGIN SET

There was only one person you could truly rely on. That teacher in primary school whom you loved and your brother hated for the same reason: rules, boundaries, parameters. You remember your mother writing bad things on your straight A report card to try and initiate a rift. ‘Laxidasical’ [sic], ‘thoughtless’, ‘arrogant’, ‘bad’. You remember throwing it in the bin, hoping—maybe this is just how she loves?

LINE INDICATOR

It is a rainy Friday afternoon and you have stayed off school to help your mother ‘shop’ at the market. Broken biscuits, chocolate brazils, boxes of marrowfat peas that need soaking; you compare your stolen goods in a rare bonding moment. As soon as you’re home, she says ‘keep out of my sight until dark’ and slams the door. You know better than to knock and ask for your coat. You spend the day trying to dodge the rain. When you return home drenched, your mother is drunk and giggly, action-dancing to Elvis with your brothers and sisters. ‘Nice of you to join us,’ she says.

TABULAR SET KEY

It is a rainy Friday afternoon and your goodbye receives no response. You wonder whether you should make a stink or leave quietly. You can’t wait for her to see your room emptied, for her to beg you to come back. Your legs shake as you close the door behind you and walk towards the bus stop. Towards a tiny yellow bedsit in town with a shared kitchen where you’re sure you’ll make new friends. When her child benefit stops six months later, and she has to pay it back, she finally acknowledges your departure. She leaves you a message with the landlord. ‘I bet you think you’re funny, you little bitch.’

RETRACTABLE PAPER SUPPORT ARMS

The letter is written: Mum, rest in peace :)

Three words and an emoticon that didn’t exist in your mother’s typing days. Three words and an emoticon to try and mend a lifetime void. Perfectly typed on fancy paper, you carefully fold it to match the size and shape of an overly-beautiful envelope. You leave the envelope blank. At the cremation, you ask for your letter to be included with the casket. You watch them slink back towards the heat together, keep your head up as the curtains close.

Mum, rest in peace :)

SANDMAN

The wait was all fidget and flutter at first. The Spring sea dappled with ripples, the sky—sunshine, showers, sunshine, showers—but Robert's gaze never faltered. Beyond the horizon: America, where his dark-haired love would be boarding, yellow soft-leather case in hand. Every boat he spotted—cargo, Higgins, U-boat—made his guts twist and his jaw set. 'Any day now,' he'd tell passers-by, brushing sand from the heavy grain of his corduroy trousers.

In summer, his wait settled like the weather. His hat provided shelter from the harsh rays, keeping his shaded eyes fixed on the distant line where ocean met sky. 'Something must have happened, Robert told those who asked, 'but no, I'm not worried.' She would resolve the problem and come soon, he knew. Her dark hair swinging. He sunk his heels in the sand to ground them, felt the comfort of grains filling his shoes and trouser legs, seeping into his pockets.

Autumn turned blustery, unpredictable. Robert felt sand shifting around him as the wind gusted. He buried in, up to his waist, to make sure he wouldn't be blown away. 'Not long now,' he told the gulls, for people had stopped listening. Over time, the boats had changed; trawler, punt, container. The dune grasses behind him rattled like gunfire, but he knew that was long-gone now. He wondered if she would still recognise him, if she remembered him at all, if she still wore that floral perfume.

Winter came too quickly. The gulls had grown tired and kept away. Robert buried in deeper, for warmth, for touch, and for want of strength to stand. Up to his neck now, people stepped around him. He overheard tales of a sandman haunting the beach, wondered if he should worry about his safety. The horizon grew foggy, misted with cataracts, but in his mind, her yellow soft-leather case, her dark hair curled, the warmth of her promise in a kiss, remained as vivid as ever. 'She's almost here, he tried to tell the sea, with sand-choked words.

You arrive in the Spring when the wind no longer bites. Your daughter gets a taxi; you tell it to stop at the beach. You sit near a sculpture of a man staring out to sea, settle your yellow soft-leather case at your feet. Tears prick your eyes. 'You can't blame yourself,' your daughter says. 'They were different times back then. A child out of wedlock was a shameful thing. You did what you think was right.' She snuggles into you as you lean into the statue, the sand cool on your toes, the sea's hush as soft as a secret.

BILLY HOWELL

THE PROPER HANDLING OF INFESTATIONS

The “feast to give other feasts something to think about,” as Clod had called the evening’s dinner, stretched from the living room table, through the room with his brother Matthew’s hardwood-and-brass office desk, and down the hallway into Matthew’s bedroom. The trail began with finger foods and snacks and hors d’oeuvres—pecan clusters, deviled eggs, a plate of pickles on crackers, a bowl of salsa and sour cream with chips stabbed upright throughout like soldiers in formation; then the main course—a two-quart pan spilling sausage jambalaya, a plate of manicotti under scattered chopped green olives, a whole game hen on a bed of new potatoes, a pot of rice noodles, a Tupperware container of Tabouleh, three chicken breasts swimming in sixteen ounces of barbecue sauce, and a skillet of undercooked hamburger patties bearing perfect squares of cheese of a toxic yellow color and only slightly melted. This last item sat prominently atop Matthew’s desk, and when he lifted the skillet, he revealed a white ring scalded into the desk’s surface.

“Is this all the food I owned?” Matthew asked.

“You didn’t have any buns,” Clod said.

“You’ve been wearing that shirt for three days,” Matthew said.

In addition to his 1994 Vs. tour original Pearl Jam concert tee, Clod wore a plastic top hat and a tuxedo shop clip-on bowtie. He called himself—variously and in sequential order—the ringmaster, the host, the gourmet, the gourmand, the leader, the gustatory expert, the magician, and Abe Lincoln.

“You know this kind of thing can’t go on,” Matthew said. “If you don’t want to be out on your ass, you’re going to have to start contributing.”

“I need time to recover from that shopping cart wrangling debacle,” Clod said. “You may not realize this but getting fired takes a psychological toll. Who knows when I’ll be ready to find another gig?”

Matthew stacked the plates of food from this office and returned them to the kitchen. Clod offered several protests, primarily on the grounds that his investment of time in cooking every last bit of food in the house amounted to “Labor with a capital-L.” From a Marxist perspective, Clod argued, his identity had become so closely linked with his task of cooking that an attack on the products of his Labor was tantamount to an attack on his person.

“We’re getting rid of this food,” Matthew said. “Why did you even do all this?”

"I'm here alone all day, Matthew, just stewing like a lobster in a pot," Clod said. "Have you ever heard a lobster scream?"

"Lobsters don't scream," Matthew said. "That's a myth."

"Trust me—it's a sound you don't ever want to hear."

In the bedroom, pancakes lay covered in syrup, blueberries lay sprinkled with powdered sugar, unfrozen waffles bearing imprints of Star Trek cast members lay under syrupy peaches from a can. An unrolled roll of Saran wrap protected the bed from a pile of strawberries drizzled in chocolate syrup.

"The interesting thing," Clod said, "is that I actually started with the desert first. Worked my way backward to the kitchen. You can see how that makes sense."

Matthew gathered the smaller plates. He directed Clod to wrap the strawberries. Each of them left the bedroom with a stack of foods and spilled drops of sugars and syrups on the hallway floor.

"I already had ants," Matthew said. "If I find an ant in my bed, I have no qualms about killing you."

"If you've already got ants, then I guess I'm not really to blame."

"They're Argentine ants. Extremely hard to get rid of. I've had traps and poisons out for four months, but they're still here."

"Only one way to get rid of ants. You've got to burn them out. Fire can get rid of anything," Clod said. "I'll pick up some hair spray next time I'm out."

They scraped food from the plates into the garbage can in the kitchen.

"Hey, do you remember the story of the ants and the grasshopper?" Clod said.

"Saving. Preparing for the future."

"Yeah," Clod said. "That grasshopper really stuck it to those ants."

White garbage bags filled with food. The stack of dishes grew beyond the kitchen sink. Plates and bowls and spatulas and forks and saucepans piled out beyond the coffee maker, past the bread box, across the counter over the dishwasher, and up to the edge of the microwave.

"Couldn't you find any better way to spend your time today?" Matthew said.

"I did," Clod said. "I started with your bookshelf."

"What did you do to my bookshelf?"

"Reorganized. First alphabetically. Then chronologically by publication date. Then by the author's birth year. By height, color, publisher, size, Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress, genre. You get the idea."

Matthew ran the hot water and filled the sink with soap. He worked through the stacks one item at a time. He handed Clod the dishes one by one as he finished scrubbing them.

“Trust me about burning the ants out,” Clod said. “The other day I was walking by this house that had caught fire. Even with the fire department there, the whole building went up.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the best part. The kicker is that while the fire was going, all kinds of things jumped ship—raccoons, squirrels, mice, roaches, you name it. Like some kind of rodent zoo pouring out.”

He gesticulated while he talked. When he finished, he leaned against the stove, his hand on the burner, then rushed to the sink and turned on the cold-water tap.

GEOFF COLLINS

IN THE YARD, TWO BIRDS

A dove with its quiet breaths
down in the dead grass
and a finch skittish
on a dogwood branch.
Certainly, these are small
fragile creatures
not worth half a glance.
But we admire them
in the pale evening anyway
and our eyes fail to capture
a woman passing on the road.
Her face remains a blank mask
her eyes perfect black stones
and her purpose a taproot
reaching blindly in the dark
mind of the earth.
What happens to the things
we always meant to do?
Like the woman on the road
they become nothing.
Vapors and spider
silk. Like the dove, they wait
for our return. In her wake
we are left with only a feeling
that something has been
missed, something that might
have made a difference.
Later, only the finch
remembers her.
Only the road
knows where she has gone.

C. W. BIGELOW

LATE MARCH

A hawk soars elegantly but ominously in the sweet breeze,
blade-like wings dissecting the bloated gray sky.

Oblivious rodents weave trails through
decayed cornstalks poking through the matted snow

like bones emerging from a gravesite.
Death is retreating in the bordering bald forest.

Maple limbs, like inquisitive fingers, itch with nubile growth
as the new season yawns anxiously

under mountainous storm clouds
lurking on the horizon,

refusing to slink into the new season
without making one last statement.

ELIZABETH BROOKS

STORM OVER MOBILE BAY



CREATIVE NONFICTION

JENNIFER V. NGUYEN

ESCAPE

That night Mom, when the hurricane blanketed our house with reservoir waters, did it feel like that evening in 1978? Back then you were 22, packed anything you could eat or sell, and walked to the shore of a Danang beach. You boarded a fishing boat headed anywhere except Vietnam.

Did you know that I have so many questions for you?

What made you leave? Did you ever step back towards grandma's shuttered candy shop?

§

You never told me about the full journey from Vietnam to Houston, but I know slivers of the story. In your defense, I am afraid to ask. One evening, I watched you make dinner as I contemplated visiting a local fortune teller to forecast a trivial event like my job performance or whether I would get a raise. Unlike you, I'm fully American, sensitive to rejection and pain.

"Fortune tellers never tell my fortune," you said to me as you chopped, boiled, and stir fried, describing a trip you took from Danang to Saigon to see a fortune teller.

This journey was after the country fell to communist rule, after the government sent someone to watch your house believing our family had gold, after you were sent to a farm outside the city to sing songs and be taught a lesson. You delivered these details in our preferred storytelling style—all facts, few feelings.

I can't remember what you cooked that night, but I remember what you asked the fortune teller in Saigon: "Should I escape from this country?"

You said he couldn't read your fortune. It would be unlucky. But it didn't matter because a *gung* had already made an arrangement on a fishing boat by the time you returned.

"Not my decision to leave. Everyone above me. Time for dinner," you said.

What was in your bag? Did you pack everything you needed?

On a overcast day in Galveston, we stood on the seawall and looked into the opaque waters. I was a teenager, already disconnecting from your world. It's scary you said, being on a fishing boat for days, surrounded by

nothing but infinite ocean. Once, you and I boiled water for a package of ramen. You laughed thinking of a *gung*, standing portside, heating seawater for his bowl of noodles. He didn't need salt you said with amusement. Unlike you, I wasn't amused.

There were other bits of answers that appeared without my asking, jolting me back from my imagination. Before each first day of school, you would buy me a pair of Lee Jeans. One August, you proudly showed me the logo tags that I loathed to feel against my skin. You sewed those on in a Hong Kong factory you told me. You were able to make a few dollars for boxed *char sui fan* lunches and fruits as you waited to be sponsored by a brother in Texas. I was not ready to hear how long you waited, if you lived in tents, if they surrounded you with barbed wire to keep you away from everyone else. Instead, I cut the tags off my Lee Jeans to free myself of irritation.

Mom, were you scared?

That night, when Harvey drove the floodwaters up to your ankles, I called you past midnight. I was 2,000 miles away, uncertain if what I was reading online was what you were living. The voice that picked up the phone was not the one that had once lulled me to sleep singing, "Que Sera, Sera." It shivered in tone, perforated with muffled splashes of you scooping away water with a cup. I wanted you to tell me that everything was fine—like you always did even when it wasn't.

An abrupt electric pop severed one of your sentences.

"What's that?" I asked. You had to go, you said. You still haven't told me what that sound was.

Hours later, through articles and our hurried conversations, I reluctantly pieced together tatters of your escape. At sunrise, you put a few bottles of water and some valued papers in a bag. With our dog in your arms and a lifejacket on your chest, you left the house, walking into knee-deep water. As you waded a boat found you, pulled you from boundless floodwaters and offered to steer you anywhere except home. I'm still anxiously awaiting the rest of the story.

§

I wonder what will we eat or see or touch that provokes the next scrap of story? The whirr of a boat engine? The feeling of wet shoes? The smell of salt? Will it remind you of that night in 1978? Will I be strong enough to hear more?

Mom, are you okay?

ACE BOGGESS

IT'S TAKEN FIFTY YEARS

I've figured out my mother
& I are alike
in how we watch TV shows
based in fantasy.
Mine involve quests
for gold, sex, Grails, keys;
her fantasy is having a stranger
remodel the house.
She wants to see cabinets rebuilt,
pipes replaced,
the entire fortress wired anew
for phone, electricity, & cable.
As if over a sensuous body,
she dreams of running her hands
across Formica, marble, &
whatever the hell shiplap is.
I'm for warriors
fighting dragons & zombies,
& better yet, in space.
She loves space, too,
when the hero tears out a wall
with a sledgehammer
to build a bigger living room.
We both watch to escape
what's familiar: I,
my thoughts, & she,
her weary place past the façade.

ROSTISLAVA PANKOVA-KARADJOVA

I MUST LOVE YOU AGAIN

Please, say something.

Tell me what to do, what do *you* want me to do. Deliver it with the smile that solves everything. The smile I loved you for.

You stare ahead and say, “Have you heard that story about hills being like elephants?”

Heard? I’ve translated it—word by word from your tongue to mine—for the degree that led me to the job that led me to you. But why do you ask? Is it because you’re The American and I’m The Girl? Or because of this miserable pub and the nameless station behind. It could be forty minutes or six hours until the next train to Sofia. This could be where I was born.

I follow your gaze. Numbed by drought, the Ogosta slithers across the belly of the valley. Two rusty bridges stitch up the hills where the river has cut through. The sun is heating the silence between us.

Please, look at me.

You shift in your chair and say, “The hills in Colorado are rolling, green.”

Suddenly I’m furious with your tongue-curved *r*’s and how once I found them so alluring. Go back home then, where everyone’s so civilised they leave things up in the air. Unspoken. Unborn. We like our hills as they are—heaving under the sun, powdered with dust the colour of flour gone mouldy. Can you hear the crickets? Are there crickets in your green hills, deafening crickets gone crazy for love?

Were you ever crazy for me?

A raspy tune from the radio inside drifts through the open door. Behind the fly-strip curtain, a woman scrubs the tables. I sense the sour breath of the pub, the sticky cement floor. The possibility of that woman being me.

I can’t risk losing you.

My fingers crawl under your palm and curl in there. You like that. Won’t you smile? Instead, you frown and look at the door. Your hand is unyielding, heavier than how I remember it on my breast, on my stomach. Stubble glistens on your chin, your mouth is set. I don’t want to kiss it. I don’t.

Why did I love you?

You lean over and call out as I’ve taught you, “Dve biri, molya!”

I squeeze your fingers and lift your hand up, like a victor. “Bravo! You

sound like a true Bulgarian.”

You don’t notice my praise. I already know that about you, how you focus on what you want. On lovemaking, my language, Ogosta. “You can’t buy a whole river,” I said. “Why not?” You didn’t smile, and your pressed lips drew the line I wasn’t allowed to cross. Like now.

The woman brings the sweaty bottles. Cold droplets roll down the brown glass, tracing paths to nowhere. I look at the hills, their curved spines malleable under the hard-blue sky.

“I know the story,” I say. “Hemingway, right?”

“Don’t know. Never read it.” You scratch at a mosquito bite and drink your beer.

Did I ever love you?

FLOWERS FOR MEREDITH

*I*s it February seventeenth? Manu wonders, standing on the kerb of Church street. The flowers in his hand, where did he get them from? Not from the Pharmacy, he hasn't crossed the street yet. Wild daisies with curly roots and soil stuck to them. *From the riverbank then*, he thinks, but has no recollection of being there or picking the flowers.

The barbershop pole spins above the open door. Mr Patel, scissors in hand, talks and wobbles his head, men read newspapers. A black dog taps its tail for no reason. An orange truck rattles through Manu's vision and plucks on a string that could be a memory. Mulligan Constructions, the logo says, with a roof above the double LL like a little house. How does he know it? Rusty pipes jut out, a dirty rag flapping at the end of the longest one, and Manu imagines them spilling out, clatter and scatter like sticks of a Pick-up Sticks game, where Jon would pull out the master stick and hold it up high, like a conqueror's sword. Always the winner, his bro.

A reflection flashes from the end of the street, where the truck has gone. Two workers carry a glass panel. They are headed for the picture frame shop that belonged to his father. One wears protective gloves, but the other doesn't, and Manu thinks, *O-oh, here comes trouble*. He expects to see his dad rushing out, shouting, "You idiot, what if you drop it, huh? You want me to go to prison for you? Safety first, you hear?"

But the glass door of the shop remains closed. It reflects a man holding flowers. Dark beard covers what's visible under the hat, the suit is black and faded. The man's trousers are folded-up, revealing skinny sockless feet in old, scuffed shoes. The hat looks familiar, the suit is like the only one Manu owns.

In a stir of a feeling, rather than a memory, Manu thinks of himself caged by the shiny pipes of a scaffolding. The air—peppered by freshly mixed cement, the passage of hours marked by rhythmic hammering. His brother—a silhouette imprisoned by crossed beams. They are building something. A house.

§

The blueprint lay spread on the grass between them. Neat lines and corners, Jon's handwriting tall and bold. That plot would take him a lifetime to pay off, but he grinned, cocky and full of future. "To show Meredith who she's married."

"Who else would she marry? Me?" It was supposed to be a joke.

"We'll build it, bro, just the two of us!" Jon punched Manu's shoulder, a

pretend-play cuff, but it hurt. “Get the consent, the materials, and we start.”

“Whoa, hold up. It’s one thing to design a house, another to build it.”

“How hard could it be? You’re the *master builder*, right?”

The words stung. Mocking him again? Like that summer job when Manu painted the school and became *the artist*, or when he started at his dad’s shop and became *the glassman*.

“Cut it out, will you? What do I know about building? Let’s hire a company—”

“A company, like your Mulligans? They’ll rip me off.”

“Mr. Mulligan will give you a fair price.”

“Are you trying to land a deal for your new boss now? You think I’m not good enough?”

“Bullshit.”

“Forget about it. I’ll build it myself.”

“A two-story house? You’re mad. I’ve got some money, let’s do this right.”

“Don’t need your money, bro. I need you. C’mon.”

§

Hearts and plastic roses decorate the Pharmacy’s window. A white teddy holds a heart-shaped balloon that says, Share the Love. Manu smiles, *It’s Valentine’s day, not the seventeenth*. Jon and Meredith’s anniversary party will be tonight. *The flowers are for her*, he thinks, relieved. Flowers, and that balloon too, instead of a case of Speight’s. If he doesn’t get drunk like the others, she might dance with him; a brotherly-in-law, innocent dance. She might even wear the green daisy dress, the one she had on that night, when Manu—reaching to touch her hair—had told her she was special. Jon had barged in, asking to be introduced. A mint engineering degree in one pocket and a job offer in the other, Jon wanted the world. He could’ve picked any girl that night. But everything was a competition with him. Everything—a game he had to win.

§

It was near midnight when the song played. “Killing Me Softly” was her favourite, she said, she had to dance with someone. They almost didn’t move, just swayed like flames of two candles, one tall, the other yellow. Her fragrance was lemony. He’d never noticed the white eyelash on her left eyelid, so tender, so lovely. Her body was warm, only a silk sheen away from his hands. A bead of sweat rolled and glistened at the dip of her collarbone. If he lowered his head, his lips would soak it in.

§

The world was painfully bright the morning after the party. The sun nailed down hard rays. Sweat stung Manu's eyes, salty and blinding. Someone called out his name.

"I made lemonade," Meredith said, her blond hair frizzy like a dandelion flower in a green meadow full of daisies. He didn't know how she'd climbed this high. The underside of her wrist shone as she held the glass. She took a step; her weight made the loose plank tremble.

"Meredith, stop. It's not safe. Go back."

"I made it for you and... Not that he deserves anything." She darted a glance through the crossed beams of the roof where his brother was.

"What do you mean?"

"Just give him the lemonade. Tell him I'm not mad anymore." She lifted the other glass, ice cubes clinking. The breeze fanned her hair, and he saw the bruise on her temple—an angry cloud of a violet sunset.

"Meredith..."

"It's nothing serious." She pulled her hair towards her face.

A split lip, sunglasses indoors. Time after time she'd say, "It's nothing serious," and would cover her neck, her bruised wrists, while Manu bunched his fists in his pockets, his mouth cemented as he walked away. Not this time. A ball of steel heaved at his core ready to get rolling.

"You wait here, I'll get him. The bastard... Jon!" He turned abruptly, sending a tremor through the scaffolding.

"Manu, please. Just give him the lemonade."

Her voice quivered. She hurried over the few steps that separated them and stumbled. The hem of her dress caught on a fitting and she bent to the side trying to free herself with her leg, kicking at the fitting, again and again.

The glasses smashed first. Manu leaped toward her, and suddenly the plank he was supposed to land on wasn't there. He grappled for the pipes, grabbing at the fittings as the scaffolding collapsed. Shattering noise, metal on metal and bricks on wood; dust in his mouth, his nostrils, his eyes, and still he hung there, looking at Meredith motionless underneath the giant sticks of a lost pick-up game.

§

"Meredith!" Manu shouts, "Meredith, no!"

He rushes forward, arms stretched to grab her, but there's no plank, no scaffolding—he is in the middle of the street, in the middle of the day, clutching a bunch of crushed flowers. His heart hammers somewhere inside his ribcage. Manu opens his fingers and lets go of the daisies. They are wilted now, petals missing like leftovers of she-loves-me, she-loves-me-not game.

Someone is laughing. The workers with the glass panel are watching him, the men from the barbershop are staring too. The black dog yawns and

Manu thinks of the little plastic dog fixed on the dashboard of his mother's Ford and how it bobbed its head, approving of the words said and unsaid on the way to the funeral. Why is he thinking of his mother now? She's gone too.

§

"It's no one's fault, you hear? Meredith had no business being there," his mother was saying, gripping the wheel. "But Jon's ruined... he'll never get over it. What were you two thinking, building a house like it's a game? You're the older one, why didn't you talk some sense into him?"

The car picked up speed with every question.

"Ma, please..." Manu swallowed hard.

"Always showing off, proving he's the best. To you, to your father, to his wife—"

"He was hitting her! Jon was hitting Meredith!"

"What?" Her glance sharp as a glass shard. "No, he'd never do that. Jon loved that girl more than anything."

"Yeah. We both did..."

His words spilled out, his secret was out, into the stuffy air of his mother's car and onto the streets whizzing past the windshield. Wide-eyed, she stared at him, and he held her gaze, wishing to stay reflected in his mother's eyes until she forgave him, while he told her how he lost Meredith, twice, how his brother vanished without a trace, how his life collapsed, and he didn't know how to rebuild it anymore.

§

A horrible noise startles him. Tires screeching, horn croaking, the orange truck skids and turns to the side. Pipes roll out, hitting the ground in a rusty tornado, the scraping sound almost visible. Manu's feet are leaden, cemented to the ground. Time stops. The world reaches him in glugging groans as though he's underwater, and he no longer wonders why the truck is back, or where he's seen it before.

The seventeenth of February! Cemetery day!

But there is something else, a sensation that is rolling through the hazy folds of his mind, trying to tell him, no, to warn him about this very moment—the truck looming, the sound of the glass panel exploding as the guy with no gloves rushes, pushing Manu out of the truck's way.

Hitting the kerb returns the normal speed of time and a single lucid thought grounds the deafening world around him, assuring him he is no longer in his mother's Ford smashed to pieces all those years ago by the Mulligan Constructions' truck, leaving Manu confused for the rest of his life, never quite fitting in, never quite in the middle.

KASHA MARTIN GAUTHIER

THE CLIFF ERODES FROM THE UNDERSIDE

We moved the house back, three times.

The first time for the kids.
From the top of the dune—
the place we'd stood for years—
we watched destructive power:
waves beating land.

We moved a second time,
after blame whistled
beneath the door, and cold
cried through the windowpanes.

*Overhangs Can Collapse
At Any Time.* I asked myself
how long to stay on ground
fated to betray its form?

My feet as unsuspecting
as shallow scrub-pine
roots: I also cannot run.

Without warning, we moved again.
This time from fear:
how the world will kill us
while we lie in our bed.

HOW I'VE SURVIVED THIS LONG, PART 4

I always take the armrest
on the airplane,
if there's a big fuckin'
white dude next to me—
especially if he checks out
my rack when I shove
my luggage up
into the overhead bin.
He'll usually make
a half-lifting move
like he's gonna get up
outta his seat
and help me—
but I'm all sweet like,
Don't worry, I got it.

CYNTHIA YATCHMAN

COVID COLOR 2



PETE PROKESCH

YOU DON'T GET A HAPPY ENDING

When I pulled into the Starbucks parking lot it was ten thirty in the morning—the day after they buried Max. I thought I'd feel worse about receiving communion one day and ordering a hooker the next. Did an erotic massage even count as prostitution? Whatever. Max wouldn't mind.

The Starbucks line snaked out the glass doors and into the lot. Polo shirts and pants suits. I ground my gears as I slipped off the clutch and a bald man in a suit looked up from his phone and shook his head and looked down again.

I slid the fresh twenties from the ATM into my pack of Camels. The tobacco end of my lucky cigarette stared up at me. Max said he had stopped flipping a lucky after he smoked it when he was drunk and crashed his parents' minivan into a parked car. He used his wipers to sweep the other car's shattered windshield off of his.

"How many drinks did you have?" I asked then.

"Doesn't matter," he said with a grin. "Shouldn't have smoked my lucky."

My phone vibrated against the dashboard and I was back in the Starbucks parking lot

Gray house next to the broken fence. Come around front.

I stepped out of the car and squinted at a house through the missing pickets. Gray shingles—cracked and worn. I walked past the snaking coffee line and squeezed through a gap in the fence. A splinter pierced my skin and a speck of blood seeped through my cotton shirt.

I walked through grass, brown from the summer drought. The front door was muddy red and you could see paint coats from years' past. Blues and purples. Like one giant bruise. The door crept open and a girl grabbed my wrist and pulled me inside. She slammed the door and locked the dead bolt and chain. Then she tested the knob twice and leaned back against it and sighed. I loosened my shirt around the collar.

We stood by the door and her small breasts rose and fell as she breathed and her silk robe slid open and revealed a black-laced bra. I thought back on the online post—scanning through Craigslist in my parents' house after Max's funeral. There were two of them in the photo—blonde hair, brown hair, tits, and lingerie. Faces intentionally blurry. Holding up clasped fingers

into guns like two girls from a James Bond movie. Now there was one. Max had said you could never really trust a backpage post.

"I'm actually doing this," she said with her eyes closed.

Then she grabbed my arm and pulled me past a cluttered kitchen. Dishes in the sink. Cabinet doors ajar. Pretty depressing, really. We walked down the hall and took a left.

The massage room was pleasant enough. Ficus trees made the perimeter of the room. They didn't even look plastic. Lavender candles burned in dim light. The jazz from the speakers was Miles Davis—not your typical elevator mix. It was actually pretty nice. I waited for the second girl to arrive.

"I'm Lucy," she said. "My friend Rita couldn't make it."

"Chris," I said. I shuffled my feet on the linoleum floor. She brushed her hair away from her face and pushed me towards the table.

"Completely naked or leave your boxers on," she said. Her eyes were the color of tobacco with yellow specks that swirled until they disappeared. Her nostrils didn't have a single hair.

"I will be back in five minutes," she said. "Topless in a thong." She pointed on her palm as if highlighting presentation-points on a piece of paper.

"You are free to touch while I massage, but anything more is going to cost—I mean *require*—an additional donation." She took a step towards me. "That *includes* happy endings."

"In the ad you said—"

"The massage lasts for one hour and costs two hundred dollars."

I thought about asking for a discount due to Rita's absence but I dug in my pocket and fidgeted with my pack of smokes instead. I guess I could pay a little more for a happy ending.

She told me again that she would return in five minutes and our hour-long session would begin. I thought back on her body leaning against the deadbolted door—breath heavy. Now here she was, pointing on her palm and negotiating rates. I remembered how small I felt walking through the towering cathedral doors to Max's funeral. I suddenly needed Lucy to like me.

The massage table smelled like rubbing alcohol and lavender. Through the speakers a voice sang over a saxophone. *In your own sweet way*. I imagined Lucy in a musky jazz club. By day she'd give massages. By night she'd play the sax in front of a mean crowd. The candle's flame bent under the push of the fan. Then the door creaked open and the light dimmed to dusk.

"This is Rita's mix," she said. "Sounds like fog horns to me."

I twisted my neck. She wore black-laced panties and had a moon-shaped birthmark next to her belly button. I didn't remember that from the

picture. She scrolled through her phone and covered her naked breasts with her arm. She raised the volume and I sunk my face into the vinyl. I heard the pump from the lotion bottle and then felt warm trembling hands on my back. She sighed and the quivering stopped and her hands became steady. Then she made circles that disappeared into themselves like whirlpools. A trumpet played over the whirl of the fan.

"I'm not much of a talker," she said.

I nodded.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Denver."

Her breasts pressed against me as she reached across my body.

"Do you mind if I straddle you?"

I shook my head and she climbed on top.

"Visiting family in Boston or what?"

"Funeral," I said. I moaned as she found a knot.

"Me too." The breeze from the fan hit my naked body and I shivered.

"Friend?" I asked.

"She lived here," she said. "The jazz, the plants, the candles. They're all hers."

She abandoned my back and sat on my butt and worked the tangles out of my hair. I craned my neck and watched her employ a rapid tapping technique on my spine. The candlelight shone on her crescent birthmark and it felt like seeing the moon in the height of day.

"Was there jazz at the funeral?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. She squirted the empty lotion bottle and then shook it before setting it down. "I didn't go."

The massage continued in silence. I thought back on Max's burial. It felt like a year had passed since yesterday. Everyone stepped forward—one-by-one—and touched the casket until the crowd thinned to stragglers. It was easy: step forward, touch the casket, then leave. This bald man stepped forward and squeezed the coffin's corner. The veins on his sun-spotted hand bulged and he squeezed tighter and tighter until he quivered. Something moved like a current from the wood through his body and he shook—slow at first, and then spastic and fast, like he was convulsing. He keeled over in violent sobs. Then his wife and brothers and friends shouldered his weight as he wailed the whole way to his car. They practically dragged him. I stood there frozen until I was the last one left and the groundskeepers lowered the casket into the earth. I turned around, too scared to say goodbye.

The fan's breeze cut through my hair and I shivered again. I imagined Rita's blurred face transplanted onto Max's funeral card. Suddenly I knew how she died.

"Drugs?" I asked.

“Heroine. You?”

“Percocet,” I said.

“Well, not me—my friend,” she added.

“Same.”

“Well, sometimes me,” she said.

“Me, too.”

She worked her thumbs into the dimples of my lower back. She paused and I winced and she touched the cut from the fence with her bare hand.

“His name?” she asked.

“Max.”

She draped a towel over the wound and bent forward and her hard nipples dragged across my skin. She rested her cheek on the back of my head like a pillow, her voice soft in my ear.

“Mine was Rita.”

Then she released her weight on top of me.

“I have a confession,” she said.

I thought of the casket and my frozen feet and wished these hands were there to guide me—shove me if they had to. She climbed off my body and onto the linoleum floor. The oscillating fan blew against my face and left and returned again. She covered her breasts with her hands.

“I’m getting a tooth pulled today and well—I’m nervous.”

“That’s not much of a confession,” I said.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“And I skipped Rita’s funeral.”

“I know,” I said. “You told me.”

She looked at me and her eyes were raw and red and I found the yellow specks in the reddish brown.

“I couldn’t touch my friend’s casket,” I said.

“Is that a thing?” she asked.

“I think so.”

She let her hands down. Her breasts were small and turned slightly up.

“Do you smoke?” she asked.

“In my pants pocket,” I said. She walked across the room to a crumpled pair of jeans and pulled a pack of camels out of the last pocket she searched.

“We can sit on the porch,” she said. She grabbed her silk robe off the linoleum floor and pointed towards a flannel one hanging on a hook next to a ficus. I pulled it down and slipped inside.

Outside the world was busy. A cardinal gathered twigs for a nest and the wispy clouds hurried through the sky like they had somewhere to be. Through the bottom of a broken fence picket I saw suede shoes shuffle forward on the pavement—waiting in line for coffee. The air was warm and pleasant and suddenly it didn’t seem so odd to be sitting next to Lucy in a

morning robe at eleven AM on a Tuesday.

“Have you done it before?” she asked. She held my pack towards me and I thanked her for my cigarettes as she slid them into my pocket.

“I’ve been to strip clubs,” I said. She offered me her lighter.

“No. Had a tooth pulled.”

“Never.” Under the broken picket I saw sneakers and then flip flops and then paint-speckled work boots. Each pair shuffled forward and was replaced by something new. I loved how disconnected they were from the bodies. Lucy rubbed the side of her jaw. I raised my hand to touch it and scratched the back of my neck instead.

“The fence is going to collapse soon,” she said. “Next big storm.” She bit her cigarette and adjusted her robe over naked knees. Then she buried her face into her hands and cried. Her hands looked smaller beneath her face than when they shielded her breasts moments before.

A chatty squirrel scampered up a tree and I switched my cigarette to my outside hand and lowered my arm around her. She leaned in towards me and I looked under the broken picket and watched the last of the shoes disappear.

§

There are three cemeteries in Max’s hometown and it wasn’t until I left Lucy’s and pulled into the empty lot of the first that I realized I had no idea where he was buried. A groundskeeper walked me to the front office and pecked away at an old eighties-style computer. She solemnly shook her head.

“Forgetting details of the funeral is very normal,” she said.

When I pulled into the lot of the third cemetery muscle memory kicked in and the crooked oak led me to the hydrangeas. The hydrangeas led me to the Pitassi family mausoleum which led me to a towering beech—smooth gray bark silhouetted against a sea of green. I saw the yard sign with Max’s name in script—marking the grave until his tombstone was ready. I guess they need more notice for those kinds of things.

Tiny weeds poked through the flattened layer of disturbed earth and I stared at the ground where the casket was buried. I opened my pack of smokes and the lone lucky stared up at me like an auburn eye. I lit the cigarette and called Lucy.

“How was it?” I asked.

“The tooth?”

“Yeah.”

“Not as bad as I thought. Pretty infected though. You know—antibiotics and everything.”

“Worse or better?”

“A little bit of both.”

I thought of the broken fence and the messy kitchen and the jazz and the ficus trees. A landscape crew unloaded mowers from a trailer in the distance.

“I don’t blame you,” I said.

“I ate pretty bad as a kid.”

“For skipping the funeral.”

The cut from the fence began to throb and I touched it and winced. Then I smelled the faint scent of lavender.

“Maybe we can meet at Starbucks,” I said. My voice quivered.

“For coffee?”

I thought of the shoes under the fence and how nice it would feel to be a body attached to them. I cleared my throat.

“For coffee,” I said.

“I’d like that.” Then she hung up the phone.

I walked towards Max’s sign and knelt on the damp earth. They must water the cemetery because it hadn’t rained in weeks. I thought of the bald man and his shaking body and violent sobs and my frozen feet and failure to say goodbye. I pressed my palm into the dirt but the coffin seemed far away and my hand left a print in the ground that looked ghostly and strange. In the distance the landscapers’ mowers moved towards me like a charging brigade.

DANIELLE SHORR

NOVEMBER, 2018

After you died, I felt like everyone in the grocery store could see my grief, dribbling out of the sides of my mouth when I talked, sloppy on my white shirt and light jeans. It was everywhere I walked, seen in muddy footprints, tire grease, flooding the aisles and exits, a viscous sap I leaked willingly.

I avoided eye contact with the cashier because I was certain he would know. I kept my car windows rolled up when I drove. I figured anyone and everyone could see it: your absence on my face and body, no matter the amount of layers worn, even with a hooded jacket, hat, sunglasses.

I went into work at my retail job and feared people would see it in the way I counted quarters, handed back cash. It was almost Christmas then. I put up display lights around the store and called the man who would have choked me to death with enough time.

Sometimes I still feel like I'm wearing it. Sometimes I still feel like wearing it, a greedy fabric, heavy fur coat I drape around my shoulders and sink into. I want the world to know you're dead when you shouldn't be. The years are becoming a costumed tradition.

The week you died I was waiting for someone to notice, to recognize a missing element and ask me about it. Eventually, I washed my clothes, myself, back to something almost like before. The week you died, nobody noticed, nobody asked me about it, but I wanted them to.

ROBIN GOW

ONE-WAY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR PET
TARANTULA

This past month I watched you molt.
Each leg cracking open to reveal
a softer fresh self.

I also know what it's like to shed
a body. I see your skeleton
curled fist-like in the corner of your terrarium.

Sometimes I mistake her for a second spider.
I look twice this morning, thinking
she is you and you are dead.

What do you know of my lover, your owner,
that even I do not know? You shared homes with her
for years before we met. Watched her chop peppers

and peel nail polish from her fingers.
I'm not asking you to betray her.
I would never ask you to do that. I say this as

a curiosity that doesn't need to be answered.
I want to know if you fear it happening again.
The body pressing a new body

from its core. In your water dish
or the glass walls of your life,
do you see your reflection and wonder

where you came from? Most days, Rose,
I try to forget you are here. Your eight eyes
startle me. I feel like you must be

hiding some dark and terrible truth.
But, today, I am grateful for your skeleton.
My life has been a series of dead girls

curled fist-like. On-lookers asking
if I am dead. Me, asking myself, if I am gone.
But today you crawl up the wall.

You spin web like lullaby from corner to corner.
I count your legs for comfort and then greet your owner,
my lover, as she sits down at the kitchen table.

ELIZABETH BROOKS

DATING A-LA MODE I



S. FREDERIC LISS

CHOKING ON CANE SYRUP

“Thinking of breaking trail tomorrow, Dad?” Junior asked.
“Hannah and me’ll take your taps.” Hannah was Junior’s sister.
“I’m healed enough to go to school...”
“Your wound’s still draining,” Peg, Junior’s mom, said.
Sonny turned to Hannah. “Early start.”
“We need a good season,” Peg said.

Seasons when warm temperatures lingered until after Christmas and returned by Valentine’s Day, the sap didn’t run. Valley folk cursed the politicians who did nothing about climate change by saying, ‘May you choke on cane syrup.’ This season, unlike the last several, was more like the old days.

The next morning, Sonny rented two dray horses and went ahead to break trail to the sugar house. Hannah followed on cross country skis. Peg sterilized the tomato cans they hung from their taps to collect sap. Many of their neighbors used sap buckets, but Sonny used twenty pound tomato cans salvaged from the valley’s only pizza joint and bartered to its owner for a gallon of sap tea.

Sonny completed the first loop from the trailer to the sugar house and back, then harnessed the horses to a sled to cut runner marks into the trail. Sugaring was hard work, but it provided childhood’s sweetest memories, especially sugar-on-snow parties to celebrate the boiling off of the season’s first maple syrup. Heated and poured on pure white snow, after it cooled everyone twisted it around their fingers, maple lollipops.

Hannah caught up to her dad at the sugar house where he stacked firewood. She draped her arm around a black gelding, one of the rented horses. She removed her gloves and combed its mane with her fingers. “I don’t remember Junior not wanting to be a Marine.”

“Since he learned to spell the word.”

“He blames you.”

Sonny looked away. Maybe Peg was right. Maybe they should send Hannah to live with Peg’s uncle in the city, accept the scholarship to the private school where he taught. She’d thrive because she was wise enough to take the valley with her. She understood the changing of the seasons, the meadow grass dying so the deer lived, the deer dying so the hunter lived, the hunter dying so the mountain lived. Junior would struggle in the city

because he wouldn't accept the valley's wisdom.

When they returned to the trailer, Peg was in the yard washing the metal filters that strained out the bark and leaves that dropped into the tomato cans as they hung from the taps.

"I'm tasting the sap tea already," Sonny said.

During the hours of sap boiling, Peg scooped boiling sap and steeped tea bags in it to brew sap tea. They sat on logs outside the sugar house, the four of them, a family, drinking tea, letting the ways of the valley bond them. Junior's bitterness reduced them to three.

On the night after Recruitment Day, the only light in the sugar house was the dim, orange glow of the fire. There was nothing to do but dream, tend the fire, monitor the evaporators and float valves, and keep the drain-off point open so boiled sap didn't back up. The Marines didn't take Junior because of his wound. Army neither. He didn't have the eyesight for the Air Force or the stomach for the Navy or Coast Guard. His destiny, a hostage of the valley.

Healed enough to take a shift in the sugar house, Junior balanced himself beside the evaporator pan, skimming foam off the boiling sap. The bubbling hypnotized him, the aroma intoxicated. Singing the Marine Hymn, he barricaded the door. Within minutes, the walls were too hot to touch. Tongues of fire erupted from the fissures between the wall planks. Flames engulfed the interior.

§

Years later after Hannah moved away, returning only at Christmas to visit her folks, then, finally, bury them, the grandchildren of the old valley families, now grandparents themselves, gathered at sugaring time to sip sap tea and recall how in the sugaring season of Junior's death the valley choked on cane syrup.

CYNTHIA YATCHMAN

COVID COLOR 3



ALFRED FOURNIER

PLUM

Pinks and reds suffused
in a purple almost surrendered to black.
It's skin cool and smooth in my hand,
reflecting light along its curves.
I lift it close and breathe it in.
A dozen childhood summers.

SAGE RAVENWOOD

ALONG THE EDGES OF PAGES

In this quiet dead heat month,
I finally allow my anger to sit
beside me. A gentle breeze floats
Quaking Aspen leaves feigned
merriment. August is done
with this garden as am I.
Even as I tend lovingly to
the tomato plants and will carrots
to grow longer, to dig down
stronger into this black belly of soil,
I wish them done. Shorter days where
darkness languishes in a sea of fireflies.
Signal fires blinking on and off.
Every absent thought and stilled breath
smoke risen from a log steeped fire pit.
Quiet sentience, everything bedded,
sleeping inside a heartbeat's rhythm.
The wind whistling a mournful
decrecendo between tree branches.
Layered siliques housed inside
pretend homes of safe.
Winter coalescence written
along the edges of pages. Reminders.
It's so loud and I'm never alone
in this quiet dark of me.

SEASONAL AFFLICTION

A 7ft Douglas Fir tree which isn't even real
There's a galaxy An Octagram polygon star
Triplicate rounded with metal cutout stars
Candescent north star haloing a tree cone in white light
Ceiling a blackout window cracked
 Lost shards letting the light in or escaping
 down the wall in a meteor shower
A secular evergreen bough Pagan before our time
Conifer branches snow dressed Milky Way
 a cosmic spectrum with hues
 from seasons before burnt autumn
There will be no winter squall scratching to be let in
Giving season's multicolored looped branches
 kaleidoscopic as a country's DNA
Each bulb a gathering of tethered moments
When the Fir temple shakes a house in December wind
Step off the stepladder to evict
 a cat silhouette covered in pine needles
Watch out for the kittens' claws
Or the dog trying to bring a fallen branch in the house
 mimicking the human bringing outside inside
I'm as confused as the beast
 not welcoming a babe in a manger
Hoping someone will read this out of season
It's ~~Christmas~~ in July
There's a forest glen somewhere where evergreens
 stretch their boughs beyond blackout ceilings
I'm not there

AFTER 'LIFE

I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying...

To not feel so much in this skin.

A deer, finally freed after he was ensnared
by a hammock draping down over his eyes
and spaghettied between his antlers,
has a new tracking collar.

Soon after hunters want to know, can they -

*"I mean you collar a big deer like that,
that may be one in a lifetime for me. Ima shoot it!"*

Buck's fair game, as long as you report it.

Yet another hunter shoots a doe.

Her mate confronts them and puts his life

in danger to nudge the fallen deer, desperately
trying to wake her. What is human of the man

filming the buck's grief, while pondering how
his head would look above the fireplace.

All of it is.

To be human is, to love

our dying more than the actual living;

Always preparing for the *after* 'life.

In the Philippines,

there's a sign beside a country road

with an outline of waving children
requesting you wave back.

There are no children. Is this a kindness

for the dearly departed. Please, pay attention.

Parents are waving to schoolchildren as they drive off
as if seeing ghost by gravestones. We're waving

as hard as we can. There is still more
living than dead inside our classrooms.

Schools are as safe as a deer in the woods.

Safer than kids in my neighborhood swimming
in a creek flowing through old hazardous waste sites.

My dog died from Acute Leukemia. I wonder;

How do I fail this humanness?

All of it.

KATHRYN BRATT-PFOTENHAUER

THE KISSING TREES

Hard to unsee it: two tree trunks joined in mid-air.
You tell me this is why the crepe myrtle is called

a kissing tree, and that's easier on the tongue than
calling it inosculation, which means the same thing

but sounds harsher somehow: a punishment, clinical. All evening,
I have lived with the inconstancy of your attention: here

your hand in my hand, a minute later, that same hand lost to me
as you peer into the dark crevices between buildings, searching

for I don't know what, but you name the trees as we walk past them:
crepe myrtle, live oak gone shaggy with Spanish moss. An acolyte,

you came to this place with a fascination that lies beyond me. The day
before I leave, and Baton Rouge begins to fade into a hot

August memory, we stop by the side of the road so you
can gather the wood of those same trees we walked under.

Your utility knife unfolds into an instrument of many purposes,
the tiny saw blade so hot by the time you finish cutting, it hurts

to touch. At home, you sit in your chair, begin to skin the bark back
with long, methodical strokes. It isn't hard to imagine what else you can do

with your hands; I know what you can do. In bed, your mouth hangs
over me like a moon, your fingers disappeared into the space

between our bodies. Is it here where I say you kissed me there? I hunger
for your body the way I hunger for most things: desperately, a palm

to your chest, to your cheek. I am miles
from you now. The missing is no less potent.

LINDA EVE DIAMOND

A LITTLE POET TREEHOUSE



PENNY JACKSON

AFTERNOON ENCOUNTER

At first, Matt thought he was definitely mistaken. The very pregnant woman in a bright blue dress sorting through the pile of magazines on the office table could not be her. No, Claire, he had heard, had moved somewhere to the other side of the country, California or Oregon, and she could not be pregnant.

Matt was the only man in the waiting room, which made sense since it was an obstetrician practice, and it was the middle of the day. Being a high school teacher with most of his classes in the morning gave him the freedom to join his wife, Jennifer, during her afternoon appointments. Dr. Bellow was the third fertility specialist they had seen this year. How Matt hated these waiting rooms that promoted fertility for those who were struggling with conception. Framed photographs of smiling babies were everywhere, on the walls and on the table. Most of the magazines were geared toward parents and families. On the other side of the wall were framed awards for Dr. Bello, a portly man with a white moustache who reminded Matt of the cartoon character on the Cap'n Crunch cereal box he loved as a child. Soft ambient jazz music played softly in the background, yet outside the doctor's window Matt could still hear the city's midtown traffic of honking horns and the occasional police siren.

Matt probably would have ducked out of the waiting room if she hadn't noticed him first. It wasn't that he was scared or embarrassed—he just wasn't sure if the woman in the blue dress really was Claire. She was very much pregnant, and her hair, which once was styled in a short pixie cut, had grown and was now past her shoulders. Her hair color, which once was blonde, was darker, even though there were still glints of gold. Her shoes were sensible flats, but Claire never wore heels. Matt was halfway out the door when he heard her voice.

"Matt!" She still had that same slight Southern accent from Georgia and a very faint lisp that he always found irresistible.

He turned around and saw that she was grinning. "Claire. Well, this is a surprise!"

Matt inwardly winced at his stupid expression. There were so more interesting things to say when you run into your ex-wife at New York City's most famous fertility clinic.

"Wow," Claire said, struggling to stand up. Her dress strained at her

swollen belly. "I can't believe this. How long has it been?"

"Ten years."

"Of course. Ten years. Sounds shorter than a decade."

The room was warm, and he could feel his armpits grow clammy. Matt's heart was beating so fast he wondered if Claire could hear it. The two stood smiling at each other until Matt took a step forward.

"Congratulations," Matt told her, and for a moment he thought about offering his hand but left it hanging by his side.

"Thank you." Claire patted her belly. "Finally." Her long hair made her seem so much younger, and Matt, who had never seen her hair long, marveled at its thickness and luster. But didn't they say pregnant women had better hair? Something to do with the hormones. Her eyes were still that shade of green that Matt would tell her reminded him of the shade of a deep meadow. Claire always loved poetry and he always felt at a loss for the right metaphor.

"How are you, Matt?"

"I'm fine. Still teaching high school chemistry. The only difference is when I was with you there weren't so many cell phones. Now I have to compete with Instagram and TikTok."

"TikTok?" Claire frowned. She still had that tiny scar above her right eyebrow from when she walked into a door as a toddler. Even though she had once thought about plastic surgery, Matt had told her the scar had made her special. He was relieved to see that it was still there.

"Social media," he explained with a shrug. "The cyanide of this generation. How are you? Still the most feared defense lawyer in the county?"

Claire shook her head. "Oh, I quit. I can't work those hours with a newborn."

They stood for a few moments in silence. Matt's mouth felt dry, and he wanted to lick his lips but didn't want to look stupid. "Here," he said, pulling out a chair. "Please sit down." He realized they were the only two in the room. The receptionist, who he had seen before, seemed to have vanished.

"Thanks Matt." Claire settled herself in a chair and placed her shiny black purse pocket primly on her lap. Her polite manners from her Southern upbringing had never left her. "If you don't mind me asking, why are you here?"

"Jennifer is a patient of Dr. Bello's."

"Jennifer?" she asked.

"My new wife. We've been married for five years."

Claire glanced behind him, almost as if she expected Jennifer to walk into the room. "I didn't know that. About your new marriage."

"I had no idea where you were, Claire."

She smiled. "I wanted to do a Houdini for a while. Congrats, Matt. How did you two meet?"

He was too embarrassed to answer “Tinder.” So instead, he said, “We met playing tennis.”

Claire’s eyes widened. “When did you start playing tennis?”

“Shortly after our divorce. I couldn’t stand staring at the four walls anymore.”

“Was it that rough, Matt?”

Was he about to confide in his ex-wife all his nagging doubts after they signed the final papers? How he called in sick at school and stayed curled up in a ball in bed for a week? But it was both their decision. They agreed that the two of them was not enough. A child may have saved the marriage, but it was too late for that now.

“Sure, it was rough. Divorce should be rough, right?”

He expected Claire to say something similar but instead she picked up a magazine with a baby’s face on it and fanned herself.

“I get these hot flashes now. I hate the extra weight too. But it’s worth it.” She examined the cover of one of the baby magazines. “Terrible that they have piles of these here. Must be torture for the poor women who can’t have babies.”

“You’re right,” Matt said. Jennifer had said the same thing about these magazines. And she was one of those poor women who wasn’t able to bear a child.

Claire pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and Matt saw that she was wearing the pearl earrings he had given her for their fifth anniversary.

“So, you kept them.”

“Oh!” She touched both earlobes with her fingers. “Of course,” she answered. “I still have our engagement ring too.”

“I had to borrow money from my brother for that ring. He still reminds me even though I paid him back years ago.”

“We were both in graduate school. Money was always tight. I love these earrings.” Claire touched her ears again. “Matter of fact, I wear them every day.”

Matt smiled. He was glad that she wore them always, a bit of him remaining after the shreds of their marriage. He pulled out a chair and sat next to Claire. His pain doctor had prescribed a new medication for his bad back, and he was feeling dizzy. Or perhaps it was this afternoon encounter with Claire.

As if reading his mind, Matt heard Claire ask, “Tell me about Jennifer.”

“She’s a real estate agent. Actually, a star real estate agent. She’s the breadwinner in the family.”

“So, where do you and Jennifer live?”

“Our same apartment. On Riverside Drive.”

“Really? You’ve been there forever, Matt.”

"It's still rent controlled. And how can I leave Mrs. Goldberg?"

Claire seemed to jump out of her chair with joy. "Mrs. Goldberg! Does she still live next door! She must be 99. I'm so glad she's alive!"

"She asks about you every day, Claire."

"She doesn't."

"Seriously, every day. Actually, she won't even talk to Jennifer. It's as if she's invisible."

Claire seemed to consider this for a moment. Her mouth twitched, and Matt suspected she was suppressing a laugh.

"Remember the day she was locked in her apartment?" Claire asked.

"I had to climb out of the window to save her."

"I thought you were going to fall straight to the pavement."

"Fifteen flights would have killed me. Yeah, I was scared. But I had to save her. Mrs. Goldberg was hysterical."

Matt and Claire had been making love when they heard the old woman's screams for help. They were making love a lot that week—trying to create a baby.

"Is Ruben still there too?" Claire asked.

"The worst super on The Upper West Side."

"Maybe the worst super in New York City," Claire added.

"We did invite him to our wedding."

"Didn't he drink so much that he passed out in the lobby?"

"He still drinks too much."

"Poor Ruben," said Claire.

"Poor Ruben," Matt said, nodding his head.

They both sat, quiet. Matt wondered if Claire was thinking about Ruben or Mrs. Goldberg or their marriage. Outside, down the hallway, a phone rang, but no one answered it. Matt realized he had not seen another person since he had encountered Claire.

"So, Matt, why are you here?"

"Jennifer. She's having trouble conceiving. And she's only thirty-two. Must be me."

"Don't blame yourself, Matt. Remember how many doctors told us we couldn't have children?" She stroked her swollen belly again. "They were wrong."

"When is your baby due?"

"Three months. So, she'll be a June baby. Summer babies are wonderful. But so are all babies."

She must have seen something in Matt's face because she placed a hand on his arm. "Don't worry. Jennifer will be fine." She stared hard at the calendar on the opposite wall filled with infants' smiling faces. "I predict she'll be pregnant soon. A baby in December. A Christmas present."

"That would be wonderful. But how can you know?"

Claire smiled her special half-smile that Matt knew she saved for secrets. "I know. So be patient, Matt. But it's hard for a marriage. It was so hard for us."

Matt wanted her to keep her hand on his arm. He could feel the warmth of her touch. But she moved away. Claire was not his wife anymore.

"Hey, congrats to your husband."

Claire stared at him.

"Who said I had a husband?"

"I mean your boyfriend. Partner. Sorry, I'm so out of touch now."

"Matt, it's 2022. You don't need a husband or a boyfriend to have a baby."

Matt slapped his hand over his forehead. "God, I'm such an idiot. Of course not. I wish I had known. About you and your baby."

He had tried to find her so many times on Facebook. Instagram. Mutual friends had lost contact with Claire, too.

"I'm sorry. My fault. As you can tell, I don't do social media. And I was never good at staying in touch with people. I live in Cheyenne now." Claire opened her pocketbook, sorted through some items, and took out a photograph. "Here is my house. I bought it myself."

Matt stared at a lovely white-painted house near a mountain with a large rose garden and a porch swing.

"They don't really have any good obstetrician clinics in Wyoming for older women so that's why I'm here. Visiting my sister. She still lives in Staten Island."

"Staten Island! I was just there. For a school field trip."

Matt had a strange sensation of no longer being in the doctor's office but on the ferry to Staten Island. He could feel the sun on his face, hear the seagulls and smell the acrid mixture of the fumes from the ferry and the East River. He had left his students briefly in charge of the other teachers and had wandered to the other end of the boat to be alone. This ferry had been their special place. Matt had proposed to Claire one midnight in January, the snow whipping their faces, flakes glistening in her hair. She adored Enda St. Vincent Millay, and "Recuerdo," which took place on the Staten Island Ferry, was her favorite poem. Suddenly, in Dr. Bello's waiting room, he started reciting the first stanza.

*"We were very tired, we were very merry,
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry."*

"You remember!" Claire said.

"The poem is called 'Recuerdo,' right? How could I ever forget."

Claire made a sniffing noise and took a tissue from the box on the table.

"Our poem, Matt. That was always our poem. Oh, we were so happy."

What went wrong?"

There were tears in her eyes. He had heard Claire cry so many times, particularly during the last month of their marriage. Matt wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He wanted to kiss her, to stop her crying, to tell her he never stopped loving her. Ever.

"We were so happy," she said over and over again.

"I know, darling. I know." He could smell the shampoo Claire always used that had the scent of an expensive floral shop. She cried for another minute and then hastily wiped her eyes with the tissue, which she placed in her purse.

"Do you ever think," Matt began, his voice shaky. "That we made a terrible mistake. That perhaps we still could..."

But before Claire could answer, Matt could see his wife Jennifer in the hall, talking on her cell phone.

"I'll be right back," he told Claire. She nodded her head. He wished Jennifer was not there, which made him feel as if someone had punched him in the stomach.

Jennifer was still on her cell phone when he walked into the hall. The bright fluorescent lights, so different from the soft lights of the waiting room he had just left, made his vision a bit blurred.

His wife looked up at him and lifted a finger to indicate one more minute. She was the opposite of Claire, all sharp angles as Claire was softer and round. Even her haircut, a severe bob, looked as if it could cut. She was standing straight, which meant good news. Matt glanced back at the office but did not see Claire. Perhaps she had left to use the restroom.

"How did it go with the doctor?" Matt asked.

"We're not there yet. But he said this the most hopeful he has been in months. We should make another appointment as soon as possible. Do you have my coat?"

"I left it in the closet."

Matt didn't want Jennifer to walk into that room and see Claire. His wife walked swiftly into the waiting room, her high heels clicking as Matt stayed in the hall.

"Are you feeling all right, Matt?" she asked when she returned, her Burberry coat slung across his right arm. Matt was now sitting in a chair, his head in his hands.

"That new medication is making me sick. I think I should call the doctor." He stood up shakily. "I forgot my umbrella in the closet."

"But you didn't have an umbrella, Matt."

"Let me check to be sure."

The waiting room was empty when Matt entered again. He could see that the bathroom door was wide open and vacant too. Matt returned to

the hallway and saw that Jennifer had taken out her phone and was texting furiously.

“See,” she said, briefly glancing at her husband. “I told you there was no umbrella.”

Matt couldn’t help himself. He had to ask. “Did you see a woman in the waiting room?”

“A woman?” Jennifer looked up from the screen of her phone and frowned. “What woman?”

“A pregnant woman. She was wearing a blue dress and had pearl earrings. Long brown hair. A black purse.”

“There was no woman,” Jennifer said. “The waiting room was empty.”

“Are you sure?”

Jennifer took in the volume of his voice. “Of course, I am sure,” she said with noticeable irritation. “I was actually surprised. Usually, it’s so crowded. Are you sure you didn’t see this woman somewhere else?” Her phone pinged and she glanced at the screen. “Come on, Matt. I have an Uber waiting for us outside.”

Jennifer turned toward the elevator bank, but Matt could not follow. He turned around and rushed into the waiting room. Jennifer was right. The room was empty. If Claire had momentarily left, she did not return. But where could she have gone? There was only one door. There was a stillness to the room that felt as if no one had been there for a while. Even the magazines looked undisturbed. He wished she had left the tissue she used to dab her tears on the table so it could be a piece of evidence. Nothing in that room revealed her past presence. But Matt had seen Claire, smelled her hair, felt her touch. Even now, there was a faint scent of her floral shampoo.

“Matt, are you coming?” Jennifer called from the hallway.

Matt stood, staring at the chair where he was so sure his first wife had sat.

Was Claire real or a dream? Did the pain medicine make him hallucinate? Or was he losing his mind? Maybe there was a secret hidden exit? He couldn’t have imagined Claire, could he?

Again, he broke out in a sweat. After three deep breaths, he felt his heart stop racing. Perhaps that poem “Recuerdo” really did cast a magic spell.

Matt took one last look at the waiting room and then walked into the hallway to join his wife. Jennifer would be pregnant by December. He was sure of that now.

“There you are,” Jennifer said, placing her hand on his arm. “I thought I lost you.”

“For a moment,” he told Jennifer. “You did.”

CYNTHIA YATCHMAN

COVID COLOR 6



MARA DAVIS PRICE

THE MORNING AFTER

I ground myself.

Five things you see:

these sheets, I say. That overturned
lamp on the floor. The hollow of a
throat as it moves in sleep. My own
body, when I look down. The floor,
when I look past my body.

My breathing slows.

Four things you feel:

tired. Dead weight and skin. A
memory of wetness, like rainwater
still puddled after the sun comes
out. Temperatureless air.

My shoulders sink.

Three things you hear:

the refrigerator, which is the loudest
sound in the world. My breathing.
Each bang of this incessant heart.

My skin unprickles.

Two things you smell:

the smell of no smell—which I
think must be everything—and
blood.

My mouth waters.

One thing you taste:

I don't taste anything at all.

JESSE CURRAN

THE PEACE LILY, THE LEMON WATER

When my dad died, there were cards and cookies
some restaurant certificates and bouquets
that in a few days faded. And then
there was a peace lily from Peter.

The peace lily sat in my writing shed all winter
and stayed alive drinking the remains of my lemon water.
Every few days, it would crinkle its leaves at me
and then bow them down, and then I'd empty
the rest of the mason jar and it would perk up again.
It was a perfect present, easy enough to keep going
on a simple diet that somehow sustains me.
Lemon and water, water and lemon.
Both sweet and sour, clean and capable
of bringing a quiet brightness,
of tasting like sun.

What I did not know is that Peter's dad would die in March
and that I would send him an azalea bonsai.
And another close friend's father would then leave in May
and I would send her some succulents.
And that this sad spring would become
about sending friends something simple enough
to sit near their desks, to be green and patient
to be yellow and dry, to be pink, to be thirsty
and crinkled, then satiated, then supple
then somehow, sustained.

What I didn't know is that this sad spring
would be about sending something easy enough
to keep going.

10:4:TENN PLAYWRITING CONTEST 2022 WINNER

BRITTON PONTOUX

THE WIDOWS WALK

CHARACTERS:

ELIZABETH: a girl of sixteen, not quite naïve but not quite streetwise

CAPTAIN GAGE: mid-forties; Elizabeth's stepfather, a sea captain

MRS. GAGE: mid-forties; Elizabeth's mother, a laudanum user

HENRY GAGE: thirties; Captain Gage's younger brother, also a sea captain

SETTING: A parlor in Charleston, South Carolina

TIME: 1850s

SYNOPSIS: The family of a returning sea captain clashes over recent upheaval in their lives.

SCENE 1

(ELIZABETH sits in a nineteenth century parlor, sewing. A brass telescope is on a table by the window. CAPTAIN GAGE strides through the door, holding a newspaper. When Elizabeth ignores him, he gives her a sharp look.)

CAPTAIN GAGE: I am well. Are you?

ELIZABETH: We are pleased to see you safe.

CAPTAIN GAGE: We are, are we? Does your mother lie abed?

ELIZABETH: Yes, Captain Gage, your wife lies abed.

CAPTAIN GAGE: In New England, the wives walk the roof hoping to see their husbands come to port.

ELIZABETH: Summer mornings in New England are cool and brisk. The air in Charleston is like steam from a bath bucket. On the roof, still harder to bear.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I would like to feel the steam from a bath. *(Yelling to*

another room) Mrs. Gage, draw me a bath!

ELIZABETH: She is not in a fit condition.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I have three weeks of crust on me. I need a bath.

ELIZABETH: I will draw it.

CAPTAIN GAGE: You are looking slim. Lively. (*HE consults his newspaper, gestures with or slaps it slightly*) At the Port Society, they told me about a spyglass. It sounds fine. Was it delivered? (*Calling aside again*) Mrs. Gage, where is it?

ELIZABETH: She placed it in the window.

(*CAPTAIN GAGE walks to the telescope and hefts it.*)

CAPTAIN GAGE: Ah. It's a fine glass. Could anchor a raft. (*Holding it to his eye and directing it out the window*) Sharp view, sharp as a shark's tooth. (*After a moment of investigating the neighborhood*) You saw the story?

ELIZABETH: I read it.

CAPTAIN GAGE: But my brother, did he see? (*Moving on before she answers; perhaps the question was rhetorical*) The Halifax was stuck for days on a rock. Those men would have perished but not for me. We hoisted them off. The Zephyr groaned but we saved them. That's what this. . . commemorates.

ELIZABETH: It's fine to do good for others.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Gratitude is the fine thing. An expression of sincere gratitude. From an entire country. Her majesty, it says. A testimonial from Queen Victoria. (*Hefting it again*) It's solid brass.

ELIZABETH: Solid brass? How can one see through it?

CAPTAIN GAGE: Brass and glass. When I take this up to the roof, I'll be able to see the salt crystals on the beard of every man in the harbor. Did you look through it?

ELIZABETH: I wouldn't dare!

CAPTAIN GAGE: My brother didn't show you?

ELIZABETH: He has not seen it. It was delivered only Tuesday last.

CAPTAIN GAGE: You said he had seen it?

ELIZABETH: I did not.

CAPTAIN GAGE: He saw the story.

ELIZABETH: I can't have said he saw the story. I have not seen him to know.

CAPTAIN GAGE: He is not here? This is a foul up. He should be in port. We

will need him. Is he not? Did he not even see the baby?

ELIZABETH: (*Blandly*) Why do you ask that?

CAPTAIN GAGE: (*With annoyance at her false naivete*) What should I ask?

ELIZABETH: You hold a newspaper.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Yes, Monday's. Has he not been here?

ELIZABETH: (*After a beat*) He no longer lives here.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Was he disturbed? About the baby's name?

ELIZABETH: I see no reason for distress.

(*MRS. GAGE enters. She walks slowly and, ever so slightly, unsteadily.*)

CAPTAIN GAGE: Where is my bath?

ELIZABETH: We were not expecting you. Mr. Chapman believed you might not hurry back.

CAPTAIN GAGE: (*To Mrs. Gage*) Your eyes are like onyx set in amber.

MRS. GAGE: They can see what is in front of me. That is all eyes need to do.

(*ELIZABETH exits.*)

MRS. GAGE (CONT'D): She does not speak to me.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Did Mr. Chapman bring the glass?

MRS. GAGE: Yes, it is here. It is beautiful. We placed it in the window.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Mr. Chapman himself brought it?

MRS. GAGE: I believe so. I believe he claimed it. Elizabeth will know.
(*Calling*) Elizabeth, did Mr. Chapman himself bring the telescope?

(*Silence*)

MRS. GAGE (CONT'D): You must ask her.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Elizabeth! Did Mr. Chapman bring it, I say?

(*ELIZABETH reappears in the parlor.*)

ELIZABETH: Yes, he did.

CAPTAIN GAGE: (*With dismay and some anger*) That wasn't right.

MRS. GAGE: But you were his agent?

CAPTAIN GAGE: If you dismiss a man for taking matters into his own hands, you ought not to accept his reward. (*After a pause to read his audience*) The Zephyr was two days from Havana. We saw the distress signal from the Halifax. There she was, stuck on a rock like Noah's ark. We could not leave her there. We heaved her ho, took the crew aboard, and passed them off to a

northbound ship when we could.

ELIZABETH: If you could do no other, why was it gallant?

CAPTAIN GAGE: I could do no other. Many would not have done it.

MRS. GAGE: You say Mr. Chapman objected?

CAPTAIN GAGE: He would like a ship master who will stick to bringing in coffee, sugar, and seegars. No matter. Street and Brothers like the cut of my jib, and this spyglass will help me cut it sharper. I can find Havana like I can find my own boots, find it by a clouded crescent moon. The new route will test me. Did my brother see it? Elizabeth did not know.

ELIZABETH: I said, he has not seen it.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Does he know of it? He must. I saw that newspaper as well.

ELIZABETH: It would seem they keep a library at the Port Society! (*Beat*) We'll have a bath when the kettle heats.

CAPTAIN GAGE: We will?

ELIZABETH: I will prepare it and you will have it.

CAPTAIN GAGE: We should be careful about saying we. They asked me, how did we arrive at the baby's Christian name? His Uncle Edward was a surprising choice of namesake.

(MRS. GAGE begins wandering around the room, inspecting or picking up this and that.)

ELIZABETH: No one would say it's odd. We all loved him.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I am saying so, even given that affection. Wouldn't your Uncle Henry have been a better choice?

ELIZABETH: Your brother was no longer living here. I don't recall anyone pleading his case.

CAPTAIN GAGE: We will have to talk about that. And yet it seems somebody slipped his into this baby's magnificent name. In a lower ranking position. He is in port? Did you say he is in port?

ELIZABETH: I did not say. I believe he is. (*Turning away and then turning back*) You assume too much. Everybody took a round of naming.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Edward Henry James Bronger. . .

ELIZABETH: I believe they all went in the newspaper in any sort of order. The newspaper would be printed, and the weather was warm. It's not a name he'll have to live with.

CAPTAIN GAGE: (*Gazing at her with astonishment*) You're a cold-hearted woman.

ELIZABETH: (*She struggles to stay placid and loses the battle*) I'm a girl. My heart beats with human warmth. Weaker in response to grief and loss. Faster in response to love and longing. Pounding in response to fear and dread.

MRS. GAGE: Please don't. Don't have things out now. I can't. . .

(*ELIZABETH turns away and looks out the window.*)

MRS. GAGE (CONT'D): She does not speak to me.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Did she ever? I don't remember a word in your direction in the seven years we have been married.

MRS. GAGE: You did used to speak to me. My Elizabeth. My girl! You would ask me to button your boot or help with your hair. The boys would rather be unkempt.

ELIZABETH: (*To Captain Gage*) We don't have ladies' maids in this house. Who else would I have asked?

CAPTAIN GAGE: I wonder, does she want a lady's maid?

ELIZABETH: She does not, Captain Gage, but she thinks it odd that some will have them in the hull of a ship but not to darken the door sill.

MRS. GAGE: Oh! Captain Gage, really. . .?

ELIZABETH: What do you think Street and Brothers trade? What takes six months to obtain? He will be hunted, a pirate, while he is at sea. The hangman ever waiting. If he is caught, we will no longer have a doorway to call our own.

CAPTAIN GAGE: You are unreasonable.

MRS. GAGE: Elizabeth, my girl. It can't be so.

ELIZABETH: This telescope will find his way to Africa. And the crust on him when he gets back? There will be no washing it off. And now he dwells on his brother. Returns ever to his brother Henry, though from one minute to the next, he cannot remember what he's been told on his favorite subject.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I will be gone for long whiles.

ELIZABETH: (*An idea—*) Yes. Yes. We will be here alone too often. For too long.

MRS. GAGE: Elizabeth—

ELIZABETH: (*Warming to her idea*) Too long. We will need a guardian—

MRS. GAGE: Not that one.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Mrs. Gage, did he leave of his own accord?

ELIZABETH: He did not.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Mrs. Gage!

ELIZABETH: You didn't realize! She banished your brother.

MRS. GAGE: With good reason. The best of reasons.

ELIZABETH: How can you find reason in it? You claimed the baby for your own. The reason therefore is null.

MRS. GAGE: I did not. . . I merely. . .

ELIZABETH: You posted a notice to the entire city. This dead child was the son of Captain James Gage.

MRS. GAGE: No. No. No. He and his family, the funeral of their infant son. Baby Edward was a member of this family. It was not a false claim.

ELIZABETH: You named him with your surname, you told the doctor the surname of your husband, and gave him the Christian name of your choice. You took my baby from me.

MRS. GAGE: My girl. My dear girl. I took him from you when you were too weak to hold him, and I bathed him and covered him. When he died, I tried to revive him with my arms, my kisses, my tears.

ELIZABETH: You cannot grieve as I have. Do not pretend to.

CAPTAIN GAGE: My surname? You object to my surname? It is the same as the baby's father's. What does it matter?

ELIZABETH: You raised the matter of his name. How dare you?

CAPTAIN GAGE: How dare I? This is my house! Should we publish another notice? This is to announce that the infant Edward, buried Tuesday last, was not the child of Captain James Gage but the bastard child of his step-daughter, Elizabeth, and her uncle, Captain Henry Gage. Is that what you seek?

ELIZABETH: I seek comfort. The comfort a home should bring.

CAPTAIN GAGE: This is my house. My brother should never have been removed. Mrs. Gage, he must return. With no baby crying in a cradle, a relative who walks in and out the door will not set tongues clucking. Before I take to sea again, Henry should return. I will be gone long whiles. (*Beat*) The parentage of a dead baby does not matter.

ELIZABETH: Oh!

MRS. GAGE: If Henry returns under this roof, there will be more babies.

CAPTAIN GAGE: And some babies survive their first year. The two should be married. Your sons have gone to their own wives and homes. She's a girl,

and several younger are under this roof. The house needs a man. I will be away more than I am here.

MRS. GAGE: We do not marry our girls at sixteen in Philadelphia!

CAPTAIN GAGE: We are not in Philadelphia. It is common here. This is probably why. Those who are old enough to have children are old enough to take husbands.

MRS. GAGE: I have not heard of marriages or babies coming from uncles and nieces among our neighbors.

CAPTAIN GAGE: Plenty among the cousins. And these two are not uncle and niece.

MRS. GAGE: He has been her Uncle Henry for seven years now.

CAPTAIN GAGE: No longer.

ELIZABETH: That's as I would have it.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I will decide.

MRS. GAGE: They will not marry. I am her mother, and that is for me to say.

CAPTAIN GAGE: I will decide if he is welcome in this house. Mrs. Gage, I will rule on this. You will not countermand me in your walking dream, your mind of watery foam. I will rule now as I rule at sea.

SCENE 2

(The telescope is gone. MRS. GAGE rocks in a chair, humming. ELIZABETH, holding folded linens, walks through the room. At a knock, she lights up and turns suddenly, then exits. OFFSTAGE there are footsteps, a door opening. Then two sets of footsteps.)

HENRY (OFFSTAGE): Good evening, Mary.

(Silence)

ELIZABETH: She will not speak to you. Henry is here, Mother.

(MRS. GAGE drops some laudanum into a glass, swirls it, and drinks it.)

ELIZABETH (OFFSTAGE): *(With a nervous smile in her voice)* Henry. *(Trying out the feel of his name on her tongue)* Henry. It is so good you have returned. We are pleased to have your kind protection.

END

CONTRIBUTORS

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