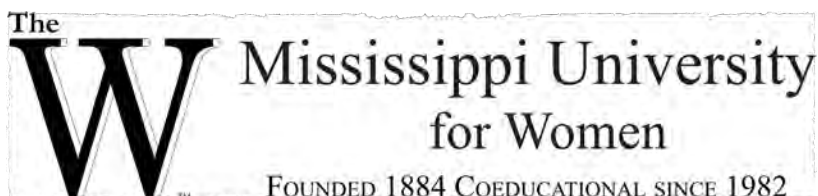


# PONDER REVIEW

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# PONDER REVIEW

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## A Note to Readers

Since the dawn of creativity, artists have studied the body—down to every internal vein—in order to recreate our image. Writers and dramatists have looked inside the mind to better understand the ways we think. Poets have burrowed into their chests to dissect the heart and all that it stirs within us. Introspection has long been a factor in the collective of our creative history. The contributors in this issue of *Ponder Review* are continuing that tradition.

Whether these be plays or stories or poems or artwork examining the body physically or emotionally or spiritually, they are artistic representations of bodily experience and depictions of what it means to be human. These peek into experience and show us not only our nature, but the ways in which we interact with our surroundings and the people within our lives. We hope that every turn of the page will stir in you the question of what it means to be human and what it means to share our humanity with others and with the world.

For seven years, our editorial teams have had the immense duty of choosing pieces that speak to us as individuals and as a literary group trying to bring the best journal we can to you. Sometimes, the decisions we face are hard ones to make. The finished product that you hold in your hands comes from determination, long nights, vigorous email-tag, many cups of coffee, and countless moments of our magazine's namesake: pondering. The content we've chosen for this issue—the content that our wonderful contributors have allowed us to share—has taken hold of us and made us consider our own humanity. Now, we pass it on to you so that you may ponder along.

Sincerely,

*The Editors*

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EMILY HOCKADAY

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## BODY IN AUTOPSY

The pain I'm feeling is not ghost pain,  
I try explaining to my doctor.  
*Open me up*, I find myself saying,  
and as I say it, I realize it is what I want  
more than anything: to see inside,  
to inspect every eggplant organ and open vein  
and raw, braided piece of muscle. To weigh them  
as though in an autopsy. To handle them,  
soft, bruised, and ripening fruit,  
and really see them for what they are.

MOLLY WALSH

---

## FREE ASSOCIATION

### I.

Whenever I eat blueberries, it's the weekend that I stayed with my grandmother. Saturday morning and I was still shaking from the night away from my own bed and blankets, from my drowsy eyelids. She served me a little bowl, Polish stoneware, hand painted daisies and leaves and dots. Blueberries, rinsed in the colander, dewed from the cold tap water. We watched reruns of *ER* and made plans for soup and sandwiches at the Georgian House. Peanut butter, grape jelly, tomato bisque, peach cobbler topped with fresh cream.

I never thought much of raspberries until one summer, when my dad told me they were his father's favorite. And now, instead of tart tongues, ice pops, stained lips, wooden sticks, I taste the letters P-A-U-L.

I'm not more than five years old and Mrs. Y is tracing downward curves along the dotted line. Criss-cross, applesauce. Carpet, cat, cup, concrete. Asphalt soup and C, c, C they're little egg noodles, suspended in chicken bone broth, in magnitude 6.8.

There's a bare wall in the den and grandma hands me pages of *Vogue*, of *Woman's Day*. Watercolor bleeds to its neighboring fibers, but glossy issues don't respond to my what-if questions, don't fill the room with incense or Estée parfum.

### II.

I'm still not sorry for that email that I sent to you the Christmas I turned 18, but I am sorry that we can no longer laugh about it over an egg cream at 13 Coins. I open my eyes, and I see a picture book, and you're telling me to color outside its line drawings. I scribble apple green and red violet, and I stare at the little loops and swirls and pretend it doesn't bother me. But weren't you the one who told me all of life is an illusion?



You sat me down at the age of 14 and said boys only want one thing. But what if all I want is one more day with you? One more soup and sandwich? One more slice of your strawberry layer cake, cream cheese frosting? One more afternoon with quartz beads and puffy paints pooling down cut crystal. Magentas and ochres and aquamarine churning, fusing to yesterday's newsprint.

I wish I asked you what you thought of your life at 27. Three boys, poolside, a country club membership. White gloves, tambourine, clutch coin purses. And how do I? How do I charm the men of Belfast and Sao Paulo and Los Angeles? How do I style silk scarves and clip on earrings? And what to do when I knock over that vase and have to pick little pieces of wilted leaf out of the carpet?

We can draw the king of swords with a shake of hands. Like Easter Sunday, left foot to soil, right to the dewdrops. I'll sell all my possessions, and we'll rendezvous on Grafton Street, Dublin. Spring tulips and I'm a lavender raincoat, and you're a string of freshwater pearls. Polaroids flash windmills, mulch fields, yellow pads and ink pens.

If it's a deal, we'll get a table by the water, nibble on warm rolls, smear each bite with salted butter. I'll try a spoon of your homemade crème fraîche, swallow and we'll chase it down with a cup of chocolate soy milk. There's a lot to catch up on.

MORNING WORKS 1



MELISSA GAITAN

---

MORNING WORKS 2



## TO BE QUEER IS TO SURVIVE

*Every lover is mad, we are told. But can we imagine a madman in love? Never—I am entitled only to an impoverished, incomplete, metaphorical madness: love drives me nearly mad, but I do not communicate with the supernatural, there is nothing of the sacred within me; my madness, a mere irrationality, is dim, even invisible; besides, it is entirely recuperated by the culture: it frightens no one. (Yet it is in the amorous state that certain rational subjects suddenly realize that madness is very close at hand, quite possible: a madness in which love itself would founder.)*

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

I love, I fuck, I write—I smoke cigarettes, even—all in an effort to ground myself; to feel, fully, each part of the body which I once hated.

In that tension between the total embodiment which emerges from both pain and pleasure and the total transcendence of bliss, I touch for just a moment a madness uniquely Queer. Unlike that which Barthes speaks of, this madness does, indeed, frighten. This abandon, this hated and dismissed bacchanalian joy for too long spoken of in whispers, these moans and gripped hands and arched backs and fingers softly trailed down thighs—this madness could never be where love founders.

My friend says that our hooking up with each other is just hot people stimming. Which, 1. is fucking hilarious, but 2. I think legitimately gets at the core of this. In trying to explain my relationship with sex in the past, I've run into the assumption that sex is either hedonistically focused on the pleasure of orgasm without the responsibility of children, or dangerous in its capacity to shift into romantic attachment. Rarely was this explicitly stated, but when I said "because it would be fun," I felt like it didn't communicate enough of the seriousness or weight or prior thought that I gave to the people who, because it seemed like it would be fun, I've had sex with; and then, on the other side of things, I've needed to reassure past partners that no hookup could usurp what I had with them (Which, for the most part, I don't feel any resentment about. People have different relational needs.<sup>1</sup>) The point, though, is that "hot people stimming" gestures towards the co-attraction (physical, emotional, etc?) and co-regulatory need/want (?) which comprises what is an as-of-yet indefinable relationship.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. It did, though, raise the question of what comparing intimacies actually requires, and furthermore what it achieves.

2. As of editing this, the closest we've come to an accurate descriptor is "besties with benefits," which is similarly funny, but still not quite thorough enough for me to say with a straight face.



To be genderqueer is to revel in the feeling of strangers' eyes moving over me, bewildered, from my face to my chest to my legs. To know I don't need them to understand. But then also, wonderfully, it is to revel in the feeling of a friend's eyes watching me undress, to know they too could never understand, but can come asymptotically close every time they run their hands over my face, my breasts, their nails down my lower back to pull me ever closer.

To be Queer and nonmonogamous is for my expressions and definitions of love to resist the boundaries imposed by normalcy. It is to know that each relation I engage in is as distinct as the people they are with. No romantic relationship could act as a replacement for another, despite the unavoidably shared structure of me and another. What we name and group our relationships by is never sufficient, each is a signifier which is both so limited in scope and so flat in depth as to make vague what it does signify, and to deem perverted and immoral what it can't.

Being on estrogen (and lexapro too, actually) makes it significantly more difficult to cum. Which on some level kind of sucks. But it has invited me to enjoy pleasuring myself for the sake of pleasure, to enjoy it without the pressure of an end goal.<sup>3</sup>

To be Queer is to live in intentional opposition; it is a rejection. I've been frustrated with Queerness as negative definition for as long as I've identified with the term (and have similar hesitations regarding anarchism), but I would like to believe that if viewed through a kind of absurdist lens, where what is being opposed is the absurdity of the hetero-monogamous relational-norm, then by deciding how I live based on that/an opposition which is assumed to be unavoidable I am able to balance that inherent-negative with an individual-positive.<sup>4</sup>

To not just be Queer in who I want to love and/or fuck and/or be fucked by, but to be Queer in the way I fuck, is to do so for pleasure and for intimacy

---

3. My feelings on Queer love and Queer pleasure are quite similar, it seems.

4. The parallels with my feelings regarding anarchism only grow here. Queer Anarchism exists as an ideology, and maybe comes close to a sufficient descriptor, but it doesn't get at the way queerness and anarchy both cut the negative definition at the core of what they are with an individual-positive. Where Queer Anarchism seems to augment the critique of state and capital by highlighting homophobia as yet another hierarchy to eliminate, I'm attempting to articulate that the way I think about my relationships—with queerness, anarchy, other people, and absurdism as well, for that matter—are all based in the same logic. Which perhaps is just a definition of being Politically Queer. But, in that case, I question how one's politics can be based on an entirely individual definition and still be effectively brought into reality. To which I would answer, being Politically Queer is not an ideology, something which requires a widespread and shared positive definition to be successful (see: the infighting seemingly prototypical of the Left); Being Politically Queer is instead, then, a way of framing and guiding one's relationship with the world.

in all its definitions, to celebrate the wonder that is being/having a body,<sup>5</sup> to mark and be marked, to lay down in bed and feel that stinging reminder along my shoulders that I am.<sup>6</sup>

---

5. Shout out Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*.

6. An ontological conclusion which I believe begins to explain the difficulty I have had articulating what it is to be Queer. Even "being Politically Queer" is decidedly insufficient. My Queerness, then, is not just a politics or a gender or a sexuality or an identity—it is a way of Being.

WALLY SWIST

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SELECT TRANSLATIONS FROM *THE  
HYAKUNIN ISSHU: A HUNDRED POEMS  
BY A HUNDRED POETS*

80.

*Nagakaran*

*Kokoro mo shirazu*

*Kurokami no*

*Midarete kesa wa*

*Mono wo koso omoe*

—*Taiken Monin Horikawa*

I am uncertain how long

Your feelings for me may last—

But this morning my thoughts,

As well as my long dark hair,

Are in a tangle.

88.

*Naniwa e no*

*Ashi no karine no*

*Hitoyo yue*

*Mi wo tsukushite ya*

*Koi wataru beki*

—*Koka Monin no Betto*

If for the sake of a single night,

Brief as the segment of a reed

In Naniwa Bay—must I exhaust myself,

Like the channel markers,

Only to pass my days in longing.

97.

*Konu hito wa*

*Matsuo no ura no*

*Yunagi ni*

*Yaku ya moshio no*

*Mi mo kogare-tsutsu*

—*Gonchunagon Sadaie (Fujiwara no Sadaie, Fujiwara no Teiko)*

In evening calm,

Where seaweed is boiled for salt,

I wait at Matsuo bay—

My entire being is aglow

For someone who does not come.



HONGWEI BAO

---

## FIREFLIES

When I think of you, I think of the spontaneous departures we made, throwing our clothes and essentials in a rucksack, striding on the motorbike, letting the roaring engine and the winding road take us to unexpected destinations; I think of my long rides on the bike, sitting on the back, hugging you tight, breaking the wind and travelling in time and space; I think of the many stops we had on the way, initially for a comfort break but ending up having our breath taken away by sublime mountain shapes or mirrors-like lakes; I think of the many cold nights we camped out, holding tight to keep each other warm and safe, while stars hung high and fireflies hovered in the air. These were happy moments. Your vivid smile, my unbound heart.

Until we went back to our small flat surrounded by polluted air, ceaseless traffic and noisy and nosy neighbours, back to the oven, the washer and the vacuum cleaner, back to the never-ending work routine and constantly rising utility bills. The lively and energetic you disappeared in the concrete jungles of the city and amongst the indifferent faces of the commuters. You smoked heavily, you lost your temper easily, we had fights, until our personality difference was categorised as cultural difference, until one day we decided life couldn't carry on like this. We broke up. I moved out of your flat. Nights without your company were difficult but I survived. On nights like this, I often wonder if you still ride your bike, travel to our favourite places, think of me when you gaze into the horizon and see the twinkling lights. Like stars. Like fireflies. Like the free spirits we once were.

[PR] Spring 2023

HOLLY WILLIS

---

# VIRTUAL UNFOLDING



ROBERT WINDORF

---

## HEARTS WAITING AT THE DOOR

While I've been away from  
my ordinary life

my dreams have been full of  
days that repeatedly dissolve  
in accord with perpetual calendars

affixed to fir trees  
I trod past in this forest

silently

except for the labored crunching  
from my tired boots.

Never forgetting my origin  
among the hills and dales  
where the trees have guided me

I remember those who await my return.

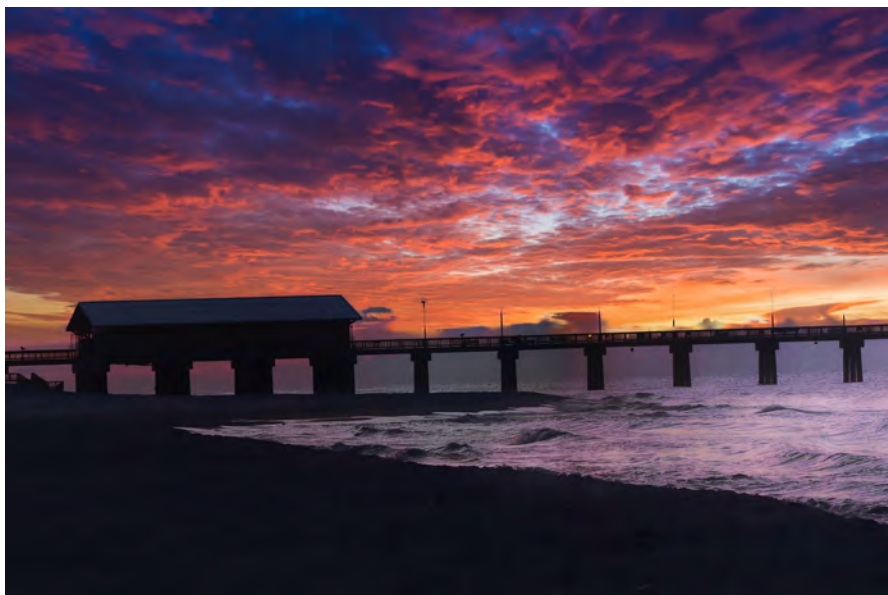
And I hope their forgiving  
hearts will be waiting at the door  
on that day.

[PR] Spring 2023

BRENDA BOLT

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## BEACH 2



SUSAN WEINSTEIN

---

## PICTURES THAT SHINE A LIGHT

A full term pregnancy is 40 weeks, which isn't exactly nine months but people get confused talking about weeks unless you go into preterm labor like I did at 27 weeks and then you obsess over what organ or bodily system isn't done yet in your unborn baby and what each additional week, or day in utero might mean for the long term health of that baby, or babies in my case as I was carrying twins. I was an older mother, miraculously pregnant after many years of infertility treatments, months of self-administered intramuscular injections (my husband worked a lot of nights and that's when the shots had to be given), too many tests and different drugs to count, multiple invasive procedures and one disappointing negative result after another until somehow the stars aligned. Who knows what a Gamma Intra-Fallopian Transfer is? It's called a GIFT. I could teach a class. When my cousin's husband, a cardiologist, found out how many times I'd had general anesthesia (multiple IVFs and 2 laparoscopies) in the eight months prior to getting pregnant, he kind of freaked out saying, "That's so dangerous, do you know how many brain cells anesthesia kills?" He was a bearer of gloom and doom. I had no patience for people who didn't understand that if you want something bad enough you will do anything to get it. I nonchalantly replied, "Do you know how much pot I smoked in college?"

By the time I got to Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan that night my labor pains were two minutes apart. They tried to stop my labor for two excruciating days; one of my waters broke, I was hooked up to multiple monitors and I was on an inverted table to take pressure off my cervix so I was dizzy and not allowed to eat. I finally sent my husband home to Brooklyn to rest as I was somewhat stable and about an hour later one of the babies was in distress and the second water broke. I had to have an emergency C-Section. "Can we wait for my husband to get back?" I asked my doctor after I called to tell him they were taking me to delivery. "Yes," she lied. I sort of knew they wouldn't wait as I was being wheeled to the delivery room very quickly with a nurse riding on the gurney with me, switching my IVs and asking me to remind her of my drug allergies. "Is this an emergency?" I calmly asked. She didn't really answer, but I watch a lot of television.

So our girls were born at 27 weeks after a six-month pregnancy. I wasn't actually prepared when I first saw them in their incubators as I'd only seen them for a second in a delivery room crowded with about 15 people (two neonatal teams plus my OB's team) before they were whisked away in transportable isolettes. I couldn't go see them until the next day; my mother

and my husband had already seen them. As I peered into their isolettes labeled “Weinstein Twin A” and “Weinstein Twin B” (sharing my name while they were there) and looked at those minuscule beings with heads too large for their emaciated bodies, covered in wires and IVs, translucent skin with veins visible everywhere, tubes snaking all over the place like those boxes of colorful telephone wires, four matchstick limbs stuck with IVs and taped down, stickers on their chests attached to lines connected to machines flashing and beeping above the incubator, I felt dizzy. My mother looked at me with a wide smile and said, “Ach, such miracles, aren’t they beautiful?”

Though she didn’t drink, I wondered if she was drunk. “Mom,” I calmly said, “What the hell is wrong with you? They look like chicken embryos.”

Furious, she retorted, “Don’t you ever talk about my beautiful granddaughters like that. Miracles I tell you!” Yes, sometimes blind faith is what gets you through.

Katharine, one of the NICU nurses slowly walked up to me and gently started telling me in her lilting Irish accent a little about the machines and the apneas and bradycardia episodes that were being monitored and occasionally setting off the alarms; she could tell I wasn’t able to take in too much. My husband Jim was asking questions; he wanted more information while I zoned out. Katharine asked me if I planned to bring a camera in to take some pictures, as if this was a happy occasion and I was a real mother instead of feeling like I was just faking it, unable to get pregnant without enormous medical assistance and then couldn’t stay pregnant. I looked at her like she was crazy and she said, “You know, when they are fat and healthy you are going to want to have pictures to remind you of what they overcame, what a victory it is.” I stared at her; she was serious. She actually thought they’d get better, that they could survive this. It was the first time I smiled.

After a few days I brought my 35mm camera (this was before digital) loaded with black and white film; color seemed like too much. Katharine helped me. She opened the isolette portholes so I could aim the lens inside. They were too unstable, with no ability to regulate their body temperature yet and connected to too many lines, to be taken out of their isolettes. I took a bunch of pictures that day, and many days after to chart their progress. My favorite from that first black and white day is a picture of Hannah’s itty-bitty hand with five perfectly formed fingers, doll-like in size, wrapped around the tip of my pinky. Katharine was right and we soon learned to trust her advice, medical and otherwise. I carried that picture in my wallet for years and would pull it out at work sometimes, when things were really difficult, when it was 3am during a negotiation and we’d been at the conference table for days arguing, as if world order hung in the balance of digital rights. I’d look at that little hand and I’d think, perspective. When I’d disagree with my husband, when it would rain on the beach day, when I had the flu, I’d look at

that picture and I'd think, there are worse things. It was a picture that knew how to heal, how to shine a light on a better path. That picture will always have power over me.

When Hannah and Sonya were eight weeks old, and slowly getting better, despite daily setbacks and challenges, Sonya got sick. Very sick. So sick they called us early in the morning and told us to get there. And Jim and I drove from Brooklyn to Manhattan and then uptown to Mt. Sinai in silence, the car filled with so much fear there was no room left for words. They couldn't identify the specific infection Sonya had, but it was bad. They moved her back to level 3, reserved for the sickest babies, put her back on the ventilator and she didn't move, not even when they stuck her with an IV; her skin had turned completely white. With so many lines and tests, despite the obsessive PPE and hand washing, infections were the big fear (and biggest killer of preemies in the NICU) as these fragile babies didn't have much of an immune system yet and had to be handled constantly by different doctors and nurses.

I knew they all thought she was going to die because the nurses wouldn't look at us when we walked in. I knew every nurse personally. Jim and I had been there every day for the past 57 days, talking, worrying, laughing, learning from them about our babies' care, what to do and what to expect. They were my hopeline. Now they couldn't look me in the eye. I asked the attending neonatologist, Dr. Holtzman, if they could save her. I'll never forget his measured response, after a beat, "Many preemies respond to antibiotics." As a deal negotiator, my special talent, so I'm told, is smelling fear across the table. I'm a good read of what people are really saying when they say something else. I knew liability protection when I heard it.

But this doctor prescribed an antibiotic, which, as he explained, he was "hoping" would be the right one for the infection he was "guessing" she had. There was no time to confirm with tests as Sonya was fading fast. As I watched them put that drug in Sonya's IV, I prayed. I sat on a chair next to her isolette, hour after hour with my head against the glass, praying. At some point I realized I wasn't praying for Sonya to get better; I was just praying for strength to face whatever was going to happen. It was a weirdly spiritual moment and I can still see the glow I saw and felt that day in the NICU. I was trying so hard to stop the negative thoughts but it was exhausting and at one point I had this awful image of a little white coffin, the kind you see on TV when a baby dies a tragic death. I physically forced myself to get rid of that image by replacing it with an image of two toddler girls on the beach in little bikini bottoms, playing in the sand with green buckets. I forced myself to focus on that image, visualizing a happy ending,

Well, the doctor guessed right and within 24 hours I saw Sonya start to move her tiny legs and try to cry, even though she couldn't with the metal tube



down her throat, which was sad to watch because neither Hannah or Sonya had tears yet; tear ducts form in the third trimester. So they cried loudly but tearlessly. To see Sonya's tiny face scrunched up crying, with no tears and unable to make a sound, tore at me. And I couldn't open the porthole of her isolette to touch her or whisper words of comfort because she was still too fragile and sick for contact, unless it was medically necessary. There were many more scary days in the NICU in the next few months, though none as scary as that one. Our babies slowly got better and they came home. Science, dedicated medical professionals, a stellar hospital, family, friends, love and prayer got us through. Katharine and my mother were both right; it was a victory and a miracle.

Two years later, when our family was on vacation in Provincetown, I took tons of pictures, annoying my husband as usual with lens changes and posing shots, but he's a good sport. Still only using film, I snapped like crazy as I always do: at the beaches of Race Point and Herring Cove, in our little cottage on the bay, on McMillan Wharf, at Lewis Bros. Ice Cream, at Moby Dick's on Route 6 in Wellfleet where they served the kids' meals in little green buckets and gave us a few extra ones that we threw in the beach bag, on Commercial street with two drag queens in full regalia, leaning over the stroller smiling as they made our girls laugh with a tickle from a feather boa. A few weeks later I had the pictures developed and as I was going through them I got to one picture and froze. Everything around me went somewhat blurry. There it was. Two toddlers in the sand dressed only in bikini bottoms, surrounded by green beach pails. It was the vision I'd had when trying to will Sonya back to life.





[PR] Spring 2023

BRENDA BOLT

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## BEACH 4



## YOUR FATHER PAINTS AS THE BOMBS FALL DOWN AROUND US:

A TEN MINUTE TRAGIC COMEDY THAT TURNS INTO JUST  
A COMEDY THAT'S KIND OF TRAGIC IF YOU REALLY THINK  
ABOUT IT

### **CHARACTERS:**

LOUISE: 40's

HERMAN: 9

### **SETTING:**

The Living Room, Afternoon, As the bombs fall

"The end of the world and the end of time are two different things."  
—Dolly Parton

*(LOUISE sits on a chair in a kitchen playing with a Rubik's Cube  
while her son, HERMAN, sits at her feet.)*

LOUISE: Herman, I would love to comfort you in this moment of turmoil.

HERMAN: It's all right, Mother.

LOUISE: I would love to comfort you, but it wouldn't be honest. It would be  
a lie.

HERMAN: It's all right.

LOUISE: *A lie, Herman. It would be a lie.*

HERMAN: I understand.

LOUISE: Because, you see, Herman, everything is not going to be alright.

*(Sound of a BOMB exploding outside.)*

HERMAN: I'm starting to see that, yes.

LOUISE: And do you know where your father is?

HERMAN: Dead?

LOUISE: If only he were dead. If only he were dead, and we could mourn  
him as a hero. Fighting and dying to protect his family. But no. He's not

dead. He's in the basement. Painting. Your father paints as the bombs fall down around us.

HERMAN: Art and the preservation of art are a hallmark of a civilized society.

LOUISE: Who fed you that garbage? Did he do that?

HERMAN: I read it in a book.

LOUISE: Who gave you a book?

HERMAN: No one.

LOUISE : Herman, don't lie to your mother.

HERMAN: Father. Father gave it to me.

LOUISE: I bet it was written by a pervert. Was it?

HERMAN: I...wouldn't know?

LOUISE: What was it called?

HERMAN: *Man's Climb to the Heights of Masterful—*

LOUISE: Perversion. Clear as day.

*(HERMAN shrugs.)*

HERMAN: I rather liked it.

LOUISE: You've got a touch of the perverse in you, Herman. Why do you think I send you to a psychiatrist eight times a week?

HERMAN: Is twice on Saturdays really necessary?

LOUISE: I feel it is.

*(Another BOMB goes off.)*

HERMAN: How soon will we be dead, Mother?

LOUISE: Could be another hour or so. The enemy has terrible aim.

HERMAN: How should I spend my last hour?

LOUISE: Have you prayed?

HERMAN: Once or twice.

LOUISE: The nice thing about prayer is that you can do it, and do it, and do it, and no matter how much you do it, you can still—keep doing it.

HERMAN: And that's...nice?

LOUISE: Well, it's nice to always have an activity with which to occupy your mind.

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HERMAN: Will I go to Heaven when I die?

LOUISE: I don't know. Will you?

HERMAN: I'm only nine.

LOUISE: But you did push Samantha Petals off her bike yesterday.

HERMAN: She said you were a crazy lady.

LOUISE: Oh. Then nevermind. You did the right thing, and you'll go to Heaven for protecting your mother against childish blasphemy.

HERMAN: Should I push anyone else for you?

LOUISE: You could go push your father into a crater. There must be plenty outside.

HERMAN: But you said Father's in the basement painting?

LOUISE: Nothing ever works out, Herman. I never get what I want.

HERMAN: Did you want me?

LOUISE: I wanted you, but smarter.

HERMAN: Aren't I intelligent?

LOUISE: You ask too many questions. Intelligent people don't need to ask questions, because they already know all the answers.

HERMAN: Are you intelligent?

LOUISE: I was, at one point, but years of living here in this pitiful town have turned me into a real ignoramus.

HERMAN: What's an 'ignoramus'?

LOUISE: You see, only an ignoramus wouldn't know what the word 'ignoramus' means. That's the irony of being dumb. You don't even know all the words people use to describe you and nobody wants to tell you what those words are, because they know it'll hurt your feelings.

HERMAN: I get good grades in school.

LOUISE: Do you know how much I pay your teachers to give you those grades?

HERMAN: But you don't have any money.

LOUISE: I've been spending it all on you. To give you a proper transcript. To get you into a good college one day. Hopefully by then, you'll be wiser, but I suppose all that is for nothing now that we're going to die when a bomb hits this house and blows us all to smithereens.

HERMAN: Shouldn't we all be together?

LOUISE: All be—You mean, your Father? We're together. He's here.

HERMAN: But here in the room with us.

LOUISE: Herman, he made a choice, didn't he? To stay downstairs and paint. That's how he wants to spend his last few moments alive. With acrylics and canvas and brushes and drugs.

HERMAN: Drugs?

LOUISE: Your father does drugs.

HERMAN: What kind of—

LOUISE: The good kind. The kind that makes you very, very happy.

HERMAN: Should I do drugs?

LOUISE: There's no point. You'll be dead soon.

HERMAN: I'd like to die happy.

LOUISE: Then go downstairs and see if your father will give you some of his drugs. Although, I doubt he will. If history serves, he does not like sharing any of his illegal substances with others.

HERMAN: When did he start painting?

LOUISE: After the divorce.

HERMAN: Father was married before?

LOUISE: Yes.

HERMAN: To who?

LOUISE: To whom.

HERMAN: Who's whom?

LOUISE: Whom is what you say instead of Who.

HERMAN: Oh. So to whom was he married?

LOUISE: To me.

*(A BOMB goes off.)*

HERMAN: But you're not divorced.

LOUISE: Yes, we are. We're simply cohabitating.

HERMAN: How long ago was—

LOUISE: Before you were born. Technically, you're a bastard.

HERMAN: You got divorced and then kept living together for nine years?

LOUISE: Longer than that. We didn't have you right after the divorce. We

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waited a bit to make sure we were ready.

HERMAN: But why didn't you move out?

LOUISE: Why should I move? I love this place. I designed all the cabinets.

HERMAN: Why didn't he move?

LOUISE: Where would he go? The man can barely bake a croquembouche.

HERMAN: This seems like an unhealthy arrangement.

LOUISE: Oh, you can say that again.

HERMAN: Is Father a good painter?

LOUISE: Not at all. He's devoid of talent.

HERMAN: Then why does he do it so much?

LOUISE: Why do birds sing even though everybody begs them to stop? I suppose they don't care who they hurt.

*(HERMAN thinks about this.)*

HERMAN: Has he ever sold a painting?

LOUISE: Oh, he's sold all of them.

HERMAN: Then he must be somewhat good, no?

LOUISE: Noooooo. People simply have bad taste.

HERMAN: Do I have bad taste?

LOUISE: Based on how you dress yourself, I would say—Without a doubt.

HERMAN: How sad. To die with bad taste.

LOUISE: How do you think I feel? I'm dying with great taste. The world will never know the likes of me again.

HERMAN: I'm sorry, Mother.

LOUISE: Oh, it's fine, Herman. Every life is a small tragedy when you consider how many of us end up marrying beneath our possibilities.

*(A BOMB goes off.)*

HERMAN: Still, I would have enjoyed growing older.

LOUISE: You say that, but you don't know. You don't know all the things you don't know, and even some of those things you would never find out. You're probably better off this way.

HERMAN: But perhaps I could have married.

*(LOUISE laughs.)*

LOUISE: To whom?

HERMAN: To Sarah Petals.

LOUISE: She despises you.

HERMAN: You despise Father, but you married him.

*(A beat.)*

LOUISE: That's a very good point.

HERMAN: Sarah Petals fled the country last night.

LOUISE: Smart girl. You should have gone with her.

HERMAN: I wanted to stay here with you and Father.

LOUISE: More evidence that you're not very bright.

*(LOUISE begins to cry.)*

HERMAN: There, there, Mother.

*(He pats her on her knee.)*

LOUISE: I thought I had another year at least to turn things around. The enemy was waffling. They were changing their minds about an invasion. They're an island nation. How were they ever going to get to us anyway? I thought I could raise you a bit better. Give myself twelve months of educating you. Pay your teachers to give you more attention. Teach you to dress. Have your father fall in love with me again. Have another child. Start that one out right. Redo the cabinets for the tenth time. Then—I don't know. I don't know what I would have done then, but I would have done something. I would have undone all the puzzles of my life. Instead, the invaders came quickly and suddenly. I wasn't prepared. I should have been, but I wasn't. How could I be? How could anyone expect me to be prepared? How close was the last bomb?

HERMAN: It sounded as though it was a few feet away from the house.

LOUISE: I hope my garden is spared. It's asking too much that I be spared and that my family be spared. It's only my garden that I'd like to keep intact.

HERMAN: That's a lovely thought, Mother.

LOUISE: Herman, do you hate me?

HERMAN: Oh no. On the contrary, I adore you.

LOUISE: I don't deserve it. I'm a terrible mother.

HERMAN: Even terrible mothers try their best.

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LOUISE: I suppose that's true.

HERMAN: The most important thing is—

*(A SIREN goes off.)*

LOUISE: A siren? Why now? Why a siren now?

HERMAN: Mother. That's it. The war is over.

*(A beat.)*

LOUISE: What?

HERMAN: A siren means—

LOUISE: That's it? But the bombs—They hadn't hit us yet.

HERMAN: We've been spared!

*(HERMAN jumps up and embraces her. She is stunned.)*

LOUISE: But—But I thought—

HERMAN: Now everything will be fine, Mother.

LOUISE: I—Yes, I suppose—I suppose it will be.

HERMAN: You'll make dinner and I'll go fetch Father and we'll all eat together just like we do every night except tonight we'll say a prayer of thanks that we were allowed to keep on going.

LOUISE: Yes.

*(A beat.)*

Yes, we'll say—

*(She tries to think of something, and then stops herself.)*

—A prayer.

*(Lights fade.)*

END



RICHARD A. MILLER

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## SPOOKY ACTION AT A DISTANCE

Two particular images captured on Kodachrome slides languished for nearly a lifetime in their little yellow Kodak boxes. Long forgotten. Stored haphazardly in closets, attics and crawl spaces for 50-years. Then nearly finally and fatally in a white plastic garbage bag, when in July, I pulled the bag out of the garbage.

My wife had spent the summer on a campaign to cleanse our country home of the detritus accumulated over decades: books, papers, chachkas and photographs—particularly hundreds of slides that were sorted through quickly; a few of our youthful images retained. The remainder dumped in that garbage bag. But not having viewed any of them for perhaps 40 years and curious to see what was in there, I rescued the bag and set it aside.

Then, I continued to ignore it for two more months—passing it by at least twice a day.

The “system” by which my wife sorted through the hundreds of slides left everything out of their diligently labeled yellow boxes and therefore comingled in the bulging white bag. So, when I finally started my own review on a September afternoon, putting each in a single slide viewer, I discovered in the fistfuls I scooped from the bag that the slides were random family, vacation and other photos.

I peered at a few hundred and paused for dinner.

Restarting the process afterward, with hundreds more to go, I fished out a slide of Eddie. Taken in 1970 at one of our friendly nickel–dime poker games. He’d posed with a white poker chip over each eye like monocles—or like coins to pay the ferryman to cross the Styx. I’d not seen or heard from Eddie since our 50th high school reunion seven years earlier and very rarely otherwise since going our separate ways. He lived in Oregon, I knew. I in Pennsylvania.

Following Eddie’s randomly pulled slide I pulled out one of our mutual friend, Mike, taken at the same poker game. I’d not seen or heard from Mike either for years.

Their images in their two-by-two cardboard holders entered the discard pile.

Then, minutes later and out-of-the-blue, “Eddie” appeared on my caller ID. The same Eddie, whose image had returned to me after 50 years only moments before. Whose picture, like Mike’s, might have been discarded in July or any other day afterward, or observed that morning, or not at all for the 19000 days since they were taken. Instead, coincidentally, I’d held each

in my hand moments before.

I launched into a description of the unfathomable coincidence before allowing Eddie to get to his reason for calling. When he did, he said, “I’m calling to tell you Mike died yesterday.”

§

*“In experiments conducted over the last 50 years, [the 2022 Nobel Prize winners in physics] confirmed the reality of an effect that Albert Einstein ... disdained as ‘spooky action at a distance.’ [Observing] one of a widely separated pair of particles could instantaneously change the results of [observing] the other particle, even if it was light-years away.”* New York Times, October 4, 2022.

SERGE LECOMTE

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## FROM AD TO SEA



## THE FATHERS DON'T TALK ABOUT WAR

They bear it in silence,  
in the darkened iris,  
the sudden startled look.

They bear it in nightmares;  
see once more the frozen dead  
or their own lost finger which aches,  
or the tooth extracted secretly  
from the old man they shot,  
stolen back in suitcase linings.

They bear it in anger after too much drink.  
Suddenly pulling the drapes off the wall,  
threatening to go missing,  
threatening to murder all ghosts  
or their living shadows.

They bear it in illness,  
the yellowing skin.  
They roll on the floor, unable to stand.  
They feel a change in their organs—  
a dull pain at first,  
the quick bursts of vomit, the opiate mist.

They bear it through their children  
who refuse to remember  
the stories that never were told.  
Who guess in the darkness,  
who learn not to weep,  
who screen their own dreams in unsought achievements,  
though death hides behind each monitor.  
The fathers don't talk about war.

MATINA VOSSOU

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## THE MASTER OF NOTHINGNESS



## GROWING SEASON

On the morning April comes to plant her garden, Lee makes bacon. One of the small reliefs in her leaving, he thinks, is that he'll never have to cook vegan meat again. He flips his eggs and remembers the imitation sausage casing, the way it would stick to his fingers as he poked the links around the skillet. The bacon burns, which he hopes will make the stench linger long enough for her to smell it. He brings his meal to the folding table. Before sitting, he pushes away the half-tied flies from the night before and sets his plate on an old *Guns & Ammo*. He checks his phone and his thumb moves automatically to the Instagram icon. He doesn't have to put down his coffee to find April's page; her name is still at the top of his search bar.

He opens her highlight called ✨GARDEN✨ party and taps through the stories, skipping to the photos from that spring. In the pictures, she fills egg cartons with soil, seeds them and places each by the large window in her new apartment. She's decorated the sill with her crystals and her mother's old religious figurines, and recently, she's added dragonfly decals that look like something from a preschool.

Lee imagines April behind the phone. She would have worn one of her ratty City Year shirts. She probably had a joint, was probably listening to a record by one of the shrill women he hated. In her post from the night before, she zooms in on her plants, nested in Chobani pints and solo cups. "the t o m a t o babies go back to the old house tomorrow!" the caption reads. "i sure will miss them ✨" She's added a filter that makes the plants sparkle. At the end of the video, Lee can see a glass of wine and a plate of strawberries. He can't picture April drinking alone and he watches the video again. When he doesn't see another glass or an unexplained shadow, he clicks out of the app and places his phone face down.

### §

April doesn't arrive until after four. Lee is already on his second Budweiser, and he sips slowly. He wants to make sure she sees it. She used to tease him for preferring Bud in a town known for its breweries. She'd stopped joking at the end, but he'd always felt her eyes on the bottle.

She opens the car door and stands and he stands too. She looks up and uses her hand as a shield against the sun, so he can't read her expression. He's not sure whether she's done this on purpose.

"You're home," she says.

"I thought you might need some help."

“Oh,” she says. “I’m OK.”

She walks around her station wagon and opens the trunk. She fills her arms with her plants, and she has to lean back as she walks in order to keep from dropping them. Lee puts down his beer and goes to the car. She starts toward the flower beds and doesn’t say anything when he grabs the stakes and twine.

He lingers, staring as she squats and lowers the plants to the ground. He doesn’t recognize her camisole, and he watches her shoulder blades move beneath her tan skin. She seems stronger than he remembers. There’s a new tattoo peeking out from under her shirt.

“You look sunburnt,” he says. He places the stakes next to the flower box.

“I floated the river last weekend.”

“With who?” he says.

“Pass me the twine.”

Lee hands it to her and she unrolls a strand, cuts it without measuring. She hands him an end and walks to the opposite side of the raised bed. They crouch in unison, tying the twine to the nails left over from the year before. She unrolls and cuts another piece and they continue down the box, making a grid. April has tied her hair back in two braids, and a strand comes loose. It falls in front of her face but she doesn’t push it away and Lee fights the urge to step into the bed, walk across the damp soil and do it for her.

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“What?”

“Your hair.” He’s in the middle of tying the last knot and gestures with his chin. “In your face like that.”

She finishes and pushes it back and leaves a streak of dirt on her forehead. He thinks of Ash Wednesday and the year April’s mother made them go to church with her. He couldn’t understand the Vietnamese sermon, and he and April played hangman in the back of her program. When it was her turn, she hung her stick figure on a cross.

He points to her forehead and crosses himself, but she’s looking down at the bed. She pulls at the twine, checking its tautness. “This looks good. Thank you.”

“I wanted to help.”

She sits on her knees and wipes her hands on her jeans. He imagines crawling to her. He wants to press his palms into her thighs, bury his face in her neck. He pictures lowering her into the dirt and pushing up her breasts and watching as her skin tightens over her stomach.

“You started drinking early today,” she says. She doesn’t look up.

“It’s the weekend.”

“Do you always drink before five?”



“Would that be a problem?”

She reaches for the first tomato plant and coaxes it from the solo cup. “Your beer’s probably getting warm up there on the porch.” She holds the mass of roots in one hand and digs with the other. When she can fit her first in the hole, she cups the plant, holding it upright, and lowers it into the ground. “I can get the rest done by myself,” she says. “But I’ll come say goodbye before I go.”

As he walks back to the house, he sees her take out her phone and take a picture. He tries to guess what her caption will be.

§

She makes the drinks and he watches, surprised by how well she remembers the kitchen. He wishes he had moved the silverware or even switched the bourbon and the gin on the bar-cart, something to make her feel like a visitor. She reaches for the junk drawer. “You’re out of matches,” she says.

“Keep looking.”

“There’s one of those grill lighters.”

“There should be matches.”

“Oh. Here.” She pulls something out of the drawer and shuts it.

He watches as she cuts off two strips of orange peel. She lights a match and squeezes the rind over the flame, then rubs the rind across the rim and drops it in the glass. She looks up at him, triumphant.

“Who taught you that?” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s new.”

“Oh.” She licks juice off her thumb and picks up both drinks. She brings them to the couch. “I think someone did it on *Chopped*.”

“They don’t make drinks on *Chopped*,” he says.

“Sometimes they do.”

He sips his cocktail and looks for something to say. She raises her glass toward him then sips hers, too.

He wishes they could watch TV, but he hasn’t replaced the curtains and the glare makes it impossible to see. They didn’t talk much, the last year of their marriage. They would sit on this couch and he would play video games while she played on her phone or searched the web. They’d switch to Netflix when they got bored, talking through the characters and scenes on the screen. April would lean into Lee, rub his knee, and they would count this proximity as intimacy.

Now, he stares at the back of her head as she looks out toward the garden. He doesn’t think she can see much from here. He leans forward and tries to see out, too. He doesn’t know how long she plans to stay and he’s



afraid to ask, as if it might spook her.

When most of her drink is gone, she leans back and turns to him. “I’m changing my name,” she says.

“I’m surprised you haven’t already.”

“There’s a lot of paperwork,” she says. “And all my writing is under Wagner.”

She takes a sip, sucks on an ice cube. She bites into it and he winces. He can feel the sound in his teeth.

“I’m taking my mom’s maiden name,” she says.

“Nguyen?”

“Yeah.”

“I bet it’ll be easier to get published,” he says.

“Don’t you think that’s a little racist?” She stands and holds out her hand for his empty drink.

“It will be like you never had a husband *or* a father.”

She walks back to the counter and starts to make another round.

“Maybe I’ll make a Google alert or something,” he says. “See if you Nguyen any awards.”

“What?”

“Nguyen,” he says. “Like your new name.”

She laughs, but the way she angles her head—so that he can see her expression from where he’s sitting—makes it feel forced.

“I wouldn’t actually track you like that,” he says.

“OK,” she says.

§

At seven, she tells him she has plans later and can’t stay for another drink. He wants to ask what she’s going to do, but he knows she’s already tired of his questions. He imagines she can smell his jealousy, then remembers the bacon and wonders why she hasn’t brought it up. The June sun is still high, and it feels like afternoon. He suggests one more round—beer this time, lighter—and she hesitates, then agrees. He’s the one to get up and he takes the opportunity to sit closer when he returns. She tucks her feet under her, and her dirty knees sink into the cushion. He doesn’t mind. He’s missed the smell of soil in the house, the way it mixes with her body odor. He puts his drink on the coffee table and drapes his arms over the back of the couch.

“Do you think you’ll stay here?” She bites the lip of the bottle.

“In this house?”

“You never liked it that much,” she says.

“That’s not true,” he says

“Won’t you get lonely?”

He pauses.

“Sorry,” she says. “Maybe that was an unfair question.”

He nods.

“I think I just miss it here, sometimes,” she says, and Lee remembers how uncomfortable she is with silence.

If he didn’t answer her, she would keep talking until—angry at his silence or her own inability to pull him away from whatever he was doing—she would get so frustrated that she’d leave the house, slamming the door on the way out. Some of her longest periods in the garden were the results of his silences, both intentional and not.

“And I mean, not just the house,” she says. “But all of it. The garden and the pond and the dog and—” she stops and stands. “Damnit, Lee.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“That was manipulative.”

“No it wasn’t. I just wanted to hear what you were going to say.”

She turns to leave but before she can walk away, he hooks a finger through her back belt loop. April turns back to him and he sees that her lips have disappeared. The tendons on her neck strain and her jaw undulates as if she’s chewing.

“You’re about to cry,” he says.

“I’m not.”

“I know how you look when you cry,” he says.

“Lee, please,” she says.

She starts to turn from him but he stands over her and places his lips against her trembling chin. She gasps but doesn’t pull away and he knows immediately, absolutely, that he does not want this.

But they move without speaking. He buries his face into her neck. He lowers her against the couch cushions and pulls up her shirt, grabs her breasts and watches her skin tighten across her stomach. She pushes up onto her elbows and he slides his hand under her bra and their lips meet and he softens his as she presses her tongue into his mouth. They move together to take off her jeans. He pulls her underwear to the side and holds her by the small of her arched back and she grabs his hips and pulls him into her.

§

There was never enough room on the couch to hold each other, and she hadn’t wanted to toward the end. She would kick him off and lift her hips above her head in some sort of fertility backbend that made him feel like a farm animal. He had always thought conception was supposed to be more organic than that, more natural. He hated the timed sex, the righteous concentration frozen on her face. In those moments, April looked like her mother, like the statues in her church.

Now, she sits up and pulls her underwear back in place. They didn’t

use a condom, but he doesn't see any use. They never found out which one of them was the problem, but either way, he knows they don't have to worry. April grabs a blanket and moves to the armchair. She curls her small body into a ball.

"How often are you going to come by?" he says.

She exhales and he can feel something shift. "I don't know. But I'll be fast. You'll barely see me."

"What if I want to see you?"

She stands with the blanket still wrapped around her and walks to the window.

"Lee," she says.

"If you leave the watering can, I can do it, most days," he says. "You won't have to drive all the way out." He watches her face.

"I think that's for the best," she says.

"Yeah," he says.

She says, "This whole thing was probably a bad idea."

"Probably."

She says, "I should have just let it go."

"The garden?"

"Yeah," she says.

He remembers her standing there a million times before, the low sun lighting up the downy hair on her arms, her thighs. He wishes she would drop the blanket. He wants to map what's changed, to commit her new body to memory.

§

It's still dark when Lee wakes up. His head pounds and the sheets below him are damp with sweat. He presses his palm firmly into the mattress and brings it to his nose, just in case. He isn't sure what time it is, and he rolls over and reaches for his phone on the bedside table. The home button doesn't give under his thumb and the screen remains black. He plugs it in, holding it as he waits for it to start. It turns on and he opens Instagram.

The first photo in her story is of a tomato plant, taken close enough that he can see small hairs on the stalk, the veins glowing in each leaf. She holds the stem between her thumb and her forefinger, angling it toward the sunlight. He swipes and sees a second picture, a view of the yard from the living room. He can see his silhouette in the windows' glare.

The last one is from two hours earlier. It's blurry, and she hasn't used any filters. He sees her new coffee table and two glasses of wine. He sees a man's feet in the corner of the frame. He taps out, then watches again. She's changed her name in her profile.

§

He finds the watering can on the counter. April's left the grill lighter out, and he puts it in his sweatshirt pocket before reaching under the sink for the starter fluid. He shakes the bottle. It's less than half full. He pours what's left into the watering can and makes himself another drink. He didn't realize how much he'd had after April left. The whiskey is almost gone.

In the blunted light of early morning, the garden feels too far away. He stands and pours his unfinished drink on top of the starter fluid before grabbing his coat and walking outside. The dew sinks into his thin slippers and he wonders if the plants have frozen. The liquid splashes against the watering can's metal sides and he slows down.

April had been meticulous. Each stake stands straight in the center of its grid. The plants have ample room to breathe. He remembers the first year, when the vines had fallen to the ground, grown and knotted into one another. The tomatoes still grew. They were underdeveloped and bitter, but he had eaten everything she made with them.

Her organization makes it easier to aim. He douses the twine and the wooden stakes, saturates the leaves until they wilt under the weight of the fluid. He stares at the muddy pool for a moment before squatting by the edge of the box. It lights faster than he expects. The fire bursts up from the mud all at once. It burns clear, so he can only see its blue tips. The plants fold over under the invisible flame and the twine snaps, seemingly on its own.

It dies down as quickly as it started. Smoke burns Lee's eyes and he has to squint to see what remains. The tomato plants look deflated, their black stems snaking through the wet earth. He drops to his knees. He rips the plants from the ground one by one and runs his fingers down every stem, searching for viable roots. When he frees the last plant from the charred earth, he holds it up to his face. He breathes in, but he can only smell gas.

MATINA VOSSOU

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## MS. IRIS CLITO



S. T. BRANT

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## MYSTIC CODA II

Life is no conjunction between space and time.  
Death's coat, this life.  
Pets of time, us all, so we Live not but are dying.  
It is not living if you're dying,  
lest language be the reaper's own. Be god-tongued  
and true and know  
You haven't Life but crew for Death; alive, as Death's  
modifiers appease  
our minds. Alive and Life are different: one we are,  
alive is on the road  
to dying; Life is deathless, free of time. Nothing  
that partakes of time  
knows anything but misery, sadness served  
incessantly at meals,  
repeated, undangered, repeated, repeated,  
repeated—O quality,  
the tenant, only tenant, of Infinity (Life unconscious  
of all quantity!)—



FRANCESCO PULIGA

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## WC



## P. S.

The only thing (or things) he could think of as he drove home from the hospital, dodging mounds of ice like speed bumps and potholes that looked, from a distance, tiny, like root systems under the road, but turned out, when you were right on top of them, to be deep vicious gouges carved by salt—all he could think of were the hospital lights, white, white, and more white, overhead, and the way his doctor said “biopsy,” the *PS* always trailing a fantail of spittle, *psssss* sounding as if Dr. Bowles wanted him to inch closer so he could gossip, and how he would have to tell Chandra later, the good news, of which there was some, and the bad news, of which there was much more; he could see her face now, as he idled in the turn lane and signaled, not just the grief and tears but the motherly resolve that would verge, if you asked him, on condescension, her being *strong* for both of them, as if he weren’t *strong* himself, as if driving home at night on these godforsaken roads, having heard all the fatalistic shit he’d heard, weren’t *strong*, and the unconscious shaking of her head and the not-quite-a-smile, a recognition of the irony of his diagnosis, that he, who’d blended his breakfasts for a decade and went through pounds of vegetables each week and ran on days off, would probably never see a son or daughter, but she, a recovering addict with anger issues, who read magazines—never books—and refused to run with him, would live to see her kids, if she decided to have them, and would drive a car or, more likely, be driven in one, back in Phoenix, where her family was, and wouldn’t have to worry, ever, if the shimmer at the edge of the road was black ice.



NETTIE REYNOLDS

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## DETECTING OBSTACLES

### CHARACTERS:

MOM: in her mid-70's, well-spoken, soft voice, proper Southern woman, hair up in a bun

SAM: oldest and only son, in his late 40's, casual jeans

EMILY: the daughter, wearing a dress, speaks softly, cries easily

ROOMBA: never see on stage, but off camera we can hear it whirring

### SETTING:

It is 2023 and three people are in a living room. An older woman, with hair up in a bun, in a house dress is knitting in a chair and her two adult children, one woman and one man, are sitting across from her. As lights come up, the characters are looking at their mother knitting.

EMILY: Mom, tell me you're not knitting that for the Roomba. Why don't you put your coat on? We're going to the grief meeting together, you promised.

MOM: (*Still sitting not getting her coat.*) Why does it matter to you what I'm knitting? Have you seen how clean my floors are? And his name is not Roomba, it's Richard.

SAM: (*Smiles at his MOM.*) Mom, I know you miss Dad, I really do but you've got to admit that this is odd behavior.

MOM: (*Puts down knitting on her lap.*) What do you know about odd behavior? Your Dad died two months ago and since then you've been here every weekend sitting in his work garage separating fly fish lures out of his tackle box and you don't even like fishing.

SAM: We don't need to compare grieving notes here, Mom. We're just worried that you're not doing okay, that you're not managing this well. We want you to know that we're here for you.

MOM: I'm doing good. I really am. Did you know a Roomba can sense when it's about to go off a cliff? Or when it's about to fall off some stairs? Wouldn't that be amazing if we could be programmed to have that same sense?

EMILY: Mom. (*Frustrated tone.*)

MOM: (*MOM interrupts.*) You know honey I've never liked that tone. That

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way you say “Mom,” in a really exasperated tone. You understand I can sense that tone right?

SAM: Ok, listen, let’s all just take a deep breath and sit here for a minute just quietly.

*(A few seconds pass and the ROOMBA noise can be heard humming in background.)*

EMILY: Is the Roomba running right now? Mom, your floors are spotless, why do you have the Roomba running all the time?

MOM: Emily, it’s none of your concern why I’m keeping Richard busy. I like how he moves across the floor. It comforts me to know he can sense each obstacle and just glide around it.

MOM: Imagine if Daddy had been able to sense that electrical malfunction in his heart and avoided death. Imagine if Daddy had been able to avoid the obstacle of his heart suddenly ceasing.

SAM: Mom, he had a sudden cardiac arrest. Nothing could have prevented this.

*(MOM looks very uncomfortable, but is listening.)*

MOM: I don’t want to talk about this. I don’t want to hear about that. Be quiet and let’s all listen to the Roomba. Hear it sweeping away all the dust and cobwebs. That’s what I want to hear.

SAM: Mom, listen, Mr. Casey is not going to press charges about the Roomba, and I paid for the Roomba you took, but you can’t take any more Roombas. You cannot go back to the Sears by yourself. We were so lucky that Mr. Casey didn’t call the police for you stealing the first Roomba off the shelves.

EMILY: *(Talking over SAM.)* Sam, stop bringing that up. She did it because she wasn’t in her clear head. She wasn’t thinking clearly. She’s in grief, can’t you see that? Why else would someone drive in the middle of a Sunday after you’ve buried your husband and steal a Roomba?

MOM: I didn’t steal it. I forgot to pay for it, that’s all I did.

SAM: Mom, you took the Roomba out of the box and put it in your giant, “Let’s Make a Deal” purse and walked out of the store with it. It’s on the store video footage.

EMILY: Sam, enough about the fucking Roomba. Let Mom alone about the Roomba.

*(ROOMBA hums clearly in the background.)*

MOM: Yes, let's all leave the Roomba issue alone. It's none of your business what I need to do with my floors in this household. Your dad was always so worried about the floors being clean. I really wish I had bought the Roomba when he was alive. Maybe things would be different.

*(MOM goes back to knitting on the big circular sweater that will fit the ROOMBA.)*

MOM: You know your Dad was the only man I was ever intimate with.

EMILY: Mom, I don't need you to tell me about you and Dad having sex.

MOM: I'm not telling you about us having sex. I'm saying it, it's a fact. Your Dad was so tender and giving. God knows he was a penny pincher all his life, but he didn't cut corners in the bedroom. Always buying me pretty lingerie and did you know every night, even the night before he died, he would rub my feet with hand lotion. Can you imagine? Your dad used to say, "Mary we should have bought stock in Jergens lotion and Kotex." Isn't that hilarious? But of course, he was right, we should have.

EMILY: *(Quiet, looking at her mom, EMILY reaches out to hold her hand.)* Mom, cleaner floors would not have saved Daddy. *(EMILY starts to cry softly.)*

MOM: Did you know the Roomba can map every room of the house and remember it? Sometimes when Richard is in your Dad's den it circles the area where he collapsed. It's like your Dad is trying to tell me something with that Roomba motion.

SAM: Mom, the Roomba and Dad are not in some sort of communication.

MOM: *(Ignoring what SAM is saying.)* You know, we don't know how far the technology can reach in these kinds of machines. I mean if a Roomba can detect a baby in a room, a piece of lint, a tiny shard of glass, what's to say it doesn't detect where your Dad had his cardiac arrest? The doctor said your Dad's cardiac arrest was an electrical malfunction in his heart that stopped his heart. *(Shaking her head and crying.)* I mean, the heart has electrical currents, the heart hums along in all these rooms and then one day without warning it just plain stops. No more electrical current.

SAM: Let's all stop talking about Dad and cardiac arrests and just everything.

*(SAM knocks over a glass on the table. The audience hears the ROOMBA noise get louder like it's coming toward the characters.)*

MOM: Shhsh. Can you hear the spinning? You're making Richard upset. You need to stop talking about what I did or how Sears is missing this Roomba. If a Roomba is just sitting on the shelf, in a box, it's not fulfilling its purpose. Let the Roomba be free and fulfill its purpose.

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EMILY: (*Talking over her MOM.*) Mom, it's not about the Roomba, you're upset, we know that, we know you're struggling, and we're here to help you. We can help you. We can all go to the grief meeting together.

MOM: The only thing I want to hear is Richard making its way around my house. Even if your Dad had a cardiac arrest, if he would not have tripped over that piece of fabric in the middle of the carpet, he might not have hit his head on the table, and he might have survived. If your Dad had been a Roomba, he would have detected that small obstacle and not tripped on it. He would still be here.

SAM: Mom, he would not have survived, he hit his head on the table because his heart stopped, not because of the frayed fabric in the rug.

MOM: Stop talking to me about what happened to my husband. Stop telling me what happened. I know what happened. Just leave me here, I want to be left alone. (*MOM is rocking now and knitting more furiously.*)

EMILY: (*Crying softly sitting beside SAM who is rubbing his head.*)

*(A few seconds pause where the audience hears the ROOMBA noise and it's growing progressively louder, as if it will come on stage.)*

MOM: Your Dad could have been saved by a Roomba. It would have detected the fraying carpet and he would have fixed it and he wouldn't have died.

SAM: Mom, there was nothing you could do. Dad died. A Roomba could not have saved him. Roombas weren't meant to be life savers. They are only machines to keep the carpet clean.

MOM: I miss Daddy. Please don't take my Roomba. I need him. I need him to keep me safe from all the obstacles.

SAM: Mom, you can keep the Roomba, just please go with us to the meeting and talk about this.

MOM: Ok, this one time I'll go. Let me turn Richard off.

*(They all rise to go out the side stage. Lights dim. ROOMBA noise ceases.)*

END

CHAD HORN

UNTITLED 1

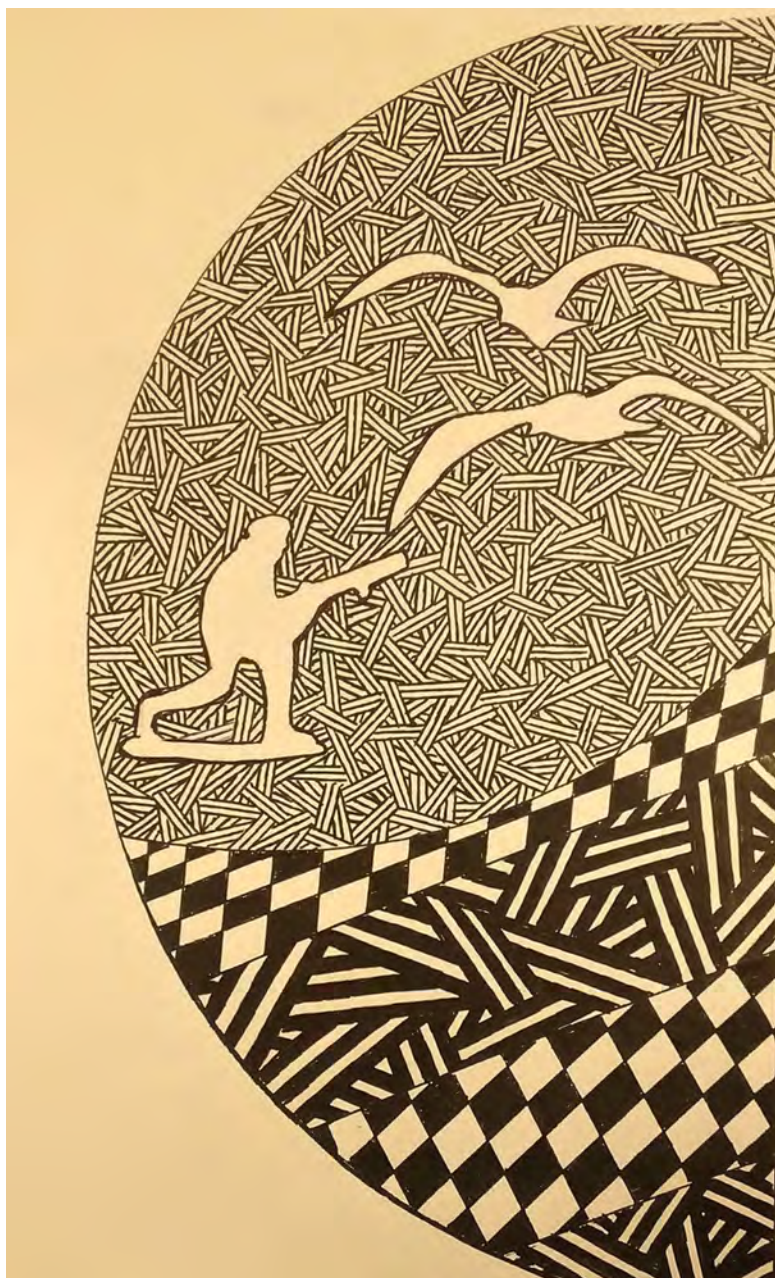




CHAD HORN

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## UNTITLED 2



MARY WLODARSKI

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## WAR HORSES

They carried the Great War  
on their backs.  
8 million galloped  
into its maw  
to be shot, burned, gassed  
chewed and spit out.

They carried their soldiers,  
kept them company,  
took bullets for them,  
were patched and repaired,  
sent back to the front lines,  
wore nose plugs,  
went hungry,  
and some survived  
to be shot,  
sold to slaughter,  
or left behind.

My Harry panics at shots  
fired in the neighbor's yard.  
His body rigid, neck rocked back,  
his heart beat thumps into my body,  
seat, legs, and he runs away.

What if the scars are still  
in all horses' memory? The shrapnel  
still lodged in their flanks?  
Does artillery still echo  
in their ears? Can today's horses  
still see their ancestors'  
terror-wide eyes?

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ROGER CAMP

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## BLUE HAND DYERS SOUK MARRAKECH





ROBERT WINDORF

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## REMEMBERING TOM

He always wanted to take  
a gentle breeze  
– even the wind –  
from a certain place &  
find a way to trap it  
inside a bottle or a jar

that would later sit on a bookshelf  
in his room

so he could occasionally open it  
as a reminder of

where he'd once been  
happy.

When I now hear the wind rustling  
through the trees  
or toppling a neighbor's garbage can

I often remember  
Tom's wish &  
wonder how many bottles or jars

are sitting on his bookshelf.

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MATO ENKI (2MASS ROKKE)

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## CHASM, (CINDY SHERMAN), 2023



JOSEPH LINSCOTT

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## RECOLLECTIVE

You begin again, searching your mind, hoping for a space to call your own. You call up the image of a large lake, not a lake that you know, but one that you can easily imagine yourself knowing. This large lake that you do not really know is not large because of its size, it is no bigger than any other lake, it is large because it is you and the lake, alone. You relax in this image, you let the lake's water envelop you. You call this image to mind but soon the image does not mind you. Soon the lake fills up with others, others who you do not know but can imagine yourself knowing along with some whom you do know. It's better here than not here. The mirrored vision of the sun on the water, its reflection stabilizes surface tension, begins to lose itself in the murk of bodies now splashing in the lake, sending their own ripples out across the water. Each ripple consuming and succumbing to every other, the water never resting, stability in chaos. And you realize that this is no longer your lake. That this was never your lake. You no longer feel comfortable here.

And so, you leave this grotto in search of another, more personal. Another where others won't find you. Another where you can rid yourself of us, of our *we* which consumes you. Our bodies in the murky water with you. But each new space you come across that lets you slip easily inward, you discover, does so for us and so you slither on out.

You become frustrated, seeing us at every turn, in every stinking pit of despair you ever felt was yours, in every joyous occasion you felt was yours and yours alone. In every moment, every memory of a moment, that you run towards, feeling once before so unique, you find us there with you.

And so, you try to take your mind off of us. But where will you go? Back to the seat you occupy amongst your family?

And here you are with your family in the restaurant you know they can't afford (but we sit here with you in celebration of you, in celebration of all of the accomplishments you have received that have also been received by others). The server who greeted your family with a false smile—fake smile, the heat of which penetrated your face, your cheeks, giving him, you think, a pleasure in upsetting you—stands, silently mocking your family. Your mother tells him the occasion for which *we* are celebrating, why you are present here. This all brings to his face another smile that rips at you, gnashing at your pride. Your father who tells him a joke that makes you cringe and makes his attempts at getting drink orders difficult.

You eye an empty table in the corner of the room lit mostly by candles, imagining yourself alone, running your hand from the cloth of your napkin

to the cloth of the table and feeling no difference. Instead, you sit with your family, your mother and father who embarrass you (the torture you feel you share alone) and those who relate to you by extension, who gather together for you only for themselves and their own desires. *We have to make an appearance*, you imagine them saying behind closed doors. We all gather here around you in conversations we have all conversed before, only changing the names of things. You continue your thoughts at the empty table in the corner, hoping to stray away from us without our noticing, but soon we reach you even there, drawing you back in so that you must answer our plodding questions.

Our questions matter very little for we've asked them all before. Just as your answers matter very little for you've said them all before.

Then the food arrives, and with it your family's silence.

But quickly, in place of theirs, the murmurs of us structure the sonic walls to the room of your meal, walls much tighter than those of the decorated restaurant. Their murmurings, you imagine, contain contempt for your family because, you feel, if you were them, if you were us, you would hold the same contempt.

The smell of half-eaten food from your plate and the clink of your silverware unite with ours to create an ocean of noise and scent that draw the walls in tighter around you.

You try to retreat back into your consciousness, find a new space of self, but the wine dizzies your mind and the cigarette you crave, the cigarette we always crave after several drinks, pulls you towards the exit though you remain seated with your family.

The hostess's fingers—or maybe it's the server's—which intrigues you more?—which is more forbidden? and like the apple to Eve's lips, draws you closer—rest upon your thigh. Their fingers, like our fingers, act as flirtatious claws digging deeper and deeper into your inner thigh.

You pull your thoughts back inside you. You retreat from us. You try to retreat from us. You try to find the path which took you to the large lake you imagined yourself knowing, but along your way back to that lake you think back to a book you once read, to the memory of you holding a book of great love letters or some such intent. You remember the girl sitting on the bed, the girl, her hair and eyes and mouth and hands you once knew very well, whose book it was you held. She thought of you when she read that book. You remember the feeling you had reading it. The feeling of coming into an overfilled auditorium, filled with us who had read the book before you, waiting on a performance of those whom the letters were written for. And the show we watched was that of once-happy women now sitting on stage crying—the love they all felt, known to all. There were no longer any seats, so you were forced to look over our heads. You watched the tear-stained faces

on stage look to each other both in camaraderie and suspicion. You wanted to leave but once you've entered, we can never leave, and so you thought that leaving that girl on the bed would be just as good.

You abandon the search for your own personal space of mental freedom, one free of us. Now, please god (but what god do we believe in?), now just let you think about anything but the incestuous prospects, you try to think this, but where does it go? And so, your mind only produces the response we want it to have. For what other response is there? How do you think of the response you think you want when it has never been thought before?

You try to find the large lake you imagine yourself knowing but get lost along the way. You return to the table among your family, the claws still in you. You reach for more wine, the blood of Christ, to wipe away the image of blood on blood that enters our mind.

Where do you go from here?

What do you do?

Where do we go from here?

What do we do?

Why any difference?

When in the end it's all the same.

You excuse yourself from the table, while you still can, flush your face with water, hope it reaches your thoughts, pray (to what god?) it reaches your thoughts. The claws, you feel them still digging into your thigh, into your mind. The blood of Christ, the forbidden fruit, your dizzied mind. Go no further than the breaking of skin, your teeth you want desperately to go no further. You try to run away from these things, to find a sense of self, but at every turn, like every turn before, we are there to greet you. We want to watch you reach the core, to see you plunge into the sweetness of forbidden desire.

You splash the water on your face and go back to our special place.

You've found your way back to the lake, past the image of the girl with the book and the tear-stained faces on stage. You enter the water with us, and our presence comforts you in a sense, our ripples mix with ours and you get lulled in. Then the claws come back, and you leave us, no longer comforted in the stability of proximal chaos, terrifying closeness. The image of your incestuous desire emptying the lake of some of us. But only some. You want to be alone, away from us, but who can handle such loneliness?

You think you want to be alone. You want to be terrified by us. But you are glad to see us. You long for us. You need us. If it weren't for us, you would not be you.

*How ya doin'*, you hear your father say. We see him as any other father, and what does that say of you? How is that for lonely?

You're brought back to the water running down your face. The smell

of citrus and piss are what you notice first. It's what we always notice first about these wasteful places. The lid of the trashcan, dotted with what you believe are the tears of those who came before you into this place to try to rid themselves of us. But only ever tried. And so, you must now stop your thoughts, focus your eyes, and say *Fine* in accordance with the rules we've established when we speak to the decades-old version of ourselves you now see before you, a reflection of what truly lies behind you.

What isn't a reflection we ask ourselves?

What is a reflection but an echo of an image?

We pass through the conversation with ourselves knowing that we know what we each know, refusing to acknowledge our reflections, our ripples. You allow us to take over for you, you let us choose your words. It's a conversation that we are having now, you and your father occupy its space, but it is one that any could fill.

This is why you focus on numbers. Numbers which never try to be unique, but simply are—at least, this is what you have been told. Whereas we, we all who try to be unique, get only death, ultimate equality. Each one different, but all a part of an ultimate order which moves them around like pawns. To the other side. Each one a part of all others and made from the parts of all others.

We are attracted to numbers because we fear them, and we fear them because we are lost in them, always searching for their hidden meaning, always hoping for our hidden meaning. A hidden meaning which lies in all others.

*What're you studying?* we ask when you return to the table.

You respond, ever fearful of the claws dug into you as deep as you wish to be into yourself, fearful of the numbers, and say to us that you study in the study of numbers and we, like all before who hear you speak, laugh and praise you with the praise of a thousand useless voices, our buzz constant and deafening.

Quick enough to give you a sense of ease, but so quick you feel insulted, our conversation moves from you, from all of you, from us, and you feel around your mind, you think you've found a way to leave us, but we clutch your thigh, we dig deeper, deep enough to pull you out. You cling for the nearest space, you're back inside the lake, our ripples caressing the surface, you seek to find a purpose, purpose, like infinity, a purpose, some purpose, but we're too far entrenched, we're too far inside.

Your search for something yours becomes a view of all that's ours.

You feel you feel something only yours, but what way to tell for sure without becoming us?

You begin to sense you understand loneliness.

You cry, you beg, we plead, but your voice gets lost in the buzz, our

noise, your noise, our noise, becomes too loud, the louder you yell the louder we become, and your voice becomes an echo of an echo of an echo until you're nothing but an echo of an echo of an echo of something not known, something too far gone in its echoing travel to be heard, the reflection no longer seen, no longer hearing but always heard, and you discover, we discover, that our search inside the echo is meaningless and there's nothing left to do but stare into the void, yell that I am you are we.

## ANDY

Fire ants gather in a mound below me. I pinch one with a pair of rusty tweezers and lift it to my face. I clamp down on its abdomen until it explodes. Bending down, I spot another one, carrying a dead leaf. I bring it into the blazing sun and squeeze until it curls into a ball and dies.

One of them bit me yesterday. My leg still hurts. Last week, one got my little sister and made her cry. Now I'm going to kill them all.

I hate these ants as much as I hate Copperas Cove, Texas. My dad got stationed here a few months ago. This place is hot and miserable. You must wear shoes all the time, or the sidewalk will burn your feet, or worse, these ants will attack you.

I kill another one and drop its wilted body to the ground. A nearby train speeds across the field, and beyond those train tracks, I swear you can see forever. I miss my friends in Newport News, and always wonder what they're doing. We used to play in the waves at Virginia Beach, or we'd ride roller coasters at Busch Gardens. But there's nothing to do in Texas but play Nintendo and kill these dumb ants.

Today I'm sad. Everyone hates me here. I lost my friend Jason. Lisa's never going to talk to me. And I feel awful for what I did to Andy.

### §

Yesterday, I was zoning in my fifth-grade history class. Ms. Smith, our teacher, scribbled on a dusty chalkboard. A large woman, who spoke in a Texas accent and wore flowery dresses—she hated me. I never did my homework or listened. While she rambled, I stared at a U.S. map on the wall. I found Virginia and wondered what my friends were learning at my old school.

Below the map, Lisa Dove sat at her desk and drew Texas Blue Bonnet flowers in her notebook. She'd won awards for her drawings at the county fair. Lisa had short blond hair and wore a Bon Jovi shirt, jean shorts, and pink jelly shoes like my sister's. Like everyone else, I had a crush on her, but I never had the courage to talk to her.

My friend Jason, a stumpy kid with a pot belly, sat beside me. He chewed on a yellow pencil and assorted a column of spit wads across his desk. He loved bullying our classmates. When he wasn't beating up kids on the playground, he wandered through fields and searched for fossils that he sold out of his locker. He never had lunch money, so I spent a lot of mine buying seashell gastropods he'd sell to me. New to this school, I didn't have



a lot of friends.

Ms. Smith pointed to me, interrupting my Lisa Dove daydream.

“Who was the 20<sup>th</sup> president?” she asked.

I shrugged and sank in my desk.

She wrote something in her gradebook, spread across her lectern, probably marking me down for participation again.

“Maybe you’ll know next year, when you take this class again,” she said.

My face burned red with embarrassment. She always said mean things to me. Honestly, I knew the answer—James Garfield—like the lasagna-eating cat. I secretly loved history, but at my other school, we’d already memorized the presidents. Ms. Smith’s class was boring. Plus, Jason never answered her dumb questions.

Ms. Smith bit her lower lip and scanned the classroom. She pointed to Andy, this big, dopey kid everyone picked on. Jason loved to tease Andy. He and his friends would take turns, pushing him down the hallway and calling him names. Defenseless, Andy would plug his ears with his fingers and hum.

“Andy?” Ms. Smith asked. “Who was the 20<sup>th</sup> president?”

“Davey Crockett,” he said with a grin.

The whole class cracked up.

“Ronald Regan,” he guessed again.

Ms. Smith shook her head, but she didn’t mark him down in her gradebook like she did to me.

When she turned her back and wrote James Garfield on the board, Jason tugged a cafeteria straw from his pocket and shot a spit wad that pelted Andy’s neck. Andy brushed it away and quietly hummed, “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.” The few of us who saw, covered our mouths and laughed.

## §

At recess Jason and I snuck off to a nearby park. I was surprised he’d invited me. We’d just become friends. While I skipped rocks across a lake, Jason settled under a big oak tree and lit a cigarette. He offered me one, but I shook my head. None of the kids at my other school smoked. Jason dug in his bookbag and fished out a magazine. Opening it, he held up a photo of a naked woman.

I’d never seen a lady like that before. Turning away, I found a smooth rock on the muddy bank and lobbed it across the water.

“How many vaginas have you seen?” he asked me.

“Three,” I lied.

“Really?” he raised his eyebrows and grinned.

I nodded and skipped another stone. It bounced off the water three times before it sank. Bored with rocks, I scanned the grassy shoreline for fat bullfrogs to catch but didn’t find any.

“Can you believe Andy? Davey Crockett?” he asked.

I chuckled.

“That kid’s an idiot,” he added.

I shoved my dirty hands in my pockets. A gust of hot air stirred ripples across the lake. It angered me that Ms. Smith didn’t mark Andy down or embarrass him in front of the class like she did to me. I gazed at Jason, smiling as he flipped through pages. I knew his favorite thing in the world—picking on Andy.

“Yesterday, Andy pushed me in the hall and called me names,” I lied.

“What?” Jason looked dead serious as he closed the magazine.

“He does it all the time,” I lied.

Jason squinted with bitterness. He held the crackling cigarette in his thin lips while gray smoke filled the air.

§

After our last class ended, Jason and I ran down the sidewalk and searched for Andy. I jogged past small groups of classmates while the lie I’d told remained lodged in my chest. I wanted everything to stop, but if I told the truth, Jason would never talk to me again.

We found Andy, walking by himself with his shoelaces untied. Jason dashed toward him and shoved his back. Andy stumbled forward and nearly fell. His bookbag slipped off his shoulder and crashed on the ground.

Turning around, Andy cowered and held his hands up in surrender. One of the buttons of his overalls sprung loose, and his clothing hung over his chest like a baby’s bib.

“Why’d you call my friend an asshole?” Jason pointed at me.

Andy stepped backward and shook his head.

A circle of kids gathered around us like sharks. I made my way to the center, where Jason balled his hands into fists and lunged at Andy. I closed my eyes as Jason reeled his arm back. I shuddered at the sound of his knuckles smashing into Andy’s face. The taunting crowd quieted.

Opening my eyes, I saw Andy cradling his chin in his hands as he spat blood. One of his front teeth jarred loose and fell on the concrete, where it bounced several times before disappearing into a sea of tennis shoes. Andy held his wounded jaw while he tried to hum in between moaning sobs, and tears ran down his face.

Nobody expected this to happen. Even Jason looked surprised. He’d beaten up many kids, but never knocked out a tooth.

Jason found me in the crowd and asked, “He did call you an asshole, didn’t he?”

I nodded but avoided eye contact.

Two adults stormed toward us, but Jason sprinted off before they could

catch him.

§

Last night, I lay awake, long after my bedtime, with blankets tugged over my head. Howling trains chugged in the distance as they headed North. I couldn't stop hearing Jason's fist hitting Andy's chin and the broken cries that followed. I thought about Andy, returning home and explaining to his parents that he'd been bullied again.

The lie I'd told hurt so many people.

Today, Andy wore new overalls to school. Bearing a toothless grin and split lip, he bounced down the hallway like nothing happened. When he passed me, I couldn't look him in the eyes.

Jason skipped school today, and when he comes back, I doubt we'll be friends. I'm worried he'll bully me next.

I can't stop thinking about something that happened after the fight. Walking home alone, I heard shoes hitting the sidewalk as someone approached me from behind. Turning around, I expected Jason to wallop me. But there stood Lisa Dove in her oversized Bon Jovi shirt. Her blue eyes no longer sparkled. They held rage.

She shoved me in the chest, and before she ran off, she shouted, "You're an asshole."

She was right.

MARY BETH HINES

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## PINECONE

She plummeted, spilled  
like a fledgling  
too soon from the nest,

a palpable *crack*  
*thud* amidst the low  
hum of forest,

dropped into a bed  
of brown  
decaying needles

surrounded by sisters,  
and spent,  
half-buried lovers.

She fit inside my hand  
like a taut  
memory of you

yet sheathed, spiral-  
scaled, wood-girded,  
armed;

fit like a grenade  
I was tempted  
to toss

into the dry  
October wind, to watch  
her explode, naked

seeds sailing, to relieve  
the swelling  
urgency to break

open and yield,  
unleash like some  
long-ago specter

of us, and I fingered  
her sides, the base  
of her spine

exuding the tang  
of almost  
forgotten fire

that swept me back  
to your hands, to our hungry,  
summer-long hour.

[PR] Spring 2023

MELISSA GAITAN

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## MORNING WORKS 3

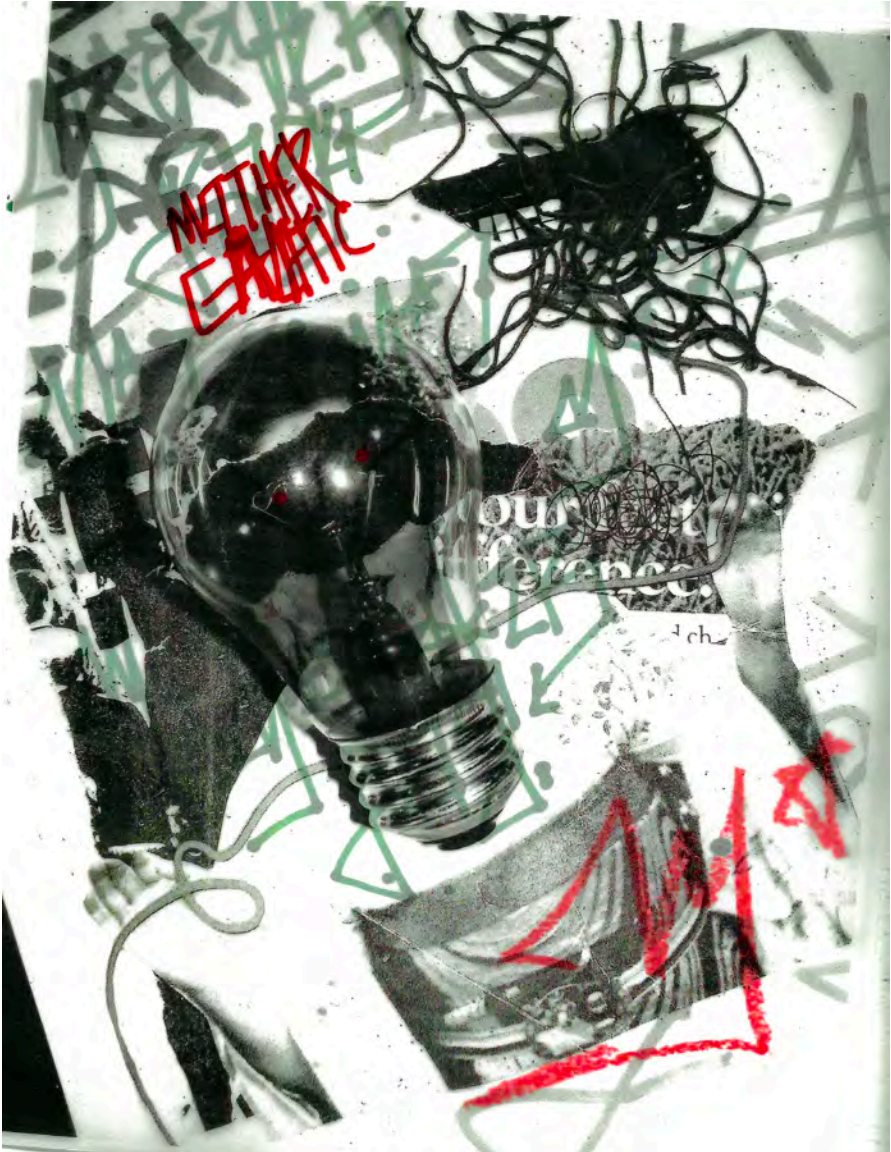




MELISSA GAITAN

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## MORNING WORKS 4



## OLD HAUNTS

Over twenty years ago, two locked cars in a locked garage ran for over six hours on St. Patrick's Day. A flower delivery man found you.

I don't think you expected that. He found a way to open the overhead garage door—a gas can in the corner crackled. He risked his life to find you already dead, complete with notes addressed to family members and a final to-do list. A flower delivery man was not a part of either list.

How many others have died in Grandma's house over the years? I don't know. I know that Grandpa died there, you died there, Grandma suffered a stroke—two out of the three happened in the garage.

I've heard it said that people think you inhabit that house yet. Your death was young and tragic and suicidal, and our culture likes to romanticize such losses. You were only 24. *Unfinished business.*

I picture people sitting around a table holding hands, candles flickering, whispering incantations—your pain a parlor game?

Your death was sad and awful and preventable—a ghost story for others to pass around for goosebumps and thrills? Perhaps they are only story-seekers. Harmless.

You, brother, have been dead many years now. This much I know. Do you haunt us all? Maybe in the intimate rooms of our hearts. Are you creaking floorboards and moaning at midnight? Only a bump in the night? You were so much more.

But, what happened on that land, before that house was built, before trees were cleared, before lynx and bobcats were dislocated from their habitat? Do only humans haunt the living?

Maybe the spirit of an old black bear knocks pictures askew stretching and yawning from eternal hibernation?

That sound a person hears might be the wheezing whine of mosquitoes craving one more blood meal.

Even in my skepticism, I see the timber wolf prowling the hallways, howling in that garage, preying on the scraps of human doubts.

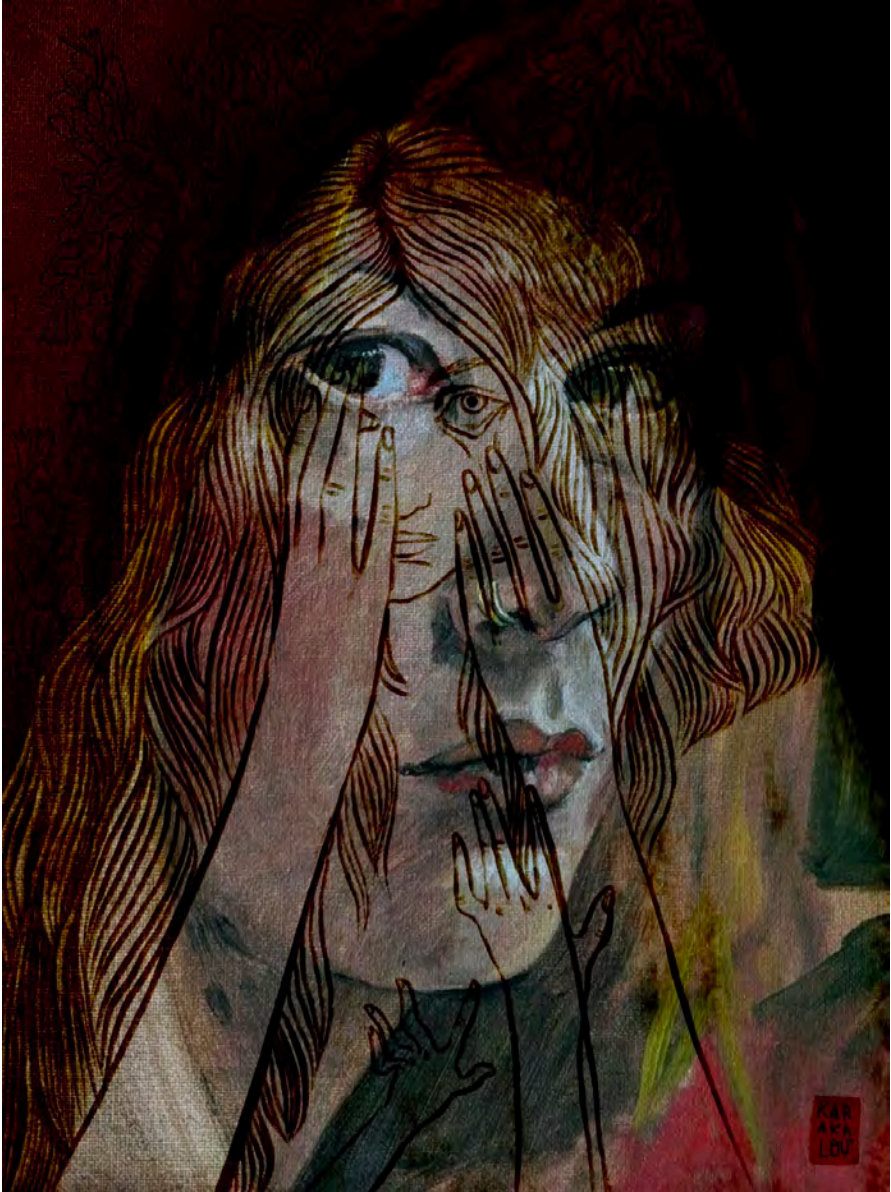
While you sleep, foxes might still hunt through bricks and boards, passing from room to room, hungry and at home.



ANNA KARAKALOU

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## INSIGHT



SHELLY HOLDER

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## NEEDLES FREEWAY LOVE POEM

Pull over for me, o traveler on the road out—  
tell me your thrumming ballads of distance,  
of mileage clicked by. No secret here how to  
woo me: oil stains my chocolate, radiator fluid  
my wine. I want your burning exhaust to kiss me  
into blisters, then I'll know what it is to be asphalt:  
permanent, and permanently left behind. Always  
knew this was a pit-stop town, fuel up fast kinda  
town, nothing here to tempt anybody to stay. Rev it  
again, baby, a little louder, and let me know if you  
head back my way—I'll have an embrace waiting,  
waiting, all grit and prickles, like ever-present dust.

REBECCA KANE

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# GHOSTS AT A NARCAN TRAINING

## **CHARACTERS:**

MOLLY: Woman in her 20s-early 30s

ANDREW: Man in his 20s-early 30s

PAT: Any gender, anywhere from 20s-60s

## **SYNOPSIS:**

All Andy wanted was to attend this training he heard might be useful. Unfortunately for him, he arrives and learns that all Molly wanted was closure.

## **PLACE:**

A bleak room of some kind in an office or medical building, like a spare conference room now being used for storage, too.

## **TIME:**

Early evening, 2019

## **CONTENT WARNING:**

This play comes with a content warning for mentions of drug use, including overdoses, addiction, and death.

*At Rise: MOLLY sits in a plain plastic chair. She isn't quite tense, but definitely ready for something. ANDY opens the door, recognizes her, and turns back around immediately. She saw someone come in, but not that it was him. He mills around just outside.*

MOLLY: Hello? Are you here for Narcan training?

*(ANDY is, so he's caught.)*

ANDY: Yeah, I'm—*(faking enthusiasm)* Heyyy! Mollyyyy!

MOLLY: Andrew? Are you kidding me?

ANDY: Nah, I'm...it's...nah, it's me. I'm here.

MOLLY: Are you fucking kidding me?

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ANDY: You know what, I think they do this on Thursdays too, and I can just switch shifts—

MOLLY: No. Oh no. Come on in. Have a seat.

ANDY: Listen—

MOLLY: Oh, I'm listening. I'm ready to listen. I've been ready to listen for six months.

ANDY: I'll just come a different night, and I promise, like, I *promise* I will reach out to you and explain everything—

MOLLY: Just like you *promised* not to up and ghost me as soon as things got even remotely serious?

ANDY: You're right to be mad—

MOLLY: *Thanks*, I really needed your *permission*.

ANDY: Now is obviously not the time to talk about it.

*(MOLLY is about to really let him have it. ANDY braces himself. At the last moment, she holds back and takes a deep breath.)*

MOLLY: It didn't seem like it was ever going to be the time to talk about it. Am I wrong in assuming that?

ANDY (*cautiously optimistic*): No.

MOLLY: I didn't want to assume things. But you gave me no other choice.

ANDY: I understand.

MOLLY: And what else?

*(ANDY is confused. After a moment of trying to read MOLLY, it dawns on him.)*

ANDY: Duh, yeah, I'm sorry. I am. Sorry.

MOLLY (*concedingly*): They told me we should just have a seat and wait for the instructor. We're early, so.

ANDY: Not anymore.

MOLLY: Oh... really?

ANDY: Yeah, it's like gotta be past 6:30...let me check...yeah, 6:33. (*MOLLY is laughing.*) What?

MOLLY: Nothing.

ANDY: Come on, what?

MOLLY: Just that I thought you'd never be on time.

*(This was said to hurt ANDY's feelings. It worked.)*

ANDY: See, this is exactly why I was avoiding talking to you when I wanted out. *(All laughter leaves MOLLY's face. She maintains eye contact with him as he continues, silent.)* Yeah? We're just gonna wait for the instructor then?

MOLLY *(mocking his tone)*: Yeah. We're just gonna wait for the instructor then.

ANDY: So. What brings you here?

MOLLY: I thought we were gonna wait in silence.

ANDY: I can't stand sitting here just not talking.

MOLLY: That's ironic, considering.

ANDY *(getting up)*: I'll come a different day.

*(PAT enters, having expertly opened the door hands free. PAT is two parts overworked, and one part at peace with this. PAT carries a clipboard, a clicker for a PowerPoint presentation, a handful of flyers, and three kits about the size of lunchboxes. PAT thinks ANDY is up to help and hands him the clipboard and starts setting up. ANDY, feeling too awkward to leave now, just sits down.)*

PAT: Thanks, bud. You're both here for the naloxone training? Make sure to initial on the sign-in sheet.

MOLLY: Oh—no. I'm here for Narcan dispensal training. Uh-oh.

PAT: It's the same thing. *(checks the sign up sheet)* Molly?

MOLLY: Oh. Yes.

PAT: Andrew?

ANDY: Andy is good. *(to MOLLY)* It's okay. I didn't know they were the same thing either.

MOLLY: I *know* it's okay.

ANDY: Okay. Well. I didn't know it was okay.

PAT *(picking up on tension)*: I'll take a guess and say we're all feeling 'okay' today? *(No answer from MOLLY or ANDY.)* Thanks for coming out tonight. Who here knows someone—well, you know what? Let's not use that language. Small class, so I'll adjust this to make it just a conversation, between the three of us. Do either of you know someone who's addicted to opiates?

*(MOLLY raises her hand, then lowers it immediately, embarrassed at this reflex. ANDY is surprised at her answer.)*

PAT: Not you, Andy?

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MOLLY: Everyone knows someone.

ANDY: I don't mean anything by it, I just don't know anyone personally.

MOLLY: You know people who are pretty good at hiding it.

PAT: For the time being.

ANDY: I really don't think I do. Not that I would judge.

PAT: Statistically speaking, you do. It's very common around here. Every seven hours someone in New York dies of an overdose.

*(ANDY is visibly floored by that statistic. MOLLY doesn't like to hear it, but isn't shocked.)*

PAT: It's very likely someone you care about is struggling right now. And you guys are taking a very important step to learn how you can help them out in an overdose, so—

MOLLY: Wait, I'm sorry. It's gonna bother me. I just have a question.

PAT: No, no worries. Go ahead. We'll probably end early.

MOLLY: Andrew, if you're so sure you don't know anyone with this problem, then why are you here?

PAT: I thought you meant a question for me. That's not really—

ANDY: I just wanted to help.

MOLLY: *Obviously so do I*, but who could you possibly want to help if you're so sure it doesn't affect you?

ANDY: Whose life are you out here saving, then?

MOLLY: None of your business.

ANDY: Exactly, so why is mine any of yours?

MOLLY: Good point. Okay.

ANDY: Okay.

PAT: Okay! *(Clicker in hand, PAT gestures from here on out to a PowerPoint presentation off stage.)* I've already shared that pretty shocking stat with you, and that's even fluctuated between an overdose death every six and seven hours over the last few years. Now you might be asking—what exactly is an opioid?

MOLLY: I'm not.

ANDY: Painkillers, right?

PAT: Pretty much. Opioids are prescription medicines that can be used to treat pain. Opioids work by attaching to structures in your brain called

“receptors” and send signals that block pain, slow breathing, and calm the body down.

ANDY: Vibe.

MOLLY: Shut up.

ANDY: I just mean, I get why people use it. Stress relief, pain relief. Who doesn’t need that?

MOLLY (*to PAT*): Oh. So woke. You know he used to make fun of my name?

ANDY: It’s *funny*, you *laughed*.

MOLLY: It gets less funny when you say you’re rolling on molly every single time you come to my house.

ANDY: “Every single time.” So all three times. Total.

MOLLY: Fuck you.

PAT: You know, guys, there’s a Thursday night class. It’s pretty popular, usually at least ten people there. Maybe one of you—

MOLLY: I want to stay and learn this now.

ANDY: Well, me too.

MOLLY: I think it means more to me to stay.

PAT: This is meaningful for everyone.

MOLLY: Fine, but he doesn’t even have a personal connection.

ANDY: I know just as much as you do.

MOLLY: Oh, please. Is that a dig at the Narcan-naloxone thing?

PAT: About that—it really is the same thing. Naloxone is just the generic version of that drug.

MOLLY: I get it. It’s just an acronym.

ANDY: Not an acronym, really.

MOLLY: Yes, it is.

ANDY: No, it’s not. It’s the brand name. *Could* be an acronym. But not necessarily.

MOLLY: Hey, Andrew. Did it ever occur to you? Ever? Even once? That you don’t know everything about this?

ANDY: Yes. I just want to help people. Is that so wrong? I heard about this from a subway ad. I looked it up on my phone. It said you could reverse an overdose by just learning how to give someone this drug and I thought, you know what? I’ve never gone out and learned how to help anyone do



anything. I've never contributed shit to my city. Certainly not back home in Jacksonville. And look at that place now. But no, I don't know know anyone who O.D.ed. Not any friends, I mean. I don't even know for sure if any of my friends use that stuff but what if they do? They probably do. I just want to be able to help if I'm there at the time. Big "if", yeah, but now that I hear that crazy-ass every-seven-hours thing, I mean, damn. Maybe I'll just walk the streets with a kit. Worst that happens is I help somebody. Why not? Okay?

MOLLY (*her turn to be flooded*): Okay.

*(PAT considers doing anything else, but just decides to move forward with the slides.)*

PAT: Thank you for sharing, Andy. Your city will appreciate you taking this initiative. I know I do. So, let's talk about how you can help. Often, people taking opioids to manage their pain are unaware of the potential adverse reactions, including overdose. Now we're going to go over some of the signs of overdose.

MOLLY: Can we not?

PAT: As in...can we skip this section? I'm afraid not.

MOLLY: It's just that it might be. Kind of triggering. For people.

ANDY: We don't have to. I'll just google it.

PAT: For you to be legally certified to administer this, we do. I need to go over it.

ANDY: What's the legal part of the certification matter anyway? I don't need to put it on my resume or anything.

PAT: Sure, but if you don't complete the training and go on to administer naloxone, you could be liable for what happens to that person in certain ways. This could mean a manslaughter suit if they don't make it. Or if they do, they might sue you for ruining their high. (*MOLLY's and ANDY's faces are incredulous.*) Both would be credible cases. I've seen them win before.

MOLLY: (*Beat*) Oh.

ANDY: (*Beat*) Yeah?

PAT: Oh, yeah.

MOLLY: My sister. Had a problem. She could have really used this. That's all I'm gonna say. (*She waits only a couple seconds for a response.*) I'm being ridiculous. I know you have to do the slide with the signs of O.D. It's fine. I'm fine. I'm okay.

*(MOLLY is visibly forcing being okay.)*

ANDY (*extending his hand*): You don't have to. But if you want to. I don't mean it to be, like, a thing. Just if you need someone. To hold your hand.

MOLLY: No, Andy. But thank you. Really.

ANDY: Thanks for calling me Andy again.

PAT (*handing them both kits*): Those belong to you now.

ANDY: Ours? Really? Oh.

MOLLY: Yeah. It's smaller than I thought.

PAT: You don't need much more than that kit to save a life. And just a little bit more training. Want to open them up and see what's inside?

*(MOLLY and ANDY open their kits and look inside. Then they both peer at the other's, as if making sure they're the same.)*

END

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Hongwei Bao** was born in China and lives in Nottingham, UK. He uses poetry, short stories, and critical essays to explore issues concerning queer desire, Asian identity, and transcultural intimacy. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Positions Politics*, *Shanghai Literary Review*, *Voice & Verse*, *Write On*, and *Words Without Borders*. His short stories “Lion” and “The Rabbit God” have been longlisted for the Plaza Prize (category: sudden fiction category).

**Brenda Bolt** has been a novice/hobby photographer for quite some time. Originally from Alabama, she moved to Mississippi two years ago and currently lives in Tupelo. She has greatly enjoyed her time there. No matter where or what she’s taking photos of, she enjoys it. She loves taking her camera to the beach, because it brings such a feeling of calmness that can be felt through the photos. Since she moved to Mississippi, she has found a place there that gives her the same calm feeling. The yellow rolling fields that bloom, especially on The Natchez Trace, have an almost mesmerizing effect. It’s breathtaking, and she considers herself blessed to have the chance to see just how great Mississippi is.

**S. T. Brant** lives in Las Vegas where he teaches high school English and Journalism. His debut collection *Melody in Exile* was published in 2022 with Atmosphere Press. His work has appeared and is forthcoming in numerous journals including *Honest Ulsterman*, *EcoTheo*, *Timber*, *Rain Taxi*, *Ocean State Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Ekstasis*, and *New South*. He is the founder of the online reading series *In the Fire Garden* that hosts virtual readings and interviews with emerging and established writers. He can be contacted through his website at [ShaneBrant.com](http://ShaneBrant.com), Twitter: @terriblebinth, or Instagram: @shanelemagne.

**Kevin Broccoli** is a playwright from New England. His work has appeared at the New York Fringe Festival, Theatre Southwest, and Actors Theatre of Santa Cruz. He is the author of “Security” and “Combustion.” He has been published in the *Stage It* series, as well as in *New Plains Review* and *Apricity Magazine*. Follow on Instagram @KBJR0719.

**Roger Camp** lives in Seal Beach, CA where he muses over his orchids, walks the pier, plays blues piano, and spends afternoons reading under an Angel’s Trumpet with a charm of hummingbirds. When he’s not at home, he’s photographing in the Old World. He is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, *Thames & Hudson* (2002), and *Heat, Charta, Milano* (2008). Represented by the Robin Rice

Gallery, NYC, more of his work may be seen on [Luminous-Lint.com](http://Luminous-Lint.com).

**Stephen Cicirelli** has his MFA from Columbia University. He is currently a full-time lecturer in the English Department at Saint Peter's University. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Quick Fiction*, *Eunoia Review*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *100 Word Story*, *Cardinal Sins*, and the anthology *Nothing Short Of* (Outpost19 Press). He and his partner currently live in New Jersey. Read more at [www.cicirelliwrites.com](http://www.cicirelliwrites.com). Follow him on Twitter @SteveCicirelli and on Instagram @stephen\_cicirelli.

**Mato Enki (2Mass Rokke)** is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher. His work repurposes existing analyses of systems and media, aiming alongside research measuring how our senses are being diluted through the distribution of goods, the effect of living in high-octane societies, and the social decimations created within them, in relation to identity and cultural hierarchies. He is an MFA Graduate of Fine Art from John Moore's University and a 2023 nominee for both the VAA International Scholarship Prize and the John Byrne Award. He has exhibited his work in the U.S., Korea, Germany, Argentina, Poland, and the United Kingdom. He lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland.

**Melissa Gaitan** is a Virginia-based artist who expresses herself through collaging, music, and photography. She creates images that evoke a sense of uneasiness mixed with nostalgia, similar to the feelings one experiences in dreams. Gaitan found it challenging to express herself verbally growing up, but through her art, she found a way to communicate and express her true feelings. Her art has been her refuge during tough times, especially after losing her mother, which pushed her mental health. Despite the challenges, Gaitan has strived to grow as an artist, building a community of like-minded individuals who believe that art can transform lives. She has exhibited her work in several venues, including the *Antifragile Magazine*, University of Maryland's online IDENTI-CORE exhibition, *Cancer: Never Give Up - 2022 Art Exhibition & Publication*, and SOHO Photo Gallery's Future of Photography competition. Through her art and community-building efforts, Gaitan aims to inspire others to be the best versions of themselves artistically and as humans.

**Mary Beth Hines's** poetry collection, *Winter at a Summer House*, was recently published by Kelsay Books. Her poems appear in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The MacGuffin*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *SWWIM*, and elsewhere. Visit her at [www.marybethhines.com](http://www.marybethhines.com).

**Emily Hockaday** is a poet from Queens who writes about ecology, astronomy, and the city landscape, alongside more personal subjects. Her first collection *Naming the Ghost* tackles the onset of chronic illness and parenting through grief. Her next full-length, *In a Body*, will be out

in October with Harbor Editions. This collection looks at chronic illness through the lens of ecopoetry. Emily is the author of five chapbooks and has had poems in a variety of print and online journals. She can be found online at [www.emilyhockaday.com](http://www.emilyhockaday.com) or tweeting @E\_Hockaday.

Poet, book club host, and online poetry teacher, **Shelly Holder** was recently selected by Geoffrey Davis as a finalist for a forthcoming special issue of *Iron Horse Literary Review*. Her poetry has been published by *Gyroscope Review* in print and audio format, and as a video recording on the Palm Beach Poetry Festival's YouTube page. Additional appearances include *One Art*, *Verse-Virtual*, and others. She is founding a reading library of literary magazines (Los Angeles Literary Magazine Reading Library; [facebook.com/litmaglibrary](https://facebook.com/litmaglibrary)). She lives in Monrovia, where she struggles to get an orange tree to fruit. You can find her on Facebook (/shellyholderpoet).

**Chad Horn** is a beat poet and mixed media artist from Kentucky. He has authored seven books and contributed to many publications. Frequently, he is an emcee of poetry events, including the annual Kentucky Writers Day, Jeanne Penn Lane Celebration of Kentucky Writers, and Kentucky Monthly PENNED Writers Awards.

**Rebecca Kane**'s writing has appeared in numerous theatres, publications, and festivals in New York City and beyond. Favorite performance credits include the National Women's Theatre Festival, The Tank NYC, and a reading through the New York Foundation for the Art's City Artist Corps grant program. Publications include the *Smith & Kraus Best Women & Men's Monologues 2022*, *Feels Blind Literary*, *New Plains Review*, *Literature Today*, and *That Gray Zine*.

**Anna Karakalou** is a scenic artist and illustrator living in Ventura, CA. She loves to paint with her eyes closed to see what story wants to be told, and then she pulls out the pieces from the mess to make something new and surprising. She generally works in inks on cards, but also enjoys acrylics, oils, and working digitally.

**Annie North Kolle** is a Baltimore native who's made her home in Missoula, Montana with her husband, son, and mastiff. She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Montana, and her work has appeared *The Madison Review*, *Shark Reef*, and *The Esthetic Apostle*. This spring, she plans to grow her first ever tomato plants.

**Serge Lecomte** was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in Brooklyn. After graduation he joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force. He earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC (1975-1978). In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University

of Alaska (1978-1997). He's worked as a house builder, pipe-fitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, and bartender.

**Joseph Linscott** is a writer and operations manager currently living in Denver, CO with his wife and their dog. His work has appeared in *ZiN Daily*, *Bangor Literary Journal*, *Helen*, *Sporklet*, and more. He can be found on Twitter and Instagram @prosephlinscott.

**Richard A. Miller** is a retired New York-New Jersey lawyer now residing in Sarasota, Florida and Pocono Pines, Pennsylvania. "Spooky Action at a Distance" is his first published piece of literature apart from prior law review articles and other legal paraphernalia that hardly qualified as literature. His legal specialty was the obscure world of financial derivatives that were arguably responsible for more than a few financial crises but, nevertheless, enriched lawyers and bankers. Speaking of derivatives, though, Spooky's story derives from an incident that—as lawyers like to say—was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

**Brendan Praniewicz** lives in San Diego, where he writes, does photography, and performs stand-up comedy around Southern California. He earned his MFA in creative writing from San Diego State in 2007 and has subsequently taught creative writing at San Diego colleges. He has had short stories and poems published in *Races Y Mas*, *The Watershed Review*, *Driftwood Press*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, and *Gold Man Review*. In addition, he received second place in a first-chapters competition in the *Seven Hills Review* Chapter Competition in 2019. He won first place in The Rilla Askew Short Fiction Contest in 2020.

**Francesco Puliga** is an illustrator, comic artist, and character designer. He works traditionally and digitally. In his artistic career, Francesco has created and published many comic books and illustrations. Now, he's working on an art project that depicts a series of abandoned places from different parts of the world. The artist wants to use these subjects for conveying a sense of mystery and interest. For achieving this goal, Francesco uses ordinary abandoned places reproduced with unusual texture and unnaturally colored light. Francesco uses a mix of traditional and digital technique for creating the artworks. The illustrations are drawn by hand on paper and painted digitally.

**Nettie Reynolds** is a playwright and essayist who lives in Austin, TX. She is a graduate of Goddard College.

**Skaidrite Stelzer** is a citizen of the world whose poetry has appeared in *Glass*, *Struggle*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Storm Cellar*, and many other journals. Her chapbook, *Digging a Moose from the Snow*, was recently

published by Finishing Line Press. She enjoys watching cloud shapes.

**Wally Swist's** books include *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), selected by Yusef Komunyakaa for the 2011 Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition, and *A Bird Who Seems to Know Me: Poems Regarding Birds and Nature*, winner of the 2018 Ex Ophidia Poetry Prize. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Montreal Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry London*, *Rattle*, *Today's American Catholic*, and *Vox Populi*. His translation of *L'Allegria* by Giuseppi Ungaretti is forthcoming from Shanti Arts in 2023. He lives near Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

**Matina Vossou** is a self-taught artist living in Athens, Greece. She uses acrylics and a toothpick, a technique which she learned by her father, who was a naïve painter. She paints faces like perfectly unfinished mosaics of emotions and ideas. The skin is depicted cracked, and life is illuminated from the inside. She believes that every face is a journey and looking at them is going to be the longest, most adventurous, and knowledgeable trip. Her most recent participations were in Artbox (Swissartexpo in Zurich) and in Expo Metro (collective artwork in Downtown Los Angeles). She has been featured in various art magazines like *Artist Magazine* (issue 21). You can see more of her artwork on instagram @matinavossou.

**Molly Walsh** is a graduate of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where she studied visual and performing arts. Over the years, Molly has found herself wearing many hats as a photographer, writer, and reporter for numerous publications around the South Sound region of Washington State and beyond. Molly's poetry has appeared in *October Hill Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Pioneertown*, and *Maudlin House*. You can find more of her work at mollywphoto.com.

As a corporate executive in the media business, **Susan R. Weinstein** often heard that her emails read like stories, so she decided to write outside the office. She is almost done with her first novel, a story about a woman whose fiancé died in the attack on the World Trade Tower. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Lakeshore Review*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Umbrella Factory*, and in an upcoming edition of *Loch Raven Review*. Susan lives in New York and is passionate about writing, theatre, and her volunteer work teaching literacy to elementary school children in Title 1 schools.

**S. E. White** earned his BFA from Bowling Green State University, MA from Iowa State University, and MFA from Purdue University. It is now his great joy to teach writing classes at Purdue University Northwest. He has published with *The Smoking Poet*, *Ginosko*, *100 Word Story*, and others. His work can also be found in the collection *Best Ohio Short Stories*. He'd like to show much appreciation to his two dearest friends in the world and



their nightly support—his brindle Chihuahua, Edgar Allan Pup, and his sweet cockapoo, Daphne du Furrier.

**Holly Willis** is a Los Angeles-based writer, filmmaker, and photographer who integrates theory and practice in a form of critical making. In addition to publishing books and essays, she creates single-channel videos, installations, photographs, and collages, exploring the materiality of images within a broader context of new materialist philosophy and the history of experimental media. She also works with an array of digital tools such as photogrammetry and drone cinematography; rather than celebrate the slick finish of high-end militarized imaging, however, she “misuses” the tools in an effort to bring forward glitches and errors that illuminate the state of the image in an algorithmic culture.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, **Robert Windorf** has lived on Long Island for many years where he is an Ed.D. educator. Windorf also earned various certificates from several prestigious culinary academies in California and New York. In addition, Windorf is a professionally-trained voice-over actor, and he taught creative writing courses at a local university for several years. Many of Windorf’s poems have appeared within various anthology collections, including *Corona: An Anthology of Poems* (Walt Whitman Birthplace Assn., 2020) and *Toward Forgiveness* (Writers Ink, 2011). And, some of his flash fiction pieces have appeared within online journals.

**Mary Wlodarski** has published poems in *Slippery Elm*, *Water~Stone*, *Texas Poetry Review*, *Sleet*, *Zoomorphic*, *Spry*, and others. She is teaching near the twin cities, and completed her MFA from Hamline University. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, two sons, three horses, and dachshund.

**Lavender Wodnick** is a Queer transfemme studying literature and photography at Bennington College. She grew up in Montclair, New Jersey with her parents, two siblings, and two cats, Puck and Ubanana. Lavender is the co-head editor and co-founder of *The Fool*, a Bennington based student-work magazine, and (predictably) spends the majority of her time reading, writing, and making photos. Her major influences include Glissant, Barthes, Camus, and conversations with friends.