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Table of Contents

Fiction		
Julia Lynn Rubin	Last Train	2
Matt Paczkowski	Surface Tensions	12
Flash Fiction		
Clare Fielder	A Thing I Know About Dogs	22
Jonathan Wlodarski	Repost	25
L.W. Nicholson	That Old Tragic Heaven	27
Ron Riecki	Witches in Swaziland	30
Poetry		
M. Drew Williams	Fisherwoman	34
Christian Vannasdall	In the Garden	35
Laura Zapico	Hellhole Canyon, 1999	36
Justin Runge	Planets	37
Janea Wilson	Mary & Her Birds	38
Mark Lee Webb	Used to Be You Could Tell Which House	39
Carl Boon	South of Mudanya	40
Alexandra Umlas	Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Lemon	41
Tom Pescatore	untitled epitaph	44
Cassandra Rockwood-Rice	About to Bleed	45
Dani Dymond	Mothers are all Slightly Insane	46
Mick Powell	translation of "a mother's reckoning"	47
Steven Virgo	Garage Sale	48
Jaime Fernandez	Up to Bat	49
Jax NTP	Two Sculpins and Honey Jacks on the Side	50
Joe Gutierrez	Strange Centaur in my Bed	52
Jake Tringali	valentine's day at zzyzx bar	53
Ramsey Mathews	Opportunity after a Power Outage	54
Donna Pucciani	Numinous	55
Hannah Huff	Incisors, Solid Deciduous Antlers	56
Eric Helms	The Stone Monkey	57
Matthew Dulany	Catoctin	58
Mark Lee Webb	It's Not Easy Being a Moth	59
Janea Wilson	Earth Ghazal	60
Elizabeth Schultz	Cicada	61
Art		
Lara Bennett	HyperLA	64
Arlene Huynh	Fall	65
Dan Lee	T.S. Eliot Triptych	66
Fabrice Poussin	Art at Work	67
Stephanie Mendez	Power	68
Brian Luong	Night Hike	70
Michelle Navarrete	Reparations	71
Sarah Arnold	People Watcher	72
Joey Callanan	EC	74
Alyse Chinnock	Directions	75
Kathy Rudin	Plug	76
Kevin Luong	Taco Face	77
Non-Fiction		
M.K. Narváez	Paris, Texas	80
Yasamin Aftahi	Maman	84
Interview with Gina Frangello		
		92
Contributor Inspirations		
		101

Fiction

Last Train

When Sabie is at the point of suggesting something as hair-brained as arson, I know for sure that something bad is coming, something that none of us can stop.

The four of us hawk spit and pace around the shaded part of the burning blacktop behind our high school, because it's summer and Stationwater stinks, but that's kind of how life is anyway. Sabie keeps clenching and unclenching her knuckles. The peace sign tattoo on her ring finger folds in and under her palm like an accordion.

"I'm serious, y'all," she says. "Fuck this school. We could do it. We could start this fire and no one even would notice!"

The heat sticks to our skin like sap, and this joint I'm smoking is making my lungs burn real bad. Big D leans against the chain link fence. It creaks beneath his weight, not that he has much of it. Big D barely eats these days. Who could eat much in this heat?

"It's a dumb idea, Sabie," he says.

"No one's even here during the summer."

"Summer students are," Big D counters.

"Fuck summer students!"

Gemma giggles. She's wearing a fake fur wrap around her shoulders. It's red, cheap polyester. I don't tell her how ugly it looks and how dumb she is to wear it in the summertime, because I know if I did, she'd fire something right back at me and it would make me want to cry but I'd have to pretend like it didn't.

The Northbound train blows its whistle. Big D moans and covers his ears. The Northbound is loud, and makes the ground rumble and shudder in its wake. It shoots right through downtown, slicing the massive Riverside Apartment complex in half. Aunt Lulu says it was a big to-do back in the '80s when the government had the new train line installed, and it almost ruined life for all of Riverside's residents. They

protested at Town Hall and everything. One man even wrote a letter to our Senator. But some people soon realized that the view of the river can't be beat, so rich folk still pay top premium for those apartments.

"Money doesn't buy you brains, Kinsey," Aunt Lulu said to me one morning over a breakfast of waffles soggy with dollar store syrup. "Remember that."

I thought money could at least buy us a car that wasn't dented, a place where the AC didn't break down in the worst of the heat, and a new pair of jeans now and again. But like usual, I just shrugged.

Sabie is still ranting and raving about the arson idea. Gemma is doing these weird yoga stretches she's been learning from an old workout DVD we found at a garage sale on Second Ave. Big D clicks his teeth.

Sabie is a tiny thing, with a mousey face that makes her look five years her junior, and dark black hair she's lopped off close to her eyes. She's like a little kid in baggy denim overalls and a Lakers baseball cap on backwards. She keeps going on about the fire — this fire — like it's something that already exists, something we'll all inevitably become a part of.

"You need to chill, babe," Big D says.

"Yeah, chill, Sabie," I say. "I'm not about to go get arrested for some fire horseshit."

Gemma just laughs. I don't know why, but her laugh reminds me of raspberries, kind of bitter under the sweet.

"But Kinsey, that's the beauty of it!" Sabie shouts, throwing her arms in the air. Her voice rains down on us like confetti. "No one would know! If we did this right, when we do it right, no one will ever have to know! They'll never suspect us. It's foolproof, man! No fingerprints or anything."

"We'd need an alibi," says Big D.

Sabie nods vigorously.

"And fake names," Gemma adds. She smiles and pulls her leg back

in a stretch. "I want mine to be Electra." Then she laughs again and sits up straight enough that I can see her polyester fur is coated in a layer of blacktop grime.

Sabie slams her fist into her palm. "No! No, Gemma! We would not need fake names! That is completely and unequivocally beside the point!"

She keeps going like this for a while, and I lean back on my hands and stare up at the sky, burning baby blue.

Finally, Big D says to me, "Hand me that joint, Kins," and I do, and he walks over to Sabie and sticks it right between her lips. "You inhale that and chill out now, Sabe."

Sabie takes a long, hard hit, smoke curdling from her nostrils. A garbage truck pulls up behind the blacktop. It opens its truck bed, and the air fills with the stench of rotten sweetness.

"This town stinks," says Gemma.

"Which is why we burn some of it," says Sabie. She's calmer after the hit, and already I'm starting to get annoyed that Big D took the joint from me. I'm feeling the itchies come on again, that awful feeling I can't quite describe to anyone. It's like my insides are revving up to go, go, go, but I can't move at the same time, like my body is stuck in slow motion. I start hopping from foot to foot to release some of that pent-up energy.

"There you go, Kinsey!" Sadie hollers. "That's the kind of enthusiasm I'm talking about!"

Gemma snorts. "I can do better than that." She starts doing jumping jacks, singing the "Mickey Mouse Club March" at the top of her lungs.

Then Big D is beat-boxing, giving us a sick beat to ride with, and soon we're all smiles and laughter, not caring who might hear us, and I feel the itchies start to subside just a little.

"We do it tonight!" Sadie declares. "We meet here at eight. I'll bring the stuff."

Gemma says she can't come, she's got plans. Big D says it's a stupid

idea and he's not doing it, no sir, no way, no how. I say nothing, because I know we'll all show up at eight o'clock on the dot, ready to go, ready to follow any instructions Sabie might have for us.

It's not like any of us have anything better to do.

The baby starts to screech as soon as I step inside, but the ice cold air-conditioning is such a relief I could almost start speaking in tongues right there.

Not that anyone would hear me over all the racket.

"Close that door, Kinsey!" Aunt Lulu shrieks. "You're air-conditioning all of Stationwater!"

Her yelling and the baby's wailing are enough to drive anyone to the brink of insanity. I shrug off my backpack and my flip-flops, heading to the kitchen for a root beer. "Shoes go in the cubby!" Aunt Lulu reminds me. Her voice is like a rubber band snapping against my skin. *Shoes goes in the cubby*. It's phrase so familiar to me now that I don't even take a moment to process the words, I just grunt and kick my cheap plastic sandals in the direction of the makeshift shelf. Piles of paper and manila folders stuffed into the little nooks and crannies topple to the floor. Aunt Lulu curses under her breath. As she fumbles to pick up the papers, the baby's cries rise to an even higher pitch.

It's like my nerve endings are being electrocuted.

"Kinsey!" she screams. "Look what you've done! Go get her rattle from the sewing room!"

Sometimes I wish I were deaf, or at least, could turn off my hearing at will. I'd live in a muted bubble, like I was underwater. When I was nine, Uncle Rick took me for scuba-diving lessons at the YMCA. I'd begged him to take me to the ocean, to see the sharks and the mermaids and the orca whales. I dreamed of salt water and ocean spray, long stretches of sand and the powerful sound of crashing waves.

"Sorry kiddo," he'd said with a laugh. "There's no ocean in Stationwater, not for over a thousand miles."

The YMCA smelled like chlorine and dirty feet. We sank to the bottom of the deep end, hearing our shallow breath in our ears as the instructor showed us the signal for when you wanted to surface.

It was so quiet, six bodies in tight black wetsuits and scuba gear circling the concrete surface of the lap lane.

I wished I could have stayed down there forever.

The baby's finally settled down and reaches for at Aunt Lulu's big chandelier earrings. She sets her on the floor and gives her a gentle nudge with her foot.

"You've been smoking," she accuses me, crossing her arms around her white cotton shirt. It's stained with spit-up and applesauce. "I can smell it on you."

I shrug.

"Well don't be greedy, now, Kins," she says. "If you have some, share it."

Aunt Lulu's house was built over one hundred years ago, a little red Craftsman at the neck of the river. That was back before the Tesco and the Mickey D's and the gas station around the corner, when the ramshackle general store was the only building for miles in sight. It was back when her father's father had a massive farm, now a wilted tomato garden protected by chicken wire and plastic garden gnomes. It was when women couldn't vote and husbands basically owned their wives, or so Aunt Lulu liked to remind me.

It was definitely before the railway line.

We sit on the patio and share the joint, Aunt Lulu's feet up on the old metal coffee table. She needs to clip her toenails and start wearing sunscreen. Her skin is starting to look like Mom's did. She's too old to have a newborn, too old to be smoking weed. I tell her this silently as the wind chimes clink together and I finish my root beer.

"Train's coming in about ten seconds," she guesses. She takes a puff of my joint.

I nod. No shit. I've lived here long enough to sense it too.

"You going out tonight?" she asks. "Do I need to call a sitter?"

I shrug. I wonder what Gemma will wear, if Big D is bringing anything good. I wonder about Sabie, if I should be worried.

Then the earth begins to shudder. The whistle blows, *woo woo*, and here comes the train, shooting down the tracks like a mustang on speed. It's far enough away that we don't feel the wind whipping in our faces, but close enough that we can see the passengers reading and talking and napping inside the stuffy little cars. When I first got here years ago, I used to stare out my window at night, waiting for the train, pretending I could board at any moment I wanted and never come back.

Aunt Lulu knocks some dirt out of a mason jar that used to hold a chrysanthemum. She pours in some Jack Daniels and lemonade that she keeps in the ice box outside and plucks a plastic coffee stirrer off the ground with her toes, just like Mom used to do.

"You be back by nine-thirty, you hear?" she asks, handing me the joint.

I can't help but smile a little. It's an old game we play.

"Eleven," I say.

She takes a drink. "Ten-thirty."

"Midnight."

"Eleven-thirty."

"One in the morning."

She nods and salutes me with her glass, draining the last of the rum.

"Midnight-thirty it is, Cinderella."

"Took me hours to pilfer all the gasoline from the garage," Sabie says. Her sweat-soaked face is redder than the sad little tomatoes in Aunt Lulu's garden. "But it works. I tested it on the rats out by the compost pile. Scorched them up like rotisserie chicken."

We stare at the neon yellow super-soaker in her arms. A long piece

of wire hanger is attached to the nozzle. A handful of matches has been secured at the curved end with duct tape.

This is certainly the deranged cousin of the toy I used to play with at the Y.

"Nuh-uh," Gemma says.

"Yeah huh," Sabie says, pointing the nozzle at her face. Gemma gasps. "I call it Dragon Breath. Wanna see how it works?" She pulls a lighter from her pocket and gives it a few cursory flicks.

"Let's uh, wait till we get there, Sabe," Big D says. "Don't want to cause a scene."

When the sun is low in the sky like this, it's like the world has a different filter on it, everything shaded in a cool blue. I wish I had the talent to paint the things I see on the sidewalk: the dirty sneakers hanging from the telephone lines and the wads of spit on the concrete. As we walk the half-mile from Sabie's house to the high school, the air gets a little cooler, a little easier to breathe. The humming of traffic intermingles with the desperate, horny songs of crickets.

"Maybe we shouldn't," I say.

They stop walking. I'm not one for saying much.

"Why not?" Sabie asks. Her hand is on her hip and she's got her chin jutted out at me all defiantly. Big D bites his lip. Gemma bends down to adjust the straps of her sparkly sandals. I want to tell her how dumb she is for wearing flat shoes on a night when we might need to be running.

I shrug.

Sabie takes a step closer. "You scared, Kinsey?"

"Nah," I say. But I am scared. The itchies are coming on real bad.

"Bet you are," Sabie says. "Bet you're too scared to even put your finger over the flame of a birthday candle."

"That's enough, Sabe," says Big D. "Let's just go and get it done before the sun sets."

Gemma nods. "They patrol the area around nine." Her grandma's a police officer.

"You want out, Kins?" Sabie asks me.

I hesitate. If I head home now, Aunt Lulu will just pester me that I made her get a sitter for the night and didn't even stay out till curfew. My friends will think I'm a coward, probably talk smack about me all the way to the school, then have all these inside jokes all next year about what they did and how they did it. I won't ever be a part of it, not really.

I shake my head. "Nah," I say. "I was just being funny. Let's go burn some shit down."

When we get to the school, Big D points out that the entrances are all locked. No shit, Sherlock. It's half-past eight. The air is weirdly still here, like time's stopped for a moment and given us a few seconds to catch up.

"We'll break a window," suggests Gemma.

"There's probably lots of cameras," Big D points out. "They'll catch us."

I've been here before at night, for plays and ceremonies and stuff like that, but the big hunk of red and white brick looks different in the dark now, glints of moonlight catching on the big sky windows overlooking the teacher's parking lot.

"We don't need to break *in*, morons!" Sabie says, swinging the franken-soaker around. "We just need to find a good place to launch this baby from. Now, who do you hate the most at this school? What would you most want to see destroyed?"

"Maybe we shouldn't," I mumble to myself.

"What's that?" Sabie asks.

"Nothing," I say.

She shoves the franken-soaker into my hands. "Do me a favor and hold that Kins," she says into my ear, her voice low and purring like an engine. "Feel all that gasoline sloshing around in there?"

I nod.

"Remember what Andrew Welts did to you the first week of freshman year, Kins?"

I say nothing.

"Remember when he and his douchebag lacrosse friends knocked you into the trash can? It was hilarious, I'll admit it, I knew we needed to rescue your sorry ass that day. Why do you think we sat next to you at lunch?"

My stomach tightens. *No, I don't remember. I can't.*

"I think Kinsey should fire the first blast," says Sabie. "It's only right."

No, I think, but I don't put down the franken-blaster.

Big D peeks over his shoulder. "Let's hurry up, Sabe?"

"Cops should be starting patrol soon," Gemma adds.

Sabie ignores them. "Who would you attack first, Kinsey? If you could burn anything or anyone in this school, where would you go?"

"I don't like when you talk like that, Sabie," Gemma says. She looks so innocent standing there in her pink camisole and cotton shorts, scuffing her sparkly sandal in the dirt. But she isn't innocent. She laughed at me that first day of freshman year, before we were friends, after...

"I know where we have to go," I say.

We move as quickly and quietly as we can to the wooden storage shed behind the gym. STATIONWATER SLUGGERS is carved above the door in blocky letters. It took the better part of a year of bake sales, raffles, and pep rallies to earn the lacrosse team enough money to buy all that fancy new equipment, just in time for States. Aunt Lulu baked a dozen brownies herself.

"Why are we here, Kinsey?" Gemma asks nervously.

"This can't be safe," Big D says. "The radiator's around here somewhere, I just know it, babe, and if that catches fire, it could start an explosion, and then—"

I can barely hear them. My ears are full of water and chlorine.

"Light me," I say to Sabie. The itchies travel from my toes through spinal cord and into my fingers. I can almost taste the flames.

Big D is saying something about how this isn't safe, it isn't right, maybe we should go home and get stoned and play X-Box. Gemma is

whining about how she's scared. Sabie holds the lighter up and nods at me.

I nod back.

The book of matches curl under fingers of fire. I pump the franken-blaster. *Whoosh, whoosh.* Big flames leap from nozzle. Sabie whoops.

"Yes, Kinsey!" she shouts. "Burn it down! Burn it all down!"

I pump again, harder this time, watch the flames lick the shed, climb up its spine. Smoke stings my eyes.

I remember, I remember. The second I walked through the doors, Andrew Welts and the lacrosse boys sprayed cologne across my chest and asked me why I didn't shave my legs. They knocked me into a trash can, red slop dripping down my new white blouse. I ran home in tears. Aunt Lulu barked at me to go back with my head up, show them who's boss. Show them who they're messing with.

But I couldn't. So I didn't. Until Sabie and Big D and Gemma found me, the lacrosse boys threw pink Dixie razors at me and my hair caterpillar legs in the hallway every day. They called me a lezzy dyke. They groped me on the way out of classes. But by then Mom was already gone, and the itchies were always there, and nothing really mattered anymore.

"We should go!" Big D says, tugging on my arm. "Before someone sees!"

"Let's go, Kinsey!" Gemma squeals.

I can't say for sure why I don't stop pumping, why it feels like there's a spring inside of me that's uncoiling. I can't say for sure why I start swinging my body around, sweat pouring down my back.

All I can say is, I didn't mean to do what I did to Sabie.

I didn't mean to hurt her.

Her screams aren't human. She writhes around in the dirt, arms wrapped around her face, flames ripping across her flesh.

Gemma cries out. Big D moans.

The Northbound train blows its whistle.

Surface Tensions

Peter didn't know why a shark attack reminded him of Sara: she wasn't vicious. She never had been. He didn't know what this victim from Illinois had to do his failed marriage, and he didn't know why his brain made such tangled, ugly connections at such inopportune times.

He did know that he needed to see the beach – the scene of the crime, if you could call this a crime. So here he was. Alone. Ninety-one degrees. A few lumpy clouds in the sky. An abandoned sand castle in the distance. A lone sailboat on the horizon. No umbrellas in the sand, no ripples in the ocean. Not even “beach closed” signs, as he had expected.

He could imagine this scene so differently with Sara in it... standing among the french fry stand on the boardwalk, the tangy air, and the burns from blowing sands. He could see her – a ghost, some floating wisp of memory – laying out a checkered blanket, that rippling yellow bandana covering her light red hair, holding one of those lemon cookies from Mel's bakery, eating one, carelessly checking tanlines. In these last seven years of separation, Peter noticed changes in his thinking, in the way recollections seemed to float in and out, in the way he was never really in the present (as there was no future), but in a strand of the past.

“Good news,” the doctor said in one of those recollections. “Peter's blood work came back, and he's a negative cross-match.”

“That means...” Sara began, leaning forward in her chair, both hands clutching the armrests. She was so happy then.

“Yes.” The doctor tapped his pen against a waiver. “From what I can tell, he's an ideal candidate for Cal's transplant.”

That pronoun: he. As though Peter weren't in the room. Sara turned, her cheeks alight, hands clasped, mouth slightly open revealing shimmering teeth.

Nine years of marriage ended that day. Two became one.

Peter walked farther down the vacant beach, past the sand castle, which caused a startled seagull to hop off one of its arches. It chirped an angry cry and flew toward the water. When he reached the ocean, he searched for blood, remnants of the Styrofoam boogie board, or other evidence of transgression. But Peter saw nothing and sat down instead, his hands pressing deep into the molten sand, which stuck to his sweaty palms, as he stared out at the ocean, wondering why people ever went in the water.

Poor kid. A twelve-year-old from Illinois, now missing a chunk of his leg. Torn out by a bull shark. The news reported that one person had died from this attack, which Peter found to be dishonest reporting, since the boy didn't die. His father did. When seeing his son in hypovolemic shock dragged along the red sand with a leg dripping pink and purple tissues while onlookers' screams filled the sticky sky, the father entered into cardiac arrest and died. If Sara were here, cooking as the six o'clock news aired the story, she, too, would have blamed the shark.

That's how most people thought: either the shark's a predatory asshole or the victim's a self-entitled prick for venturing into an animal's home. But Peter knew better. He blamed the father, not the shark. In the blurry photograph shown on the news, he was a morbidly obese man with a sweaty, sun-burnt, mustached face. The kind of man who dips his fries into mayonnaise. As far as Peter was concerned, the fat fuck had it coming. There are only so many unhealthy choices the body can withstand before it gives up entirely.

“Excuse me.”

Peter turned to see an officer in a white four-by-four idling his engine on the sand behind him.

“The beach is closed, sir!”

“I'm not going in the water.” Peter sat up, with an expression that asked, who would?

"Doesn't matter," the red-faced officer yelled from his Jeep while adjusting his mirrored glasses. "No one is permitted on the beach. Twenty-four hours."

Peter sighed, stood, and walked a crooked path back to the boardwalk's staircase. Grains of sand stuck to his skin like clumped cells, and he brushed them off. As the Jeep pushed through the uneven landscape, Peter turned and looked back at the unused beach, at the setting sun reflecting off the waves, obscuring the predators skulking beneath the surface.

"We need to move quickly," the doctor stated, and Sara circled a date on the calendar.

When Sara *really* wanted something, she didn't ask. Not once had she said, "Would you be willing to donate a kidney to my dying brother?" It was hinted at – go for this test, Pete, get this blood work, stop by this doctor's office – until it was assumed that the choice had been his.

But in reality, Peter's decision was simple: he would never give up his kidney. Never. Why should he, to this skinny bald bastard who'd had one illness after another for forty-two depressing years? Cal had had his shot. He lost. When the dialysis stops working, that's it. Game over. Peter's own mother died of breast cancer when he was only fourteen, and he didn't recall her being permitted to snatch vital organs from friends and relatives as her skeletal lungs took their final breaths.

After his bicep curls, Peter lay on his couch, sticking to the hot leather while drinking a protein shake. His air conditioner stopped working months ago, and he hadn't bothered to replace it. The heat didn't bother him anymore.

He rotated his arms, feeling that lovely low-grade bruising from yesterday's shoulder workout. Since moving here, he'd lost his gut, gained eighteen pounds of muscle, and boasted a constant auburn tan.

He was in the best physical shape of his life, and women wanted him in a way they hadn't since before Sara; he just didn't want them. Besides, the workouts were better. The problem with fitness, unlike his problem with sex, was that he always wanted more. Why stop at eighteen pounds?

Peter swirled the shake around in its clear plastic cup, watching the thickened fluid cling to the sides before slowly dripping down.

He flipped on the news, where a reporter noted that the boy from Illinois, following a multi-hour surgery, would be okay. Doctors had applied intensive skin grafts that would take over a year to heal fully, but with physical therapy, he would walk again. He might even go swimming again.

The father would be buried on Tuesday.

When the news anchor shifted to international politics, Peter turned off the television, put his shake down, and rubbed at his temples. What was it about this shark attack? He couldn't stop thinking about it. About this thing in the water. Invisible. Murderous. Hungry.

He was stung by a jellyfish once, six years old, visiting Rockaway Beach with Uncle John. He sat in the sand, cried, rubbed at his leg for, what, hours? Passersby gave advice that didn't work – water? ice? butter? That was the last time Peter had gone swimming, and he often wondered if he still knew how, if that it's-like-riding-a-bike nonsense held water, so to speak.

An incompetent therapist once told Peter that his problems stemmed from thalassophobia, a fear of the sea, and that it was also the reason he avoided swimming pools. One time in high school, right after his mother's death, his friend, Jason, invited him over – out of kindness, likely. The two split a case of stolen beers along the poolside, and on a dare, sometime after midnight, Peter threw himself into the deep end with all his clothes on. Even now, if Peter closed his eyes, he could feel the heaviness of his garments – the ones he had picked out at Macy's with his mother a year prior – the way the pockets filled with water,

weighing against him as he kicked wildly, punched frantically, imagining what could be waiting for him in those dark depths, ready to tear off limbs, bloody the black waters, and pull him down, down, down.

Peter closed his eyes and finished his protein shake, nearly choking on the thick liquid.

Four days after finding out that he was eligible for the transplant – the day Sara drew that circle – Peter told her that he would be visiting his uncle in Queens for a couple of days. Instead, he looked for Cindy, a bartender at Sal's who had a reputation of being "easy."

When he got Cindy to the Warf Hotel filled with two cosmopolitans, two beers, and a shot of tequila, he watched her undress. Cindy was blonde and all tan lines, and he told himself that he wouldn't think of Sara, that he wouldn't compare. A quick, surgical fuck. Then it would be over. All of it.

During penetration, Peter felt a profound wave of nausea – a physical churning in his stomach, and after, he lay very still in that dark, immaculate room inhaling the clean linen while the whiskey faded.

A thunderstorm passed, and Peter found himself sitting in the closet with a Warf Hotel bathrobe wedged between his bare feet and the polished floor. The air conditioning pushed frigid oxygen against his legs. Was he crying?

Cindy came over and whispered, "You're married, aren't you?" Her voice held a raspy tenor that implied false wisdom.

He didn't reply.

"I can tell, ya' know." She sat down next to him in the darkness and rested a head on his shoulder, the bed sheets wrapped loosely around her back. He heard the distant passing of cars along the interstate, of tires kicking up water. "I won't say anything, and we don't have to see each other ever again... if that's what you want." Cindy took his hand in hers, and he looked at her – really looked – at the sensitive blue eyes, the plump cheeks.

"Don't cry," she whispered. "Don't be sad."

"I'm not." He rubbed at his nose. "I'm crying because I'm happy."

Even in the moment, he may have been lying. It was hard to tell.

When Cindy left the next morning and light trickled in through the vertical venetian blinds, Peter stared hard at his wedding band and thought – for the first time – that memory was peculiar, the way certain recollections floated to the surface at uninvited moments. This realization would crystalize over the next seven years. For instance, after cheating on Sara, rather than conjuring phantoms of her in her mother's puffy wedding dress or those late night movies at the multiplex when they'd first starting dating, Peter instead recalled an elementary school science experiment with Miss Lynch. Why? He pictured the class shifting around a lab table, Miss Lynch explaining that molecules in water are packed more densely along the surface, as she filled a narrow test tube with cloudy drinking water and dropped a pin onto the liquid.

It floated.

"Surface tension," his teacher explained, "keeps the pin where it is."

She asked for a volunteer, and when his disinterested classmates ignored her, Peter raised his hand. "Gently touch your finger against the pin, Peter," she instructed, leaning down, pulling back a strand of her black hair.

His small, calloused finger nudged cautiously against the metal. It seemed to flicker for an instant and Peter pulled away, drying his hand on his pants, and he watched the pin sink into the cloudy water and thump against the bottom of the test tube, a movement that seemed to occur in slow motion. "Did everyone see that?" Miss Lynch asked before moving on to some peripheral lesson about liquids climbing cups. But Peter had stopped listening. His vision remained fixed on the pin at the bottom of the glass, and the fact that it could no longer be accessed without dumping the contents of the vial. He watched it with a mixture of fear and fascination.

Peter removed his wedding band, wondering why he'd forgotten to

take it off in the first place, and rubbed at his lower back, imagining two kidneys hard at work within. They were safe from Sara and Cal now. He had touched the pin and was now forever out-of-reach.

Peter lay in bed, the heat keeping him awake and alert. Drifting visions surrounded him – first of Sara – then of Cal, who'd been planted in the Green Grove Cemetery seven months after that day in the kitchen. Sara, sobbing over her tea. His ring left on a coaster. Her looking up through knotted hair, *"okay... but the surgery..."* as he closed the screen door and headed south on the I-95.

He learned about Cal's death through an online obituary, which he'd searched for when Sara stopped cashing the checks. He knew that to Sara, not going through with the operation was tantamount to strangling her brother with a telephone cord. Fuck, maybe she was right.

But what could Peter do about that now? What could anybody do about anything? Like the shark victim's father. Like Peter's father. Like Peter's mother. People die. That's all life is. Waiting for an internal or external aggressor.

Christ, his mother. He was back there again now. To her frizzy dyed hair and vacant eyes. The day some thirty-two years prior when she came home from the doctor slamming doors and moaning wildly. Fucking memory, the drifting nature of it, so abstract, yet so very real.

When Peter approached his mother in her bedroom – this was before he knew about her routine doctor's appointment – his thirteen-year-old mind arrived at an illogical, adolescent conclusion: all of their money was gone. His mother had always been wealthy through inheritance – first from her parents, then from her husband, who died when Peter was two. Peter had been learning about the Great Depression in school and wondered if his mother could ever find or hold down a job if she absolutely needed to; she never seemed capable. Always on edge. Always yelling at the help.

"Mother?"

She turned, noticing Peter in the room, and patted her bed. He sat down beside her, and noticed the wet, crumpled tissue clutched in her bony hand.

The gesture happened suddenly. She pulled down the side of her floral blouse, exposing the top left side of her breast, something Peter had never seen from a woman before... at least not in person. The shape, the size, all of it so very new.

"What do you see?" She dropped the tissue to the white carpet and turned to face him.

"It- it looks red." His voice trembled.

"No, that's from rubbing it." She lifted his hand and pressed it against her warm flesh. He felt her heart, alive within, a forceful thing.

"A lump," she said, emphasizing both syllables. "Do you feel a lump?" Her voice cracked.

"Mom?"

"Do you feel a lump there? Peter. Nothing ever mattered more."

"I-" His hand felt placed there for hours, and he stared at the drifting red curtain and the glass of water on her windowsill. He finally spoke the words – "Yes. I think so" – and she started to shake, muttering something indiscernible with the word "over" being used again and again and again.

She died six months later with no hair and a flat chest.

As Peter lay in bed now, he still wondered whether or not he had actually felt a lump in her breast, or if he simply said that because it seemed the response she had baited out of him. She always irritated him growing up, her nagging lonely paranoia, and part of him suspected that he murdered her by saying, "Yes. I think so," just as he murdered Cal by sleeping with Cindy, and the shark murdered that fat man by biting his son. Peter's whole life might have been different had he simply stated, "No, mother. I don't feel a thing."

He sat up in bed, the sweat unbearable, and knew with sudden clarity that he had to get out. Away. He left the sliding door open when

RIP RAP 39

he exited his home – part of him wondering if he'd ever be back – and he ran barefoot along the cracked concrete road. Minute pebbles stuck into the grooves of his feet, but he kept running from streetlamp to streetlamp, the warm breeze flapping against his white undershirt.

When Peter finally reached the ocean, he could not see. The vanishing lights and swaying palm trees were behind him now, and the sand and ocean stretched out as a distant nothing, speaking some loud, crashing language.

The crab-scented winds pressed against him, and the closer Peter walked –sand now covered his toes – the more he seemed to vanish, to become one with the great void. He stumbled over something, maybe the sand castle he'd seen that morning, and stood, continuing on with increased momentum, pushing ever forward.

For a moment, it all nearly ended, when his feet touched the cool water and he imagined stepping onto a jellyfish. That dead electric pain. And, for a second or two, Peter winced. Then he shook his head and removed his clothes – his shirt, his watch, his shorts, his underwear – everything, and buried them beneath the sand. He walked into the ocean, the cold, dark waters pressing up against his animal skin, the salt burning at his nostrils. This was feeding time, and he could feel the schools of bull, mako, blacktip, tiger, and nurse sharks circling him, dorsal fins waiting to slit the surface, cutting in like a noose. He was ready for them.

Flash Fiction

A Thing I Know About Dogs

No one will tell me that my dad is dying. They are trying to keep it a secret but I've worked it out for myself. Right before Zara's dog died he kept running away and they had to keep going out to look for him. They would find him hiding under bushes in the park or trying to dig holes in the garden, even though he loved them and had always been a good dog. Then he hid under a bed and he died. Zara said that sometimes dogs know that they are going to die so they do strange things, like hide from their owners and try and get away from their homes so that dying will be easier. Zara said that her dog loved her so much that he didn't want her to see him be sad, but she still would rather have been there when he died so that he didn't have to be all alone.

My dad is doing the exact same thing. He keeps running away from home, only me and my mum don't go to look for him. He comes back when he has to take me to school, but then he disappears again and he never sleeps at our house. My mum says that he has found a new place to sleep, and that he won't come back and sleep at our house forever. I think that they are trying to protect me because they love me and they don't want me to be sad, but really I know that my dad is going to find a quiet place like Zara's dog did, so I wish they wouldn't try and protect me so much.

I know that my mum and dad love me because they keep saying it. My dad never used to say it, but last week when he was running my bath he said, Whatever happens we still love you, and I said, Ok, and then I had my bath and he sat outside the bathroom and read to me like always. In books when someone says, Whatever happens, that always means that something scary or dangerous is going to come next and sometimes my dad has to read ahead so that he can tell me the story will turn out ok and not be lying.

At school, teachers are being extra nice to me. My mum said that she

had to phone them to tell them what was going on at home. I don't like that everyone else knows what is going on at home, but they still won't tell me the truth. The teachers keep saying, Do I want to talk, and I don't want to so I say, It's ok, and at break time I try to make it look like I'm playing with my friends, even though I'm just watching and thinking, because I don't want them to tell my mum to worry about me. She is probably already worried because my dad is dying.

Before I started school, and maybe a little bit after that, me and my dad were best friends. My mum went to work every day, so my dad stayed at home to look after me and make my lunch and play games. In the evenings I would always get anxious if my mum was a bit late, in case there was a train crash or an axe murderer or something, so I would sit on the stairs and wait for her. My dad didn't make me do something else, like practice spelling or eat my dinner before it went cold. He just sat with me and sometimes he told me stories and sometimes he didn't.

My dad must be feeling very anxious now. I wish that he could come home so that I could sit with him so that he wasn't all alone. We're not always best friends any more, because I don't see him as much and sometimes he doesn't really listen when I tell him things and he is always very quiet and doesn't smile. He doesn't like to play games so much either. He still reads me books though, and that is a very good thing about my dad. Even though he is dying and must be very sad he is still trying to make me feel better by reading me the books that I like.

In the playground Zara says, Why are you always so boring now? And I say, I'm not boring, I just don't want to play right now. She asks me why and I say that it's a secret because I don't want to explain it. Then she teases me for having a secret because she's jealous that I won't tell her. She calls to Isla and says, Emily has a secret but she won't tell us and then Isla teases me too. Then Zara puts her hand in her pocket and pulls it out like she's holding something. You're not allowed to look at my secret, Emily, she says. She cups her hands around whatever it is

then puts her hands against her eye and looks through a hole that she makes where her thumbs are. I don't think she's really holding anything, but she says, Wow, then lets Isla look and Isla says, What an amazing secret. It's a shame that Emily can't see it. And then they laugh and keep doing that until the bell rings and it's time to go back inside.

Repost

Carol Smither at 11:01am on 01/04/17

We appreciate all the kind words you've been sending us during this hard time. To those of you able to make it out to the funeral, thank you for coming. It was nice to see some of you. John and I decided to post this video in the hopes that it teaches other kids a lesson, or acts as a wakeup call to some of you parents—we never thought Chance would do something like this, and if he did, then your kids probably are, too. Losing Chance has been the most unimaginable pain, and if sharing this video stops even one more parent from going through what we are going through, then it will all be worth it. Hoping you all have a safe, blessed New Year.

Comments

Michael DeAngelo at 11:02am on 01/04/17

Carol & John, so sorry to hear about Chance. Thinking of you.

Carmine Lumley at 11:04am on 01/04/17

Sending hugs and prayers xo. Let me know when I can make you guys dinner.

Victoria Beverley at 11:07am on 01/04/17

Praying for you and John. Sorry we couldn't make it to funeral—had to go to see our Josh play basketball in Terryton.

CrazyDudesBible at 11:48am on 01/04/17

Check out this sick vid of a kid downing 12 shots of tequila and swallowing 12 lit matches to ring in the New Year. Dude fucking breathes fire like a dragon!! Absolute fucking legend! Tag your friends who are too pussy to try this!!

Comments

Demarco Phillips at 11:49am on 01/04/17

Alex Healey Jordan Merkel Joe Gomez look at this fucker dude is crazy as hell lmfao we gotta try this next weekend this is so lit lmao

Jennifer Allen at 11:49am on 01/04/17

As an ER nurse I have to say this isn't "sick" this dangerous please anyone if you see this don't try it at home

Jordan Merkel at 11:50am on 01/04/17

Fuck off twat

Josh Beverley at 11:51am on 01/04/17

This was my friend Chance rest easy dude you were a party LEGEND

Carol Smither at 11:58am on 01/04/17

To the people who run this page: please take this video down. This was our son, Chance, who died shortly after this video was filmed.

Alex Healey 12:00pm on 01/04/17

Shut the fuck up whore at least he died a legend.

That Old Tragic Heaven

I.

The lady looks like a violet crab. She tells a story to a group of five-year-olds about two brothers whose father is dying. Before he dies, she says, the father wants to bless his oldest son. The younger brother, desiring the inheritance, conspires with his mother to trick the blind and aging father into giving him the blessing instead. The younger son slaughters a goat, cooks the meat for his father's meal, and wears the animal's skin to seem hairier when he is touched. The father eats the meat and touches the son's hand. He is sure that it is his eldest, and he hands over all his lands and gold and livestock.

The Bible school teacher is filled with the spirit of temperance and authority. She is violet law. Even her tits are orthodox.

Why did he have to kill a goat? a boy asks.

When an animal dies, we call it a sacrifice, the lady announces. She sets graham crackers and apple juice on the table.

Can a person be a sacrifice? I want to know.

Only one person has ever been a sacrifice, she answers. She is smug. She has said something meaningful.

II.

At midnight, the father drags his daughter and me out of bed, pulls her brother from the sleeping bag on the floor, and marches us into the backyard. It is my first junior high sleepover. My pajamas are coffee filter thin, and spiders have strung frosted ribbons across the trees. He wants to teach us about life. He wants to show us what happens when children are not responsible with their pets. He wants to build hardness. Death, he says, is a lesson.

We watch as he kills a new litter of puppies, one by one, with a metal bucket. We do not look away. We are not allowed.

III.

A young man tells me a story from his childhood. He and his cousin are playing with the chickens at their grandma's farm. They place their hands tightly around the necks of the birds to hear the strange gargles and to watch the small, feathered bodies go limp. It is fun putting the chickens to sleep, they think. It seems like such a kind thing to do, to alter their known universe, to manipulate peace and stillness with their fingers. That night their grandma belt-whips them six times each.

IV.

The doe hangs by her hind legs from the tree next to the driveway. I cannot tell if she is the same one I saw as I drunkenly gathered hickory nuts in the woods last week. Her skin is a pile of slop on the ground. Her severed head cast to the side, her body is raw and cold like a peeled grape. The blood is dark where she was shot, thick and inky. She is a swaying church bell. My husband steadies her and draws his knife.

As he slides his knife into her shoulder, a green froth oozes down onto the meat. The smell of it is rancid. He turns away, gagging.

I gaze and gaze.

V.

The picture on the wall shows Jesus splayed like a butterflied chicken and pinned to some wood. His skin hangs off him like lemon peels. At what point does a body become a carcass?

I imagine slicing the body from testicles to chest cavity, pairing off the young man's skin and putting it around the backs of my hands, my chest, my shoulders. I picture my own father taking my hand in his, feeling the grizzled skin there, the thick hairs, mistaking me for my brother. Yes, my son, he would hum. I have never been a son before. It must feel tall to be a son.

I carve out a thigh and trim the wedges of lunar fat, boil the meat with cumin and cinnamon and chunks of apple. I put it on a platter with

eggplant and mint and figs and honey and dolmades. I roast the liver and heart with artichokes and garlic.

Then I imagine I am slopping it all onto the front pew of the sanctuary.

I douse it in lighter fluid and light a match.

There's no such thing as sacrifice, I say aloud to the violet crab.

She hushes me and pushes a plate of graham cracker into my hands.

Witches in Swaziland

We argue until our insides are dry and our outsides are wet.

I can see people on the metro sometimes who have mild lives, their heads encircled and swallowed by *People* and *Family Circle*. I wonder how they got there, into the safe house of their everything.

My girlfriend's older sister was arrested in Brno last week for carrying over fifty pounds of heroin. She got arrested in a city with a name that feels like a Sesame Street fistfight. I've heard coughs that would be better city names.

She wasn't carrying the dope herself. The scag. The dragon, the black tar, the chiva, the nod, the black pearl, the junk. There are so many nick-names for heroin that you can basically say any word or combination of words and it means 'heroin' somewhere, e.g. the crumble, the O.J. Simpson cocoon, the death to Wall Street, the frozen banana, the duck soup, the Rob Lowe (a.k.a. raw blow, a.k.a. rob low, a.k.a. rubble O).

I know she wasn't carrying the big H herself though. Because she weighs about the same as an afghan. She must have been involved in a drug ring, a drug wedding ring, married to a world of childish swastika tattoos and droopy appearances, burned spoons and shoelaces missing. And, above all, weight loss. The thing that sucks is that she was third in her class, that horrible nameless spot after valedictorian and salutatorian. She should be a plumber by now or something. Those bastards make more than fifty grand a year. Instead she's learning street Czech from some cellmate Prague ex-money launderer.

We find out the news while I'm reading an honest-to-God 2013 *Washington Times* article on how "Witches can't fly brooms above 150 meters in Swaziland." I tell my girlfriend how stupid this is and she says that witches shouldn't fly that high, that they could get hit by planes, and I can't tell if she's being serious and she can't tell if I'm being serious and we know how to escalate arguments better than any esca-

lator ever could because in about five minutes she takes an entire gallon of milk and throws it down at the floor and I'm warning anyone reading this, but if you throw a gallon of milk, it'll basically explode, just like our fights, explosions that come out of nowhere, like fireworks on Easter, the crucifix lit up by high-pitched whistling girandola.

And with milk in our hair and in our eyes and in our shirts and everywhere but in our stomachs, we argued to the death over witches and whether or not her sister was an idiot, with one of us taking a strange pro-drug position and another taking an even stranger pro-witch position and I slammed the door and went out onto the street covered in milk with the crazy hippie acid-head neighbors looking at me as if they'd heard everything because they had and I walked straight to the Hawaii-fetish Trader Joe's where you get fired if you don't know how to fake happy and I bought another gallon, walked home, and, for something to do, she had started making big, obese, gooey chocolate-chip cookies like we love, because she said otherwise she was worried she was going to kill herself and right when I got back the cookies came out of the oven and we ate them on our chairs in the kitchen because we couldn't afford a table yet but we made sure the window was wide open so the neighbors could spy in and see how normal and safe and kind and normal that we were, too.

Poetry

Fisherwoman

From the porch I watched her
 emerge from the riverbank:
 three opalescent trout slung
 over her shoulder on a taut line,
 pendular in the heavy air.
 Though moving steadily
 with her sundress sweeping
 the tops of wildflowers,
 for an instant she appeared
 caught in a purgatory
 of reposed motion:
 her rubber boots,
 the unpolished sheen
 of obsidian, seemed to tread
 upon the same tired plot of mud.
 Her stamina returned
 midway through the field
 where she ducked
 the wooden slats of our fence
 and continued onward,
 quick and swift.
 When she came to the porch,
 her presence dovetailed
 with the tepid scent
 of currenting water,
 she paused on the top step
 and turned to look back
 toward the river,
 outlined in undulant heat.
 There, she asked me
 what she would do
 if the impending drought
 took it all away.

In the Garden

The earthworm,
 exposed to the warm
 noon sun, wriggles
 and squirms on my hand-held spade—

faceless and desperate
 to delve back into the cool subsurface
 it hangs off the flat metal,
 alien, and suspended in space

Then, in silence
 I watch it plunge, writhing
 in jello ringlets
 toward the ground

I reach in carefully, fingers slower
 than before and promise one
 last disturbance as I cup it,
 with some soil, in my rough palms

In the shade of the fig tree
 I kneel and let loose the dirt
 feeding the earth to that unseen mouth.
 I go on digging—
 a place for the lilies.

Hellhole Canyon, 1999

Here's where we slept
 when the world almost ended,
 cranking a handheld radio
 listening for signs of life;
 where you led me
 through the badlands
 pointing out creosote,
 desert sage, bones and teeth
 preserved in rock,
 layers of fossilized shells;
 where you peeled off my shirt
 and pants and carried me
 to the creek, washed red wine
 vomit from my face and hair,
 submerged my head like it
 might make me new.
 This was before the baby
 came: a plump cactus spine
 stuck in the soft foot
 of night, whose throbbing
 would not let me rest;
 before you gave up trying
 to breathe life into this
 withering landscape, its
 terrain now covered
 in fine brown dust.

Planets

The shadows bend to death before
 we can kiss them. The music fills
 my room, vibrating the books there.
 I head back, interjecting traffic like
 refutation. Find a child who wants
 to follow me. Should I tell my wife
 I met you? That shapes stay where
 you've thrown them? The shadows,
 though, do fall. A nameless comet
 comes slashing across a lithograph
 like the sash over a soldier. I cannot
 prove how light years pass without
 calculation. I cannot stay with you,
 Helen, and tell you I am weightless.

Mary & Her Birds

For (Mary) Flannery O'Connor --

Fowl gather into a warm ripple around the mulberry tree this afternoon.
The blue-black breast of Colonel Eggbert smolders like the eye of Hera.
Peahens bray as their sires strut. I have never known a strutter to budge
a fraction for anything else.
Not truck nor tractor nor automobile.

Some twenty-odd years ago my backwards chicken landed me in the
paper.
That old cochon bantam could walk forward and back. I have trouble
now walking at all.

I perch on crutches, my body rendered a dangling shoe.
My hips unlike the green-necked buff,
whose black feathers suit for some regal woman to powder her nose.

Mama asked me, "Don't these things eat flowers?"
Well, I suppose they do.
Pheasants quibble with quail, geese form against ducks.
I've well over forty beaks to feed, so what do I care if they eat up
my geraniums?

Babies fuzz together beyond the crêpe-myrtle hedge. I lean on warm
brick,
well as I can,
and a peachicken or two flutters overhead.
Andalusia basks in a peculiar chill.
The peacock had been the bird of many ancient goddesses but have
since
come down.

Used to Be You Could Tell Which House

by the flowers.
Here, not much lasts long.

Before buying a bushel of moths
(Yellow Crown, Yellow Dream)

I warn my new wife to sweep strays
out of our attic, that ripe avocados

give slightly when gently squeezed.
If it wasn't for the weather

we'd have missed each other.
On days it doesn't rain

we reseed dunes with native
plants. Sagebrush and salt grass

primrose and poppies.
Let stand barrel cactus

and coastal prickly pear, eradicate
invasive Mexican feathers.

Next month—strawberry pickers
in Camarillo. And the old bracero

squatting on the Safeway side lot.
To get here, take the fork in the road.

South of Mudanya

South of Mudanya
pistol-shots split
the olive trees
and Seda doesn't want
to go home.

There's too much to gain
in danger, examples
she might hold later
when the boys come
back from the sea.

She wants to be an ax;
she loves the word
balta, which glimmers
inside her
like an infant.

She wants to fold
six olive leaves
in her fingers and listen
for the Izmir train.
It weaves haunted

across the lines
of her childhood,
the dolls she clutched,
her grandmother's whispers
over breakfast.

She wants to wait,
a mark in the land
where strangers pass,
where the olive trees
grow frantically.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Lemon

I
Out of the last hard ground,
A sprout thrust itself.
A lemon was born.

II
I placed four, no seven, lemons
In a bowl for
Evenness.

III
The sour lemon lay on the yellow pillow.
A thin outline of the whole.

IV
A lemon
Is helpful.
A lemon and some sugar and some ice
Is helpful.

V
I sliced the lemon for my water each morning
In thin, papery sluices
Or in thick wedges
One without and one with edges
Both with juices.

VI
Fish stared at me from the deli case
With sharp jagged ices
Little lemon sunshines lay around their heads
Halos or balloons
The floating
Over the fish and the cold
Made the crisis melt away.

VII

O women of Whole Foods
Why do you pucker picking among the fruits?
Can't you see how the lemon
Is more a womb than vacuum
With eyeless embryo seeds?

VIII

Meat has no meter
There is no beat in its sinews
But the lemon makes meter
And the meeting is involved
In the meter it makes.

IX

When the last lemons are squeezed,
The pulp, the rind, the remaining pith
Still sit on the countertop.

X

A lemon falling into a pond
Making a small plip;
Even the glassy surface of the water
Ripple would create a wake.

XI

She walked through the California fields
In canvas shoes.
Twice images leapt between the trees,
One was the sinking sun
And one was a large lemon
Falling into the horizon.

XII

The beer is bubbling.
The lemon must be listening.

XIII

The fruit was still in the painting.
It was yellow paint
That made the fruit seem yellow.
The lemon wilted
Between the leaving and the leaves.

untitled epitaph

Pebble skip from shore
sink below the tireless surge
become the river's floor

About to Bleed

On the hutch part of her water
bed frame were little round pot
seeds.

I touched them, put them
in my mouth like popcorn
kernels, stared off at the unemployed
typewriter on the screen porch, and lay there
on my back, the plastic undulating
beneath me, considering what
to make my little brother for dinner.

Some days her room was different, blinds
rolled up and devoid of the strange sour after
smell of uncommon smoke.

Off the cuff, I found my almost 90's pink Levi's
Christmas divulged premature
on a latch-key afternoon. MTV's Madonna
in leather was raping a chair
in the slit of door cracked on the living room.
I tried them on. I danced like her. It was 1989.

Eventually, through the cupboards
I established her huge
jug of Carlo Rossi, I licked it from my pinky
pink and tart. Everything was suddenly
copper and wet, rosy like that wine
and sharp, about to bleed.

On the tail-end of ten that November, I stuck
my chilly fingers in the holes
of everything, the old brass Massachusetts
locks, into the folds
of her braided rug, the one Great
Grandmother made when I was born. It was ripping.

Mothers Are All Slightly Insane

National Geographic claims that a small child can swim through the veins of a full-grown blue whale. Yet my six-year-old slippage below bathwater, adolescent anchor, didn't seem to equate. Do you regret the eventual resuscitation?

You shook off your maternal washout, a fluke;
I shook off tepid suds, and swore that I had held
my eyes open long enough to see your shadow hover
at the tub, glass surface still intact as you studied
my sinking, hands hung in hesitation.

Eardrum dams sensed the internal war between your
sanity and your self. I felt the beat of our blood
through my temples, an interspersed shatter,
the withered cord from utero so foreign to us then
and now, bursting in abruption.

If only time had hitchhiked onto a speedboat
in that instant spent in the shallows, "nine Mississippi..."
tallied under aquatic asylum – but still I swam, simply
wishing we spoke in echoes under waves instead,
lungs tiptoeing toward suffocation.

translation of "a mother's reckoning"

"The stranger you fear may be your own son or daughter."

Sue Klebold, mother of one of the Columbine shooters

i mother a monster and most mornings,
the sun swallows his bedroom whole.

there are no traces here: there is a vase
brimmed with lavender, there is the soft scent

of aged flannel and clean bedsheets,
of a bright-lit baseball field,

of an old photograph, a dusty smile,
of nothing dead and nothing dying.

most mornings, there is warm bread.
there is honey, there are raspberries.

i eat them all with my bare hands.
i mother a monster with my bare hands.

there are no traces: there is only night,
it is heavy. i have never closed the window.

i have pressed red berries into paper towel
and painted his face with my eyes closed.

i have imagined his hands reaching.
i have imagined the sun swallowing.

i want to bury his bodies in our backyard.
i want to bury them by the knotted sycamore.

i want to save their mothers from the sight.
i want to save them from the seeing.

Garage Sale

Sequined wedding gown,
regretfully worn one day
for four hours under
a blistering, angry sun.
Recommended use: dish rag.

Up to Bat

Not The Ninja Turtles who taught me
how to taekwon-go-jitsryu-foo-putasos
judo-n know who yur messin' with.

Not Superman's weak-ass genes.
He's vulnerable to a green shiny rock.
We have tons of rocks and they only hurt
slung from the neck of a slingshot.

None of the balloons with painted
bulletproof super spandex, lassoed
together; poor poor helium haloed heroes.
I don't want to blow them up
to smithereens at the tip of a dart.

Fine. Give me
an un-psychotic free-range piñata,
I said shopping for my eighth birthday party
looking at the macheted papier-mâché.

Then give me one of my older brother.
Both of them to scale.

two sculpins and honey jacks on the side

in the middle of rustler's future you snap for tangible
 descriptions of the day not
 bittersweet because that's too cliché
 it has a beginning and an end but we're
 just lacking fireworks all that centered
 excitement you came early just to be the
 first one to see me parked next
 to a g-wagon can you believe that?
 woke up with purpose can you feel
 this? let me run it over with you again
 olive green knit taut on your biceps
 tennessee whiskey tortoise glasses
 salutes your searing jawline fingers
 tap in anticipation you're the happy
 lot the lot i don't fuck with now swim
 with me fantasy tentacles deep
 wade for the sting — what is pain
 if you're asking for it — anti-climatic
 was that it? you can't lay awake awaiting
 for someone to get it right but what's
 after the honeymoon stage? when you mistaken
 a stranger's small talk slightest
 attention for flirtation plush plash
 my fingertips graze your earlobes
 as you order our drinks pinky swipe
 sharp jaw hairs when did i start closing
 my eyes to see you more clearly? i know
 it's twat-o'clock but hold that thought
 i need to urinate release liquid courage
 heavy the size of elephant tusks
 your eyelids are but a reach away
 there are circles we draw and
 deltas we gravitate to — future
 fascination means i'm interested

 in you now cucumber crisp desire
 as canines puncture pink-ladies
 i can be your gala ripe do muscles
 tense mid-orgasm glow? squirt spew
 hands on clock arrange for maximum control
 skeletons as centerpieces you
 wanted status and vulnerability to nurse
 open there are two types of eaters:
 nibble corners in or center suckers

Strange Centaur In My Bed

it has taken me this long
 to bathe put ribbon
 bows in my hair
 grind the long axe I've been grinding
 Now I'm just sitting in the hot-ass sun
 & drawing attention to myself

valentine's day at zzyzx bar

there's an old cowboy making cheese
 with a portuguese queen hiding the candy
 deciding whether to rain down on his ass later

the mexi roid bouncer flits a lit ciggy down
 and removes the dwanky tipper from libations
 flexing to mangy him down the midnight gutter

combat zone vet ingests a hellwater fix
 high bootstomping and ranting the dance floor
 cursing a phantom moving atwixt mirrored walls

a blood goth leashes her twinnie's collar
 pale limbs leathered and lacquered in a hidden snug
 four fuck-me-boots and four crimson knees

kid capri rocks a zef pose in the bathroom line
 so a groupie genuflects and accepts the nod
 they share gold trash, silver hells, and ruby welfare

two technoheartbeat lovers mollywacked
 back alleyway lips and tongues under sodium lamps
 lurid underwear wet against a mandarin vette

a slinky betty finishes her go-go genderjam
 she jitters a vial backstage with a lit gaffer
 dual thrillerkillers stroll the streets on megaton fuel

the bar boss peels off the last guest before flight
 singing stooge poetry to this fool muse
 they trip hop drunkenly to his crude quarters

the moon, an alabaster witch, sinks with yearning
 to touch glitter city, gay with rage, catching lunacy
 lil cupid does its sick voyeur thing from the moonshadows

Opportunity after a Power Outage

When the thunderstorm arrives, the walls mumble
 & the ceiling challenges the floor.
 The thunderous summer sky disorders
 bed sheets & tosses pillows. Nighthawks invade
 slumbering minds & disturb our elusive
 half-light trance. *Move away from windows!*
 Every communication device we own buzzes with *heavy rains*
 & *lightning* texts & emails,
 though as the storm passes, we half-sleep through.
 The morning rumble stops, the earth is splashed
 with debris. A delicate azure drizzle on the patio
 is a frail reminder of a lovely, rough & rampant
 storm we once respected between us. The unruly tactic
 your hair took to strangle my ankle. The harmonic chord
 my thumbs played on your stomach.
 Our time pilfered by conflicting work schedules, dinner
 dates with other people, car repairs
 & wisdom tooth surgery. The thunderstorm
 was so severe the power went out, yet the spider web
 outside our patio door remained intact.
 We long ago stopped asking questions & now
 we are unconnected halves with one chance to reconcile,
 so after this morning's sex we should stop
 our talk of presidential politics & Super Bowl
 half-time shows to imagine a world where Khaleesi
 rides dragons & burns ships. Return us to that bright
 orange aura when love trundled in our bed
 & we cackled as lightning interrogated
 our conversation. Let's create our own emergency! Again.
 We - A pronoun full of lack. Most mornings
 you make love to me like I accidentally strangled your canary.

Numinous

is the crack in the pavement
 which teaches us that nothing
 on which we stand is whole
 for today is the day for
 epiphanies when the quotidian
 seems inexplicably miraculous
 yet ordinary this bird
 with a broken wing
 in its naked frailty hopping or
 the garbage truck that great
 beast of necessity whisking away
 our waste grumbling and stinking
 A holy comfort is
 the bookcase in the corner
 aging and thinking and
 dragonflies on dahlias
 dissolving in the sun
 un-catchable
 Spirit-dust hides somewhere
 in old men muttering sums
 but forgetting their grown-up children
 A fresh peach its flesh
 bruised and aging turns brown
 in a white china bowl
 god becomes
 a fruit fly in the periphery
 of failing vision
 which gave us genetics
 a divine humility in its littleness
 its dark dot of self

Incisors, Solid Deciduous Antlers

to thwart my father from trapping gophers i pranced
 around the lawn and refilled each freshly dug hole
 before he could embed the steel snare within dirt,
 my teeth jittering with compassion for toothy
 whiskered faces that nose through the crust and test
 the air before tugging at dinner, movement and stillness
 coddled by clods. to ensure the deer never starved,
 i toppled the mesh cages thimble-ing my grandmother's roses,
 tamped down the wire fence to reduce their steeple
 to this fragrant sustenance, and watched whole families
 traipse through the yard, gnawing off buds peppered
 with aphids. to start my own garden, i planted
 rocks and lavender for their resilience, and on a whim,
 a tulip, a perfunctory plopping of the bulb into the ground
 and smoothing over of an inch of earth. two springs later
 a white flower punctured the soil, appearing full-grown
 instantly, perfect against the mud and railroad tie rose arbor
 backdrop – what a delicate surprise from that rarely
 watered bulb, so that i forgot all about the lavender
 in favor of studying my tulip in the evenings. a single

nibble. i could see this was all it took to leave stem only –
 stamen, antler, style, stigma, pistil, ovary, and petals
 all gone, the absence blossoming cleanly, and in the evening,
 the bulb pulled from below, leaving nothing but my lack of fur.

The Stone Monkey

in Memory of Dean Potter

He lived on a sheet of glass that was a sea of polished granite
 and mostly below the bare minimums—
 rope and harness; the pieces that if set with care to the angle
 of the pull would serve to brake

the fall before your body broke in two, splintering the ground.
 But he needed more to feel and so went with less and less
 until he was climbing without a clew* to trace his way back.
 At the fringe, he called it. *Frenge* from *fimbria* meaning the 'shreds,'

perhaps the remnants to the primal fear flight had restored
 to power, or the freedom
 that kept Icarus above when no feathers were left.

I can almost hear the pair dropping into the updraft of air
 made by the very notch they were trying to clear.
 Then the sharp, sudden pop of parachutes opening
 into what now is unsayable. May Heracles erect a tomb.

* From Middle English *clewe*; from Old English *cleowen*, *cliwen*
 ("sphere, skein; ball of thread or yarn")

Catocin

Running low, I traipsed
 on up to Chimney Rock
 and north along the ridge
 to Wolf Rock, and as I did
 replenished my aesthetics
 cache with quartzite whims
 to hurl at occupying notions,
 rounds of patience for strafing
 strife with wife and world,
 delightful bombs to lob
 at midnight bugaboos:

ammunition to see me through
 another week or few,
 disarming disadvantage:

the ancient range embracing
 the wind, the trees roaring.

It's Not Easy Being a Moth

Almost-butterfly. Spanish Moon. Chinese Luna.
 Tiny scales diffracting light. Rub the wings

and illusion dissolves into fingertips.
 You are here on a whim, a woman hued

because you slipped saying *I love you* first, landing
 a season early. No one pays attention in the beginning—

threads from fibers of maguey plant,
 the excessive number of sewing needles.

I wear the cotón instead of shirts, loincloth instead
 of pants. Feet bare, no shoes. At night we sleep

in patterns of checkered embroidered pearls
 you stitched from sultepeque cotton.

And this bruise I got trying on new hats?
 I'm still waiting to see how we emerge.

Earth Ghazal

My TV shows sparse farms and mud huts in South Asia suffocating in earth,
and in the mail comes a postcard of a polar bear stranded on dissolving
earth.

On the way to work I mistake the refinery fire for the sun rising, the orange
glow so bright it could stand for the ritual salutation I receive from mother
earth.

Three more casualties succumb to my black thumb: two cacti, and an orchid
that lived in the bathroom. Its last leaves clung as long as they could.
I return the corpses to the earth.

When the ravaging begins, and a Terminator II style apocalypse motivates
hysteria, When paralyzed by fear, whose hands will pluck tomatoes
from the moribund earth?

The last slip of pinkish yellow slides down the sky as I sail the road that cuts
the boulevard, where I sing, and I shop, and where palm trees paper earth.

Wilson, though you are crafted of bone and water—your carbon footprint
garbles the same as bastardized oil. Even still, I say kick up your soles
and bask on the earth.

Cicada

In misty Japan once,
one morning early,
I saw a family of children
strolling through a temple
garden, their pet cicada
on a thread. Now I hear
cicadas trapped in
my summers, their harsh
purr the sound of Kansas
stirring into a boil.

This May my yard, riddled
with dime-sized holes,
throbs with another whirl.
After seventeen years
of feeding underground
on tree roots' succulence,
a delicate taste evolving
in hibernation's long, dark
corridors, the magicicada,
their eyes of coral made,
their legs and wings veined
mandarin orange, release
themselves in rapture to
imperialize the garden with
drilling, shrill, satanic.

Artwork

HyperLA



Fall



T.S. Eliot Triptych



Art at Work



Power



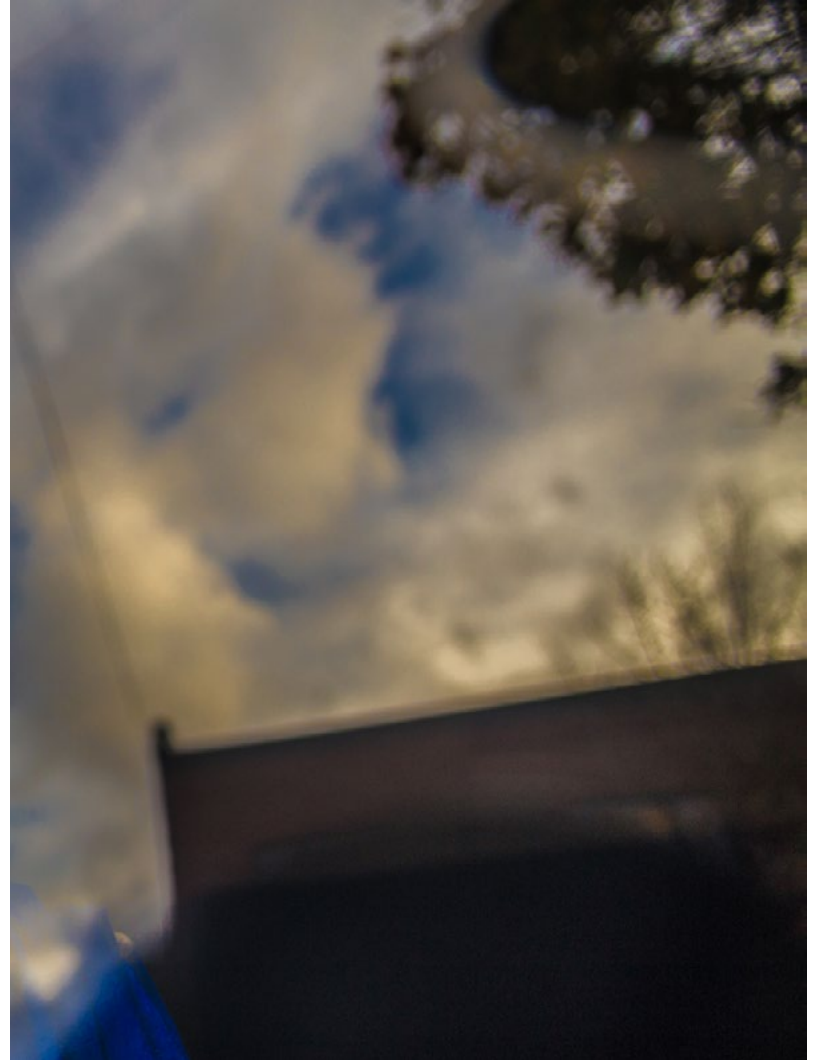
Night Hike



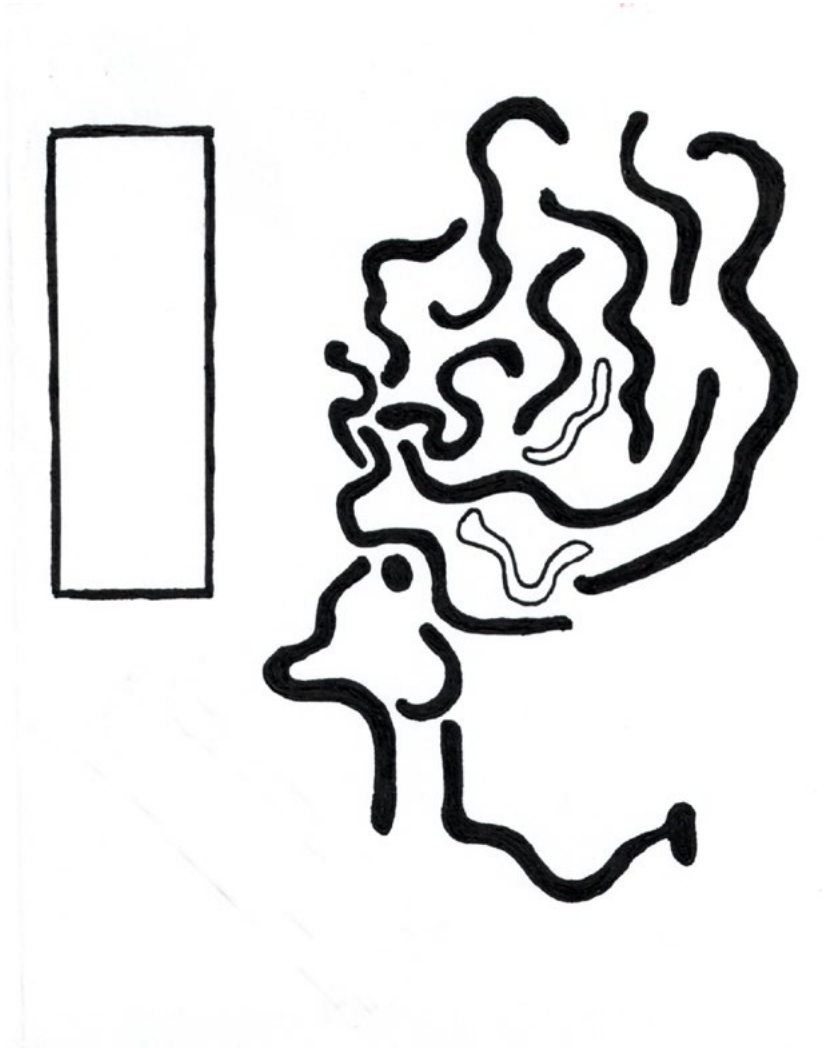
Reperations



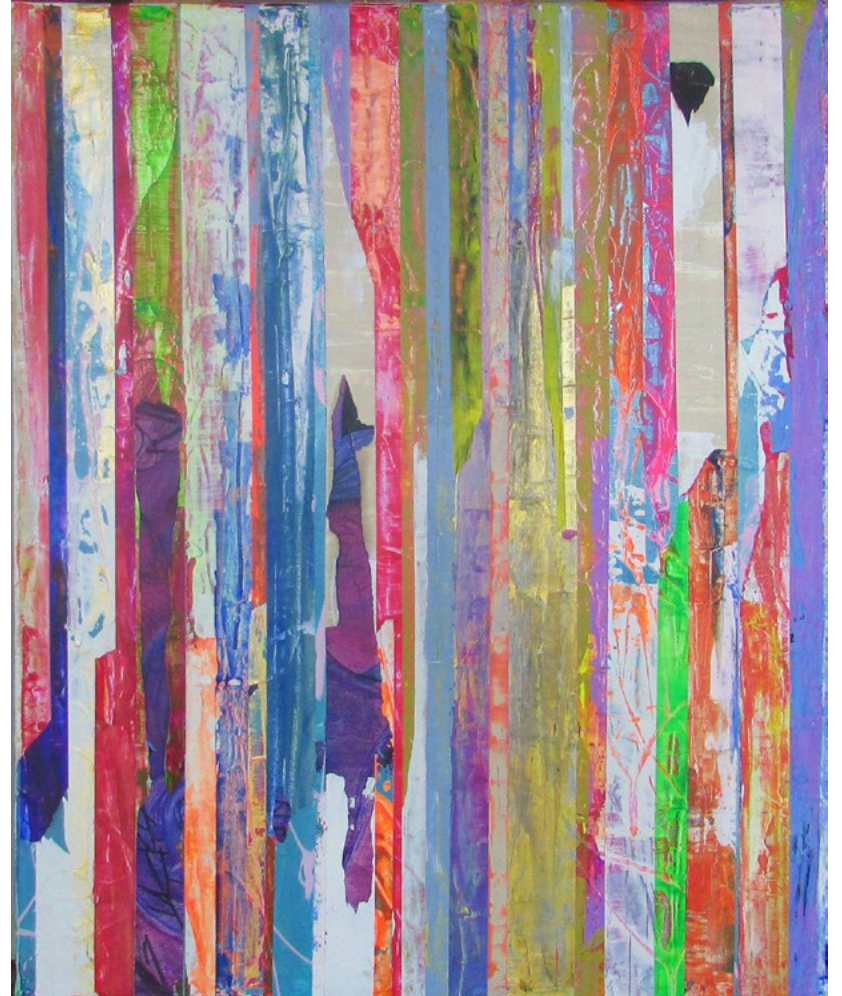
People Watcher



EC



Directions



Plug



Taco Face



Creative Nonfiction

Paris, Texas

I was 16 years old when I first began watching Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*. I say that I began watching it, because I wouldn't know the ending until twelve years later, and it is precisely that lag in time, the fact that I saw the ending when I did and not earlier, that sparked a crucial insight into myself and gave me the courage to realize that my marriage was over.

But let me start at the beginning, that first moment thirteen years earlier when I saw Harry Dean Stanton's mute and tormented figure crossing the southwestern desert. We were at the home of a boyfriend's friend. He and his wife had just had a baby, and whether it was because we had run out of conversation, or to avoid addressing the awkward fact of our substantial and illicit age difference, the friend put the movie on. The opening scene's incantatory pace immediately drew us in. That white expanse of sand below the vivid blue skies, the spare, melancholic music, the deliberate tempo – every aspect onscreen transmitted the mystery and grief at the heart of Stanton's Travis.

This was not the Texas of cowboys and Indians and the Alamo. No shoot-'em ups, indeed no action at all, only languor. The alienation spoke to me. I was still living in an abusive home, where we each had devised our own ways of shutting our eyes to the truth. At nine, I escaped into books and movies, but as soon as I reached adolescence, I discovered that love and sex were ideal ways of numbing myself. It would take a long time to break through that numbness, until middle-age, but I didn't know that yet. I was still too young to know the high price of refusing to face the pain head-on. Self-deception is like heroin, a hard habit to break.

Nevertheless, even at 16 I could recognize the despair present in Travis' muteness. The mystery was why? What had led him to disappear for four years, leaving his child and wife behind?

They all seemed so happy in the home movies. Nastassja Kinski's radiant beauty smiling into the camera, the filmstrip's colors somehow both vibrant and washed out like watercolors. Sometimes the memory of a long-gone happiness can sting.

And then – just as I was most entranced--, it was time to go. It was late and they had to put the baby to bed.

Fast forward 12 years later. I am now married to a young man I initially rejected, but whose persistence finally wore me down. We are practically newlyweds but our marriage is already in trouble. For some reason I can't fathom, I can't match his love. He demands I try harder, and to help me out, he insists we go everywhere together. He can't live without me, he says and I know it. In spite of his passion, I love him less and less each day. I feel so ashamed, but I can't. What's wrong with me? So I keep trying. It's a mystery.

That summer we visit his brother and his wife in Portland so that we can meet their new baby. They're both exhausted and she confides in me that she broke down crying the week they brought the baby home. "So much responsibility," she says. But in spite of the stress they may be under, they look happy, connected. I wonder what their secret is. Dinner over, we went to bed.

My husband sleeps beside me, but I lie awake. I get up and head to the living room. I turn on the TV. Harry Dean Stanton's doleful eyes appear, and the room fills with the strain of Ry Cooder's soulful steel guitar. I sit up, thrilled to recognize that I'm watching *Paris, Texas*. All these years later and I'd never seen the rest of the movie. Now I'll finally uncover the secret to Travis' melancholy. My troubles no longer matter, all I want to do is to finally find out whether he and his son will be able to find Kinski's Jane. Given the size of Texas, it's an insurmountable task, but I ride along.

And then he does find her, working behind a one-way mirror in a peep-show booth. What a sordid place to find the woman you love, I think. No wonder he didn't approach her. Was he disgusted by her

evident downfall? I think of those home movies and hope for a reconciliation anyway. I'm surprised when he goes into the booth. She is perched on a stool and greets him brightly. It's that happy tone of the compliant geisha, who hides all her troubles and true feelings for the sake of a pleasant illusion. Kinski's Jane is radiantly beautiful, yet after all these years, Travis can't bear to look at her. He picks up the phone and turns around. And finally, the moment I'd been waiting for all these years, the final piece in the puzzle. He begins to tell his story – their story. I'm moved as he recounts their early happy years together, his obsessive passion with her, her pregnancy, his constant struggle to pull them back together more, which is futile and makes matters worse. As she listens, Jane begins to cry.

"That was all she dreamed about – escaping..."

I watched and hoped Jane would smash the mirror keeping her and Travis apart. He loved her! These two belonged together, that much was clear. And then:

"So he tied a cowbell to her ankle, so he could hear at night if she tried to get out of bed."

I frown, confused.

He caught her, dragged her back to their trailer, tied her to the stove with his belt. He just left her there. Went back to bed. And lay there listening to her scream."

And with that, I'm thrown back some months earlier. My young husband and I argued about something I can't recall.

"Because you're my wife!" he yelled, hovering over me. I bolted up to escape his suffocating presence.

He jumped ahead of me to the front door and fiddled with the lock. With a flourish, he gloated: "You're not going anywhere!"

I pushed him aside and attempted to open the lock, but he jammed it so that we were both trapped inside. Panicked, I burst into tears, regressing immediately to a terrified little girl.

"Please, please, open the door, please," I heard myself plead.

He stared at me.

"Please," I kept begging.

The rage on his face drained into a look of alarm. "Okay," he said.

He turned to the lock and unlocked it. He hung his head, ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said, patting me on the shoulder to calm me down.

As I watch Harry Dean Stanton, other scenes flash into my head: the surprise party my husband arranged for me where he was the only male; his insistence that I go everywhere with him; how he tracked me to the place where I was staying when we first met and came looking for me although I didn't give him the address. I think of all the times he crowed that he was the one bringing in the money so that gave him the right to make the rules—when he was the one who convinced me to quit my gig so that I could write full-time.

It's easier to be outraged at Jane's imprisonment than at my own. My outrage at her loss of freedom momentarily breaks through my numbness and ignites the suppressed rage I've held inside me.

"You fucking asshole," I shout at Travis on-screen. "That's not love, that isn't love!"

And just like that, I know why I can't love my husband. But you don't get rid of numbness that deep that quickly and it will take me nearly twenty years to be able to know what I truly feel and what I want. It sounds as if it should be so natural, but it's so hard when you've spent a lifetime hiding your true feelings from yourself so that you can survive. But I don't know any of that at that moment in time, as I watch an old movie in that cabin out in the Oregon woods. I don't even know how to walk away.

Maman

The smell of saffron and the smell of bacon; two equally evocative, and equally representative sensations. I have spent my life hovering over two worlds, which tug at me constantly, each battling to pull me over to its side for good. One foot crosses the border into the world of my parents and grandparents, the grand paradise of pre-revolution Iran. Bell-bottom pant suits, sweet dates, women with thick hair cascading past their shoulders, no *hejab* in sight. This exotic Eden thrived in the Middle East long before me, but I still find myself searching for it amidst the calamity and claustrophobia of New York City. And then there is my suburban kingdom. Bloody knees from an asphalt playground, friends with shining hair the color of cream, smoothies, white bread, and wheat thins, delicacies I'd find deep in the back of some "All-American" pantry at a sleepover while my fair-skinned surrogates slept. At first, it seems that two such wonderful ideas can exist side by side to create paradise, home, but they are two rays of energy that burst upon conversion. And through this eruption I see me, age 9, curled up on that same asphalt playground, hugging my knees for warmth, and to ebb after-school hunger, scanning the horizon for a grey-blue mini-van racing for the school cul-de-sac. Where is Maman? She is winning bread, fighting to fill the footsteps of all those who came before her with a green card burning through their wallets, dreaming of the simple freedom of wearing their hair down, hissing identifying words like "Persian" to hide the true origins of that thick, curly, black hair. She is winning bread, and I should remember 17-year-old Maman sleeping outside of the embassy in Austria so that I could have white bread and wheat thins and blonde friends. But there are still packages of sticky sweet dates alongside the Ritz crackers in the pantry, and I feel a sting each time I reach past them for that familiar red box. I still giggle along when the kid at the lunch table screams, "Ew, what's that smell?" when I know the pungent odor

is the *kotlet* Maman packed with love and care in my lunch box that morning, pulling out a cheese stick, a staph proclaiming my belonging at that table, far from the *korsi* my Maman's Maman set with blood-red pomegranates, *anar*, for *Shabeh Yalda*, the Winter equinox. I sit at both tables, tripping over Farsi at the head of one, and only half comfortable with the Wonder Bread sandwiches at the head of the other. Maman, where do I go from here? I see exile on both fronts, and home is a pantry of currants, walnuts, saffron, and marshmallows.

My mother's heart was broken when she was a child, and when it mended back together it was left lopsided, crooked scars where she held it from falling apart, her hands too small to put the pieces together correctly. She suffered alone for many years with a black secret, a poisonous fog that followed her into womanhood, shielding her eyes from seeing beauty, life, love in those around her. A deep-seeded mistrust planted by the incestual hands of her daei, uncle, whose abusive torment came and went like a shadow in the night. He took my mother's innocence in small handfuls like it was hot, buttered popcorn; I hope the kernels seared his palms into charred hamburger meat, I hope they left him raw and blistered like the space where his soul should have been had he not sold it long before. My mother's voice pounded out, trying to penetrate the ears of her protectors, who shut her secret behind a door, not knowing that shadows can slip through the crack of the frame in the night while they slept. They lashed her with blame, and she let the waves pour over her head for years so that her baby sister would not be drowned under the same tortuous weight too, touched by those sinister hands, covered by the shadow man.

The body of the shadow man lies beneath the Earth. Maggots picked at his flesh, and he rotted slowly to ivory bone, his hands never to touch another being, to turn another living thing into black ash. But the shadow man haunts me. Though I never saw his face, he has haunted me since my mother told me her secret, let me inside her roasted mind to explain to me why she couldn't love me the way other mother's could

love. She let me step inside her vaulted heart to see the things that had died in there that could never come back, so that I could understand the fragility of her crocheted nerves. I am a daughter, I have a mother, but for many years her eyes glazed over with mental illness I did not have the capacity to cognize. It took me twenty one years to understand so many fragmented memories of terror and pain from trying to make someone happy who chemically lacked the ability to be happy. I forgave the woman who locked me in my bedroom with the lights off at five years old and stood outside the doors while I screamed with sheer terror until my throat tore and all sound cut off. I forgave each time I stood by her bedside and begged her to stop as she screamed into her pillow that she would kill herself; blowing each account away like a flower petal in the wind, more gentle than the memory itself. It took me twenty one years to appreciate the orange bottles in the medicine cabinet, soldiers lined up ready to fight the shadow man twice a day as needed, with names I can't pronounce, like foreign doctor's assigned to my mother's side. After the forgiveness, the redemption of my mother from the Hell of her past, came the beauty of knowing her. It took me twenty one years to understand my mother, to stop trying to carve her out of ivory, but to hear her story, and use it to paint the true image of the woman I now I call my hero.

In the early eighties, the aftermath of the war between Iran and Iraq, as well as the revolution that shook the nation to pieces and the hostage crisis that shifted the relationship between Iranians and the rest of the world, left the borders out of the country closed and visas extremely difficult to get. My mother patiently waited to graduate from high school, looking for the day her sister was old enough that she could tell her parents about the abuse and that she wanted to leave the country. Her innate restlessness, something which I have inherited myself, led her into the arms of underground political movements rooted in communist ideals, where the disillusioned youth of Iran released their anguish upon seeing any dreams of freedom in their

country dissipate in the air like the Tehran smog. As she ran around the capital city, pasting flyers to telephone poles and buildings, skipping school to attend protests aimed at criticizing the new regime, she dreamed of Western lands who worshipped freedom above all else, above nameless figures from religious texts and ancient traditions that worked to keep women like my mother under a veil. With each day came another name, another friend who disappeared in the night. My mother knew that they would never come back, she knew that they would never see their first wrinkle, their first child being born, the day they could escape to a land where their life wasn't put in danger each time they pointed a finger at the wrong in the world. Weeks later she would console the distraught parents of a now murdered child, raped and killed for wanting something I grew up taking for granted as guaranteed to me, the simple freedom of speech. She rebelled, thinking she could create a perfect world on her own, but her political unrest was kept hidden under her bed as my grandfather was under the constant and watchful eye of the government that he once worked for. She began to study German, dreaming of escaping to live with her Aunt Fereshteh in Austria, a life in the Western world becoming more and more concrete as she received acceptance to the University of Vienna. Her best friend Mahi fled the country illegally by way of traffickers who, for the equivalent of three thousand dollars, would dress people in sheepskins and herd them across the borders of Turkey or Pakistan. She patiently waited for authorization to leave the country, gathering pocket money in case she would need to don her own sheepskin if all else failed. In May of 1983, the borders miraculously opened, and my mother went to Vienna to fight for a visa at the American Embassy. At the time, it was generous if they gave two visas per day to Iranian citizens, and student visas were even more scarce as they did not want to send Iranians to the states who planned to stay and make a life for themselves there. The tension between the Iranian people and the US was at its toughest point, and for two weeks my mother slept outside

the Embassy in Vienna in order to be one of the first in line when it opened in the morning. Although her TOEFL scores were exceptionally high, and she had received acceptance to the University of Syracuse, hopelessness began to settle on her shoulders, as student visas were given out so rarely. Finally she was given an interview at the embassy where the Ambassador's assistant asked for a personal interview, which was conducted in German as my mother could not yet speak English. They asked her what her intentions were in moving to the states, and if she planned to stay there. I asked her what she told him: "For us, the US was the land of the free where you could become an amazing person. Anyone who came back to Iran from the states brought with them the idea that you could be anyone there. I can't promise you that I won't stay, that would be lying, but I can promise you that I am going to do big things someday, you will remember me someday. I want my kids to experience the amazing things I never had in Iran. I never want them to feel the emptiness of not knowing where your friends are because they were captured in the night. I never want them to have to sit in a bomb shelter when it's below two outside and hear your world being gunned down in the night. I don't want to see the blood of school friends, stolen in the night, tortured and murdered, when I close my eyes. I don't want to see blood anymore. I don't want to see blood anymore".

The next day, she received a call from the embassy to come pick up her visa. In September of 1983, my mother landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport and had Burger King for the first time. When I ask her if she liked it she laughs and says no, but somehow I don't believe that, at that moment at least, it didn't taste like the best thing in the world. When she describes the feeling of walking out into America for the first time, my heart feels heavy with love for her. Seventeen-year-old Maman, walking out into New York City, the bloodshed behind her and with only a suitcase and her dreams. I see so much of myself in her; my restlessness, my belief that one person *can* change the world, how steadfast she holds onto her dreams, her independence, and her

belief in romance and poetry and the importance of struggle for the development of a creative soul. I too stepped off a plane at JFK with a suitcase and dreams four months ago, not knowing what lay ahead but with so much faith in my heart that fear couldn't get through. I also see my inability to let anything go, how my emotions overtake logic when I make decisions, my flare for dramatics and emotional manipulation. I think, sometimes, that I am my mother. I have her eyebrows, her eyes, her long oval face and dark, curly hair. I have her tenacious spirit, and years worth of adolescent struggle to last a lifetime of trying to create something magical with two human hands. I am an Iranian woman, I am an American woman, and I am a woman who feels like an alien. My mother says she always felt different, she always felt on the outskirts of a world that she didn't belong in. Not just in terms of cultural identity, but human identity. As a woman, as a person, she felt everything tenfold until it crushed her. She had men at her fingertips, though when she tells me this it is with such humility, as if she doesn't understand that her soul is magnetic, and that if one catches a glimpse of it, they will be hypnotized in the pursuit of claiming it for their own. But no one can have her, because she has spent her life running from the shadow man, running so that I could have the freedom that she travelled an entire ocean to give me. I look in the mirror for hours sometimes, trying to find myself in that body reflected back at me. I want to be magic, I want to be hypnotizing; I want to be an alien like my mother. She is larger than the boundaries of any country, and I too want to be too large to contain or claim.

In 1983, my mother moved to the United States of America. Ten years later, she had me in a hospital in San Diego, California with my Dad by her side. She tells me that when she held me in her arms for the first time, covered in blood and wrapped in the blanket I still have, I looked like an alien. She says my head was squished and the wrong shape, I had too much hair and at three pounds seven ounces was too small to be considered human. But I think what she meant was that I

RIP RAP 39

was the product of all her suffering, the moment where she understood that something was happening that was larger than herself and all the abuse that was chained to her ankles as a girl. I was an alien because I came from her; I came from the seventeen year old girl, marching in protest down the streets of Tehran, asking herself: "What for?" I was the "What for?"

Now, at twenty one, I begin to ask myself "What for?" for the first time, and I know that someday I will know the answer. I will find the answer somewhere between Burger King and JFK, between Tehran and New York City, between *kotlet* and marshmallows, between my mother and my daughter. Somewhere between those is me, and I can't wait to meet her.

Interview

Interview with Gina Frangello by Frankie Victoria



Courtesy of Gina Frangello

Gina Frangello is a prolific writer of short stories, novels, and creative nonfiction. Her previous novels include: A Life in Men (a book club selection for NYLON magazine), Slut Lullabies (a Foreword Magazine Best Book of the Year finalist), and My Sister's Continent. Gina is currently the Sunday Editor for The Rumpus and is part of the faculty at UCR-Palm Desert's low residency MFA program in Creative Writing.

Her latest novel, Every Kind of Wanting is about the people involved in a surrogate pregnancy: Chad and Miguel who want to start their family, Chad's sister Gretchen who donates an egg, and the saint-like surrogate Emily. At the center of this narrative is Miguel's sister Lina, a former stripper, alcoholic, and drug addict, fighting to understand her mysterious upbringing and trying to work out what the future holds for the people taking part in this "community baby." Written in stunning prose and edited in the midst of a battle with cancer and the strains of divorce, Every Kind of Wanting, is a study in family, loss, breaking ties, and new life.

Gina was gracious enough to correspond with Riprap and speak about writing Every Kind of Wanting, as well as reading negative reviews, endless travel plans, and having side jobs.

Riprap Journal: You write from the perspective of characters who live completely different lives in *Every Kind of Wanting*. Can you describe what it is like for you to "get into character" when writing this novel or any other piece of writing?

Gina Frangello: This is a tricky question because in most instances, the moment I begin to work on a novel in earnest is when a character has become so loud in my head that s/he won't stop talking, and I'm constantly having to pull my car over to the side of the road to take notes like I'm taking dictation, and when I go into a store or listen to the radio, I'm so obsessed with my character that I'm thinking about what she might buy or wear or eat and what songs would remind her of. There have been very few times in my life when I've had to consciously

try to “get into character” and write my way into a character and figure out who he or she is through the writing. That said, Gretchen was such a character for me, in *Every Kind of Wanting*. She was very mysterious to me, with her privileged and moneyed WASPy background, and I was worried about being able to get inside her. Then I started writing and realized that she was a place where a certain type of humor I’ve probably never had before in my work could come out, and she just clicked.

RJ: The novel also deals with a lot of difficult thematic material - class, surrogacy, parenthood, drug addiction, disability, cancer, divorce, etc. I’ve read that cancer and divorce are things you dealt with while writing the book. Did these experiences shape the writing of *Every Kind of Wanting*?

GF: Actually, I didn’t have cancer nor was I getting a divorce during the writing of the book. It’s a question I get asked a lot, but the book took about two years to write and then was sold still half a year before my ex and I separated and a full year before my cancer diagnosis. It was the revision of the novel that took place during my divorce and cancer treatments, but both elements were already in the novel before they were in my life... because of course things can be in your life in indirect ways that influence the writing, and it’s not a 1-to-1 correlation. One of my closest friends died of ovarian cancer in 2011 and that definitely influenced the novel, and my writing in general, and the directions my own life took from there. Everything is related but not always in neat and obvious ways. Of course, even with deeply autobiographical fiction, which I probably have strains of in all my books, there are always, always going to be things kept private and separate. Even a memoir isn’t a diary and is a curated, artistic thing.

RJ: When it comes to characters, I read that Chad and Miguel, two more characters from *Every Kind of Wanting*, appeared in a short story from *Slut Lullabies*. Can you talk a little bit about the impulse to stay with these two?

GF: Yes, it’s true, the story “How to Marry a WASP” appeared in *Slut Lullabies* in 2010, and was actually written a decade before that, at a residency at Ragdale. It’s about a 30 page story and I wrote it all in one day on my first day of the residency, and at the end I was crying and a wreck. I proceeded to have total writer’s block for the remainder of my two-week residency and to be completely unproductive (though I did read a lot).

I’ve said in many interviews that Miguel is strongly based on my best guy friend since elementary school, and when my real-life friend and his husband had two children through surrogacy, I found myself thinking about Miguel and Chad “ten years later,” after the story, and what might happen to them and to the cast of characters in that story, if they were to pursue that route to parenting. I thought about those what-ifs for years without actually writing the novel. Then I very abruptly realized that the story was largely Lina’s story, even though she wasn’t involved in the surrogacy, and once her voice came to me, the novel kind of cracked open and came very fast.

RJ: “How to Marry a WASP” sounds like an intense story. Were there any changes you made from the short story to the novel?

GF: Oh, I changed a lot. At first I was hesitant to do so, and then I realized that was ridiculous. It’s not like I was changing *The Great Gatsby* for a sequel! That was liberating. I changed names and details and even some personalities around, because every new project needs to have a wide berth for the characters to invent themselves and dictate their own directions, plot wise.

RJ: Let’s backtrack and talk about Lina a little more. You said that *Every Kind of Wanting* is largely her story and it seems true because, while the other characters are written from the third person perspective, she is written from first person. How and/or why did it go down this way?

GF: At first, I thought Lina’s sections would be actual letters to Nick,

like emails and texts, and that I would also be including his responses, and that her sections would be epistolary, but it just didn't actually happen that way when I sat down to write. Lina just started talking to him and the novel went that direction. Her sections came extremely fast—they were probably all written inside of a week of writing days (to clarify, they did not happen in a week, because it can take me seven months to get seven writing days, but I mean that her sections were written in maybe five or six sittings).

RJ: I've read several reviews where people say Lina is unlikable! Do you agree with this? Is it important to have likable characters in your stories?

GF: Well, I know *Publisher's Weekly* didn't like her, but other than that, I'm not really sure about the reviews with regard to her likability per se. I don't think it's important to have "likable" characters at all—I mean, look at Humbert Humbert!—but it's important to have characters the reader gives a shit about and feels invested in, and to get someone to feel that way about someone they don't like is a harder task for a writer than when you give them a clear "hero" or "heroine" to root for in a clean way. Personally, that's a challenge I like and one of the things that compels me to write. I prefer highly messy, highly flawed characters, and when I say "messy and flawed" I don't usually mean in cute, superficial Bridget Jones-y kind of way à la she smokes too many cigarettes and sleeps with an unsuitable man, I mean characters who really are capable of doing harm because of their own demons, and who have to struggle with whether or not they will do things that can really impact other people. And with Lina, she does something that is arguably pretty despicable at the end of the book, but she does it for reasons that she genuinely believes are humane. I don't agree with her choice, in what she withholds from Nick, at all. But I'm very interested in characters making choices they believe are right, based on their own moral codes and life experiences, because we don't all have one version

of what is right. I have never really thought for two seconds, during the writing process, about whether someone is behaving "likably" or not.

RJ: Do you read reviews in general? Why or why not?

GF: I read them if my editor or agent or someone sends one to me or links it on social media. I'm rarely the one to find my own reviews first. I don't go looking for them, but I find them interesting. I certainly don't go out of my way not to read them or anything. I have friends who do that, who really feel like a bad review isn't good for them, and would throw them in ways that would be detrimental, and who won't read anything or who make a friend of partner screen media for anything hurtful before they'll look at it. I'm not really that person. Overall, reviewers have been pretty good to me, but the handful of really crappy reviews I've had... I don't know, they sometimes upset me for a few hours, but then I forget about it. I believe powerfully that there isn't one right reading of a text, and I respect a reviewer's right not to like my work and to enter the public discourse about that... Literary culture is a dialogue, and I have no desire to be immune from anything.

RJ: In terms of setting, you've written about Chicago for *Every Kind of Wanting* and Greece and London for *A Life in Men*. It all seems very global -- have you personally traveled to these places? What inspired you to write about them?

GF: I've been everywhere I've ever written about except Gander, Newfoundland, in *A Life in Men*, and Caracas, Venezuela, in *Every Kind of Wanting*. But one of my best friends grew up in Caracas and advised me. Yes, though, otherwise, I'd been to all the... ten countries, maybe, in *A Life in Men*?...I've been to all of those places and lived in some of them, and that's true of all the settings in all my other fiction too, except those two places. Travel is of such significance to me that it would be hard to overstate it. I've been traveling since I was 19, under every kind of economic extremity from so broke that I was sleeping in the park in my early 20s to, when I was married, sometimes staying places like the

Four Seasons. Right now, I'm not broke, but it would be very easy to conclude that I cannot afford to travel internationally, especially with three kids in tow, but I can say without reservation that I'm going to do it anyway—that as long as I am not too sick to fly or too poor to buy food for my kids, travel will remain a top priority.

RJ: Are there other places you would like to write about in the future?

GF: There are always more places I'd like to write about, just like there are always more places I'd like to go. That's a bottomless well that can never be fully attained.

RJ: When did you start writing creatively and what inspired you to start? Did you have any early influences (in terms of authors you liked/wanted to be like)?

GF: I've been writing since I was four—I would dictate "books" to my mom and then illustrate them. I started writing my first "novel" at the age of ten, on butcher block paper because it was cheap, and had written four by the time I was sixteen. (Mercifully, no one has ever read these!) I read voraciously as a kid, but I had never met a writer. I grew up very urban poor and none of the adults I knew had ever been to college except my teachers, but my mother nurtured my love of reading and took me to the library every week to get books. Even though I had written my entire life, I didn't realize I "wanted to be a writer" because it didn't seem like a thing real people did, until I was in my 20s. I think I believed for real that I actually might be able to have a career as a writer after reading Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior*. I had been writing by that point for about twenty years—I was 24. But many writers have inspired me. Milan Kundera was maybe my first adult literary obsession, starting when I was about 19.

RJ: Do you think your writing has changed at all since you realized you wanted to write at 19?

GF: Wow, I'm 48... so yes... I would say it's changed a great deal. That was, like, 30 years ago. I had no kids, few responsibilities, no models in the literary community...so in some ways things have changed entirely. Well. Okay. Now I'm kind of laughing at how untrue that may be. I was always a binge writer and I still am. I was always drawn to difficult, troubled characters and I still am. My fiction was always very psychosexual and it still is. So I guess both things are true, really. My process and career are very different than anything I knew at 19. The things that drive me have widened and deepened. But to some extent the more things change the more they stay the same, I guess. We always bring our own cores to the blank page.

RJ: In terms of your writing career, you've been quite prolific in publishing your creative work and have held regular editing spots at places like *The Rumpus*. What is some advice you'd give to anyone who's had the realization they want to be a writer?

GF: Well, editing and literary citizenship are very different from the writing, but to me, equally important. I've been editing and teaching alongside my own writing since 1995, for over 20 years. I have literally no idea who I'd be as a writer without the things I've learned from the writers I've published (and those I didn't) and my students. I also think the dry periods when I wasn't writing or when work wasn't selling would have been infinitely more difficult without the sense of community and of my own role in that community that my editing work in particular provided. It was an incredible balm to be able to foster other careers in the times when my own wasn't going well. I still edit, at *The Coachella Review*. I can't imagine ever not having a side project like that, really. Though I'd probably get more writing done!

RJ: What are you going to do after this?

GF: I'm filling out paperwork to get my kids' passports renewed, and then going to get my first haircut since my hair grew back after chemo. Well, first, before that, I'm having more coffee.

Inspiration

Words from our Authors and Artists

What inspired you to create your specific piece in Riprap 39?

Yasamin Aftahi

"Writing Maman has been a long time coming. Given the current political climate, especially in regards to President Trump's recent ban, it feels more relevant to tell this story now than it ever has in the past two years I have been working on it. It is important to me that we continue to tell the stories of this particular minority group in a way that humanizes them, rather than perpetuating a media driven dialogue that continues to both marginalize them and clump them into one homogeneous group."

Sarah Arnold

"This photo came to be when I was walking the streets of Portland, Oregon. I just so happened to be people watching when suddenly I turned around and there was this skeleton doing just that, people watching right back at me. The reflection in the window made it appear that the skeleton was floating in the sky and it was a magic moment that I couldn't miss."

Lara Bennett

"All a photo can be is a memory. A representation of nostalgia - it becomes more vivid and brighter than the moment itself as you gaze back on it through a colored lens. It drives a constant desire to return that should remain unmet. I see this day in my dreams and I know it can only be reproduced, skewed, distorted, and made more interesting but never replicated."

Carl Boon

"One of my most consistently useful methods of making poems is to imagine life inside a place I've never been. Last summer, while traveling in a bus from Erdek to Istanbul, Turkey, I passed near a small town called Mudanya. This poem is simply the culmination of imagining a girl's life

inside of that town--a Seda among the olive trees who thinks about getting out."

Joey Callanan

"I live in Los Alamitos, and EC was just a doodle."

Alyse Chinnock

"The piece is part of a series, "Directions," which started with an obsession with lines. Each stripe represents an entire layer, a whole abstract painting, that one or two segments were saved from. A collection of the moments in painting that I enjoyed the most."

Matt Dulany

"I suppose the poem is about finding courage in the natural world to carry on in the everyday."

Dani Dymond

"In my first semester of workshop as a grad student of poetry, my classmates and I were tasked with reading *Calle Florista* by Connie Voisine and responding to this poetry collection with a poem of our own inspired by Voisine's work. I enjoyed her poems and their geographic intensity, as well as their focus on relationships and the inclusion of dark humor and even "fun facts" slipped into the middle of a few poems like notes under a door. She was a fascinating read, and ultimately led to "Mothers Are All Slightly Insane," which attempted to utilize Voisine's unique voice and poetic attributes. Thank you to Connie for helping give life to this piece, and Professor Patty Seyburn for the assignment!"

Jaime Fernandez

"I never understood why piñatas were heroic figures, brutally beaten and torn to shreds, instead of a body deserving of such affliction. This will not stand; this aggression will not stand. Originally, piñatas were crafted out of clay, until it became practical and economical to make them from cardboard and paper. As the American border crossed over into piñata territory, the shapes took on beloved cultural icons. In my

young mind, a new style of revolutionary activist had begun to take shape; one who sought to eradicate the world of cruel older brothers. Join my movement.”

Clare Fielder

“I enjoy writing from the perspective of children and thinking about how children interpret the adult world. In this story I was interested in taking a moment of misinterpretation and seeing how far it could be taken emotionally, as the main character uses her imagination and logic to try and make sense of her changing environment.”

Joe Gutierrez

“I wrote this poem in the summer a few years back. I became very interested in (consciously) deceiving myself. I would refer to myself as ‘Trinity’ in the mirror and wait for Trinity to respond back.”

Eric Helms

“On May 16th, 2015, Dean Potter and Graham Hunt both were killed while executing a bold (and illegal) wingsuit flight. By the time of his death, Potter had already taken on the reputation of pariah, outsider, exile—the Doc Holliday of Yosemite’s Camp IV. The real momentum leading to his downfall would come, quite abruptly, after his reckless 2006 climb of the Delicate Arch. Because of the unanticipated spectacle garnered after his ascent, his longstanding sponsorship with Patagonia would be severed. For Dean this was an unequivocal act of betrayal; for readers outside of the climbing community, the only apt comparison would be to consider the likes of Nike severing their contract with Michael Jordan or Roger Federer well into their respective careers. While this blow from Corporate America did little to keep Dean from continuing to push the bounds of free soloing and BASE jumping, it, unfortunately, pushed Potter dangerously into overdrive. Particularly after coming to terms with the other consequence of that climb: the immediate fracture of his marriage to Steph Davis, also sponsored by that corporation.”

Hannah Huff

“Hindsight alone tends to disfigure past commitment into silliness. Writing and sharing poems restores the original weight without losing the gained light. Growing up, I was an avid protector of my backyard fauna, until I suddenly wasn’t. Writing this memory as poetry, I realized that while welcoming local wildlife may disrupt what we consider our property and flush out an intrusive awareness of being clunkily human, that is exactly why we need to do it.”

Dan Lee

“I created this as a visceral response to T.S. Eliot’s poetry during a time when my understanding of poetry and art were being stretched in new ways. The juxtaposition of various historical and cultural allusions, encoding Eliot’s authorial intent in some ways and revealing it in others, seemed to lend itself perfectly to a unique type treatment. I chose a variety of styles and composed the piece in a less-linear manner to, in a small, visual way, express a hand-letterer’s fresh appreciation for the mystique and madness of the modernist movement.”

Brian Luong

“This piece was inspired by wide open spaces and the great outdoors. I wanted to create a piece that captures the wonder one may experience when being in the wilderness.”

Kevin Luong

“The almighty Taco-Diety. Bringer of explosive flavor. Neither corn nor flour vessels’ stability guaranteed.” The piece was inspired by ancient deities and mythic folklore of a bygone era. I’d like to believe this one brought forth the tasty hand-held delectables that we all are familiar with these days.

Stephanie Mendez

“This image was shot on 35mm B&W film during the mass protest in DTLA after Trump’s election in November. I wanted to capture what felt

like the start of the new revolution, and this photo speaks to that. This photograph was processed and developed by me.”

Nancy Mungcal

“I believe that thoughts can become things. Whether they are ideas, calls for action or self-talk, these things we allow to take root and grow matter.”

M.K. Narváez

“I decided to write the piece because at the time a lot of people were telling me that the arts couldn’t change your life. I was also hearing a lot of people putting down film as fluff. Those ideas rang false to me— movies and books saved my sanity as a kid because they allowed me to escape a harsh reality. But in “Surprise, Ending” I wanted to explore how the arts can reflect realities that we wouldn’t see otherwise. Looking back all these years later, I can see how pivotal that movie was in my becoming my own woman and an independent writer.”

Michelle Navarrette

“Reparations” is inspired by an old, unclaimed, photograph. The piece was initially a set, alongside another piece of a soldier in a gas mask. Both pieces reflect the struggle of war, and the toll that it takes. The piece you are looking at is merely the reaction of a detrimental cause that is war. Dysentery was a common place for towns affected by such epic tragedy. The survival of the girl, clearly comes with an acceptance of death that is the skull upon her face.”

L.W. Nicholson

“I received detention in the second grade after reciting conjunctions, loudly emphasizing the delightful homophone “but.” It was then I discovered how words could both entertain my peers and provoke anger in authority. I have been writing ever since.”

Jax NTP

“I’m interested in how people’s hands gravitate towards alcoholic beverages. But I’m even more interested in how their body language

triggers emotional bridges from my affinities to uncertainties. What happens to the body in the moment when the mind is distracted by fragments of the past?”

Matt Paczkowski

“When I was a child, my father used to tell me plots of old *Twilight Zone* episodes as I’d fall asleep. I wonder if he knew this had an adverse effect, that the tales kept me up imagining wondrous – and sometimes frightening – possibilities. Really, it was that first connection between storyteller and audience, between father and son, that made me want to write.”

Thomas Pescatore

“In northern Montana there’s a waterfall on the Kootenay river. I was on a cross country drive coming from the east coast and we decided to stop off and hang out along the bank and skip some stones. Eventually we decided to dive in and when I felt the river bed I opened my eyes and it was made up entirely of the same small stones that lined its edge.”

Mick Powell

“I lost a close friend in the 2016 Pulse Orlando nightclub shooting. Since then, I’ve been through a grueling grieving and healing process. Part of that process has included working on a series of poems that focus on the prevalence of mass gun violence and the lives impacted by it. *translation of “a mother’s reckoning”* is part of that series.”

Fabrice Poussin

“The piece is a combination of two things: first I found a window by accident in an old barn. I began using the broken window for a series of photos outdoors, as a new window on an old world, or an old window on a new world. Later on I decided to continue another experiment which I had began using found paint. Combining the window with the paint was another way to explore with glass and color. This is a final

stage in the coloring of the window and the effect it may have had on the perception of the world around us.”

Donna Pucciani

“Numinous” was the result of a challenge by artist X Woods, with whom I frequently collaborate long-distance, Chicago to Boston. The idea was to explore the meanings of the word “numinous.” The results were displayed at a solo art show by artist X Woods, Atlantic Works Gallery, East Boston, MA 2014, and I am glad to have had my poem displayed at that exhibit. X Woods and I taught together at a small college in Ohio decades ago, and reconnected on the internet a few years ago and began to collaborate on various projects. Our collaborative website is shutterverse2.wordpress.com.”

Ron Riecki

“I read Cheryl K. Chumley’s “Good to know: Witches can’t fly brooms above 150 meters in Swaziland” in *The Washington Times* and thought about why only witches can’t fly above that height and why specifically 150 meters and what about the U.S., do we really want our witches flying above 150 meters, and is it OK if witches fly other cleaning equipment, can they fly planes, how about plungers, is the air space below 150 meters going to be cluttered with zooming warlocks and speed demon demons? There were just too many questions that needed answers, so I started writing.”

Cassandra Rockwood-Rice

“On one hand, we want our youth to feel ‘allowed’ to explore their sexuality when age appropriate, on the other hand, the impact of early sexualization can be confusing. In America, we are equally bombarded with religious views, legal views on decency, and standard code of conduct, while also being fed a constant stream of sexualized media, advertising, and messages promoting the commoditization of the female body. It is liberating and empowering, but also can provoke insecurity and mixed feelings in a young girls perception of herself. I was

inspired to write this poem in an effort to explore my own healthy, body aware, coming-of-age experience of sexual development while playing on the tensions brought on by a fractured, sensational, and sexualized consumer society.”

Julia Lynn Rubin

“I’ve never not been a writer. That is, even before I learned to put pen to paper, I was always creating elaborate stories in my mind. I wrote my first “book” in first grade, and I still remember my excitement and joy in creating it. I’ve been writing ever since. So I suppose what got me into writing was the compulsion to write, to create, to imagine.”

Kate Rudin

“Inspiration? BOREDOM, waiting in the Doctor’s office.”

Justin Runge

“This poem was inspired by a viewing of “Planets,” a lithograph by Helen Lundeberg, at the Whitney in New York. Not ekphrastic, the poem instead is a short rumination on the intimacy formed between viewer and art — and, by proxy, artist.”

Elizabeth Schultz

“Living through long hot summers in Japan and Kansas, I had to learn to breathe in relation to the constant pulsations of cicadas. They define the air with their unceasing cry. The seventeenth-year cicada, however, adds an additional dimension to my relationship with the cicada family, however, allowing me to believe that after long years in darkness and stupor, one may yet come forth in a blaze of orange glory and endless song.”

Jake Tringali

“I wrote this piece after listening to zef artist Die Antwoord and watching the science fiction television series ‘Firefly’. The word ‘zzyzx’ is a term from the old text adventure ‘Zork’.”

Alexandra Umlas

"Wallace Stevens wrote, "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake,". This poem is inspired by and written with appreciation for his use of perspective in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

Christian Vannasdall

"In the Garden" was written about an afternoon spent digging in my back yard. It is rare, but occasionally I find myself engaged in an activity and realize that my thoughts have been solely fixed on the task at hand. This poem was an attempt to capture those small but meaningful moments that arise in the calm of a quiet mind."

Steven Virgo

"I wrote this poem because I was watching an episode of It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia where one of the characters buys a wedding dress from a pawn shop. This led me to think why would someone sell their wedding dress and how they would go about selling a wedding dress themselves. Then I thought about a garage sale as the perfect selling place for selling a used wedding dress."

Mark Lee Webb

"I wanted to write a set of poems that articulate the here and now of Southern California. But the here and now is only nominally Southern California; it is also the speaker's idiosyncratic view of their world, filtered through a lexicon of vernacular indigenous to the area."

M. Drew Williams

"My poem is loosely based on an experience that I had roughly five years ago. For three consecutive days, I saw a woman with a fishing pole walk by my house. She was coming from the direction of a nearby river. Each day, she had walked by empty-handed. Unlike the first two days when the woman had passed by in silence, on the third day she looked at me as I sat lazily on my porch, and humorously shouted "the drought's taken everything away."

Janea Wilson

"I write, sometimes, "urban pastoral" poems, by which I mean poems that focus on urban/city landscapes. "Earth Ghazal" is one such poem that I wrote to think about my relationship with consumption and destruction. My poem "Mary & Her Birds" is a persona poem tribute to my Queen of Southern Gothic, Flannery O'Connor. I know my words could never measure up to hers, but I adore her just the same."

Jonathan Wlodarski

"I started writing when I finally realized that fear and embarrassment couldn't be the things that stopped me from trying. I haven't looked back."

Laura Zapico

"This poem was inspired by a night in the desert on the eve of the new millennium, and by a long and tumultuous relationship. It's about care and regret, and about how sometimes, if we're lucky, love endures."

RIP RAP 39