RipRap Literary Journal

ISSUE 42

RipRap

RipRap is a literary arts journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB).

RipRap is published in association with the department of English and with the support of the Instructionally Related Activities Fund.

RipRap accepts submissions from early September to mid-December. Genre specific guidelines can be found with the following link.

http://www.cla.csulb.edu/departments/english/riprap-journal-submission-guidelines/

Please direct all inquiries to riprapjournal@gmail.com

Department of English
RipRap Literary Journal
1250 Bellflower Boulevard
Long Beach, CA 90840

RipRap is printed by:
University Print Shop
1331 Palo Verde Avenue
Long Beach, CA 90840

RipRap 42

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RipRap is a literary journal designed and produced annually by students in the Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing program at California State University Long Beach (CSULB). Since its inception in 1951, the journal has evolved from its original title, Hornspoon, until it was renamed Gambit and finally, in 1979, RipRap.

RipRap highlights new and emerging writers from across the country as well as enlightening interviews of award winning, published writers who are featured in the CSULB English Department's Visiting Writers Series or from the known writing community.

RipRap offers a humble invitation to talented and aspiring writers of all genres and is open to everyone. Specifically, RipRap publishes short fiction, flash fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and art such as photography, illustration and comics.

This year, RipRap 42 contains local and global submissions of writing and art inspired by the kaleidoscopic composition of Southern California, the greater US, and abroad. As always with all our submissions, we seek out work that is innovative, forward-thinking, and as entertaining as it is thought-provoking

New editions of the journal are published each May.

Acknowledgments

RipRap would like to express its sincere gratitude to all those who helped contribute, edit, promote, support, and produce this year's issue. We could not have completed this year's issue without the help of you all, and we are incredibly thankful.

We would be remiss to forget any one person but would like to personally thank the following with the hopes that even those we do not name know that we appreciate you and all you have done:

ASI, Lisa Behrendt, Dr. Stephen Cooper, Sarah Davis, the English Graduate Student Association, the Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden, John Feijoo, Lisa Glatt, Suzanne Greenberg, Dr. George Hart, David Hernandez, Dr. Eileen Klink, Christopher Knight, Chris Kraus, The Instructionally Related Activities Fund, the MFA Creative Writing class of 2020 and 2021, Dr. Bill Mohr, Sean Richard Moor & Gatsby Books, Chris Giaco & Page Against the Machine, Joyce Morfe, Doris Palomarez, CSULB Print Shop, Dr. Norbert Schurer, Dr. Patty Seyburn-Little, Submittable, Dr. Charles Harper Webb, and Rafael Zepeda.

*

We dedicate this issue of RipRap to the memory of Chelsea Smith and Doris Pintscher

RipRap Literary Journal

42nd Edition

Spring 2020

California State University, Long Beach
Department of English

Table of Contents

POETRY

ART

FLASH FICTION

CREATIVE NONFICTION

FICTION

POETRY

Andrew Liu

ORPHEUS, UNDERWORLD, DESCENT

The truth was this, that
fate is powered
by the suffering of lovers.

He muttered on his wedding day, sun
sinking down on heart's horizon.

So…
Heart
full of dark wood,
dark water. Into the earth,
he descends.

In twisting tunnel,
in obsidian throat,
the souls of the dead
rise and swell
like a breath,
like a forgotten habit.

In the throat
he once blockaded with grief,
the song is a breath
as expansive as a sky.

Even the notes
are like birds
lining the trees,
the bars, the thread
of the field
and its horizon.

Even though the dead
begin to remember
hearing nothing
but the length
of his breath
he's yet
to start singing.

*

Such a song
seems made,
entirely,
of tragedy.

Such a song
seems
no tragedy
at all.

It was then they remembered,
and the summer descended
upon them. Even the memory
of the light, the sky
melting apart into multi-
chromatic sunsets, colors
so wild the eye invents
them out of light,

even the memory
was enough
to dispel their pain,
to evaporate their bodies,
to burn them alive
in the clear blue prison
of their minds.

*

Even the guard dog is crying.
Even the bare-faced council of judges.
Even the stones.

What once
was so unbearable,
can be found
already fallen, resting
on shoulders, the surprise
of its weight, only twin
to the burden
of each shuddering step
towards
each note? What
is this music?
From where
does it emerge?

*

Whoever it was who sat on the throne
was no longer a god.
Whoever it was seated beside him
was no longer a widow.
Against the ashes of their kingdom
the summer rose on a swell of light.
The spring had come
to a place impossible,
where even the winter
had learned to die.
But here was a song, here
was a memory beyond
any earthly paradise, darling
it was your arms encircling me
like a ring or trees, like a chorus
of birds, like an altar of sky
opening into the mountains,
so real and complete
even Death could not stay
Unchanged.

But death was still
a place to inhabit.
Eurydice was as pale
as a snakeskin sleeve.
The ground opened
and she was gone.
No bargaining then.
No deal between mortal
and god. Just
a price. A head
floating in the amber waters.

*

I think
that when he looked back
it wasn't because
he doubted she was there
but because, he wondered
if he'd ever come
to sing like that again:

The clouds flowing across the sky,
a thousand blazing, wild brides.

Tay Greenleaf

HALLOWEEN

My grandmother became a candle. She demanded it. Defy the coroner!
Dig up the dog from the backyard and roll their bodies together.
Still a good girl, the dog offers her tail as a wick. Their bodies,
melted from the decay and hot wax, cool back together.
When I light them, we watch our words. We are never alone.
And yet behind me you fill your mouth with the amount of air
it takes to breathe the word, that word, which the last time
any of us—me, the dog, or my grandmother, had heard was when
it was my own squeaking voice as Luna—our girl!
wagged her tail to say Here we all are! Now everything is ok!
Before going limp on the table.
You don't say it. Like the dog, the word has a soft death.
Later, when we lay cocooned, I count how many dead dogs we could
sleep with us. I have met more live dogs than dead.
Your breath on my back burns, and I lean into the heat.
I feel we too will become a candle.
Perhaps, too, in love.

Stephen Benz

NEEDLES

If a long series of ups and downs
stranded you in Needles,
would you change
your mind about fate?

The early pioneers
on the Calvin Trail
met with the devil
in the desert
and resisted his wiles.

They died anyway.

The Mojave tells stories
of mysterious hovering lights,
jackrabbits flash-burned
in the mesquite scrub,
single-car rollovers,
scavengers picking over
the debris field.

Come sundown
the whirlwind
rattles the thorn tree.
Silhouetted horsemen appear
on the ridge, like the opening shot
of a movie you didn't want to see.

At the filling station,
a signboard bobs in the blast:
Last Chance Gas Next 100 Miles.

Heed the signs, the voice
on Bible radio rails.
Let those who have ears hear.
A chorus of amens answers
the preacher's zealous yawps.

Up and down the strip,
motel neon puts it more bluntly:

Sorry No Vacancy.

Len Krisak

AT AN ARIZONA CEMETERY

Men buried in their boots lie in Boothill.
That's true. But though a name no fact can kill,
Tombstone has a grave-yard free of stones
And free of tombs, which are not there as well
(Well, one or two).

Most of the bones
They buried here can hardly help to sell
This tourist town; their owners are "Unknown"s
Whom death has granted monuments of wood—
Faint-painted, canted markers that have stood
In silence for one-hundred-thirty years
Or more—or else have been replaced when needed.

Surely someone must have shed some tears
For each of these Anonymouses deeded
His or her scant real estate beside
Those OK gunmen who had also died?
One marker's maker tries to wring a laugh
From how it is its corpse has ended there:
"Unlucky Man," declares the epitaph,
"Shot dead because of how he wore his hair."

And yet some modicum of dignity
Attaches to a varied set of hues—
To white and brown and yellow, laid to rest.
Their graves mix here, as far as I can see.
Pebbles on a signpost say some Jews
Rest to the side a bit—a ghetto plot
Away from Clantons and MacLaurys, star
Attractions for the crowds, such as they are.

Cold rain, and wind that scours from the west,
First soften up then harden each bare spot.

One last look down upon the town below,
Then through the makeshift giftshop, out we go.

Simon Perchik

COMPARED TO ITS ACTORS IN LOVE...

Compared to its actors in love
the movie darkens with *The End*
and though the stage no longer moves

you reach behind the blackening pit
grasp its gigantic monster—four eyes
four lips, four arms opening and closing

devouring itself and the screen
not yet covered with flowers
asking you to leave though the usher

has heard it all before, says it's safe
even with the lights on, with the grass
and aisles growing over you.

Ross Farrar

THE MOON & THE POTATO

The homing pigeon remains faithful to its mate throughout its life &
if they have young, their bond becomes even stronger. Reading this,
I ask myself–*Why do you find this notion so endearing?*
& know it's because I've always cheated.

Still, I seek the chipped porcelain bowl. The parking space
near the dumpsters, even the pigeon. Some don't see their beauty–
the gleam of its nape in the sun, pavonine like a peacock, yes.

This is how I imagine the potato endears itself to the moon–
bound to earth, dirty & small, waiting to be pulled up. The potato
screams:

If you cut me in half, I'm the same as you, only smaller. If you
cut me in half, I'm the same as you. If you cut
me in half.

Mikey Bachman

LEMONS

My mom would pick lemons from our neighbor's tree,
searching between the bark and green for soft yellow
ripe as a newborn's first dream. She'd wait for night,
reach over our backyard wall shining her flashlight,
and say, "let the cops come; I doubt they've noticed
anyway." Night after night she'd think, after all those
lemons overflowing from a bowl by the kitchen sink
roasted orange in the sunlight in the passing weeks,
"if they've started to notice, they haven't said a thing."
I wanted to warn her that stealing lemons is a crime
punishable by death; I wanted to warn her to throw
them in the garbage disposal, flip the light-switch on,
let some gutter monster deal with them, and be done.
When she asked me to walk around the corner to steal
lemons off another neighbor's tree, how could I refuse?
I climbed up the wall, searching among the canopied
leaves and branches by flashlight, silver spires of light
refracting off pitch-black fruit, unaware the difference
between wrong and ripe: between their skin and mine.

Kevin Svahn

PALMS

If landscapers didn't wear gloves
their palms would be shredded meat.
And not from skilled labor.
But the simple stuff. Like stuffing
pruned roses or bougainvillea
into trash bags. Thorns and thickets
poking through plastic
and, inevitably, skin.
It's picking up the pieces
that would do it.
But that was never your job.
Your palms were always smooth
and unblemished like lily-pads.

It's from this window
this morning that I see this—
Myself swelled against the glass in guilt
or, at moments, dried up
and pasted to the wall.

Though I wish I could see once more
how your lines blended into currents.
How they folded over each other like falling tides
when we rolled together our fists.
How your palms held my love in crests
only you could reach.

Felipe de la Rosa

BEYOND THE CERROS

Con sombrero y pala y el pico al
alcance, they float sand & gravel
in midair. Gravity takes control,
forming a circle of cerros.

Bags of Portland cement are tossed into the
middle. They cut through air, landing as
heavy as the tears they hold for their families,
forgotten like the wharfs they once worked in.

Shovels spike through the bags.
The dampness helps it tear in half.
Cubetas of agua bautizadas with
salted tears begin the flooding and
mixing.

A circadian shuffle heaps cement
left & right. Wooden shovels
kiss palms until the chalans
blisters form blood pacts with
each one.

Shovels pour cement onto wheelbarrows, &
out the wheelbarrows, on to the ground &
endlessly floating, cement gently spreads
chaotically, until a two-by roughly
compacts the new driveway.

The arching of shuffling— Como una lenta
coronación al trono de los olvidados. Espaldas
jorobadas, float back home como aves
desventuradas. Their wives with worried eyes

lend their help to cure:
remedios curanderos. What
makes the pain go away is the
eyes of their children: pétalos
del futuro.

Casey Killingsworth

SHOOTING TOY BULLETS AT A REAL WAR

Recruiters came to my grade school to sign us up as soldiers; okay, that
didn't really happen but it sounded like it on the loudspeakers and in the
books they made us read. Every mark on the chalkboard was a new strategy for how to win a war.

One thing I didn't read in school was how Al Capone opened a soup kitchen in Chicago
during the Depression. They don't teach that in school because it's rough sawn,
not tailored to our needs. It doesn't fit into margins and, yes, too many seams.

In between, when they weren't recruiting me, my brother and I used to play war,
with toy guns that killed in slow motion, scopes that sensed movement behind the trees long before the enemy could actually see you, long before you would feel the need to protest wars that had yet to be dreamed.

Edwin Cordero

VIBRATIONS DE SILENCIO

In a land of unpaved roads and bright painted houses,
where elements test the durability of foreign skin,
los ciudadanos live day by day in caution.
Fearful the government may exterminate their families.
Plagued by civil unrest, and the town on relentless alert.

Children walk to and from school.
Best make it home before the sun goes down.
The girls in plaid skirts and white collared shirts,
black buckled shoes and high socks.
The mercado on the way home, their colones jingle.

A quick stop for a snack, but not too much.
Ya va estar la cena. Can't spoil the appetite
or the adults will know they stopped.
Just down one more street, one corner.
War cries from guerrilleros,

enclose the streets.
Loud banging of metal, cuando las puertas cierran.
The enemy firing shots, as the vibrations
fail to make sound. One girl's shoes bolt into
the ground, shocked. The other takes charge.

Screaming a familiar name to her little cousin.
Somehow she comes too. La bechita mayor
jala la primita al piso. They crawl quickly on the dirt
like chicharras avoiding curious hands.
Stray bullets raising dust and plaster.

They cross the urban battlefield,
where a family friend has opened their door.
The girl signs to the primita to make sure que esta bien.
They wait inside as the steady flow of rapid fire
quiets down, trucks taking off in the distance.

The woman urges the girls to run home, heads down,
their powerful stomps cause gravel to dig into their soles.
Shadows on lifeless bodies grow longer, corren
por la vida. Breathless and panicked las muchachitas
llegan a casa. Se salvaron.

Jonathan Greenhause

BURST & BURN

If you squeeze a dog, it'll burst into fireworks.
Wielded well, a gun carries out acts
of tremendous kindness; or, if not kindness,
mercy. If drawn out, a tender embrace

is effective as a murder weapon.
At the right distance, an ocean echoes a sound
identical to silence; &, if close enough, a lake
can be linked to another lake

via a bridge composed of freshwater.
If properly emptied, 100,000 carpenter ants
can pack into your hatchback;
yet only 17 carpenters fit. If the sky falls, stars

will burn freckles into your celestial skin
& you'll be left holding the perfect shape of nothing.

Kurt Luchs

OUTSIDE IT HAS STOPPED…

Outside it has stopped snowing,
the pale glory that had turned every withered tree
into a throne for the king.
How quiet everything is,
as though he might still return.

Inside it goes on snowing,
the hiss swallowing up the last cries
of all the things that must die in a man
if the man is to go on living.
No wonder we feel immortal—
we have died so often!
The heart, strangled a thousand times
in its bloody nest,
shudders with disgust and longing
and goes on stuttering…

The sun stares over my shoulder
at my shadow making an abyss in the white,
and in my heart the snow goes on falling.

Frank Karioris

THE MEMORIAL // FEAST

In death, Lenin was served on large white stone plate,
his body draped across a dark table sixteen feet long.

Engorged to twice his height, expanded to serve all,
each particle taking on an overworked watered size.

It had been only moment before, standing in line,
waiting to see him before leaving for the airport

to head back home after what seemed a success
of a visit to offer my suggestions for them now.

I was walked down a multiple building hallway
to the office he used that week to say goodbye.

Goodbyes were meant as hellos as we hadn't met,
my message had been given to him I had been told.

We were told to go to the airport and started out,
through the glass pane I saw him rise from his desk,

his visage clear as lightning on a midsummer's eve.
Even through glass he pierced me, held me in place.

It was only moments later we were shuffled back
from the door towards the car waiting our departure

where we found ourselves in a room, his body
entered on the largest roast dinner plate ever seen.

We were given our plate of a small part, for us to eat.
The room was full of suits and uniforms, each similar,

no one wishing for this, all thinking that this must not be.
Before He entered, we left, moving as lightning away

into the still waiting car with only half our bags en tow.
No one followed us, speaking to the uniqueness of this.

I don't remember anything else from that day, try not to;
all I can see is his face through the glass, tired, but strong,

heading towards the door, us moved into the next room,

& then in what seemed a moment, him served to us all.

This is how I experienced it, from outside his door, Lenin's
death on a cold January morning before flying backwards.

In truth, it is all I can remember about most days. Waking
from a dream I had to walk to the study to write this down

before I once again forgot it until sleep, where it visited me.
A reminder? Paean? Warning? Advise? I don't know as of yet.

Alex MacConochie

DREYER IN THE CITY

I've tried to explain this. The ache
When the camera slides around the room
Or circles past a pillar in *Ordet,*
In *Day of Wrath,* the sharp sweet pang
Of a perfect picture shifting
Into three near-new dimensions: don't
Ever meet success. Makes me want

To ride every train to the end of its line,
Stand on the tracks and shout yes
Until everyone's gone and it's me,
The tallest night around, dark trees,
All space making way for itself.

Daniel Edward Moore

RILKE'S GHOST

The killers in me were nameless
cold red clay in southern white hands
all fired a piece of me in the kiln of a filthy heart.

Listen close as they stalked the room
whispering my name like a sniper's scope
one hand down their pants one on the trigger.
On holidays the blood forgot to invite
the bones to come
& boys were returned minus instructions

on how to work the frozen fields
of resurrected heroes. I went door to door
man to man saying trick or treat

dressed like a stranger no one knew
unless you were my Mother & I was your girl
pretty as Rilke's ghost.

Andrew Liu

ELEGY WHEREIN TEAR TURNS TO OCEAN
after Larry Levis

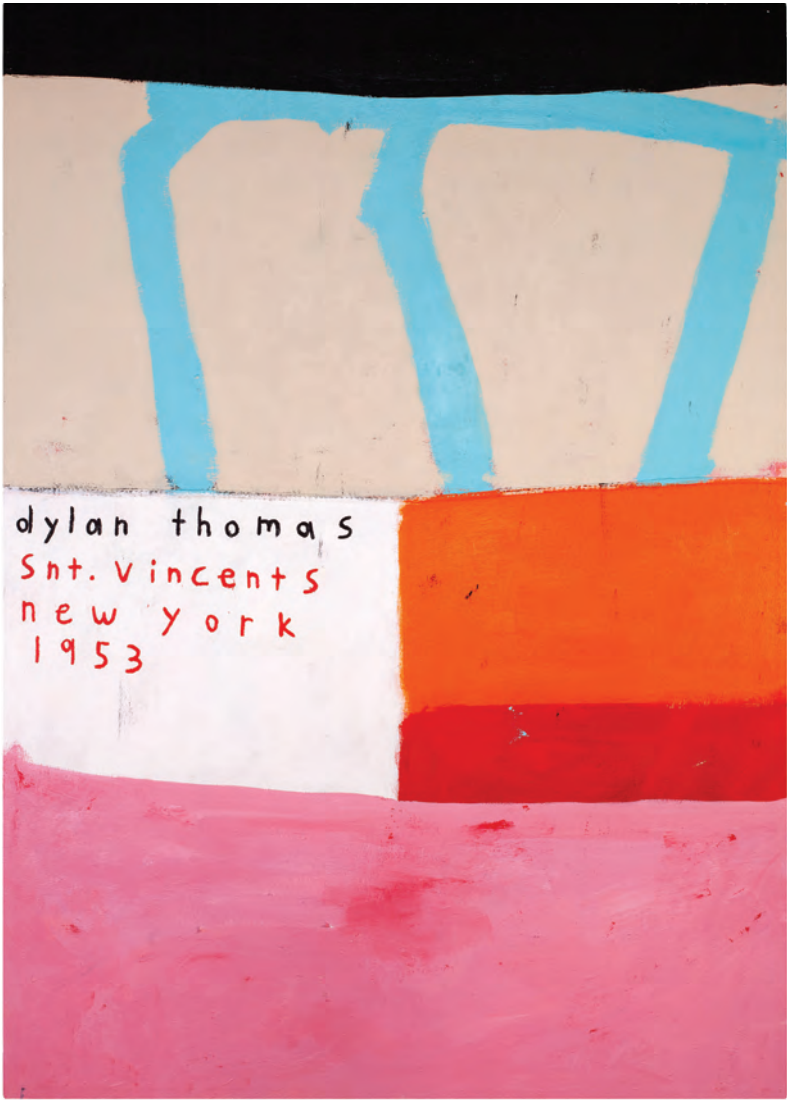
One day, when you die, your son will inherit your bruises.
You will perish, embarrassed, the clear glass of your heart
finally coming into view as the shame you covered
each delicate turn of the music box spindle
falls away, like a shedding, like a cicada molting off
its past self. I am sure now that every animal
should learn to shed, to leave a papery, soft-form sculpture
on the branches, on the leaves, in the oceans
like galaxies of false selves. Ghost-birds, deer husks,
blue whale cocoons discarded amongst a seascape
of dead fish skins. Papering waves with mothwing. You
will be among them, embarrassed, ashamed, totally
human for once. You'll pull off your chitinous armor
with ungloved hands, raw and pink from release
from abuse, each closeted confine loosening as straps
are undone, as buckles unbuckle, as the belt
(so much a weapon once, so much a failed
conduit of your actual love) goes free.
I can see your unarmored body now.
Your son, in the city's light, in the mortal world,
he is touching his cheek and imagining it's you.
I close my hand around yours, lifting it
to the exact same spot. Now
with every vertex on the social imaginary
I radiate your warmth.

ART

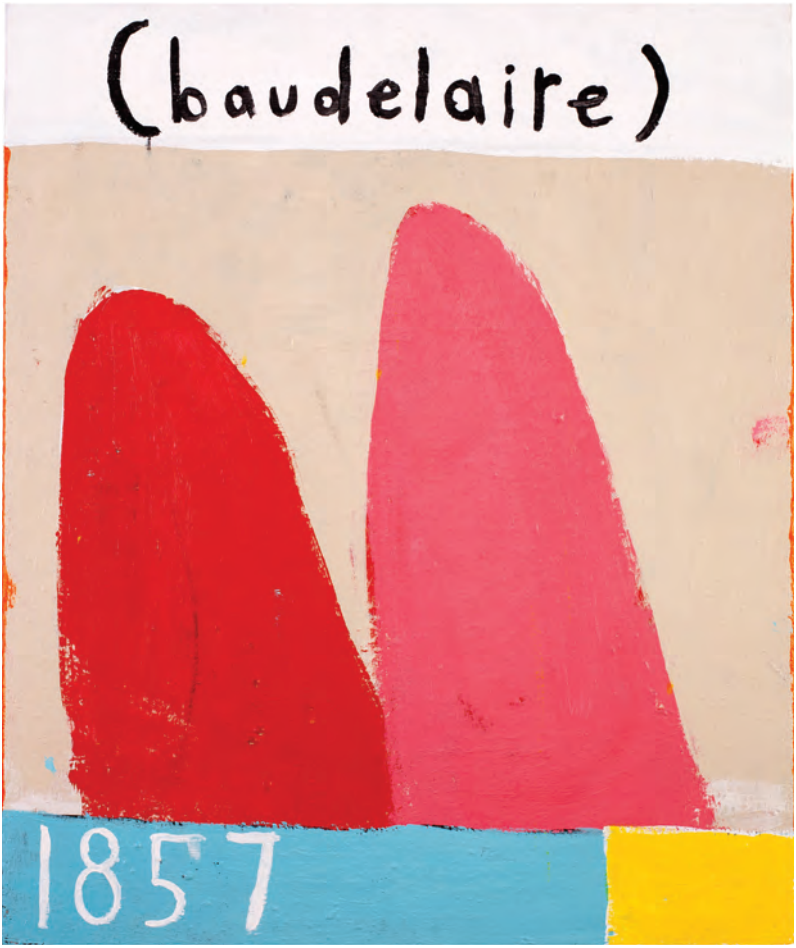
Sampling Control No. 18 & 19 (Diptych),
Grègór Belibi Minya

Confusion is Next, Liam Snootle

Limeline, Varvara Kronberg



Dylan Thomas 1953, Joseph O'Neal



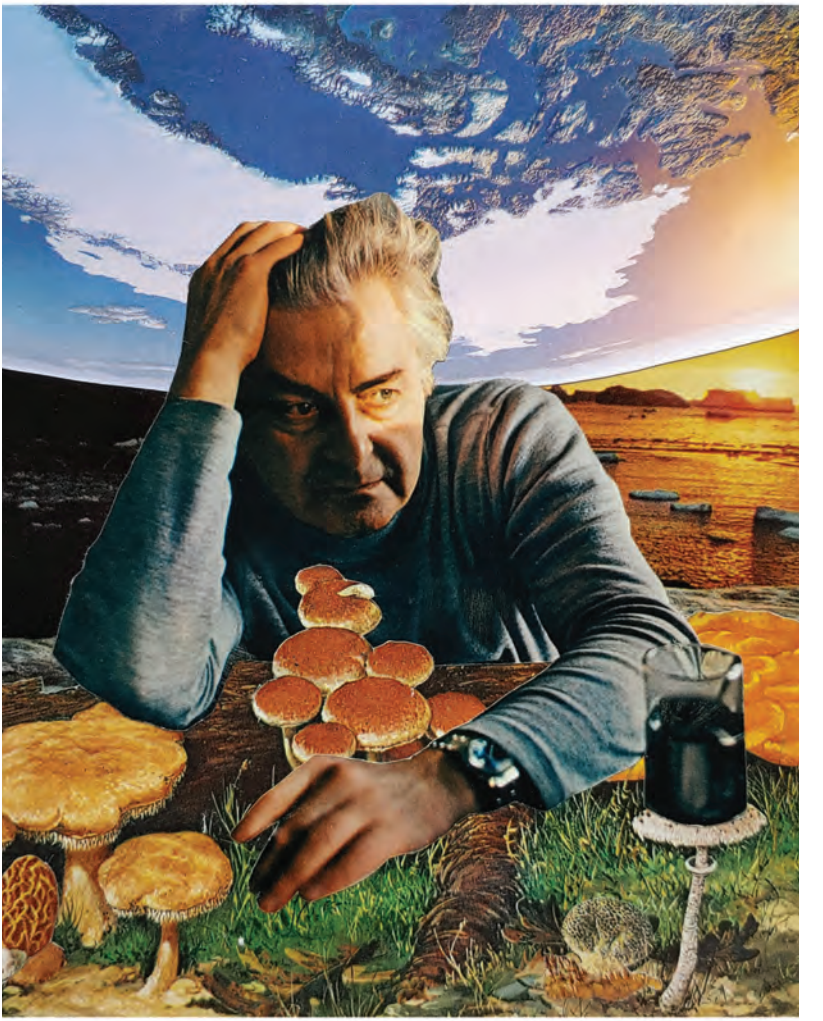
Baudelaire, Joseph O'Neal

Neon I - IV, Natalie Keuss

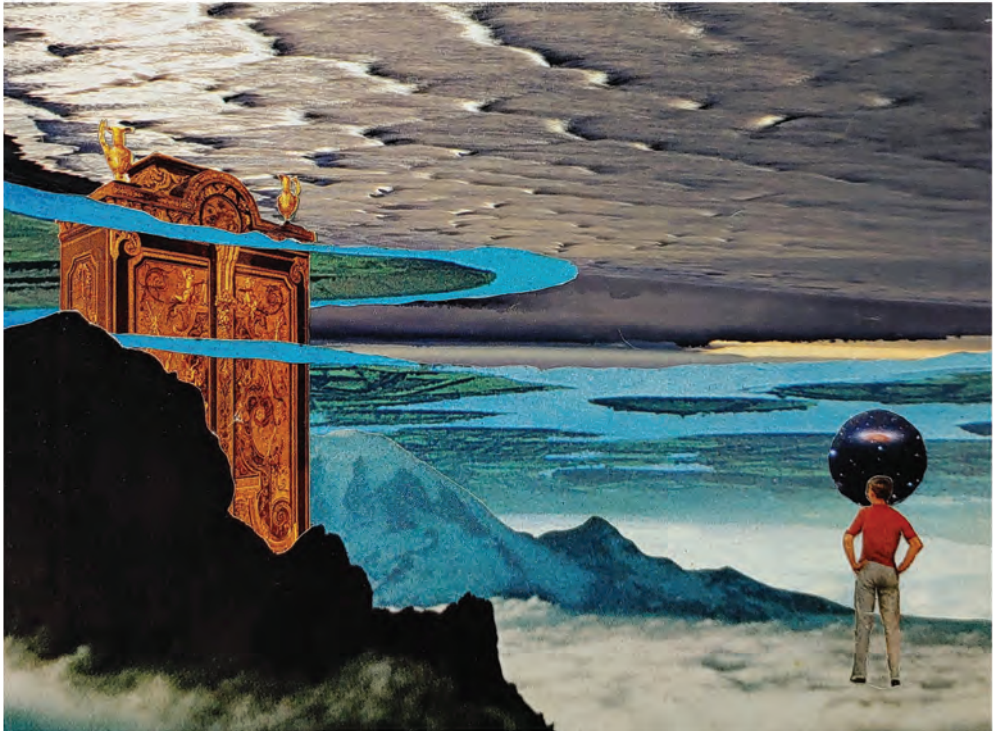
Acrylic and Ink Composition III, Rick Grime

Got a Light?, Joshua Dunlap

Empty Vessel, Joshua Dunlap



Atlas, Derek Savard



Water Tied, Derek Savard

FLASH FICTION

Seth Morales

BASEBALL AT THE END OF TIME

The last attempt has failed. There is no stopping the end. Those of you who are still listening, I hope that you are with the ones you love, and that you hold them close. We—

Someone turned off the radio now that its last message had been delivered to those waiting for a stay of execution. The thirty or so neighbors stood silent, as dead as the radio that had declared their impending extinction. Many of those gathered had returned to the corner they had grown up on to revisit their beginning now that the Earth had reached its end. There were four generations of neighbors gathered at the junction of Santa Gertrudes and Valley View. The youngest generation clung to their parents and grandparents, confused by the silence that had infected the gregarious mouths that had raised them in laughter.

Arthur sat on the curb in front of his house. He looked up at the sky and stared at the celestial body that would soon collide with little blue planet. It didn't seem to move. It sat in the sky like a curve-ball with no break. He raised the wiffle-bat he had in his lap, and swung at it as if to send the meteor back into the infinite acreage of space.

Across the street, Ben saw the lazy swing his childhood friend took. He lifted a stone from the grass he sat in and shouted, "Artie at the plate with two strikes. The season's on the line," and the stone left his hand in a laconic arc. Arthur batted the stone down the imagined left field line, and muscle memory took over. He ran across the street where bases had once been drawn in chalk . Two of the men, thirty year-old fraternal twins returned to their adolescent selves, jumped from the truck they had sat on in search of the stone. As Arthur rounded second, Jared, the shorter of the twins, tossed the stone to his brother who tackled Arthur to the asphalt.

"Out!" a disjointed chorus of voices proclaimed as the twins helped Arthur up, skinned elbows and all, off of the street. Someone produced a wiffle ball from a garage, and a motley gang of bodies took the field. Ben took to the mound, deciding he better finish what he started. Cera, a stick of a girl who looked the same at twenty-nine as she did when she was twelve, took the bat in hand and stepped to the plate with the mythic force of Kirk Gibson on that fateful night in '88. Ben served up a pitch that Cera struck without hesitation. She watched the ball ascend and disappear into the black maw of the meteor, as the cheers of her parents and grandparents erased the silence of final judgement.

The children, now untethered from their fear by the excitement around them, ran through the haphazard diamond with no regard for the game being played. Armageddon came for them without notice.

John Dufresne

CONGRATULATIONS, YOU MAY ALREADY BE

Richard's listening to WTAG, talk radio, and a caller from Grafton Hill wants to know why he should have to pay for parking at the Galleria. He has a point, Richard thinks. Why should you have to pay to spend money? Richard's writing a letter to Steve Harvey with the directions to his house. It's not so easy to find. *And when you get here, go around to the back (the landlady hates for anyone to use the front), go past the bulkhead, and come on up to the third floor. Don't mind the mess in the hall.* This just in case he does win the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. He probably won't, but it would be wicked sick to win, and then they can't find you, and the money goes to some runner-up from Iowa. *I'll have a drink ready for you. Scotch, I'll bet. Am I right? You probably won't come yourself, though–that's just for the commercials. Maybe you could pass the map (not to scale) on to one of your functionaries.* Richard puts the letter in an envelope, puts his coffee cup in the sink, the jar of Folger's Instant in the cupboard. He leaves the radio on for the cat.

Richard's got his gloves and his tools in a ten-gallon plastic bucket, and he catches the bus to Hope (somebody's idea of a joke) Cemetery. He scrubs his mother's headstone.

He washes and dries the plastic flowers, returns them to their galvanized vase. He trims the grass against the headstone. He sits beside his mother, opens his lunch bag, eats his sandwich (olive loaf) and an apple, and thinks about what he'd do if he won the million.

He heard on the radio about a guy in Canada who won the lotto, bought a muscle car, rented a cabin in the woods, threw a party for his pals till the money ran out. That's not what he'd do. Right in the bank, live off the interest, live like a king. He wouldn't let incredible wealth go to his head.

At Denny's, Richard eats with his ball cap on. He studies the guy at Table 16, guy with a gray brush cut, pants hiked up to the middle of his round belly, hearing aid, gray and white checkered shirt. The guy's got a black leather wallet attached to a chrome chain attached to a belt loop on his pants. Wallet like that would be nice, Richard thinks.

He goes back to his paper, reads about a woman in the jungle who is the last person alive who speaks her language. She says she dreams in this language but can't tell her dreams to anyone. Richard thinks there's something wrong with our own language when the same word, *dream,* means what you see in your sleep and what you hope to do in the future. Denise, his waitress, pours him another coffee, leaves him the check. Macaroni and cheese + coffee + apple pie + tax + tip = $9.75. The article says that each language contains words that uniquely capture ideas, and when the words are lost, so are the ideas.

That night Richard dreams about a man with no left arm. They are in the jungle, and the man is jolly enough and asks Richard to tie his shoe

for him. In the morning, Richard calls his sister Paula in Maine. She tells him about the surgery she's had for the cancer and how her arm is now paralyzed from the operation. Which arm? Richard says.

When he hangs up, Richard asks himself if there's a word for this: for a person whose dreams may be real, but whose hopes may not.

John Dufresne

THE CATECHUMENATE

Are you a Christian?

Yes.

Are you a catechumen or one of the faithful?

Sister Mary Timothy explained sin to the first-grade class at St. Stephen's by drawing three milk bottles on the chalkboard. Then she produced a stick of brown chalk from her desk drawer. She tapped her reception bell for our attention. She explained to us that the bottles were like our souls. See how nice? she said. She smiled. The first bottle she left as it was and said, That is your soul in the state of grace. Grace is green, I thought. Got it so far. In the second bottle, Sister shaded in a blotch of brown with the side of her chalk right where I figured the heart of my soul was. That's a venial sin, she said. And here's another–she browned in another area and then another. Then she embrowned the third bottle completely and stepped away from the board. Did anyone know what this third bottle was called? Roy Desaulniers yelled out, Chocolate milk! Sister ignored him, probably forgave him, might even have said a prayer for him. Mortal sin, she said, and she let that sink in. And you will be going straight to hell if you die with your soul in this condition! She tapped the soiled milk bottle with the point of her chalk. We've talked about hell, she reminded us. You do remember? How could we forget? Fires, body sores, darkness, melting eyeballs, no Mom, no Dad, no baseball, monsters with ice picks stabbing at us, buried to our necks in dung. Lasts longer than school does. Yes, Sister, we sure remember. We'll never forget. I was terrified. Well, Sister said, there is a cure. Hallelujah! Tell me now! She held up an eraser. Confession, she said. Confession, I'll have to remember that and get me some. I committed the word to memory. Then Sister erased the mortal sin and the venial sins. She said, and now we'll talk about original sin.

Bobby Farrell and I got the dangerous job of clapping erasers that afternoon. We were careful not to inhale the dust of sins. We tried to figure out what the *mortals* were. Murder was mortal for sure. Lying couldn't be. Missing Mass was. Swearing–venial. Disobeying parents–big time mortal. We were doomed. Cheating on tests? Bobby had older brothers and knew all about Confession and how when you left it, you didn't even bother looking both ways when you crossed Grafton Street because if a truck did clobber you, you were going straight to heaven. Bobby said his brother Ronnie said if you make your nine First Fridays and wear your scapular

you're guaranteed heaven. How do you make a Friday, Bobby?

Every day in May, we worked on composing our own letters to the Blessed Virgin Mary in which we were to ask her to intercede on our unworthy behalf with her Son and his real Father. We were to examine our consciences, those of us who had them, write down our every malfeasance, our every inclination to evil. We were to hold the pen correctly according to the Palmer Method. We were not to ask for toys. We were to look at the May Shrine in the front corner of the room by the door if we needed inspiration. Mary stood there draped in blue and pink crepe paper streamers, her bare feet on the head of the serpent. And then on the last school day in May, we gathered in the schoolyard with the other classes and put our folded letters in a trash barrel, and then Mr. Grenier, the school janitor, lit the letters on fire and stood aside, chewing his pipe, leaning on his rake, as our words and prayers ascended into heaven, to Mary, on columns of smoke. And the smoke went straight up like Abel's, Sister said, ignoring the wind and the coughing of the fourth graders.

Do you believe what you have heard?

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Caitlin Sellnow

KYRIE

"Dearly Beloved," Pastor Alice said, opening her arms wide to the congregation, "let us confess our sins." She stood in front of the altar in a long white robe. I was in the third pew from the front. We were following the traditional, Episcopal service as it was printed in our red vinyl hymnals. The spine of my book was cracked so that it fell open to the confession as soon as I picked it up. At the pastor's cue, we dutifully read out loud together: *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed…*

This was my first visit back to this church in Baltimore since I finished my Lutheran Volunteer Corps term, five years earlier. The sanctuary was just like I left it. The heat wasn't working, and the windows were covered with swirling, blue-green paint. It gave the whole place a chilly, underwater feel. A large wooden cross hung over the altar between two green banners. Toys, cleaning supplies, plastic tableware and folding chairs nestled in various corners. As people came in, they could help themselves to coffee from a pot set up on top of a dresser next to the door. The pews slanted towards each other across the aisle. Pastor Alice once told me that they rearranged them after a beloved member died. "We had to do *something*," she said. Everyone seemed so sad and helpless after it happened, staring at the backs of each other's heads. So, the day of the funeral, they unscrewed all the pews and folded them slightly inward.

There were about 25 people there for worship. I didn't recognize many of them, but the general mix of bohemians, bleeding hearts and misfits was familiar. A black woman in a long coat with a handkerchief knotted in the center of her forehead stood near the back, talking energetically to herself. A white woman with a toddler in a stroller sat a few rows behind me. She would not be out of place in the vitamin supplement section of a Whole Foods.

All of us continued our confession together: *We have sinned against you by what we have done, and by what we have left undone…*

I was raised Lutheran, not Episcopalian. But the denominations are close enough that I know, from confirmation class, why we began this way. In the middle ages the Catholic Church used to charge money for the service of absolving sins. Martin Luther, who was a Catholic monk at the time, thought that was wrong. In 1517, he drew up a list of 95 reasons why. Basically, he thought The Bible made it clear that God's forgiveness is free. Humans don't have to do or pay anything to earn it. He called it the mystery of grace. According to legend, Luther nailed these 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg castle in the dead of night. Really, he might have just sent it to the archbishop. Either way, he meant it as constructive criticism. The church took it as heresy. So, Martin Luther founded his own

church on the idea of free, cheap grace. And now Lutheran services — and the services of several of the other protestant denominations that came after — start with a confession. The members of the congregation list their trespasses, ask for mercy, and are reminded that they were forgiven before they even walked in the door.

I've been confessing my sins in these vague, lilting verses about once a week for as long as I can remember. That morning in Baltimore though, the ritual of asking for forgiveness felt a little stickier than it usually does. My unease had to do with both where I was, and why I was there. When I was planning my visit, I told Pastor Alice part of the reason why I wanted to make the trip — that I haven't stopped writing stories about this neighborhood since I left. And to finish them, I had to come back to collect updates and verify some memories. What I didn't tell her was that I also needed to confront part of my own story. I had to take stock of everything I did in Baltimore, and especially everything I left undone. I had to ask if I should ask for grace.

I knew if I was going to get an answer, it would be in this church. Though, I am only now figuring out why I felt that way: It's because grace is the gravitational center of the congregation. I didn't recognize it at first because it's different from the abstract concept I learned about in Sunday school — wrapped up in history lessons about medieval theses and metaphors about soul-washing. In this Baltimore church, grace is practical. It shows up in ground-beef dinners and fellowship hall basketball games and readings of psalms in quiet rooms. It connects stories there like the small bright circle at the center of a kaleidoscope. The disparate members of the church fold in and out of each other's lives, but they keep coming back to the same place for forgiveness and acceptance. I understand. I went back for the same thing.

The Pastor

I met Pastor Alice on my first day of work in the neighborhood, in front of the sanctuary's big red doors. The first thing she said to me, after "Hi, I'm Pastor Alice" was, "You can tell your mother that Baltimore is only dangerous if you're a young, black man."

For the first of many times I smiled, nodded and said, "Oh."

She was in her early 50's. Her face was round and boyish, and her hair was cut shaggy and short. She had a big, warm voice with a showy cadence — like she was always trying to sell something to a crowd. She wore gold-rimmed bifocals, a t-shirt and cargo shorts. I was wearing a floral-print skirt and Mary Janes. My outfit still smelled like TJ Maxx.

Technically, I worked for a nonprofit housing corporation, not

the church. I wasn't required to worship there and, most weeks, I didn't. But Pastor Alice was the housing corporation's partner in the neighborhood, so she was my day-to-day supervisor. We both had offices in the parish house next door to the sanctuary. At one time the church's priest had lived there, but not anymore. Pastor Alice's office was on the first floor and mine was on the second. She blew through hers a few times a week. She would bang through the screen door, sift through the piles of paper for something she swore she had just seen, maybe boot up her boxy desktop computer to print something, then get fed-up because "all it wants is updates," then swing back out the door, late for her other part-time job as a dog walker. Sometimes she'd be back within a couple of hours. Sometimes I wouldn't see her again for two days.

I spent months trailing behind her: She chatted with people in the food pantry line, and I sat on the bench across from the pantry window. She led Wednesday morning Bible study, and I sat next to her at the card table, eating Pepperidge Farm cookies. She traded inside jokes with neighbors on the sidewalk, and I laughed along, a little too loud and about a half-beat too late. I was frustrated, but I didn't really blame her. It seemed like her work was such a natural extension of herself that she couldn't figure out how to teach anyone else to do it.

Pastor Alice was not native to the neighborhood. She was born in upstate New York. After graduating from a small liberal arts college, she worked retail for a while before entering seminary. She answered her first pastoral call at a church in a suburb of Baltimore. She never gave many details about that time in her life, but she said that being there was like trying to stuff her whole body into a tube sock.

Meanwhile, the Pastor at this other church in the inner city was sleeping with several women in the congregation at once — and lying to everyone. When the scandal broke, the church needed a new pastor. Pastor Alice needed a place where she could breathe. She answered the call and arrived to meet a congregation full of broken, distrustful people. This suited Pastor Alice fine. At least here, people were open about their anger.

A few years later, Pastor Alice came out as gay. She was nervous about how her congregation would react, but they met the announcement with a collective, "…So?" Pastor Alice fiercely accepted everyone in the neighborhood — including but not limited to drug addicts, ex-cons, single teen mothers, one-legged panhandlers and middle-class millennials. And they returned that acceptance back to her. When I arrived in the neighborhood, Pastor Alice had been working there for thirteen years.

It was hard for me to imagine her leading services in the suburbs with long hair, or cashiering at Target, or existing in any of the other places she said she had lived. Her current church seemed to provide her with so many of the nutrients she needed. She suffered from migraines and

back pain. She always had bags under her eyes. Some nights she shuffled into community dinner at half-speed, wincing like every plate-clank was a jab to the temple. But as soon as one of her people came to her with a crisis it was like backup power kicked in. Her back straightened and her eyes focused.

I often watched her in ministry mode with Butch, the ex-con who lived in a trailer at the edge of the neighborhood junkyard. He was a loyal helper at many of the church's ministries. He also had a habit of flying into violent rages. Whenever that happened, Pastor Alice put her arm around him and waited for his breathing to return to normal. Butch was bigger than Pastor Alice. He was built like a club bouncer with a big belly and tattooed arms. But with his pastor's arm encircling him and his eyes cast down, he looked more vulnerable than her. And Pastor Alice looked protective in a tender, maternal way. They both seemed relieved that they could rest together, for a minute, in a pocket of mercy.

The Food Pantry Crew

Dean and Doreen were the youngest of the food pantry crew, in their late 70's. Dean kept his silver hair slicked back and his mustache neatly trimmed. One of his shoulders hunched up toward his ear, like he was always in the middle of a sarcastic shrug. Doreen, his wife, was a sour woman with a rare but sweet smile. Jean was 87, but she looked at least a decade younger. She had a hooked nose and high cheekbones that made her appear hand carved. Miss Annie was the oldest. She had a little, warbling voice and a wide, pillowy body. When the light showed through her curled white hair, I could see the curve of her head.

Every week, for exactly half-an-hour, they handed out bags of food to anyone in the neighborhood's zip code. Annie's husband Ed started the operation. When he died, Jean and Dean stepped in to help "temporarily." By the time I arrived in the neighborhood, they had been running the pantry together for 15 years. Miss Annie sat behind a card table in the entryway of the fellowship hall, checking ID's and writing down names. Jean and Dean stood in the food pantry and slid plastic bags full of boxed goods across the serving window counter. At closing time, they locked up and shuffled over to the parish house to meet Doreen, Pastor Alice and me for Bible study.

We all sat around a plastic table in the dining hall on the first floor. Pastor Alice led the group in a reading and a little biblical discussion. Mostly though, the five of them just talked. They cycled through the same stories about their lives in Baltimore and the people they used to know: Miss Annie declared when she was 10 that she was going to start taking herself to Sunday school at the church. She liked it better than home. She seemed childlike and confused — rather than angry — when

she asked, "what kind of father would tell a 12-year-old girl she wasn't wanted?" A sly streak ran through Jean's stories about her teenage years. She said she met her late husband when he was 19 and she was 14. Well… she was almost 14.

Dean, Jean, Doreen and Annie sometimes talked about how much "better" and "nicer" the neighborhood used to be. I cringed, because these are often code words for "whiter." That might have been part of why they preferred the neighborhood in the old days, but it wasn't all of it. They all remembered a time when the whole neighborhood revolved around their place of worship. Miss Annie talked fondly about the former reverend who led the church for 45 years. Everybody called him the Pied Piper because he used to march through the neighborhood on Sunday mornings to lead all the local children to Sunday school. Now, all that was left of that era was the reverend's name on the fellowship hall, and the food pantry crew. I sometimes wondered how the four of them could bear the emptiness of the place now.

One winter night, I let a call from Dean ring through to voicemail. I was irritated with him because, the previous week, he had refused to give his blessing for other volunteers to hand out food while he was snowed in. I listened to his message the next day: "Um, hi Caitlin…" Each word sounded dense and heavy. "I'm here…at the hospital…my wife…they said she wouldn't make it…through the night. I don't know how much… how much longer she'll… I don't think I can be at the food pantry on Wednesday."

I went to Doreen's memorial at the funeral home a few days later. There was a picture of her and Dean as newlyweds on an easel next to her casket. Their skin was smooth and their hair fell in soft, oily waves around their faces. Before Doreen died, I had thought maybe Dean and Doreen were bored of each other, just biding time in the same house. While Doreen was alive, I watched Dean roll his eyes at her and complain about taking her to doctor's appointments. But in the funeral home, I began to understand how much I didn't understand about love and grief and 50-year marriages. Dean and I awkwardly clutched each other's forearms as we greeted each other. He looked lopsided and exposed — like a tree split down the middle. "Dean," I said, "I'm so sorry."

Once I saw how much Dean had needed Doreen, I also saw how much he needed the food pantry. Because, a week after the memorial, he was back behind the window, filling plastic bags with boxes of mac and cheese.

The food pantry seemed like one of the few precious landmarks Jean, Dean and Annie had left. So many other navigational markers for their lives were gone. Friends, husbands and wives had died. Dean couldn't play golf anymore. Miss Annie couldn't move from the fellowship

hall to the parish house on her own. Whenever she tried, her son (backed by Jean and Dean) would remind her how fragile she was. But they still had places saved for them at the food pantry. There, they were forgiven for not being as quick or as kind as they used to be. And when they didn't show up, people noticed.

One time, Miss Annie caught pneumonia and had a long stay in the hospital. I took her place in the fellowship hall, taking down people's names on her notecards. Jean and Dean suggested that I might replace her permanently since, when Miss Annie was there, she was getting slower and miscounting by wider margins. The line moved faster with me at the table. But Jean and Dean seemed to be the only ones who cared about speed. All anyone in the line wanted to know was, "When will Miss Annie be back?"

Community Dinner

The night of my first Community Dinner, I met Pastor Alice in the parish house kitchen as the sun was setting. She popped the lids off a row of cans of vegetables from the food pantry, opened a bag of rice, and dumped everything into a trough-like pan. She stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon. I asked if there was anything I could do to help. "No," she said, shoving the whole thing into the oven, "this is pretty much all there is."

Pastor Alice started Community Dinner to bring different types of neighborhood residents together. She wanted to connect the old neighborhood (mostly poor families who had been living in their houses for generations) and the new neighborhood (the artists and young professionals moving in). But, in practice, it was only the old neighborhood that came — the ones who needed a hot meal the most.

Butch arrived and wordlessly set up two long folding tables end-to-end, forming one skinny banquet table that ran the length of the dining room. After that, two boys who looked 11 or 12 showed up. Pastor Alice introduced the dopey-looking redhead to me as Joey. The quick one, with the curly tuft of hair at the back of his neck, was Mike. She asked me to help them fill two big plastic pitchers with water from the tap, then carry them to the table.

Then, all at once, about ten more people arrived. Later, I learned that most of them were part of the same family. They lived in a row home down the street with a sagging porch. There was a blond woman who alternated between shouting into her cell phone, and at her young son and daughter. The two blond kids thrashed around the room like bats caught indoors. A young woman with a soft lisp had a chubby baby boy with her. I figured she couldn't have been older than 18. Actually, Pastor Alice told

me later, she was sixteen, and she was pregnant again. Her boyfriend was a round-faced boy who looked like he was trying to grow a mustache. The matriarch of the whole crew was Miss Joan. She entered the parish house last with the aid of a walker. Her thin, brown hair was pulled back by a pink headband.

After everyone had eaten their fill of Pastor Alice's stew, the noise emptied out of the parish house almost as quickly as it had filled it up. Pastor Alice sent several people off with Ziploc bags full of leftovers. Only a few people — including me, Butch and Miss Joan — stuck around for what Pastor Alice called "compline." She handed out red books of worship so we could follow along with the service. Miss Joan insisted on taking the one with the binding that was falling apart, exposing its cardboard spine. She explained that it was her favorite because it reminded her of herself: battered and broken, but "it's still got the word of the Lord."

Pastor Alice lead us through the brief service. She opened with the words, "The Lord almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end." There was some call and response liturgy including a confession, a few prayers, and a psalm. "Amen," we said again and again, "Amen." After the last one, we sat still for a moment. Then, the rustlings of leaving began — plastic chairs scraping against the hardwood floor, hymnals closing, folding table legs clanking. After everyone else was out the door, Pastor Alice sighed at the stack of dishes in the kitchen. "We can worry about these tomorrow," she said, and turned out the light.

During my time in Baltimore, I saw community dinner change with the moods of the neighborhood. Sometimes so many people came that we had to eat in the fellowship hall. Sometimes we could all fit around one folding table in the parish house. But always, the evening ended with four or five of us sitting with our books of worship, chanting our prayers.

At first, I wondered why Pastor Alice bothered with compline. Most Community Dinner attendees left before it began. And I couldn't imagine the arcane liturgy resonating with the residents of inner-city Baltimore. It didn't resonate with me. I grew up hearing words like these on Sunday mornings, spoken in the same, rhythmic monotone. My Sunday school teachers tried to make them meaningful in modern terms. I remember being told once that "daily bread" didn't just mean bread, but all earthly sustenance. I saw, briefly, a thin thread between the Lord's Prayer and things I could actually touch — like the Cinnamon Toast Crunch I ate for breakfast, or the patent leather shoes on my feet — but it didn't last. After I had chanted the prayer several more times, the words were just sounds again. And if protestant liturgy seemed abstract to me, I assumed it must seem even more so Butch and Miss Joan, whose problems were so concrete.

Eventually though, I saw the soothing effect the liturgy had on them — on Miss Joan in particular. She had a short fuse during dinner. But in the space between the meal and the end of the service, she unfurled. I learned that she was thoughtful and darkly funny. Her favorite joke was that she wanted to be stuffed when she died, with her arm outstretched and her index finger pointed. So her kids would know she was always watching them. She talked about the voices she heard in her head. She knew she should eat healthier (she was diabetic and had suffered something like six strokes), but she said the devil kept telling her to eat potato chips. Sometimes she laughed about it, other times she cried. Either way, the rest of us would sit and listen. Then we would open our hymnals and say together, "the Lord grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end."

The rocking sameness that I found boring seemed to calm her. It created a brief, quiet respite outside the chaos of the neighborhood. I also began to appreciate that bubble of peace myself. It gave me a break from all the uncertainty I felt the rest of the time. During the service, I didn't have to guess at what to say or do. I could just be present with the people sitting next to me, speaking the same words and breathing with one breath.

The Missionaries

Once a month, I joined Pastor Alice at her breakfast meeting at a neighborhood cafe with the sister church committee. These were three white women in their late 30's and early 40's who led mostly white, suburban congregations. They would have fit right in at my home church, lining up rows of cookies on serving trays during fellowship hour. The warmest and most enthusiastic was a woman named Dina. She had frosty blond hair that flipped up at the ends, and she liked to wear turtlenecks and shining stud earrings.

The committee planned several yearly events over coffee and pancakes. There was a Thanksgiving dinner and a Soup-er Bowl Sunday soup supper. At Christmas, there was a toy giveaway. A couple members from the church council arrived in their SUVs to set up for it. I unlocked the door of the fellowship hall and helped them carry Barbies and train sets and bags full of plastic sporting equipment and one shiny new bicycle into the gymnasium.

In the summer, Dina's church sent about 20 teenagers to Pastor Alice's church for a service trip. Pastor Alice referred to the trip as a "suicide prevention program." She chose the phrase partially for shock value, but also because she meant it. It reflected how suffocated she felt in the suburbs. Baltimore city had been her way out, and she wanted to offer the same escape route to teenagers who were still trapped. She explained that these kids had been told their whole lives they were lucky, but they hadn't

been told what to do with all their unearned fortune. Her church could give them an outlet. As she explained this, the three women on the sister church committee gave tiny, solemn nods. Pastor Alice assured Dina that she would try not to say "fuck" so much in front of the kids.

"No, are you kidding?" Dina said, "They're going to love you! You're so real."

The year I was working in Baltimore, the youth group arrived in July in a big white van. They wore shorts and T-shirts and had limbs that were too long for their bodies. Several of the girls had damp, freshly plaited hair. They all looked mildly jittery and eager for instructions — the way I must have looked in front of the doors of the sanctuary on my first day of work. They had a few trips planned to other service organizations and tourist destinations. But they spent most of their time working on a nearby home that had been gutted by a fire. They diligently pried blackened planks of wood off walls and banisters and hauled the debris to the dumpster outside.

I ducked in every few hours to check their progress. I complimented the kids' work ethic, and they smiled without making eye contact. The chaperones treated me with respect. I asked if they had any questions, knowing that I wouldn't know how to answer them if they did. I had even less of an idea what I was doing there than they did. I wondered if it showed. I wished I could pull on a pair of gloves and go to work with them — taking a house apart, instead of the much more complicated "community building" that I was supposed to be doing.

I talked to the group about the Lutheran Volunteer Corps one evening, in case they might be interested after they graduated. I thought about my own service trips in high school. We bagged lunches at the local food bank and painted houses in Appalachia. I remembered feeling like I was pressing up against the convex glass of the inside of a snow globe, looking at the "real world" just outside. That feeling was part of what led me to the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and to Baltimore. I wondered if the members of the youth group felt the same way now.

When I got up to talk to the group though, I didn't ask. I didn't tell them how small I felt, measured against everything the neighborhood needed. I didn't tell them that I envied the satisfaction they probably felt after a long day of manual labor, while I sat in an office aimlessly googling Swiss chard recipes. I didn't talk about God. I didn't talk about grace. I didn't fully understand what these things meant to me yet — and I definitely wasn't ready to explain them to a room full of teenagers. So instead, I talked about how joining a service corps could be good way to make friends and ease into the workforce after college.

I might tell them something different now. I might say: go ahead. Volunteer full time. Learn about how you fit into the wider world. Weed

gardens and paint murals and cook meals and show up for people who are different from you. Just, don't do it because you're trying to pay off a debt. That weight you inherited by being born "lucky" will not get lighter, no matter how many good works you do. You can't earn grace.

The Congregation

On the day of my return to Baltimore in 2017, as I climbed the steps of the church, I counted trespasses — *forgive me, for I wasn't outgoing or ambitious enough. I couldn't figure out how to get Serena her GED, or fix Miss Dorothy's roof. Sometimes, when Mr. Eddie banged on the door at 3 o' clock in the afternoon, I pretended I wasn't there. I have taken more from the people in this neighborhood than I gave them*. Cool sweat made my armpits slippery under my winter coat.

The sanctuary was empty and quiet, except for the clanking of communion-ware and a familiar voice. I followed it past all the rows of empty pews. My heels were so loud against the concrete floor they sounded rude. Finally, I reached the small room tucked out of sight behind the altar and poked my head through the doorway.

I said, "Hi Pastor Alice."

She turned and smiled. I hadn't really expected her to greet me any other way, but I still felt relieved. We hugged. "You seem taller," she said.

I smiled, nodded and said, "Oh."

We sat together in one of the pews for a few minutes. She gave me unvarnished updates on the people I used to know: The church still partners with two of three sister congregations. Butch, Jean and Dean are still around, running the food pantry. Butch is doing better, but Dean has gotten angrier. Miss Annie has died. There's a picture of her, mounted with blue masking tape, on a whiteboard in the back of the sanctuary. She is resting her folded arms on the table in front of her, laughing at whoever is taking the picture.

I was afraid to ask specifically about Miss Joan and her grandchildren. Pastor Alice only offered that they are "the same." I did ask if Community Dinners have continued. Pastor Alice smiled and confirmed that they have. The church has connected with a doctor's association from John's Hopkins University, which set up shop in the new row of buildings next door. MDs come and cook a meal in the parish house kitchen every week. So finally, the meal is fulfilling its original mission to connect different kinds of neighborhood residents. Pastor Alice married a woman named Chris, who she met towards the end of my tenure in the neighborhood. When I ask Pastor Alice about married life, her whole body softens.

The two of them are living in Chris's house in the suburbs — but Pastor Alice hopes that when Chris's teenaged kids go off to college, she and Pastor Alice can move to the neighborhood together.

The muscles between my shoulders began to loosen. As Pastor Alice answered the questions I asked out loud, she also answered the questions I wasn't asking: Did the neighborhood remember my shortcomings as clearly as I did? Did they resent me for my slow tongue and my thin skin? And when I left, did it feel as sudden and violent to them as it felt to me? Pastor Alice was telling me no. I was just one of many imperfect people who wandered through their neighborhood. They welcomed me as I was, said goodbye when I left, and went on with their lives. I didn't need to go back to ask forgiveness. It had been freely given to me before I arrived over seven years ago.

Part of me must have known this before I went back. Now, I am realizing that it was not just guilt that made it feel both so necessary and so difficult to return to Baltimore. It was also a sense of loss. I do not regret my decision to leave the city at the end of my LVC term. Even if there had been a full-time job available in the neighborhood, I wouldn't have taken it. The work took too much out of me, and I suspected I wasn't very good at it. Anyway, the East coast was too far away from my family in Minnesota. That doesn't mean, though, that I didn't lose something when I left. I have now lived in Chicago for three times as long as I lived in Baltimore, but I have been floating above ground. I haven't wedged myself into a community here the way I did there. That's at least in part because I haven't found a place with its doors flung as wide open as Pastor Alice's church.

There, all are welcome to come and be exactly themselves: A gay, dog-walking minister; cranky food pantry organizers; ex-cons; a diabetic matriarch; Patagonia-wearing minivan drivers; teenaged cul-de-sac dwellers; and at least one doughy, fragile volunteer. I can't say how much of the grace there is divine and how much is human. I can only say that it is real in a way that is rarer than I knew.

After we recited our confession at the beginning of the service, we received the blessing of forgiveness. Pastor Alice said, "Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life."

Together we said, *Amen*.

Bianca Maldonado

FIRST GENERATION

I grew up in a family that wasn't always focused on their own personal academic success. Most of my older family members, like my tias and tios, only finished elementary school and some high school. Out of ten older cousins, only one finished school and actually graduated with their Bachelor of Arts degree from Cal State Long Beach. It always seemed like they talked about going back to school to finish and get a degree, but none of them showed initiative to actually go back. It was just words to them, but I didn't want to be like the rest of my family.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of Hispanic people that graduate from a 4-year university within 4 years is 32%. I didn't want to be part of the 10% of students who dropout between the ages of 18-24. I knew this from a young age, which surprised many people in my life. I had this mindset because I grew up in a predominantly Latinx area. In middle school, my parents were always open with me about how they would want me to get an education and have a better life than them. A lot of these conversations happened in our kitchen while my mom was washing dishes.

"All we want is for you to go to school and graduate with a degree," my mom said.

"Why? I know I want to, but why do you always tell me this?" I said, confused.

"We don't want you to struggle and live paycheck to paycheck like how we do now. We want you to live in a house and not have to worry about how to spend your upcoming check on bills and food," my dad said.

I was reminded of this almost every week as I kept getting older and as I kept complaining that school was getting harder. I was reminded by watching my parents struggle financially, I was reminded by seeing my tias and tios struggle financially, and I would definitely notice when I would go to my friends' houses. Whenever I would go to my friends' houses, I would see the type of life they were living; nothing like mine. They were able to call their place an actual house, they would have their own room, they'd have a pool, a living room that was separated from the kitchen, a dining room, and a backyard. I got jealous that I didn't have those things. All I had was an apartment, a shared room with my older brother, no pool, a living room that was connected to the kitchen and dining room, and no backyard. I remember I would come home and tell my mom about the houses. She would be in the kitchen making dinner and I would be all giddy from just hanging out with my friends.

"They have a cool room with a big bed and lots of fluffy pillows!

And their kitchen is huge! We made cookies in this fancy looking oven and they were delicious!" I exclaimed.

"I've always wanted a big kitchen to have a place where all these pots and pans can go," my mom said.

"Why don't we get a house?! Me and Chris can have our own rooms too! It would be great!" I said with excitement.

"We would… if we had the money mija. Right now, me and your dad are struggling to pay the bills, and rent just keeps getting higher. This is why me and your dad always tell you to finish school and get a really good paying job. That way you can buy yourself a big house with an extra little house in the backyard for me and your dad to live in."

It started to hit me, at a young age, that my family was part of the lower working middle class and I realized how much it would hurt my mom every time I talked about other people's houses. So, I stopped that and started helping her more around the house. I would help with cleaning, moving furniture around, and even redecorating our apartment. I accepted my family for who we were and took that as my motivation to make my parents, and myself, proud.

When I began high school, I had this drive in me that pushed me to do well in my academics. Although getting my academics up wasn't easy, it was something that I focused on just as much as I did my extra-curriculars. Before I started high school, I applied to be in a program that was focused on getting high school students to graduate and accepted into 4-year universities. This program was called The Puente Program. I had found out about the program from a few presenters who came to talk to my 8th grade class about it. They really caught my attention because once I found out that they were there to help me get into college, I knew that was where I needed to be.

When I got into the program, my counselors would always show us percentages and statistics about how students that come from low income families either never graduate high school or drop out of college within their first two years there. It made me push myself to want more in life. When I learned about these statistics it gave me new confidence to keep pushing for my academic success, because once my brother was in community college, he became part of that statistic to drop out within his first two years.

When he told my parents and I that he didn't want to go back and that he just wanted to work, I had never seen my parents more disappointed in him. I was really upset by this news too, because he had been my guide in going to college. He was supposed to be the one to make my transition easier, and I felt that I didn't have that anymore. I became alone in this whole journey to higher education. I remember the conversation

so clearly. My parents and I were hanging out in the living room, watching a movie, and my brother came out of our room and dropped the news on us.

"Why did you drop out? Now how am I supposed to figure out what to do in college?" I said in disbelief.

"You'll be fine, school just isn't for me. I hate it," my brother said.

"But what about getting a degree to live a better life?"I asked.

"I'll figure it out. It's what we do, we figure things out," he replied.

My brother has a really good job now, and he has become a supervisor of his division, but it's harder for him to move up since he doesn't have that degree behind him. Although he hasn't been able to help me with college-related things, he definitely has been there for me through the stress and depression. I've pushed through the ups and downs so far, and I've motivated myself because I want to be a role model for my family.

I did a lot of school work on my own, because the only example I had of higher education was my cousin, who I had never really talked to before. But he graduated back when I was around 12 years old, and now he has a well-paying job working for different airlines. He is the only example I really have of someone in my family going into higher education, and I still look up to him and talk to him about the school once in a while, when I get to see him.

Graduating from high school and continuing my education at the same college that my cousin graduated from was a big step for me. Although the Puente Program helped us find out what websites to go to and how to begin our applications, it wasn't like I had someone next to me, physically and morally helping me get through all the stressful paperwork. There were things that my program couldn't help me with. When it came to filling out the family portion of the applications, the counselors didn't know my family's history. I had to find out on my own. I had no one to guide me, no one to tell me what papers to fill out for FAFSA, and no one to tell me that I was on the right track. I figured everything out on my own—at least, that's what it felt like. I had to be brave and take initiative into finding information. I was able to do it, and I'm still doing it. I still remember the first time I filled out FAFSA. It was one of the biggest struggles I have encountered. Most of the questions I didn't know how to answer, but luckily, my dad had almost all the answers when I would ask him.

"Dad, what's our household income?" I asked.

"I'll find the papers for you to look at," he replied.

"Dad, how far did you reach in school?" I asked again.

"I was able to receive my AA at a trade school, but never finished to get my BA," he replied again.

A majority of the other questions I had to ask my counselors because I wasn't sure how to answer them. In reality, it took me a while to actually not feel embarrassed about asking for help. I was never the one to reach out for help, because I thought I'd always be able to figure things out on my own. This process made me realize that it's not bad to ask for help.

When it came time to fill out college applications, I was stressed and had anxiety that universities were not going to accept me. I was okay if I had to go to community college first, but it was my personal goal to go straight to a 4-year, just like my cousin. After submitting applications and waiting for the end of the school year for those life-changing notifications to come in, I was nervous and so were my classmates, who were waiting for their emails, too. Acceptances and rejections had mostly gone digital by my senior year, and when I received my first email, I was scared to open it. I was right to be scared, too, because that was my first rejection email.

I was heartbroken. I didn't even tell my parents. I was not ready to receive any other emails anymore. I became sad for a while, but I soon brought myself back together and applied to be on the waitlist. Weeks went by and I received more rejection emails. I kept applying to the waitlist and kept hoping that I would get into one. After being shot down multiple times, I received my first acceptance to Cal State Long Beach.

I was super excited to tell everyone that I got accepted and was going to Long Beach! My family was proud of me, and they couldn't have been happier.

"Great job mija! We knew you could do it," my dad said.

"All the nagging we did was for this! To see you go to college! To keep pushing yourself!" my mom said.

"I know I know, but it was hard, and I know it's only going to get harder," I said.

"But you're smart. And look at you, you were able to do all this college stuff with such little help," my mom rebutted.

"I'm proud of you sis, I know you can go all the way," my brother said.

I have two and a half more years left of my undergrad. I will be the second child in my family to have a degree, and the first-generation female graduate in my family, as well. From that moment way back in middle school, I knew that I wanted to achieve more. That's when I knew that I would stand out from my family, and it is the hardest thing to do.

FICTION

Marlene Olin

ABBY

The serving platters were equitably distributed on the table. The pot roast lay centered, the rustic potatoes to the left, the ratatouille casserole to the right. Each napkin was folded with origami precision. The menu not only reflected the right combination of eye-catching colors but a sufficient number of antioxidants as well.

Abby was pleased. She marched into the kitchen, thumbed through her calendar on the wall, and struck off Thursday night dinner. Two hours of television would be followed by a fifteen-minute shower. Then if Clifford were in the mood, the 10:15-10:30 slot would be occupied by lovemaking. Her day was done.

A few moments later her family was seated at the table. While they ate and talked, Abby's head swiveled from side to side.

"So here we are in the faculty lounge," said Clifford, "looking out the window. It's the middle of February, and wouldn't you know. The kids are walking to their classes in tee-shirts and shorts. It's the middle of February in New-fricking-England, and they're dressed for a day at the beach!"

"It's climate change," said Lewis. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

Their nightly game was simple. Whatever ball her husband tossed, their son returned. Though Clifford was short and squat, their son was six feet tall and a hundred and thirty pounds. Pale lank hair. Tentacle-like fingers. Everything about him was stringy. She watched the words as they swished overhead, bandying across the table. *Greenhouse effect. Ozone layer*. *Rising waters.* Then she sighed and cleared her throat.

"By the way, Clifford. Did you speak to your friend in Admissions? What's her name? Clara or Cassandra or Claudia. You know. The one who said she'd help."

It was a sore subject. Lewis' SAT scores were embarrassingly low and he refused to retake the test. Clifford was a tenured Professor of Modern Poetry. Though he loved his son, he hated intervening. Lewis' college application would be an embarrassment. Clifford knew it. Abby knew it. They all knew it.

"Perhaps Father could help," said Abby. "Maybe Father could make a donation…"

Clifford shot her a look. Abby knew that look. It was a look that said she was crazy. They lived in the kind of small academic town where the trappings of wealth were frowned upon. Clothes and jewelry didn't

matter. The kind of car you drove didn't matter either. What did matter were internships and acceptance letters. *My Henry's volunteering in Botswana this summer. My Lydia's dancing with The Met.*

"Be patient, sweetheart," said Clifford. "One school or another will offer him a spot."

But what if every single college turned Lewis down? They were his parents and this is what parents did. They'd find him something. Right? A job at a publishing house or a prolonged trip overseas. Right? But then again he could end up a freeloader. Dressed day and night in a pair of sweatpants. Knuckle deep in Cheetos watching TV on the couch.

Underneath her hand she felt her lips moving. Did they move? There were days when what she thought and what she said no longer had any distinction. She glanced at her husband then back again at her son. Tears the size of rivulets ran down her cheeks. She felt her face redden. Was it red? She watched Clifford lean forward as he patted her hand. He looked worried. Was he worried? How well he simulated concern!

"Is it hormones, Abs? Are you starting menopause? Lately you just haven't been yourself."

Define *yourself.*

Abby closed her eyes and felt the branches of her lungs expand. If only she could outsource her feelings, if only she could hand them off like a baton to someone else! When she concentrated, she could breathe. The clock ticked. The radiator clanked. Then suddenly she heard feet shuffle. Lewis was rearranging his arms and legs. All at once he beamed his parents a smile.

"No problema, mis padres," said Lewis. "I have the problem like totally under control."

Abby looked at Lewis then Clifford then back again.

"Did you know," said Lewis, "that you only have to be like one sixteenth Native American to be labeled Native American?"

"I believe the correct term is Indigenous Peoples," said Clifford.

"So I ordered a DNA kit. Sometime around Easter we'll get the results. I'm super super excited."

Abby couldn't remember the last time she had seen her son so animated. The day his new Xbox arrived in the mail? When the Red Sox won the World Series? On and on he went like a spool unraveling.

"Remember those dreams I used to have?" said Lewis. "You

remember. About tepees and war paint and riding around on a horse."

Abby blinked.

"My friend Zach Schwartz found out he's 8% black. So I figure maybe we're something cool like Cherokee or Comanche. And once I check that box on my applications, the schools will come running."

Clifford was moaning as he buried in his face in his hands. "My parents, if you recall, were Jewish immigrants from Russia. Your mother's family dates back to the Mayflower. They're blue bloods, Kemosabe. As blue-blooded as they come."

Meanwhile Abby was quickly reconfiguring previously stored information. Drawers in her brain were opening and slamming shut. Without speaking a word, she got up and walked quickly into the kitchen. Then she stood over the sink and threw up whatever forkfuls of food she had eaten for dinner.

***

When she first met Clifford near twenty-five years earlier, the light was low and the music loud. The bar was off-campus, a typical Boston hangout, the food ample but greasy. Abby was just starting her senior year. The bar was teeming with boys of every shape and size, but none of her college classmates were the least bit interested in Clifford. Perhaps that was the attraction. Falling for him was a *fuck you* gesture. To her friends. To her parents. To the white bread country club her parents dragged her to every Saturday night.

In heels, she was at least three inches taller. Though they were bundled in winter clothes, a carpet of black hair ran on the outside of his hands and inside the vee of his shirt. His hair wasn't trimmed as much as chopped, a mass of unruly curls covering his collar. And when he spoke, a torrent of words flowed out, a veritable tsunami that threatened to swallow her whole.

"Let Saudi Arabia fight their own fricking wars!"

"Reagan and his goddamned toys. First it was Peacekeeper rockets. Now it's Patriot Missiles. What's left? The Benevolent Bomb? The Magnanimous Torpedo!"

Pontificating of course. About everyone and everything. His teeth were badly in need of orthodonture. He smelled of day-old clothes and sweaty socks. Having summered in Europe, Abby had been educated in the finer things. Giverny. Givenchy. Gauguin. Clifford was like a third world country. Foreign. Exciting. Strange.

Hours later, when her friends paired off, Abby found herself

stumbling to his tiny apartment. Alone with his half-dead plants and stacks of tattered books, they made love.

She felt both dirty and clean, vulgar and virtuous at the same time. Clifford was far more sexually experienced, expertly traversing her body's dips and curves. He blurted sonnets as he moaned. Nothing was off-limits. When he showed her the way, she followed.

The memory of that night still brought a smile to her lips. The creaky floor. The headboard banging against the wall. There was a time her parents hoped she be wooed by wealth and Wall Street. That she'd find a guy whose first name sounded like his last. Instead Abby fell in love with a disheveled poet who enticed her with Shakespeare and sin.

***

When they married the following year, Abby imagined a whole new existence. A world of pot-filled rooms and bongo drums, of long-haired beatniks and their barefoot wives. Clifford would read to her with her feet in his lap. A wood-burning stove would warm them. They'd grow tulips in the spring.

Instead they tumbled into the trenches of academia. Clifford, like countless other MFA candidates, was vying for a PhD fellowship at a top school. Abby had never known such duplicity. The cheerless faculty teas. The limp handshaking and the backdoor promises. All Abby wanted was to be was whisked away. Two years later she both did and didn't get what she wished for. Clifford, to their great relief, was offered a full ride. The catch was that the program was in Ohio.

Within weeks, the Clifford that she knew transformed. He cut his hair, wore corduroy sport coats, and learned to moon his nails. At cocktail parties, he impressed the men with his wit and the wives with his charm. Abby had trouble keeping up. The banter always seemed one step ahead. The women were impossibly efficient balancing children and jobs, play-groups and potlucks. And what was Abby to do?

The plan had been to get pregnant. But when that didn't happen, she had no idea how to fill her days. The university had plenty of slots if she settled for bookkeeping or clerical work. But Abby could barely work a calculator or even type. What she did know was clothes.

It was a Sunday morning. The panes of their bedroom window were laced with snow, the crystals sparkling in the morning light. Three blankets were piled on top of them as they clung to each other for warmth. Clifford kissed the top of Abby's head.

"That store on Main Street, the nice one with the brick facade, has a *Help Wanted* sign in the window."

Jones of New York. Pendleton. Austin Reed. Abby knew the brands right off.

"It's up to you, Abs. If you want to keep busy. Before the baby comes, is all I'm saying."

A month later, her fingers flew over the cash register as she rang up sale after sale. She both loved and hated the job. Midwestern fashions lagged a year behind the ads she combed in *Vogue*. Most faculty wives just picked over the sales racks. There was a shocking paucity of black.

But there was no denying she was good at it. She was confident without being pushy, tactful without being shy. Before long, the owner gave her a 50% discount. She's a Renee Zellweger look-alike, they told her. With her long legs and slim waist, everything she wore flew out the door.

***

She met the stranger during a lunch break. Most salesclerks and secretaries were paid minimum wage and brown-bagged it. Of course, she and Clifford were on a budget and had lots and lots of loans. But dressed in her long wool skirt and silk blouse, Abby felt rich. A handful of restaurants ran up and down Main Street. A glass of Chardonnay. A salad Nicoise. What was the harm?

"Hello, beautiful. Did you drop this?"

He was dressed in Armani and smelled like Christmas. Blond and blue-eyed. Of Scandinavian background, she supposed.

Abby scanned the restaurant. No one appeared remotely familiar as the lunch crowd jockeyed for seats. Waitresses were carrying trays. Bus boys were cleaning. "Killing Me Softly" played on the radio above the din.

"I hate eating alone," he said as he waved the glove. "Do you mind if I join you?"

In a flash, he was sitting across from her. His field was gas and oil, he told her. He flies in and out, he said, staying at the Best Western outside of town. Abby was used to sitting eye to eye with Clifford. But this guy, six feet tall at least, peered down from the stratosphere.

"Do you come here often?" he asked her. "I hear the steak au poivre is grand."

It was like someone changed the channel. For a brief moment, she imagined herself in a different life and a different city. No longer was Abby stuck at a dead-end job in a dreary town. Instead of black and white, the program was in Dolby Technicolor with 3-D sound.

The man was clearly lonely. Lonely or bored or both. For once he

started talking he didn't stop. A half hour then an hour passed by. Outside the snow was falling horizontally while winds whipped litter across the sidewalks. Would it ever stop snowing? Abby had no idea when spring would finally come.

"Can I see you again?" he asked. "There are other places, nicer places. It could be just the two of us. A good brandy. A warm fire. A nice Brie."

Abby pinched herself. For as long as she could remember she was on the outside looking in. Like she was a squatter in her own body, merely occupying it until the right resident showed up. So when that movie replayed once more in her head, she simply slipped into the screen. Batting her eyelashes, she held up her hand and transformed.

"For goodness sake. You had me at *hello*."

***

Clifford had no idea that she and the man were meeting. It was easy, too easy, to lie. *Did I tell you I was taking yoga? Did you mind if I went to the gym?* Abby's husband simply adored her. He never suspected a thing.

Those few weeks were both exciting and exhausting. Abby and the man met like spies, using different motels at all times of day. They'd sign fake names into the register and spend the next hour pretending they were real.

You look gorgeous today, Mrs. Brown.

Could you help me with my coat, Mr. Lee?

Of course, Abby wasn't a fool. There was the distinct possibility that the man was nothing he painted himself to be. A door-to-door salesman, in all probability. And God only knew his real name.

In the beginning, that was part and parcel of the allure.

But soon the script was getting harder to follow. Sex with the stranger left her wanting. It was too mechanical, too color by number. A fake fireplace always burned in the lobby. The bathrooms had carpeting on the floors.

Sure he was good-looking. But by now Abby had expanded her education. There were an infinite number of motels located on the outskirts of town, and an infinite number of attractive men seemed to frequent them.

Then two months from the day they met Abby found out she was pregnant.

At the first she ignored it. The nausea. The soreness in her breasts. After trying so long to get pregnant with Clifford, she couldn't believe it was happening now.

She made a doctor's appointment and quickly came to a few conclusions. One. Even though the child was probably the stranger's, she decided to cut off all ties. And two. She'd never ever tell Clifford the truth.

Months passed, and the pregnancy both was and wasn't what she expected. The film now playing in her head was a '50s sitcom. In her dreams, she was wearing an apron over her shirtwaist dress, her hair in an updo, her feet in heels. Clifford would come home to a roast and a home-cooked pie.

But reality always had a way of interfering. Instead she'd leave work early in the afternoons, her legs swollen, her feet throbbing. Her waist became nonexistent. Sometimes she looked in the mirror and had no idea who was looking back.

Then in her ninth month, weeks before she was due to give birth, she once again saw the stranger. He was walking down Main Street, holding a briefcase with one hand and a jacket with the other. He must have been fifty yards away, his head above the crowd, his blond hair loose in the autumn breeze.

Closer and closer he came, and as the space between them narrowed, the wilder Abby's heartbeat. When she had broken up with him, he had sounded both a little upset and a little relieved. He knew where she worked. He knew how to reach her. Abby was both a little upset and a little relieved when he didn't try.

Thirty yards. Twenty yards. She had gained forty pounds with her pregnancy and though most of the weight was in her stomach, her face was mildly bloated, too. Fifteen yards. Ten yards. If only she had worn her cashmere sweater! Five yards. Four yards. Her hair! If only she had pinned her hair!

And just like that, as if she were invisible, he passed her by.

***

"My husband and son keep telling me that I'm not myself."

Weeks after their dinner conversation, the snows in New England had come and gone. Some days were blazingly blue while others were shrouded in gray. The therapist opened the blinds to let in the sun.

"Then who are you, Abigail? Donna Reed? Sandra Dee? Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*?"

"Very funny," said Abby.

Spectacled with a herringbone jacket, he was a shrink straight from central casting. Abby didn't trust him. Why should she trust him?

"I think we need to address the issues at hand, Abigail. You know the roles. Dutiful wife. Beleaguered mother. When you try, you can play them quite well."

Abby opened her purse and took out a cigarette. She'd been smoking since she was fifteen but nearly no one knew. Of course, the therapist wouldn't let her light up. But just sitting on the couch with a Virginia Slims between her fingers lent a certain thrill. She gestured as she spoke, waving the cigarette theatrically, watching her hand as she waved.

"The DNA results are due any day," said Abby. "Obviously I'm frantic. Shouldn't I be frantic?"

Dr. Teitlebaum leaned forward in his seat. "Like we discussed last week. These ancestry tests provide limited information. Their data only reflects relatives who've had a swab. And even then their identities are concealed. Any disclosure needs a consent."

Abby started foraging in her purse for her lighter.

Teitlebaum shook his head. "All these years and your husband and your son have no idea."

"I told you," said Abby. "What? A thousand times? They think Lewis takes after my family."

Teitlebaum spoke louder and slower. "I'm talking about the smoking. Not the pregnancy. The smoking. Do you hear me, Abigail? Are you listening?"

She now had the lighter in one hand and the cigarette in the other. She felt a camera zooming in. "What you don't understand is that people like to be deceived. They're highly motivated, you know? They believe want they want to believe."

The shrink lifted his pen and clipboard. Abby hated when he started writing. Once something was put to paper it could end up anywhere. *The Boston Globe. The New York Times.*

"One thing is certain, Abigail. Those DNA results will change your life. Your son's genetic makeup--his ethnicity--will not be what he expects."

Over the years, Abby had tried many therapists. Psychiatrists. Psychologists. Even a Hindu yogi or two. But this one had an entire catalogue of faces, and she could sit on that couch all day long just watching

them. It was so interesting, the sitting and watching, trying to figure out which one he'd try on next.

"There's always the chance that Clifford was adopted," said Abby. "Maybe he was adopted and never knew."

The narrowed eyes. The opened mouth. Yes! There it was! The Concerned Face.

"Besides Lewis is an idiot," said Abby. "If he were smart like Clifford, he'd put two and two together. But he's just like me — dumb as a stump."

Hah! The Surprised Face.

"Have you been taking your medication, Abigail?"

"Do you know what bothers me the most, Dr. Teitlebaum? The possibility that we'll find out the Swede's true name. That was part of the mystery, you know. Fucking a total stranger. It made it all so anonymous. Like it was happening to someone else. Like I was a cloud hanging over the bed, looking down, watching two bodies fuck like cats."

Ah! Her favorite. The Shocked Face.

Satisfied, Abby looked at her watch. "Oops! Time's up." Then she tucked her cigarette and lighter back in her purse, arranged the pleats of her Faconnable pants, and headed for the door. As usual, she concentrated on her exit. She slipped her hands into her coat sleeves, wrapped her scarf around her neck, and slowly pulled on her gloves. She watched the therapist as he watched her. Then she followed him as he crossed the room. In a moment his hand would be on the door knob. There'd be a whoosh of cold air. Perhaps an inch or two of light. A whiff of her Chanel No. 5. Next she'd say, "See you next week, Dr. T." And only when she was halfway down the hall would he sigh and close the door behind her.

David Ruiz

WHERE HE GOES

I told him I wouldn't check. I told him I wouldn't. And, really, for so long, I've been quite good, I haven't checked.

But today I did.

Two years ago, John surprised me.

"Can I ask you to do something?" he said.

"Yes, of course," I said, of course, yes.

"Can you not check our GPS app today? Just—just don't check it at all. I'm going to surprise you."

It was nearing our anniversary and, just months before, I'd persuaded John to share his phone's location with me. All hours, every day, everywhere he went.

It all comes in an app, and the app came with both our phones, I told him. It was simple, I said.

"It's simple. Look at all your apps and find the one called 'Find My Friends.' It's already on your phone—it's on both of ours. Open that app and tap 'Add' and then choose me as the contact. See? I'll be right there in your phone. Then you just tap 'Send' and select 'Share Indefinitely.' Remember to choose that option."

"And then what?" John asked.

"And then I'll do the same exact thing with you from my phone. See? Done."

John looked at me blankly.

"It's probably confusing," I said. "I get it. Let me show you. Look, I asked Megan today to try it out, to have her share her location with me for 24 hours."

I put my phone to John's face and we watched Megan—a little blue dot—pacing through a grocery store. It worked, I told John. It worked.

"Okay," John said, slower this time. "But… then what?"

"What do you mean 'But then what?' There is no then what."

It was rational, I said, in case one of our cars broke down. It was practical, I said, in case I misplaced my phone. It was easier, I said, for all those times we got separated at music festivals. And it was imperative, I said, in case of emergency. What if I get robbed? I asked. What if I get kidnapped? I asked. What if I'm taken away and the police have no clues to find me? What if they try to reach John and he's stuck at work, I thought, I always thought. What if they call and they call and they call and he doesn't pick up?

John had become so much busier then. A promotion gave him so many new clients, and those clients didn't care about finishing the last season of The Americans together, about putting up the Christmas tree, about promising to visit my mom this weekend. Those clients weren't just in the United States, they were in Tokyo, Singapore, London, Dubai. They

had morning meetings at night. They kept John stressed and exhausted. They kept me stressed and exhausted.

John started coming home so late that I couldn't tell if he was eating right or eating at all. I couldn't tell if he had any more time to go for runs at the local track. I couldn't tell if his routine was ruined, if his emotions were thinning, if he felt frayed just like me. I couldn't imagine him staying so long at his desk, paling under the fluorescent lights. I couldn't believe it for John and I couldn't believe it for his coworkers. So what if he made more money? So what if he could buy a house in seven years instead of twelve? So what if any of them could do the same thing? They couldn't be working 10-, 12-, 14-hour days, six or seven days a week. They couldn't. It was wrong. What client wants to be entertained at 9:00 PM? What kind of deadline is 11:59 PM for an environmental impact report? What needs to be done at 1:00 AM that can't be done by hiring more employees? If John and his coworkers made just so much money why didn't they just hire more people so they could all go home on time? So they could all see their families and their fiancées and their friends?

Why didn't they want to see us?

Knowing John's location would help. Just a little, at least. Just to know he wasn't only sitting at his desk all day, he wasn't only getting his exercise in the steps from his car to his office. Just to know that when he'd say "I'll be home in twenty," that he'd really be home in twenty. Just to know that when he's at the supermarket I can remind him we've run out of paper towels. Just to know. Knowing John's location was for safety, like I said. Knowing John's location was for emergencies, like I said. Knowing John's location was for my anxiety, like I never said. It was for knowing.

"I don't see why we need this," John said.

"I don't see how we can't," I pushed.

John stayed quiet and shifted a little, and I watched him closely, close enough that he knew I was watching. I saw his shoulders pull closer to his chest, his breathing fighting against the muscle-bound straight jacket of his body. I watched him struggle. I watched his eyes pull away from our living room and into somewhere distant, somewhere I've never seen myself, but somewhere I know John visits often, somewhere at the end of a tunnel that must have the most tempting glow. Somewhere where the curtains pull away, as if by magic, and the stage puts on a most dazzling show.

"I'll do it," John said. "If it will help you feel better, I'll share my location. It's really—it's a good idea."

It was a good idea.

And for some time, it worked. It all worked.

I'd only check once a day, at most, at first. Often just after getting home, just after setting my bag down and taking off my shoes and changing into my glasses from my contacts. I'd open up my phone and look at John's blue dot. It glowed. It shone, a small star placed between a web of freeways, side-streets, office parks, and highway numbers.

It also danced. It skipped to the parking lot of John's office. It

fluttered out the driveway, pirouetted onto the freeway ramp, and leapt. Sometimes it stopped at a bar, other times it spent two hours at a nearby restaurant. I could almost see John parking his car, walking out and across the lot, opening a set of double doors and walking into a great, bustling space, greeted by a hostess, putting his name down for himself and his clients, only to wait. And then, John's blue dot would be walked to one corner of the dining room, and there he'd sit, likely with three or four other blue dots—blue dots for someone else, for wives, partners, fiancées or girlfriends who made the same appeal that I did.

It's for safety, they would've said. It's for emergencies, they would've said. It's for practicality, they would've said. And it's for moments just like this, when we can see and know and be okay. It's for moments when our stomachs rise up into our throats. It's for moments when I know I shouldn't worry and I feel terrible about it. It's for moments when, after worrying so long, I get angry with John and then I get only angrier at myself.

It's for moments where I swear I saw John's blue dot pulse, a cartographer's heart beat mapping out a promise: I'm here. I'm here for you.

But one day John surprised me.

"Can I ask you to do something?" I still remember him saying. "Can you not check our GPS app today? Just—just don't check it at all. I'm going to surprise you."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's a surprise. But I need just one day off the app," he said. "One day without the map, one day without the compass."

"And then what?" I asked.

"And then you'll see."

John went gift-shopping for our anniversary. He didn't want me to see the store he visited. He didn't want me guessing and ruining the surprise.

And, oh, John did so well that day. John framed dozens of memories from our first year dating—a receipt from a dim sum restaurant we stumbled upon, movie tickets for Lady Bird at the Varsity theater in Davis, two bracelets from Coachella (I thought I'd lost mine!), even a little drawing of a bird that I made on a bar napkin one night. Oh, John had been saving it all, and he put it all together and framed it and even hung it on the wall in that empty spot in the living room that I'd always wanted to fill up with something special—something big and beautiful and something that told the guests exactly who we were. John filled that space with us.

I imagined what our friends would say.

"Oh, you filled that space!" they'd say, because they knew how important it was to me.

"Oh, it's you and John!" they'd say, because it was obvious.

"Oh, it's so full and vibrant. It's so full of love. John loves you so much. Oh, how John loves you. How John loves you he loves you he loves

you, trust him. Trust him."

Surely, they'd say that.

So, when John asked that I not look at our GPS app the next time, for another surprise, I was giddy. Of course I said yes.

And John surprised me again.

And then John asked again for another day of no-checking. And again I was radiant. And again he surprised me.

And John asked again and again. And again and again he surprised me.

The app-less, map-less days became frequent. John became hungry for them. My birthday, Christmas, our anniversary—it seemed like at least once every other month, John surprised me. The surprises got bigger, too; they took longer to produce. So John asked for more time, more "buffer" before each.

"This one will take a week," he said, then "This one might take two."

It did take that long. For my birthday, John took cooking classes for two weeks, a sort of accelerated course from a friend of a client. He had saved a menu from our first real, real dinner together as a couple, our first prix fixe, and he recreated it all himself. First up, a twist on French onion soup, with bacon-onion jam and red wine aspic, followed by a beet risotto with fontina, horseradish, and pistachio. The main entree was a type of European sea bass served on top of cannellini beans and broccoli spigarello. For desert, John was honest: He completely ruined the dark chocolate mousse and flourless biscuit sponge needed for a small cake. So, he bought me ice cream instead.

It was just as wonderful as I remembered.

This year, John asked for the most time ever: everything after Thanksgiving, a whole 32 days before Christmas and then so many days after that, too. It was important, he said.

"There's Christmas, New Year's, and then it's basically Valentine's Day," John said, though he'd never taken Valentine's Day seriously, and who gives gifts on New Year's?

But I agreed. John could be trusted.

But today I looked, and I saw something new.

I saw John's blue dot somewhere else. Not a store, not a restaurant, not a kitchen or a climbing gym—I've been hinting that I want to try rock climbing—or even a card shop. John's blue dot was 13 miles away, somewhere residential, somewhere that required so many left and right turns away from his office, away from our home, deep into another neighborhood.

I don't know what I'll say. I told him I wouldn't check. I told him I wouldn't. And, really, for so long, I was quite good, I didn't check.

But today I did and I saw John somewhere new, somewhere new at least to me. New to me until it became familiar. Drive after drive. Drive after drive after drive. Day after day. I've done it so often now, I know it by memory.

I remember the first visit quite well. The walking to the car, the closing the door, the turning the engine on, the left turn, the left turn, the staying right to enter the highway, the exit, the left, the left, the Head Straight for 1.3 Miles, the right, the Your Destination Will Be On The Right.

You Have Arrived.

Sometimes I drive by and I don't stop at all. Sometimes I keep driving, right past John's parked car, sitting in an entirely different driveway, in front of an entirely different house. Sometimes I keep driving and just glance. Sometimes I make a U-turn and glance again. Sometimes I do it over and over and sometimes I try not to slow down at all and sometimes I drive right through the intersections and sometimes times I can hear my tires screech and if I drive fast enough the houses start to blur and I see John's car not at one house but many. Maybe John is at the house with the new paint job or maybe he's at the house that kept its Halloween decorations up until mid-December or maybe he's at the house with the small, plastic children's slide in front. Maybe John is with a young mother, whose partner maybe did the same thing, whose partner maybe drove his own car to another woman's house, tired of being a father, tired of being married to a young mother, with a slide in the front yard for their child, tired of it all, and so maybe John is with her. Or maybe he's with a coworker. Or maybe he's making a home call to a client, a real emergency, maybe it's an emergency that happens every evening and only John can fix it, only John knows what's right. Maybe John is with all these women all at the same time, and maybe they attend meetings, and they have a schedule and a shared Google Calendar. Maybe I'm the only one not on it. But maybe, really, I just need to slow down, yes, slow down, because I've blown that stop sign four times tonight and I'm having trouble focusing on the road because the lights behind me are just so bright.

"Do you know why I pulled you over, ma'am?"

"I was speeding. I know that. I was speeding and I ran a stop sign."

"That's partly true, yes."

"Partly?"

"We've been getting complaints, ma'am. Complaints about your car, specifically. Neighbors say they've seen you driving up and down the streets here multiple nights for a little under three weeks now. Ma'am, what are you doing? Do you live here?"

"I do not."

"Then explain what you're doing here."

I tell him everything. About the GPS app, about John's surprise gifts, about the map-less days, and about me finding that blue dot where it isn't supposed to be.

"Does your boyfriend know you're here?" he asks.

It's a question I never considered.

Does John know I'm here? How doesn't John know I'm here? Doesn't he check his app, too? Doesn't he check to see where I am just as often as I do for him? But he can't have checked his app. He can't have.

Not even once, otherwise he'd have seen me outside, driving by again and again, my own blue dot jetting up and down the street. Or he'd have seen my blue dot sometimes sitting and waiting across the street, just hundreds of feet away from him. And he'd have stopped. He'd have been caught away from home with someone else. He'd have stopped, right? Of course he would have stopped. He would have to. Caught, he would stop.

The officer tells me to go home and that if I come back he'll have stalking charges waiting for me. Stalking against who, I ask, it's not like John is the victim. John has no idea I'm here. The officer says he'll tell John, and I wonder if it's better that way. If it's better to confront this with a third party.

But I decide to tell John myself after I drive home. I know where you've been, I'll say. I know that you've been seeing someone. I know you don't have a great gift for Christmas-New-Year's-Valentine's-Day. I know that this is the worst surprise so far.

"I checked the app," I tell John when he gets home that night. It's just a week before Christmas now.

"Hmm?"

"The app. I checked it. I saw where you were."

John pauses with his keys dangling in his hands. He's halfway between the door and the dining table and his eyes flick towards the television. He doesn't say anything but his head tilts upward and he stares at the ceiling for just a little too long, his shoulders falling like they've removed a great weight, free to relax and roll. I can see his jaw clenching slightly and he's curious what he'll say next. Even he doesn't know.

He starts with "I'm sorry" and then "I can explain."

"You're cheating on me."

"It's not like that."

"Explain what it is like."

"Babe… you know how—"

"Explain," I interrupt.

"Lately, ever since—"

"This isn't an explanation," I interrupt again. "An explanation is 'I cheated on you because.' Explain."

"I'm not—"

"Cheating on me?" I say. I wait. John is slow, the pauses in his speech make this easy. "What are you doing then, visiting the same woman four nights a week for the past three weeks? What are you doing there?"

— — —

I moved out the next night and John apologized for weeks. He said he would change. He said he would be different. He agreed to no more map-less dates—the phone would be on him at all times and he'd be visible every second of every day. So many people told me cheating isn't as simple as I made it out to be, that relationships take work, that love is hard.

Restarting my life alone is hard. Moving back in with my mom

is hard. Seeing friends from high school at Barnes & Noble and avoiding them is hard. Continuing to hate John is hard. Avoiding him—not just his blue dot—is hard. His Instagram, his Twitter, his Facebook. His friends, which are my friends, have split in half, some consoling me, the rest consoling John. Feeling like I wasted years of my life is the hardest, harder than I thought.

I try one more time. I move back in.

Christmas came and New Year's came and Valentine's came and, though John's gifts no longer surprised me, I was fine. I didn't want surprises. I wanted certainty.

I now check the app constantly. I never turn it off. This constant use drains my battery in hours, but I bought an additional charger and a portable battery that I carry with me everywhere. I won't go anywhere—not a cafe, not a bookstore, not a friend's home—without knowing if I can use the electrical outlets.

And for a little while, it works. It works even better than I want. John's blue dot is often the first thing I see when I unlock my phone. John's blue dot is at work. Then it's at home. Then it's at work. Then it's at home. It's regular, it's routine, it's constant. His blue dot doesn't even go out for lunch anymore. Instead, John packs a lunch every night. Sometimes it's leftovers from what I make for dinner, sometimes it's something cold and pathetic that he tries to put together after coming home around midnight. Cold cuts sandwich, no mayo, no veggies. 11-minute pasta, sauce unheated and lumped on, directly into the Tupperware. Baby carrots dropped into a half-eaten container of hummus. I never offer help.

One night after work I get in my car and I take a wrong turn. And then another. And then another and another and another until I'm in front of the house I visited every night for weeks.

John's car is no longer in the driveway. I breathe a heavy sigh of relief. I know John isn't checking my location. I know it and it's okay. It's freeing, much more freeing than making sure to turn down the TV volume after 10 PM for my mom who wakes up early. It's much more freeing than avoiding my own life.

It's about 7:30 PM and the sun is going down and everyone's indoor lights are turning on, and, just for an hour or two, it's easy to see everyone's lives, neatly framed within their windows.

The woman comes into focus. I never really saw her, not clearly, that is. I was always too upset, too anxious, too worried. She's pretty, but not too pretty. Her hair is tied back in a low-slung ponytail and her work bag is slumped over on a chair in her living room. Underneath it are unfolded jeans and a couple of crumpled tank tops. She's already changed into grey shorts and a black, thin pullover. She's taller than me. She's slimmer. But she looks just as tired and burnt out as me, a slumped posture, two dark circles starting to form around her eyes. She's poured herself the same, oversize portion of wine that I do most days. The bottle sits nearby.

I watch and I watch and I feel myself stuck. She comes in and out of the window frame, her oxblood-colored curtains pulled back and her

blinds drawn up, her movements a dazzling show on a stage. She goes to her work bag and pulls out her laptop, opening it and setting it down just within view. She refers to it over and over, probably for a recipe.

She walks directly into the center of the window and sits on her couch, her figure in profile. Her nose sticks out a bit too much but her cheekbones—at least the one I can see—swoop gracefully into her jaw. The corners of her mouth pull downwards as if by instinct. She calls out someone's name. I can't hear it.

And then, from the side of the frame, comes John.

I look at my phone. His blue dot is at work.

I call.

Through the window frame I watch John reach into his pocket and pull out a flip-phone. He answers.

"Hey, what's up babe?" he says, so easy.

I'm startled and almost lose my own words. "Oh, I'm just—well, I'm… I'm trying this new recipe tonight."

"Yeah? Sorry, I won't be able to try it right away. I'm stuck at work."

"Oh, okay, yeah. Yeah, that's fine. I just thought maybe you would wrap up early today."

"Sorry. Just not tonight. But leave some out for me for when I get home. I'll be starving."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Love you," I say.

"Love you, too."

John hangs up the second phone, the second phone that he's likely set up to receive calls from another number. His blue dot is at work. It's just that he isn't.

Caught, John didn't stop.

Shit… I promised I'd make dinner, too.

Maria Lourens

TYING THE KNOT

I always tied my hijab with a knot at the back of my neck before I did my makeup. I still think it frames my face. I don't wear a veil like some women do; I just cover my head. I like it; it's like a little bit of mystery under my headscarf. I remember the first time I used the blue eye shadow and the black kohl pencil—it really popped against the black of the hijab. That's all we really have—the eyes. It's not as if I could flick my long hair or show off my legs like European girls do. I remember my Aunt Nodira and her friend sitting on the balcony eating oranges and drinking mint tea. It was in the summer, unbearably hot, but on the balcony, you could feel the cool sea breeze sweeping in from the ocean. They always sat there on a Saturday afternoon.

"It's all in the eyes. It's all in the eyes, Minah," I heard Aunt Nodira say. Funny the things you remember.

I bought the blue makeup from 1er Mae and hid it in the camel-leather bag with the gold zipper. I could never put it on at home with Sadia watching my every move in those days. I waited until I got to Club 54 on Place Auden. I always walked down the tree-lined street, stopped at the University gates, and looked up to Madame Afrique, the big pink cathedral that watches over the city. It's still nice to know Madame Afrique watches over us.

There were lots of traders on Place Auden selling handmade pastries with almonds and honey and ras-el-hanout and za'atar and other spices. There was always a queue outside Mustapha's little shop, where he roasted the coffee beans and ground them for people waiting with little brown paper bags. The smell was addictive; you had to stop for a few minutes and take deep breaths of the bittersweet coffee. Zohra, my best friend to this day, her father had a shop next to Mustapha's selling camel-leather poufs and woven carpets. Sometimes we used to sit on the poufs and just breathe in the aroma that came off the roasted coffee beans. I still love the walk to this day; I just walk it differently now.

The coffee shop wasn't full that day, so I slipped straight into the ladies' toilet with its two squatty potties and the cracked mirror. The small window with the frosted glass and the black burglar bars made it feel like a prison cell, but Madame Farouk always made sure it was spotlessly clean. I picked up the soap she kept in the blue-and-white enamel dish; it was marbled with cream and a coffee color, shaped like a clamshell. The almond fragrance clung to your hands when you lathered it under the hot water tap. I washed my hands over and over and cupped them over my face, inhaling the sweet almond smell.

The first time I did it, I made sure I applied the eye shadow exact-

ly the way they demonstrated on the model at Madame Bakoush's salon: first, using the cream color to highlight the top part of my eye, just under the eyebrow, then carefully using the darker blue for the center of the eyelid and the silvery blue color on the tips to widen the eyes. I was really careful not to smudge the black kohl. I steadied my hand and arched the black line slowly along the edge of my eyes, and then carefully applied the mascara to my dark lashes.

"Most Algerian girls don't need blush on the cheeks. Our olive skin has a natural glow to it." Madame Bakoush was very clear on this point.

She said too much rouge on the cheeks could make you look like a kahba. I smiled at the face that looked back at me through the cracks in the mirror—I felt sophisticated and worldly. I patted the knot and thought of the Knots of Islam we were taught in Tarbia Islamia. Never undo the knots that keep the faith so strong.

I could hear Souad Massi's music blaring out of the speaker closest to the toilet door. Everybody was so excited that year to have an Algerian woman in the Top 20 in Paris. "Le Bien et le Mal" was playing loudly, and it has so much meaning for me now, like I was meant to hear it then but I didn't listen. Le bien et le mal—the good and the evil.

Anyway, I could hear loud voices and knew the place was packed by the time I finished my makeover. The kahbas were always sitting on the comfy leather sofas close to the toilet door. They smoked long cigarettes, which looked strange to me—a woman in a hijab smoking—but there are lots of smokers here. Aunt Nodira said that in Europe you were not allowed to smoke inside a building. They talked about it on the radio. They want to ban it now, but I don't know if they will. I could smell the smoke in the toilet and was glad to have my hair covered with the hijab so it wouldn't smell of smoke when I went home to Sadia.

As I walked out, I saw him: Whaleed and the boy he was always with. Malik was his name. Whaleed was a policeman and, according to my cousin Rafik, he was already doing really well. I heard my cousin Rafik talking about him at a dinner my aunt gave some time before that. I fancied Whaleed. He looked a little bit like my older brother that lives in England, Abdi. He was tall, with dark hair, and his eyes had dark, long lashes. His nose was straight and long, and his teeth shone, they were so white, when he cracked a smile. I knew he noticed me then because I remember he said something to Malik and they both nodded. It made me feel good. I put it all down to the blue eye shadow and wanted to scream out loudly, "Thank you, Madame Bakoush!"

The café was painted in a deep red color and the back walls in a light lemon yellow. Madame Farouk really thought about the way she wanted the café to look—woven camel bags hung on the walls and dark

leather floor seating with lots of bright cushions made it look so festive. She told me once she bought the fabric in Egypt because it was really cheap there. She got the little carved tables from a man who made them in Tizi Ouzou. The tables were always full of pots of mint tea and small colored glasses. The men mostly drank espresso coffees from the little brown cups with gold rims around the edges of the cups and saucers. I loved the chocolate cake with almonds she baked on a Friday. It was always gone by Saturday afternoon.

By the time Abdi, my brother, arrived in Algeria for Ramadan that year, I had already been seeing Whaleed for a while. Not in any improper way—I mean, it was not as if we were ever alone; Malik was always with us. Sometimes it really annoyed me. Malik. I learned the meaning of the name only later when it all ended, and my heart was full of sadness and anger and I think hate, but I couldn't tell anyone. Malik: the guardian of hell. I thought about it sometimes, how his name was just right for him.

The whole family always came together for Ramadan. We still do. I love this time of year. We fast during the day, and the older aunts start cooking at three o'clock. At Iftar, when the sun sets and we break the fast with dates and milk, everybody seems so happy and peaceful. Aunt Nodira always uses the best linen for the table, and there are so many dishes to choose from. My favorites are the vine leaves stuffed with rice and nuts and cooked with lamb in the oven for hours until the lamb is soft—it almost melts in your mouth. And the creamy scrambled eggs with lamb mince, onions, red peppers, and cumin is delicious. Depending on the time of year, we always have fresh figs with yogurt and honey and nuts, and the room smells of oranges and spices and mint tea. We play games and listen to music and the men smoke apple hookahs on the balconies.

I thought it was the best time to ask Abdi if I could marry Whaleed.

"No, Amal, please, not him. Not Whaleed, please. I know about him and I don't want you to marry him. That's it."

I cried and cried. I couldn't eat. I was pale and tired all the time. Sadia came to check on me.

"Amal, Abdi only wants what's best for you, habibti." But it was no use. I was inconsolable.

By the end of the week, Abdi finally came into my room. He sat on the end of the bed and said, "I can't stand to see you like this, Amal. Do you really, really love him?" He looked as if he couldn't believe it.

"Yes, Abdi, I do love him. I really do." I said that through tears and blowing my nose.

He looked at me for a while and said, "I can't stand your unhappi-

ness, Amal. I don't like seeing you like this. I don't think it will work, but if you really think this is what you want, then you can marry him." And then he kept quiet. And after a while he said, "But any heartbreak from this marriage will be on your own head." He shook his head and left the room.

You see, my Mom and Dad died when I was only nine. And Sadia, my oldest sister, was only sixteen at the time, but she raised us. Abdi was the only man in our family, so he had to give his consent; otherwise, I was not allowed to marry. Whaleed was relieved when Abdi finally said yes. He really wanted the marriage to go through as soon as possible because the police were assigning new apartments in the La Madrague area to young married couples. He was desperate to live in that area and own one of the new apartments. Married police officers also got more money.

From the time of the engagement, when both our families agreed on the wedding, our apartment was a hive of activity. Sadia and Zohra were more excited about the shoura than I was; a girl had to have as much stuff as possible to take into the marriage. They were advising what household stuff to buy, what clothing I needed, and Sadia even gave me one of my late mother's gold chains and a bracelet for the shoura.

The wedding ceremony was at a hotel in Zeralda, and I was just a bundle of nerves and excitement. I insisted on having the blue eye shadow and the tiny blue flowers on the veil. Zohra and Sadia helped me into the big white dress. My hair was tied up in a white, silky, satin hijab that looked a bit like a turban, and then they put the big white veil with the small blue flowers over me. It was very thin and I could see the whole world through the beautiful white veil with the light blue flowers. My hands and feet had a very delicate henna pattern on them. Sadia said she had the same design on her hands and feet when she got married. An older lady that worked for Madame Bakoush did all the henna patterns for the brides for years and years. I also had all my gold jewelry on because it's really important to show off your gold on this big day. Sadia left the room to check if the bridal car was downstairs. Zohra couldn't wait to ask,

"Amal! Are you nervous for tonight? Will you know what to do? I'm so excited for you. You look so beautiful!" She whispered it, and I laughed. I didn't know what to expect; I was so innocent and young then. The night before, Sadia came into my room and sat on the bed.

"Amal, you mustn't be nervous. Whaleed loves you and he will lead the way. You mustn't be afraid, habibti. It is the most beautiful thing between a man and a woman—if they are married."

She always placed the emphasis on *if they are married*. Like it is something dirty and ugly when you're not married.

The hall at the hotel looked beautiful: lots of yellow and gold and flowers. The buffet had couscous and lamb, chicken, and vegetables of ev-

ery kind. And even though the hotel did the catering, Aunt Nodira and her sisters insisted on making the baklava and makroud for dessert. I couldn't eat much; I was just really nervous for the wedding night. I did relax a bit when everybody started dancing. Whaleed and Malik were dancing like Algerian boys always do. When they went outside, I saw Abdi following them. I think Abdi was more nervous about that wedding than me.

After the party, I was driven to our new home that was prepared specially for the occasion. They hired a very grand gold chair that was decorated with lots of roses and I had to sit on it, and the close family came and danced around me and wished me well as they prepared to leave.

I remember how quiet it was when everybody left. I was so nervous and told Whaleed I had to take a shower. Whaleed said I should relax and take my time. When I came to bed, he was half asleep and said we were both very tired and we should just sleep and rest until tomorrow. The next morning when all the women came to whistle and wail and do the traditional procession to celebrate me becoming a woman, I could feel my skin turn bright red. But they thought it was because I was being shy.

Another week passed, and when we finally did it, it wasn't very nice at all. He didn't want me to hold him or cuddle. I cried in the bathroom. I didn't know what I did wrong and why he suddenly didn't like me. He always seemed bad-tempered, no matter what I did.

I read in the new women's magazine that just came out that a woman sometimes had to tell her husband how she felt because he couldn't read her mind. That's when I decided to cook the special meal with the lamb and couscous and lit the candles. I told him then that I didn't know why he didn't want to sleep with me and hold me or lie with me.

He got angry and said, "You want sex? That's what you're after all the time?" I didn't say anything. I was so ashamed and cried. He left and didn't return for the rest of the night. I didn't know where he went.

I slept on the couch in the lounge. Well, I tried to sleep, but the sleep only came when the sky streaked with the first silvery orange as the morning broke. I had to go to work and somehow got through the day.

Whaleed didn't look at me or say anything after that. I stopped eating. I was hurting inside. I couldn't understand why he married me, why Sadia said it was the most beautiful thing between a man and a woman when it made me so unhappy. I cried whenever I was alone, and I didn't know what to do.

I remember asking myself lots of questions every day: "Was this marriage? Was this why so many of the older women in my family were

now living alone?" I asked these questions to myself because who was I going to ask? I was afraid, and it was something I couldn't talk about to anyone.

"Any heartbreak is on you." Abdi said it. I thought it was this heartbreak he was talking about. I just didn't know.

By the next Friday, I was feeling really terrible, and the supervisor at the office said I looked ill and should take the afternoon off. She thought I was pregnant and said I should have myself tested. For the first time in weeks I laughed, and she thought I was overjoyed.

I walked along the harbor and watched a seagull soar into the sky. It looked so free and light. The French named it Alger La Blanche—a good name, I think. My heart lifted a little. I watched the white buildings with their blue shutters along the coast as far as my eye could see. And the waves rolled onto the sand and pushed the breeze upwards to make my hijab flap in the wind. The sea was dark blue farther out and lighter at the tips of the wave, like the eye shadow I bought from Madame Bakoush. Maybe that's why. Maybe it made me look like a kahba and Whaleed had no respect for me. I felt the tears burning in my eyes, like when I cut onions on the wooden chopping board in my small kitchen.

I stopped to buy a baguette, even though I didn't feel like eating anything. I knew Whaleed was working night shift, but he was always out with Malik. And after that night, he didn't really want to see me.

I walked up to the lift in the foyer of our apartment block and felt that I could sleep for a hundred years. I was tired of dragging myself through that new married life. I wanted to just lie down. By the time I got to the bedroom door, I didn't even know how I got there, how I possibly managed to be there without knowing or even seeing my way there. And then—then—I just froze. I remember it clearly, even now.

I don't know how I didn't hear the sounds they were making up until I opened the door. I don't know what I saw. I knew it was bad, or not what I knew to be good between a man and a wife—like I talked with Zohra. I saw the naked back and bum of Whaleed first, and then he turned and I saw him from the front. The next thing, Malik folded out from under him, or almost from nowhere, and he had no clothes on. They stood naked, and I looked at them as if they were small boys who suddenly realized they were both naked. Nobody said anything, and then it all seemed to happen very slowly. They looked for their clothes or anything to cover themselves, and I ran for the door. I couldn't wait for the lift. I just had to run and take the stairs. At first, I took the stairs two at a time, and then I just jumped, and I think I fell down a few. But when I came to the bottom and fell against the heavy fire door, it opened almost by itself, and I ran. I ran towards the harbor and breathed the sea air in as deeply as I could. I was shaking and couldn't calm myself down. I sat down on the bench, and

suddenly I thought, “It’s not me. I am not the kahba. I am not the bad one. This is not on my head. This heartbreak is not on my head.” It just came to me then.

The wind lifted my hijab and I pulled it down at the back and felt the knot. Never undo the Knots of Islam. The Isha Adan, the last prayer call, drifted over the waves and back to me on the bench, and I wanted it to fold around me and hold me and tie all the Knots of Islam around me to keep me safe. The first knot is Salat, the prayer, and I dropped my head to my chest and closed my eyes, and the wind dried the tears on both my cheeks.

THE END

Frank Scozzari

THE TEN-THOUSANDTH PIPE OF OPIUM

The sled glided swiftly through the white silence, down alongside a frozen creek beneath a grove of dark furs. Low-hanging branches pulled and snapped against the top rail as the sled continued on a southerly path. Mala, the youngest of the dogs, yelped and cried in protest of the rapid pace. Gaga, the lead dog, ignored her. She mushed onward, leading the team up along a steep ravine through another grove of trees, nearly dragging the other dogs with her. She knew not of her path. She knew only of her instincts, which told her something dark was following her, and she wanted to find that place of living men where there would be food and safety. Their one passenger, Ed Collins, was merely along for the ride, boxed-up in a seven-foot-by-two-foot wooden crate.

Beneath a hazy gray sky, the sled came out into an opening. Both paw and rail trudged across a long inclining snow field. The harnesses stretched and creaked and yawned as the runners dug into the ice. White puffs of condensed air came from the dogs' mouths and noses.

It was the fourth ridge they had come to, and summiting it now, Gaga stopped and looked out, her nostrils flaring. Below was a river valley. A road wound downriver through the woods and a cable ferry stretched across some narrows. Further south, a wisp of smoke rose above the trees.

Gaga let out a yelp and flattened her chest against the harness.

They descended through the thick forest, reaching the river, and traveled downstream where they encountered many obstacles. Trees had fallen along the riverbanks and there were large boulders and frozen inlets which they had to navigate. Eventually they reached a road. The sound of a running mill and a working crane got Gaga pulling harder. And familiar aromas of man, the smells of human cooking and diesel fumes, got all the dogs whining. The sled rattled over the icy asphalt surface of the road. Where the road widened it came to a small city of buildings constructed on the upslope of the mountain.

It was an usual sight, to say the least, for a group of mill-workers standing on a corner, to see a sled racing through the yard absent a wheelman carrying one's ever-after container. They exchanged bewildered expressions and let out after them.

"Whoa! Whoa! Stop!" cried out John Tilley, the resident dog-handler.

Gaga followed her nose in the direction of the mess hall and kennels.

John Tilley came up alongside her and grabbed the reins, and pulled back.

"Whoa, girl. Whoa!"

Gaga's blue eyes flashed up at him.

"Whoa, girl. Stop!"

She stopped and came to a sitting position. He ran his hand over

her head and spoke calmly now. “Whoa girl, what’s wrong?” He looped his hand in Gaga’s harness and loosened the buckle. “It’s okay, girl. You’re all right now.”

He shot a glance over the other dogs. They were all panting and had ice caked around their mouths and nostrils.

The other men caught up with them and gathered around the sled. The Foreman, a big man with a handlebar moustache, stood back with both hands on his hips, studying the sled and its strange cargo.

“What the hell, John?”

John Tilley glanced at the wooden box and shrugged. “What the hell is right.”

They checked the sled for papers and found none, nor did they find the normal supplies onboard. The sled had no marking as to its ownership, but one man seemed to recognize it.

“That’s Bill Clifford’s sled,” he said.

The Foreman instructed the men to take the sled to the garage and the dogs to the kennel and feed them. John Tilley unleashed Gaga.

“I think she’s dragged this thing far enough,” he said.

The Foreman, who still looked bewildered, pointed at the wooden box. “And that, bring that to my office. I’m going to need to call the sheriff and tell him what we got here.” As the men began to unstrap the wooden box, the Foreman spoke again. “On second thought, boys, better keep that thing in the shed. We don’t want it to defrost.”

The men nodded their heads. One of them went to the front of the team, grabbed hold of the reins and led the dogs up the hill. John Tilley, who had already unhitched Gaga, led her to the kennel with a pat on his thigh.

“Come on, girl. I’ve got some good stuff for you.”

***

Two days earlier, Bill Clifford and Willy White had found a perfect place beneath some trees on the western slope of a mountain to settle for the night. It was flat and having been used as a camp before, had all the advantages of a pre-built camp. There was a nice stone-circle fire pit and some leftover firewood, large logs to sit on and nails driven into the trees to hang items from. The dogs were unleashed and fed and now the men sat around the campfire sipping coffee. The elder Bill Clifford sat on a tarp that was on the ground with his legs stretched out strategically toward the fire. His back was resting against a large log. He was bundled in a huge parka with a fur collar. The young Willy White was perched on a sawed-off log. He was likewise bundled in a heavy winter parka.

“Have you made many runs like this?” Willy asked.

“None.”

“It’s your first?”

“Of this type, yep.”

“It’s a bit strange.”

“Yes, it is.”

Willy looked over at the sled and the long wooden box strapped

to it. “Why didn’t they just keep him, I mean on ice, until they could get a snow plow up from Dawson or Whitehorse?”

“The family didn’t want to wait,” Clifford replied. “They asked Ranger Bob to pull it on his snowmobile, but he declined. Said it would be too spooky. So they asked me if I’d take it. I didn’t have to think about it much. It’s the off-season, you know. Haven’t had any tourist gigs for a while now. So I took it. That’s about it.” He looked over at the sled too, at the long wooden box strapped to it. “I don’t mind dragging a dead guy around with me anyhow, even though he’s not much company. That’s why I asked you along.” He paused and nodded his head. “The way I look at it I’m doing his family a service. They’re wanting to bury him in Florida. I’m getting him back home in a timely manner so they can do that.” Clifford looked over at Willie. “I’m glad you could come along. I’m not spooked by dead guys or anything like that, but I prefer not traveling alone.” He looked over at the box again. “I mean, I prefer traveling with a living person.”

“I’m glad you asked,” Willy said. “Don’t mind it really. I needed the money.”

“We’ll be in Whitehorse by Wednesday, and he’ll be on a plane back home probably that same day.”

“That’s good.” Willie went to the fire, lifted the coffee pot, and poured another cup. “Want some?”

“Sure.”

Willy took the kettle over to Clifford and poured a stream until Clifford pulled his cup back. “Whoa, leave some room for the good stuff.”

Willy returned the kettle to the campfire and watched as Clifford pulled from his coat pocket the same bottle of whiskey he had pulled out earlier. He watched him top off his cup and raise the bottle in his direction.

“Want some more?”

“Sure.”

Willy took a quick sip of his coffee to make some room in his cup. Then he walked over to Clifford and let him top it off. Clifford capped the bottle and slid it back in his coat pocket. Willy went back to his perch, took a few sips, sat down, and set his cup on the stump beside him. The heat vapors rose into the frigid air. He pulled the fur collar of his parker up high around his neck and shook. “Burrr. It’s fricking cold.” He took his smart phone out from his coat pocket, turned on the screen, and looked at it.

“No bar.”

“Not out here.”

Willy held the phone up and turned it facing Clifford. “I want to take a picture of you. You look cool sitting there with that gray beard and that ski cap and that big fur collar, sipping whiskey.”

Clifford held his coffee cup high in toast-like fashion.

“You look like some kind of crazy-ass mountain man, some kind of a throwback from the past.”

"I am."

Clifford cocked his head sideways and made a funny smile and Willy snapped a couple more pictures. Willy turned his phone on the sled and the wooden box, squared it, and captured the image. "I want to remember this trip. My friends won't believe this shit."

"It's not that unusual. In the old days it was the only way to get somebody back home to the lower states. It was a common thing years ago." He raised his cup to the sled and wooden box. "To Ed Collins. Thanks, man. I needed the fifteen-hundred bucks."

Willy raised his cup too. "Yeah. Thanks, man. I needed the money too."

Clifford's eyes turned to the mouth of their tent, which was pitched between two large trees back from the campfire. "Can you see my satchel in there?"

Willy turned and looked into the open door. "Yeah."

"Get it, and I'll tell you more about Mr. Collins."

Willy obliged, went to the tent, fetched the satchel, handed it to Clifford, and returned to his perch. Clifford pulled out a clear vinyl protective sleeve that contained some documents. He took off one glove and pulled the papers out of the sleeve and angled them to the light. The face-sheet showed all the vitals.

"It says here… Edwin Phillip Collins, age 43. Poor bastard was ten years younger than me. He's from Clearwater, Florida. He has a sister and two brothers. It says here, they've all been notified."

"What the hell was he doing up here?"

"Don't know."

"How did he die?"

"Some kind of illness." He looked over an autopsy report, but didn't recognize the medical terms. "I guess it had been with him for sometime." He read further down the face-sheet. "Says here, 'no foul play.' There's a Coroner's report enclosed." He paged through the papers looking for the Coroner's report but couldn't find it. "Oh, Hell. It doesn't matter, does it?" He spread the mouth of the vinyl sleeve with his fingers and slid the papers back inside. Then he tossed the sleeve into the snow beside him. "I say we give ol' Edwin a toast."

"Yeah, let's do that."

Clifford pulled his whiskey bottle from his pocket and filled Willy's cup, which had been reduced to a quarter. He looked into his cup, slugged down the last of the coffee-whiskey mix, and filled it to the brim with straight whiskey. Then he raised his cup in the direction of the sled.

"To Edwin Phillip Collins, age 43, of Clearwater Florida, may yea rest in peace."

Willy raised his cup too, and laughed. "If he's going to Florida, at lease he'll be warm."

"That's for sure."

They both raised their cups a second time and drank healthily.

"And may yea enjoy this last ride through the Yukon wilderness,"

said Clifford.

"Yeah."

They both drank again.

"And may your happy ever-after be happy ever-after."

"Yeah!" Willie laughed, and they both drank.

"And to Florida, a place I'd like to be now."

"Yes, to Florida!"

" Never been but want to go."

Again, they toasted and drank.

Then Clifford went silent. "Picture a warm sandy beach under palm trees." He looked over at the wooden box. "I'm kinda jealous of him now."

"Don't be. Florida is something better done alive than dead."

"Probably so. Never had a dead tourist before. I've had plenty live ones, but never a dead one."

"To the dead tourist," Willy said.

"Yes, to the dead tourist."

Again their cups rose.

Clifford held a long reflective gaze at the box. "We should give Edwin a drink," he finally blurted out. He looked over at Willy, who burst into laughter. "No, seriously. We shouldn't be sitting here drinking without him. This is his last ride. We're his only company. He's our company. We're sitting here drinking, excluding him. Wherever he's been and whatever he's done and wherever he's going, he deserves a last drink. And he shouldn't have to drink alone."

Clifford struggled to get up. His big belly was in his way so he rolled to his side, planted his hands in the snow and got up on all fours. He stumbled through the snow to the sled, stood over the wooden box, and unscrewed the cap of his whiskey bottle. Wobbling above it, he poured a healthy quantity onto the wood.

"There you go Edwin. Drink up."

Through all of this, Willy was laughing wildly. Now he doubled over and fell off his perch. Clifford looked into his bottle of whiskey, saw a small amount left, and drank it, tilting his head way back. He screwed the cap back on and looked through the glass, confirming it was empty. "Peace to Edwin, a friend I never met." He tossed the bottle down through the woods and it landed in the snow. He wobbled back to his place by the fire, lowered himself to his knees, and lay back on the tarp.

"Can't let the party stop here," he said.

He turned his head and looked at his satchel, which sat in the snow beside him. He lifted it onto his lap and began rummaging through it. Inside was a small leather pouch, which he took out and unzipped. From it, he pulled out a pipe and a paper baggy full of tobacco. He also took out two black 35mm film containers.

"This is some good stuff, from back in my Hippie days."

"What is it?"

"Good stuff."

"What is it, Peyote?"

"Better."

He pinched a thumb of tobacco from the baggie and stuffed it into the pipe. Then he opened one of the film containers and sprinkled some of the grainy brown material into the top of the pipe. He packed it in with his thumb and licked his thumb. "Ah yes. The taste of my youth." He took a lighter from his pouch and lit it. The pipe glowed and illuminated his face, making him look like some kind of orange, bearded wizard.

"Yeah, that's my baby." He held the pipe away from his face and looked at it appreciatively. Then he looked over to Willy. "Want to try some?"

He held the pipe out toward Willy.

Willy got up from his perch, wobbling now too, and carefully negotiated the few steps over to where Clifford lay. He took the pipe, brought it to his lips, and inhaled deeply. He coughed and grabbed his throat. Clifford laughed.

"My God, what is it?"

"Good stuff, I tell you."

Willy handed the pipe back.

"Take a seat and sit back and you'll feel it coming on," Clifford said.

"It burns like shit."

"Take a seat, I tell you, while you can."

Willy did so, and Clifford took several more puffs.

After a few moments, Willy wandered back over to Clifford, holding out a wobbling hand. Clifford handed Willy the pipe and Willy took a double inhale.

"This is crazy stuff."

"This stuff is old," Clifford said. "I must have taken it from my old stash. I'm not feeling it the way I should. You feeling it?"

"Kinda yes," Willy said. "Kinda a little bit…like crazy." His head was spinning, actually.

"Not me."

Clifford took the pipe back and looked deeply into it, seemingly puzzled by its lack of potency. He knocked the pipe against the log to empty it and he looked into it again. The black hole stared back at him.

"Maybe I'll try the other stuff?" he mumbled.

He repeated the process, taking a pinch of tobacco from the baggie, stuffing it in the pipe and adding in the grainy brown material from the second film canister. He used less tobacco and added more of the grainy substance this time, packing it deeply into the mouth of the pipe as one might pack a musket. He dashed in some of the ingredients from the first film container as well.

"That should do it."

He lit it up and took a puff.

"Now that's my baby. That's more like it." He looked over at Willy. "Want some? This is a better mix."

Willy didn't answer at first. He was staring straight into the dark forest, in a catatonic daze.

"Hey! You want some?"

Willy got up, wobbling like a top, and stumbled over to Clifford. Clifford handed him the pipe and Willy took another hit. He handed the pipe back to Clifford and carefully negotiated his way back to his stump.

Clifford continued with the pipe. "Yeah, that's my baby. Feel it in your toes yet? That's where I feel it. I get this tingling feeling in my toes and my fingertips." Willy didn't reply and Clifford looked over at him. "You okay?"

Now Willy was staring into the fire, seemingly mesmerized by it. He saw something he didn't believe he was seeing. He saw little elves dancing in the flames.

"Okay, then," Clifford said. "If you won't smoke with me, I know someone who will."

Clifford took another long drag from the pipe and rolled to his side and then to his belly. He planted one hand in the snow and, realizing the pipe was still in his other hand, he lifted it to his mouth and inhaled again. Then he set the pipe in the snow, right-side up, pressed both hands against the ice, and rose to his knees. He picked up the pipe and stood up. He shook considerably, took a couple steps toward the sled, and fell in the snow. Crawling now, holding the pipe carefully, he inched his way alongside the rails. He reached up and grabbed hold of the top rail and pulled himself up. He wobbled there for a moment and tried to gain his equilibrium, but he never did. Then he inhaled from the pipe and blew out a plume of smoke over the surface of the wooden box. It curled and curved over the edge of the wood and dissipated. "There you go, ol' buddy."

Again he inhaled and let out a long plume of smoke which engulfed the entire upper portion of the box. "Peace be with you, ole' buddy."

He looked back at Willy, who remained quietly, somehow still perched on his stump. He was blinking dreamingly at the flames.

Clifford returned to his resting place against the log, a journey that took several minutes. He inhaled more from the pipe, each time the embers glowing and illuminating his face. He looked over at Willy but could not see him now. Then he found him. He was on the ground on the opposite side of his perch in a fetal position.

"Dude, I think you had enough."

An hour passed.

When Willy's eyes finally opened, he saw only white crystals because his face was pressed into the snow. He lifted his head and tried to look around, but could not see much. His head felt numb and was spinning. Nor could he remember where he was or what had happened. He felt a panic inside, for he was shivering cold. He pulled himself up and looked into the fire, which had dwindled considerably. Inside the bright embers he could still see elves dancing. He looked over at Clifford, who looked like he was asleep. He wasn't moving, and the pipe was lying on

the snow at the end of his out-stretched arm.

"Hey, Clifford, we gotta go."

But Clifford didn't move.

Willy crawled, slowly and purposely, over to Clifford and grabbed the big man's jacket lapel. "Hey, wake up," he said, shaking him. "We gotta go, Clifford."

Clifford didn't move.

He looked back at the fire, which had flamed up a little, and saw the dancing elves. "We gotta get the hell out of here."

Willy now rose to his feet. He felt dizzy and saw sunspots. He took a long moment to balance himself. In the white starlight, he staggered over to the dogsled, which was now covered in frost, as were the dogs, who were all curled up and sleeping in the snow. He woke the dogs and began to affix them, not positioning them correctly, except for Gaga. The dogs, not accustomed to being affixed at such an early hour, wagged their tails nonetheless as he strapped them in.

"Hey, my beautiful lady," he said to Gaga. She stood obedient, wagging her tail, ruefully, waiting to follow his commands. "How you doing, puppy-dog?" He wrapped his arms around her neck and hung on for a moment. "Come on, Clifford. We've gotta get the hell out of here while we can." His words were slurred and muffled, by both the cold and the drugs. He fell over in the snow, nearly taking Gaga with him. She pulled away and licked his cold face then resumed her sitting position at the front of the team, waiting for his order.

But his order never came.

The hours passed, and the cold deepened.

Willy remained keeled over in the snow, knees to his chest, his face pressed into the ice. His young, clean-shaven face was half in starlight; his one eye stared down the white slope; his eyelashes and brows were white with frost. His body temperature had dropped considerably, but he did not feel it. His body was as numb as his mind, in which he saw the elves in the fire. He thought how they must be warm and toasty in the fire. He wondered how they did not burn their feet. They were merry because they were warm, he thought, and they did not care if their feet were burned a little. It is better to be warm with burnt feet than to be cold. It is better to die in a fire than to freeze to death.

He saw Clifford on a beach in Miami with the deceased Ed Collins, both lounging in beach chairs and sipping some kind of umbrella drink, a big yellow sun shone over them. And as he thought of this, dark branches laden with icicles wept over him and the white silence surrounded him.

The End

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

MIKEY BACHMAN is a SoCal poet who loves night walks on the beach with his wife as well as spending time with his two demon pups, Toby and Coco. In 2019, he graduated CSU Long Beach with his MFA in Creative Writing: Poetry, and he enjoys playing video games, watching anime, and learning about the human psyche. He hopes that his poems reach people intimately and that readers can use that connection to explore parts of themselves.

GRÈGÓR BELIBI MINYA was born on April 1, 1989 in Cherbourg (France). He spent his childhood in Normandie and his adolescence in Savoie. Having never had a taste for classical school, he began his artistic apprenticeship self-taught. He received his first lessons of drawing and painting at the Municipal art school of Chambéry (France) and began an electronic music project in Lyon (Digital Cosmic Disco) around the same time. In 2014, he returned to school and began his first year at the School of Fine Arts in Nîmes. Having a desire to find inspiration, he returned to Normandie to continue his studies: he spent his second year in Cherbourg, and finished his third year in Caen where he obtained his National graduate in Art in 2018. In 2019, Grègór is represented by Mottet and Eymeric gallery (France). He invests in his research the void as a dynamic space and open new perspectives. It is difficult to split the pictorial approach of the musical approach in his works. These two elements explore the color, the masses but above all the void.

STEPHEN BENZ has published essays in Creative Nonfiction, River Teeth, TriQuarterly, New England Review, and other journals, along with two books of travel essays—Guatemalan Journey (University of Texas Press) and Green Dreams: Travels in Central America (Lonely Planet). Three of his essays have been selected for Best American Travel Writing (2003, 2015, 2019). His poems have appeared in journals such as Nimrod, Shenandoah, and

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EDWIN CORDERO is a Latino native of Los Angeles. A recent graduate of California State University, Long Beach, where he received a BA in Creative Writing. He hopes to continue writing poetry and fiction that is able to resonate with those who come across his work. He also hopes to continue his education and is applying to Masters programs across the state.

FELIPE DE LA ROSA is a first-generation student working on his undergraduate degree in English, Creative Writing. Felipe's work focuses on bilingualism as a form of empowerment. As a Chicano in Los Angeles, he writes about his experiences in labor work and community struggles from a perspective desiring a change.

JOHN DUFRESNE has written two story collections and six novels, including Louisiana Power & Light, Love Warps the Mind a Little, both New York Times Notable Books of the Year. He's also written four books on writing, two plays, Liv & Di and Trailerville and has co-written two feature films. His stories have twice been named Best American Mystery Stories. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and teaches creative writing at FIU in Miami.

JOSHUA DUNLAP chemical messiah is pop surrealism from philadelphia, pa; creating foreign nostalgia that haunts the viewer even after they look away. chemicalmessiah.com for more info or @chemicalmessiah on instagram.

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JONATHAN GREENHAUSE was the winner of Aesthetica Magazine's 2018 Creative Writing Award in Poetry and a runner up in America's 2019 Foley Poetry contest. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Columbia Poetry Review, The Dark Horse, Moon City Review, New Ohio Review, and Salamander, among others.

TAY GREENLEAF is a poet and journalist living and working in Asheville, NC. Her work can be found in Young Raven's Literary Review, Headwaters Magazine, and Aberration Labrinth. She is currently seeking her MFA in poetry.

RICK GRIME is a self-taught abstract painter from Durham, NC. His current work explores the relationship between geography and self-image.

FRANK G. KARIORIS (he/they/him/them) is a writer and educator based in Pittsburgh whose writing addresses issues of friendship, masculinity, and gender. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in Pittsburgh Poetry Journal, Collective Unrest, Maudlin House, Sooth Swarm Journal, and Crêpe & Penn amongst

others. They are a regular contributor to Headline Poetry & Press.

NATALIE KEUSS creates paintings in a minimalist style while incorporating bright, bold blocks of color. She focuses on playing with the interactions of different colors in her works and the feelings they provoke. Recent paintings explore creating the illusion of transparency within compositions. Specifically in Neon I - IV, the mixing of different colored neon light sources is portrayed while paying attention to the differences in color when mixing light versus mixing colored pigments.

CASEY KILLINGSWORTH has work in The American Journal of Poetry, The Writing Disorder, Two Thirds North, and other journals. His book of poems, A Handbook for Water, was published by Cranberry Press in 1995. As well he has a book on the poetry of Langston Hughes, The Black and Blue Collar Blues (VDM, 2008). Casey has a Master's degree from Reed College.

LEN KRISAK translates classic verse. The winner of the Robert Frost, Robert Penn Warren, and Richard Wilbur prizes, he is a four-time champion on Jeopardy!

VARVARA KRONBERG (Zhemchuzhnikova) is Vancouver(CA) based textile and digital artist, who previously worked as costume, fashion and sportswear designer for various brands. Painting waste is a sustainable art project that questions the concept of textile waste in the contemporary fashion realm. The artworks are made of textile leftovers/scraps from fashion and textile brands and independent designers. Through her art practice Varvara questions us, producers and consumers: "Is it really a waste what we consider to be waste?"

ANDREW LIU is a graduate student at CSULB working towards an MFA. He is obsessed with myth, poetic structure, and the idea of writing the sky into a palace. He lives in Rosemead with his parents and sister (still).

MARIA LOURENS has lived in South Africa, Algeria, UK and currently teaches American and British literature in China. She writes for commercial publications and is a public speaker, recently gave a TED Talk in China on The Patriarchy has no Gender.

KURT LUCHS (kurtluchs.com) has poems published or forthcoming in Plume Poetry Journal, Antiphon, and The Bitter Oleander. He took Second Place in the 2019 Fischer Poetry Prize, and won the 2019 Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest. He has written humor for the New Yorker, the Onion and McSweeney's Internet Tendency, as well as writing comedy for television and radio. He has a humor collection, It's Funny Until Someone Loses an Eye (Then It's Really Funny) (Sagging Meniscus Press), and a poetry chapbook, One of These Things Is Not Like the Other (Finishing Line Press).

ALEX MACCONOCHIE currently lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. The recipient of the Connecticut Poetry Society's Nutmeg Award for poetry (2020), he has published poems in Meridian, Tar River Poetry, The Summerset Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, and elsewhere.

BIANCA MALDONADO is a student at California State University, Long Beach, earning her degree in English Rhetoric and Composition with a minor in American Sign Language (ASLD). This is one of her most recently completed pieces that she has

been working on. “First Generation” is her first published work, but hopefully the first of many.

DANIEL EDWARD MOORE lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. He is the author of two chapbooks, “Confessions of a Pentecostal Buddhist” (CreateSpace) and “Boys “(Duck Lake Books). ‘Waxing the Dents,’ is a full length collection from Brick Road Poetry Press. Visit him at Danieledwardmoore.com.

SETH MORALES is a current MFA student at CSULB. He graduated from CSULB with his BA in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2018. He wanted to write a story celebrating his youth, playing baseball in the street.

JOSEPH O’NEAL lives and works in Easton, Pennsylvania. O’Neal is an internationally collected artist having participated in group and solo exhibitions throughout The United States, Europe, and Mexico; including large scale exhibitions in Basel, Switzerland in 2011, 2015, and Zurich in 2018 respectively. Joseph’s work has appeared in publications such as The Basler Zeitung, Sensitive Skin Magazine, Art Rated, Still Developing: A Story of Instant Gratification, as well as interview features with Telebasel, and NPR.

MARLENE OLIN was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in journals such as The Massachusetts Review, Catapult, The American Literary Review, and Arts and Letters. She is the recipient of both the 2015 Rick Demarinis Fiction Award and the 2018 So To Speak Fiction Prize.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, Forge, Poetry, Osiris, The New Yorker and elsewhere. His most recent collection is The Rosenblum Poems published by Cholla Needles Arts & Literary Library, 2020. For more information including free e-books and his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

DAVID RUIZ is a San Francisco-based online privacy advocate and writer who has written for various newspapers and partnered with several nonprofit organizations in defending our digital rights. His reporting and commentary have appeared in The Sacramento Bee, Electronic Frontier Foundation, and 2600 Magazine, and he has been cited by The Intercept, The London Times, TechCrunch, and more. In 2019, in stepping back from nonprofit work, he began focusing on fiction, the most popular of all failed endeavors

DEREK SAVARD was born in Edmonton, AB and was raised on his parents acreage, in Stony Plain, AB. He currently lives in Edmonton with his husband and daughter.

FRANK SCOZZARI is an American novelist and short story writer. A five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his short stories have been widely anthologized and featured in literary theater.

CAITLIN SELLNOW currently lives in Evanston, Illinois, but she will always be a Minnesotan at heart. Her work has appeared in The Writing Disorder, Empty Mirror and Living Lutheran magazine. Also, her book reviews have appeared on the TriQuarterly Review website. She received an MFA in creative writing from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

LIAM SNOOTLE is a visual artist with a background in Mathematics and graffiti working in Melbourne, Australia. Predominantly working with painting and urban installation pieces, Snootle's work can be categorised as a visual response to sound or in contrast an attempt at creating an aural experience via visual stimulus.Influenced heavily by East Coast American alternative music of the 80's and 90's, Snootle is interested in the combination of colour and shape and how these are able to trigger an emotional response in the viewer. Often painting representations of his interpretation of punk songs. Using a language of shapes as his alphabet he encourages the viewer to allow the work to recall a memory, a sound, an idea or a thought previously experienced and provide time to contemplate and celebrate that moment. Snootle's work is held in private collections throughout Australia, USA, UK, Germany, France and Spain.

KEVIN SVAHN received a master's degree in Education from CSU Chico in 2018. He currently resides in Pittsburgh, California where he teaches 10th grade English and coaches Track & Field. His poetry has appeared in Chico News & Review.

Rip Rap

42