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IN THROUGH THE NOSE
RIPRAP VOL 43
OUT THROUGH THE MOUTH

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**IN THROUGH THE NOSE
OUT THROUGH THE MOUTH
RIPRAP VOL 43**

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.

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RipRap 43

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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 43 contains local and national submissions of writing and art inspired by the isolation, introspection, inspiration, and hope sought during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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

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*

We dedicate this issue of RipRap to the memory of those lost during the COVID-19 Pandemic

RipRap Literary Journal

43rd Edition

Spring 2021

California State University, Long Beach

Department of English

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Poetry

Placebo Effect *Alan Elyshevitz*

It's bliss

to misapprehend a spoof of that which you hold. Dear,
in a strip mall you secure the right shoe for the right
foot and the lofty hair care of a gimmicked life.

Juvenile artifacts are on sale with a whiff of bubblegum.

You grow big then bigger on treats of trans fats
and soft insulation, the cinema and sliced kiwi fruit.

Somehow yes you're climbing the food chain,
somewhat yes feeling better and better.

You're even relieved that Mormons are praying

for you. To you

every snowfall is a dusting, a neighborly chat
between gravel and sky. Insemination is in the air.

That and a surplus of carbon dioxide shut
your eyes for the night when you're elevated

by baseboard heating to the highest level

of sleep. Last week

a Christmas card from the auto shop thanked you
for business. Here's what you remember: A stag
walked away from a wrecked minivan, and the driver,
too, who took one photograph for insurance and another
with her own muzzle aimed at a magnificent rack.

Cooking Up Down Farm *Les Wicks*

Under my guidance

apples slice the sun into child sized segments
which cool on the loose bark kitchen shelf.

The lawn offered to help

though passionfruit vines were dismissive — thought
who works when you're busy with Beauty?

Down here in my dustbowl

where I grow the crop.

On the basalt balcony I make resolutions

to be “successful” while calling home
to my dead parents every Thursday.

The lilli pilli drops berries

which I mistake for accolades.

The sugar gliders will eat well tonight

while I don't mind.

Tried *aw shucks*

it didn't take.

I love ya all was flowery

but the fruits turned bitter.

Don't tell me all those locusts are *psychological*,

I ate one once

as you do

just to be sure.

One has to plough

but too deep & biome is destroyed.

Too shallow the seeds gasp.

I was eaten once,

someone had to be sure.

At a Secluded Spot in Potrerillos *Jonathan Greenhouse*

Out back, Shirley's burying blueprints on how to survive the prospect of a postapocalyptic Potrerillos. An hour from the city of Mendoza, this modest plot boasts peach trees, swiss chard & potatoes, several hens pecking at her Rottweiler's bandaged toes. Snow falls as if it were ash, as if burying the world's unpleasant aftermath. Thousands of miles to the Confederate North, Shirley's family pleads that she return to Jefferson, Georgia; but she's convinced the New World Order will imprison her upon the Great Plains in a secretive internment camp. Her nearest neighbors are hidden by poplar trees, don't see the tall men, shackled & dirt-encrusted, staring at her through gaps of uneven planks, lured to this cabin by her cryptic messages on the internet. Shirley's skilled at handling an axe, brings it down to split trunk after trunk, crosses them over the firepit, whispers a sermon.

Her Rottweiler's developed a taste for tongues, is fed regularly,
But old age offers her blurred vistas. This snow won't stop in time
to forestall the roof's collapse, Shirley unversed in structural integrity.
She focuses upon the grill's flames, the legs evenly cooked,
shaved skin a reminder of what's pristine, of the value of hygiene,
as from the cabin's interior, muffled screams serenade her as she feasts.

Marriage Lesson: Dawn *Iris Dunkle*

Dawn echoes dark doe
same color as dun grass sheathed
in fog—

 Through mesh of screened
window the world shakes out:
shale and dust. Perhaps
a little gold Will shine out from what's gone

Of the Good *Mark Simpson*

How good it is not to know all the ways there are,
the details not even an afterthought.

No in-kind contributions.

Too difficult

to tote the multipliers or contemplate
their syntactic functions.

No interference in the airwaves because

I'm the idler's ideogram.

Look me up in the program!

Look me up in Bloomington or New Rochelle!

I won't be there. I'm a 59/60 kind of person.

The ghost in the machine? You can have it.

The oil in the crankcase?

My excuse.

I've got a custom-built and acreage,

So, no need for intercession.

No need for the spelling bee.

You can have the rule of compound interest
and the principle.

Your intentions—take them elsewhere.

It is good not to know.

I'm the one with the cardboard sign
that says *The End Is Near*.

Fiction

MINNESOTA STRIP *Severin Allgood*

Vincent watched her from twenty feet away. He took another sip of beer and checked his phone. Thirty minutes before last call. The band had finished, and the club's stereo had switched to Al Green singing. *Loving you whether, whether, Times are good or bad, happy or sad, And if you do me wrong, I just might leave you alone.* Vincent hadn't been laid in weeks, and sexual withdrawal was getting the best of him. He wore himself out looking at porn. Even weird shit like foot fetish and granny videos, it just didn't substitute for the real thing. A human touch, a familiar smell and taste— he needed those things. It'd been six months since he and his girlfriend Adrienne split, and he couldn't shake the regret he had for the whole thing, a tinge of guilt and sadness, knowing he'd been the one who'd caused it— too much partying, too much self-indulgence. Vincent had never been so morose over a woman before. Adrienne was special, and he'd known it then, like he knew it now, but still he'd watched the relationship end in slow motion, like the replay of a knockout in a title fight.

He eyed the girl at the bar. She had a tattoo of a bug on the inside of her wrist. A beetle, or a cockroach, or some shit. A spot opened at the bar and he sidled up next to her, holding his beer up and tapping it to get the bartender's attention.

“Hey,” he said to the girl. “I think I know you.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?” She played with her drink, stirring the few, unmelted ice cubes around.

“I think I’ve partied at your apartment. Your roommate, her name’s Charlie, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We have a lot of parties.”

“My name’s Vincent. Yours is— Rebecca?”

“Rae. My name’s Rae.”

“Can I buy you a drink, Rae?”

“Sure. I’ll let anyone buy me a drink.” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. He thought this must mean he had a chance. But she could also just love free drinks.

Vincent bought her a double vodka soda. He asked her about the tattoo on her wrist, and she said it was a blister beetle, an Oregon native—like herself. She’d been born and raised in Portland, not like the thousands of transplants who’d moved there in the last few years.

Rae said: “They’re called blister beetles because they secrete cantharidin, a blistering agent. You know Spanish Fly?”

“Like the stuff that’s supposed to get you laid?”

“Yeah. They made it from cantharidin. Specifically, from *lytta vesicatoria*, this emerald-green beetle that’s in the Meloidae family.”

“What are you, a scientist?”

“Nah, I wanted to be an entomologist. Hence the beetle tattoo.”

“What do you do instead?”

“Drink a lot, mostly.” Rae laughed

Vincent considered Rae, and her beetle tattoo. She was pretty, with straight black hair and olive skin. She looked Mediterranean. *Lebanese, or Greek, maybe Syrian*, he thought.

Twenty minutes later he piled into the backseat of the cab with Rae. Their knees bumped together along the ride, with a sensual brush of denim every time they came to a red light. There were a handful of people waiting under the awning in front of the girls’ building. Vincent knew two of the guys and greeted them with high fives and fist bumps. Rae lived just on the edge of sketch— two blocks east of them you could buy all the meth you’d need.

They walked into the apartment and she headed for the stereo. Vincent followed and leaned into her ear. “I’ve got some blow. Not enough for everybody, but you and me could sneak off to the bathroom, if you want.”

“For sure,” Rae said. “Let me put this record on.” She pulled out an old Morris Day album, and the beginning notes from “Jungle Love” followed them into the bathroom. Through the door Vincent could hear the Time backing Morris up, and the lyrics buzzed into his ear. *I’ve been watching you, I think I want to know ya, I am dangerous, Girl I want to show ya.*

“You do a lot of coke?” she asked.

“No more than anyone else I know,” he said. Vincent watched her as she bent over the toilet to snort the rail he’d cut up for her on the back of the tank. Her shirt rose and exposed the small of her back.

“You a big Morris Day fan?” he asked.

“I mean, everything from Minneapolis around then was incredible, don’t you think? Morris Day, Prince, The Replacements, Husker Du. There must have been something in the water back then.”

“Yeah, I love the Mats. Prince is one of the best guitar players ever. Really underrated. It always seemed funny to me that he came out of Minnesota.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, you know. He’s black. Seems like he should be from Detroit or somewhere, not Minnesota.”

“Black people can’t be from Minnesota?” Rae gave him a quizzical, raised right eyebrow.

“It’s just, Minnesota’s so, white, you know? I don’t really think of that place as having a lot of soul.” Vincent hunched over and snorted his line. “But, *Purple Rain*, that was awesome. When he left Appolonia in the lake? Pure genius.”

“Yeah. That was good.” Rae’s jaw seesawed back and forth from the stimulants running through her blood. They stood chest to chest, and Rae put her hand around the inside of his elbow. Vincent leaned in and kissed her, gently at first. Rae shoved her tongue into his mouth and then pushed him back.

“Let’s go out to the party.” She adjusted her hair and checked her nose in the mirror, wiping away any remnants of the blow.

“Right.” He adjusted himself and tried to hide his hard-on, which was causing him some pain.

“Come hang out.”

Vincent did as he was told. He went out into the living room with Rae, and drank beer, and laughed, and listened to old, scratchy vinyl records. Rae knew her tunes, not just punk rock, but hip hop and soul, too. She put on an Equals record and Vincent sang along: *Come back, Baby, come back, This is the first time until today, That you have run away, I’m asking you for the first time, Love me and stay.*

“I fucking love this song,” Rae said.

“I know. Listen to that bass line. It just doesn’t stop. Drives the whole thing.”

They sat together on the couch and Rae leaned over and laid her head in his lap. She looked up at him and he brushed her hair back off her forehead.

“You want to smoke a cigarette?” she asked.

“For sure.”

Rae stood up, grabbed his hand, and pulled him behind her toward the small balcony off the living room. They stood outside, not talking, just smoking and looking off at the dawning sky, the purples and pinks of morning taking over the deep blue hue of night.

“You been in Portland long?” she asked.

“Almost six months.”

“Where’d you move from?”

“Denver.”

“What made you leave?” Rae asked.

“I just needed a change of scenery.”

This was a lie, and Vincent knew it. He left Denver sheepish, with his tail tucked between his legs, after having a final fight with Adrienne. He’d screamed at her at the bar in front of everyone he worked with. He woke up disoriented and full of self-pity. There were messages on his phone from his boss, his co-workers, Adrienne. They all said the same thing— no one wanted to see him. If they did, there’d be trouble. He’d been burning bridges for a while, but Adrienne had stuck by him, even as he watched himself make mistake after mistake. Her voicemail said she was sick of apologizing for

him, for defending him, of having to convince people he wasn't an asshole. *You're an asshole*, she said. Those were her last words. He boxed up his shit and threw it in his truck. Left his furniture in the room of the house he shared with four other guys, jumped on I-70, and headed west into the mountains, on into Utah, up through Idaho and into Oregon, not stopping until he hit Portland.

“Looks like everyone left,” Rae said, looking through the glass of the French doors that opened up onto the patio.

“I guess I should get going, too,” he said.

Rae stood leaning against the railing of the balcony, blowing smoke rings out into wet morning air.

Vincent flicked his cigarette and watched it sail three stories down to the alley below. A stray cat strutted by and sniffed it with suspicion.

“You don't have to leave,” Rae said. Her eyes were pinkish-red with fatigue. “You can crash on the couch.”

A sly smile crept across her face. She walked past him and into the apartment. He followed her past the couch and down the small hallway into her bedroom. She shut the door and plugged her phone into the small stereo she had on her dresser. The dissonant organ notes of “Award Tour” buzzed from the speakers. Rae danced around the room. *We on Award Tour, with Muhammad my man, Going each and every place with the mic in their hand.*

Rae sang as she shimmied out of her jeans and he climbed between her legs, pulling her shirt off over her head. She wore no bra.

She guided him into her, and they started the movement of what should've been an awkward first time together. But it wasn't. Vincent wasn't sure if it was the early morning hours, or that they just physically meshed, but it was good sex. Honest sex. He took it slow, not wanting to cum too soon, not wanting this physicality with another human to end prematurely. Rae made little moans, more sighs than anything, and held firm to the small of Vincent's back. Their sex stayed slow, but Vincent became more aggressive, driving himself as far as he could into her. Rae's sighs became more vocal, her pleasure extending to her fingernails, which she raked across his skin. They began a race to the finish. He found himself no longer concerned with his sexual stamina as he fell into a quick rhythm of thrusts. Rae touched herself and seemed near climax, when he felt himself reach the end of the dance and erupt inside her, wondering only then whether he should've used a rubber.

He fell over onto the bed next to her, the two of them panting. She finished herself off as his eyes closed and he fell to sleep with Q-Tip and Phife still ringing out from the stereo.

The days rolled on and Vincent found himself very much in lust with Rae, possibly even in love. Everything she did he found remarkable. From the way she scrambled eggs, to the copious amounts of vodka she could imbibe,

he was in awe. He had to watch himself when they went out drinking. He'd white knuckle it, passing up shots and sticking to beer, afraid he'd make an ass out of himself in front of her, afraid he'd repeat the same mess he'd made with Adrienne. After three weeks, the shine of the new relationship had yet to wear off, and he wondered if it ever would.

Rae had talked about her parents. They'd divorced when she was fourteen, and her mother had remarried. Her dad lived in the suburbs not too far from her mother.

Vincent was sprawled out on Rae's sofa, thinking about an article on moths he'd seen on Reddit he wanted to tell her about.

"I've got to go out to my mom's a little later. You want to go?" she asked.

"Out to the 'burbs? Sure. Why not." He looked up and smiled at Rae.

"Think your mom will like me?"

"Of course."

"Think your step-dad will like me?"

"Fuck him," Rae said, "Racist piece of shit."

Vincent hadn't seen that side of Rae, full of vitriol and detest. It turned him on, to see her riled up. *Everything she does turns me on*, he thought.

“Is your mom hot?” he asked. Rae gave him a glance that told him she didn’t like the direction of the conversation. “I’m just joking.”

“My mom has issues.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know. Is that why your folks split up?”

Rae stood silent above him. “I guess. It was a lot of pressure to be in a mixed marriage, especially back then.”

Vincent considered this. He considered Rae’s olive skin and black hair, and her last name of Jones. “So, you’re mom, what is she, Greek or something. Iranian?”

“My mom’s American.” Rae looked at him confused, like he was an uninformed child.

“I mean her ethnicity. You said mixed marriage. I assumed she was Mediterranean for some reason. Is she Latin?”

“Latin? Like Mexican?”

Vincent said: “Yeah, you know, Latin American. You’ve got that black hair, and your complexion, your skin tone’s way tanner than my Irish ass.”

“My mom’s side is German. I mean mixed marriage ‘cause my dad is black.”

Vincent looked her up and down.

“Black? Like, how black?” he asked

“Ever seen *Iron Eagle*? My dad looks like Louis Gossett Jr. Black, black.”

Vincent knew the reference, but he had a hard time picturing how someone that dark could’ve fathered someone who looked like Rae. Her facial features, her skin; none of it screamed black, like so many of the mixed race kids he’d grown up around in Tennessee— with their African physicalities and kinky hair— who passed for light skinned blacks rather than children with a white mother or father.

“Oh, gotcha.”

“I doubt you do, but whatever,” Rae said. “I’m gonna shower, and then we can leave, alright? I want to get out there before my asshole step-dad gets back from work.”

“Yeah. Cool.”

Vincent had never slept with a black girl. His mind rolled the idea back and forth. He would never have guessed her for black when they met, but now, he wasn’t so sure. *She does have a really nice round ass*, he thought. *Shit. Is that racist? Or is that a compliment? Not sure how she’d take that. Better keep it to myself.*

Rae’s hair was still wet when they left the apartment and walked to the corner to catch the bus east into the suburbs. Vincent hadn’t said more

than a few monosyllabic words since Rae got out of the shower. They sat together facing the window, and watched the buildings and trees go by. He thought about the things he knew, the way he'd been raised. His parents were teachers—liberals, hippies even, in a former life. But his grandfather—he'd held onto the ideas and beliefs of a bygone era. Vincent wasn't so sure they were instilled in him, but he knew they made him question his time with Rae. A few hours before he'd been daydreaming of what it would be like to marry Rae, to have kids together. If they had kids, they'd be part black. What would his grandfather say? What would his parents say? They were progressives, his parents, but they still had trouble with urban culture. *These black kids, sagging their pants, talking like criminals, his mother would say. I can't control the classroom. The girls are either pregnant or have their asses hanging out of their shorts, or both.*

Rae squeezed his hand. He looked over and she smiled at him. She laid her head on his shoulder and said, "Our stop is about a mile from here. The cross street is 182nd."

"Alright," Vincent said, and looked back out the window. *If she left me out here, he thought, It'd take me days to get back home.* He had five dollars in his wallet and a bank account near zero.

They got off the bus and walked four blocks down a shady street. Rae pointed out her mother's house. It was nondescript—a split-level ranch like all the others in the neighborhood. Above the door was a wooden stencil of

two angels kissing. Rae tried the doorknob, but it was locked. She rang the doorbell and they could hear someone's weight press against the inside of the door onto the peephole. A bleach blonde woman in yoga pants and a tank top pulled Rae in and squeezed her tight. *Her mom is hot*, Vincent thought.

"Rae-Rae, how are you?" her mother asked.

"I'm fine, Mom." Rae unhinged herself from her mother and hooked her arm around Vincent's. "Mom, this is my boyfriend, Vincent. Vincent, this my Mom, Judy."

"Hello, Vincent. My, my. He's a looker, isn't he, Rae?" Judy said. She winked at Rae and shook Vincent's hand.

He said: "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"Ma'am? Aren't you polite?"

"He's from Tennessee," Rae said. "That's just how he talks."

"Well, you guys come on in. Sorry the door was locked, but we've had some trouble in the neighborhood since they started moving in," Judy said.

"Who's they?" Rae asked.

"The blacks," Judy said. Vincent bristled and braced himself for Rae's response.

"Come on, Mom," Rae said. "The only people committing crimes out

here are all the meth heads. And they are most definitely white.”

“No, Rae. There’s been tons of break-ins over the last few months. Ever since that apartment complex started taking those damn Section 8 vouchers.”

Rae looked morose. Vincent hadn’t seen this look on her.

“Mom, you know I’m black. Dad is black. Your grandkids will be black.”

“I’m sorry, honey. You know I don’t mean you or your dad. You’re not even really black,” Judy said.

They were still standing in the doorway. An awkward dance between mother and daughter, with Vincent not sure what to do or say. He pretended to notice something on his coat sleeve and started inspecting it.

“It’s always the same shit with you. I know you regret having me with dad. I know Mims and Pop resent me, resent you for being married to Dad. I just came out here to get my shit out of the attic.” Rae brushed past her mom and headed for the center of the house. She pulled a built-in ladder out of the ceiling and climbed up. Vincent gave Judy a confused look and followed Rae up.

“What are you looking for?” he asked her. Rae tossed boxes aside in a furious manner.

“My shit. My bug shit. All my books and posters. Preserved butterflies and beetles under glass. All my shit.”

Vincent turned on his phone’s light and scanned the cramped attic. He headed to a corner where he saw a box with *Rae* scribbled on the side. He opened the top and peered in. There it was. A dozen paperback books on entomology and three cases of bugs under glass.

“I think this is it.”

“Where?” Rae came over and knelt by the box at his feet. “Awesome. We can leave now.”

Vincent went down the ladder first and Rae lowered the box to him. She climbed down and brushed the dust off her knees. Her mother sat at the dining room table with a glass of white wine.

“Find what you were after?” she asked.

“Yep. We’ll get out of your hair.”

“I thought you might want a glass of wine. Or something to eat. You guys hungry?”

“No, thanks. I’m not really drinking right now,” Rae said.

That statement caught Vincent’s attention. He realized he hadn’t seen her drink or smoke anything for the past few days. She’d been going to bed earlier. Not staying up all night like the first couple of weeks they were

together.

“You know, you turned into a real Nazi after you married Steve,” Rae said. “You’re like a racist Stepford wife.”

“I never say the right things around you, Rae. I never have. Can’t do anything right.”

Rae struggled to reposition and hold the box, so Vincent took it from her. She hooked his arm and led him toward the door.

“I love you, Mom,” Rae said, on the way out the door.

Vincent struggled with the box on the four block walk back to the bus stop.

“Do you need me to carry it for a minute? You want to put it down and take a rest?” Rae asked.

“No, I’m good.”

On the bus, Vincent stuck the box under their seat. He rubbed his shoulder where he’d pinched it trying to leverage the box. He looked over at Rae, who smiled back at him. His mind was murky, his emotions blurred.

“Is it weird?” he asked.

“What’s weird?” Rae said.

“You. Having a white mom. Being black but not looking it. What’s

that like?”

“It was always a little strange. A little tough. The way people would look at my dad when we all went out to eat together. Like he’d done something wrong, being with this white woman. They probably didn’t even think I was his kid.”

“How’d your mom end up with your dad, if she feels the way she does?”

“She wasn’t always like that. Or maybe she was, and just felt my dad wasn’t like the rest of them, as she’d call us. My stepdad’s really done a number on her mindset. Fucking asshole.” Rae turned her head away from him and twirled a strand of her hair. “I grew up in the suburbs. All my friends were white. I like white things, white music. But my Dad’s black. I grew up with black cousins, a black grandma. I don’t try and hide the fact that I’m mixed, but I don’t feel I need to vocalize it either. I’m just me. I’m just Rae.”

Vincent reached for her hand. She let him take it.

“I’m late,” she said. “I should’ve had my period by now. I’m ten days late.”

Yesterday he would’ve felt elation, jubilation even at the prospect of having a child with someone he admired so much. Now, he wasn’t sure. How would he deal with a son, or God forbid, a daughter, who was part black? What if the kid was dark? What if the pigment skipped a generation, and

that's why Rae was as light as she was? He closed his eyes and imagined that first night with Rae. He'd been elated, euphoric in her arms. Consequences had meant nothing then.

They left the bus and trudged up the three flights of stairs to Rae's apartment. Vincent lost his footing twice and nearly fell back down the stairwell, but Rae was behind him to prop him up. She walked in the front door and went straight to the stereo. She put on a Guided By Voices record and walked to the French doors and looked out their windows, and up to the sky. *Hey glad girls, Only want to get you high*, Rae sang along. *Hey glad girls, only want to get you high*, Vincent sang along with her. In that moment he saw her humanity like he hadn't seen before. She looked lost but resigned and content to whatever path she was on.

“Should I go get a pregnancy test,” he asked.

“That'd probably be a good idea. I've never been this late before.”

“Alright,” he said. He walked to her and kissed her on the cheek. He kept the taste of her on his lips as he made his way out the door, down the street, and on up the block to the drug store. He knew he'd always taste her, always keep that moment in the back of his mind and remember it like a song.

Waiting for Mo' *Marcus Clayton*

Mo',

You live in a red state, but I write this waiting for you to meet me for lunch on your visit back to Los Angeles. Even though the best you could say was, “maybe,” I am still sitting on the blue bench directly across from Pizzamania, watching the last of its customers trickle in and out. The store announced it was going out of business months ago, but you were busy with your big boy job in Michigan and couldn't come back to California until the store was on its last legs. Sorry if that comes off as hostile—I am excited to see you. Truly. I am excited to sit down with you again and hear your voice straight from your mouth instead of a cell phone; to talk each other's ear off until the store closes for the last time, to eat one last large Pineapple and Shrimp pizza we got all the time in Undergrad, laughing off the stares from fellow patrons. I am excited to see your misery. Let me explain:

The house you and your fiancée bought looks over a hill in Kalamazoo; fed your excitement to see wildlife and stars, to sit outside and watch fireflies the way your city living never allowed. A cheap sales price sandwiched you both between two old white families whose houses sported *TRUMP/PENCE* signs in their grass like weeds. They told you both, You two are the *good* kind of Muslims! as though planting a gold star on yours and your Hindi fiancée's chest. They flaunt their open carry privileges around

you, saying things about being a good guy with a gun, triple checking that you weren't the bad guy. They spoke slowly around you despite Urdu being your second language. You mentioned selling the house eventually, hoping to make your way back to Los Angeles if better jobs open up. I wanted to use your melancholy today to push you back here, to prove that you and your fiancée are safer here than a red state.

I'd say, Damn dude, just move back here! as though you never had a problem in Los Angeles. I am banking on you forgetting our second to last trip to Pizzamania: we got drunk off of Irish Car Bombs and sour cocktails at the bar near campus before we stumbled over to our Shrimp and Pineapple, gorging on the whole pie in what felt like minutes. We sobered up at the parking lot in your car, a Honda S2000 which you loved like a child. You know I know nothing about cars, but my memory has always been a steel trap, which frightened people sometimes. You know better than I that I can't forget the things people love.

You loved Purple Rain, by Prince, and I banked on you not remembering how I shamed you for that while we sobered up.

I asked, You can't think of a better Prince song to like other than *the* poser song?

Then you said, It's a great song!

True, but *everyone* thinks it's a great song. It's lame when an artist's

poser song is your favorite song, dude. That just shows you don't understand the artist, that you don't give their other music a chance. You just listen to what the radio tells you to listen to, man! and this all sounded contentious and petty and I'm so sorry.

You have never loved music the way I do, just as I never thought of cars as more than scrap metal. You would never call me by my punk name the way most people do, instead always using my real name, []. You never understood punk, never wanted to understand punk, but you let me love it. I wanted to do the same for you, but I couldn't.

You continued with, I just like the way it sounds, man. I'm a sucker for pretty love songs.

But it's about the end of the world. In the apocalypse, blue and red skies make purple.

You probably don't remember me saying that, me shaming you for not preferring Erotic City or Black Sweat, as you shouldn't. A rogue Slurpee collided with your S2000's windshield, painting the glass in Wild Cherry slush. Two white boys walked past the car flipping us off. They screamed, Je Suis, Charlie, you terrorist motherfuckers!

I wanted to get out of the car and fight, but you told me to stay, assured me you had been through worse. The two white boys disappeared into the dark, and I calmed down.

To be fair, your passport makes you look Iranian! This was your joke.

My joke has always been that I am a double minority, cursed to be black and Latino at the same time; when I get pulled over I risk being beaten by a billy club before deported to the wrong Latin American country. But my skin has always been light enough to only feel softer jabs rather than the bones in knuckles. We were both twelve years old when the Twin Towers fell; both old enough to know targets were temporarily removed from every colored back except for Arabs. My parents hung American flags from their cars like shields despite both of them being afraid of it—whose blood do you think colors those stripes, you know? But they felt protected in ways you felt afraid, and I do not need to tell you about your own fears, my friend. You've fought them off for too long, especially when we met.

We both signed up for a Summer class abroad in London, England. I made it to the airport before you did and met the other students on the trip. White girls. White girls everywhere looking for a vacation within the blowoff class, Comparative Literature in Theatre Arts. I walked up to the gate as a few blondes who had made fast friends sang Katy Perry's California Girls and stopped when I walked up to them to find a seat. That day, I wore a small 'fro, a backpack, torn jeans, a leather jacket scribbled with punk pins, and a ~~Germans t-shirt~~—sorry, a band t-shirt. The blondes looked afraid when I sat near them. I never told you that.

I never told about my jealousy when the blondes were more receptive to you when you came to the gate wearing clean jeans, a nice haircut, and an *OBEY* t-shirt. They opened up a seat for you to place your bags. I never told you I already knew your full name was Mohammad, when you introduced yourself saying, *but my friends call me Mo'*. The itinerary the professors provided us prior to the trip had all the student names: I saw yours and froze. I found solace joking with my big sister, who—to this day—still sports American flags on the side of her mom-van which cover my nephew's face like an umbrella.

There's a Mohammad on my flight, sis!

Dios! Be careful! Try to get an aisle seat so you can trip him if he tries anything.

Mo', I am so sorry. If it means anything, you, and X, and Bōkun are the only faces that have stayed with me—the sea of white peers mesh in faceless memories, and I guess I didn't love them enough to let nostalgia reconstruct them as I think about London.

X, as you do know, was the first person I met on the trip. The light reflected off her septum piercing caught my attention at first. Her auburn hair offset her whiteness among the other blondes, and her flannel led me to believe would could talk about Nirvana for the entire 12-hour flight—we did not. Nonetheless, she looked at me without cowering like the other students, so of course I fell in love. You felt the same for Bōkun. The lie is you noticed

her straight, raven hair among the blondes; how she read quietly in a corner seat while the other white girls sang obnoxiously loud; how her muted clothes made you feel an ease that everyone else's bright colors did not. Truth was that Bōkun was the only Japanese student in our group—of course we noticed her immediately.

You never told her how you braced for conversation with her in broken English, how you were prepared to speak slow and listen intently to piece together her attempted syllables. You were shocked when her voice sounded eloquently American, when she told you about her monolingual tongue and how she went by *Amanda* throughout middle school and high school to avoid people mispronouncing her name. Part of the reason you gravitated toward her so much during the trip was her name, how she decided to stop accommodating for people outside of her culture when she entered college and demanded to go by Bōkun even by white people. You always wanted that kind of bravery, that unapologetic celebration of your name, but you introduced yourself to me as, *my friends call me Mo* ' knowing most of your friends were not Pakistani or Arab or even Muslim—you regretted every word of your introduction.

It makes ordering Starbucks easier! This was also your joke.

We both considered it karma that our class stayed near Gloucester Road, a college town walking distance from a Sainsbury where we bought American booze, and near fast food chains we recognized from our food

deserts back home. We had to pass by an H&M and two Starbucks when we returned from school to our flat. How foolish of us to think we could escape America by hiding in its colonial big brother.

Neither of us knew we were rooming together until we got to the flat itself—more karma for me. What a painless process, wasn't it? We got the beds we wanted, sides of the closet we wanted, portioned off the fridge so we wouldn't eat each other's food, and we talked about *The Simpsons* right until our cohort went for that first night outing. All of us walked to some nightclub close to the flats. X and the blondes guzzled collective gallons of mixed drinks while dancing together on the hallway sized dancefloor, celebrating being 19 and legally drunk. You and I stood with Bōkun and a few other peers neither of us kept in touch with. We were all 21 at the time, so the sheen of drinking did not glisten quite as well.

The PA poured out American pop, stuff I know you dug since I caught you bobbing your head arrhythmically as the whites gyrated. Even still, I remember our first big laugh as a group when Katy Perry's music entered the room and the white girls erupted yelling CALIFORNIA GIRLS despite the song actually being Firework or some shit.

You told us, Alright, let's pretend we don't know them, get one more drink, and sneak out. Maybe they won't find their way back.

Our group laughed with you, basking in the anonymity of being wallflowers in a foreign country. We all made more jokes at the expense of

the whites, our laughs inflating to almost block out the music. Eventually, our corner started dancing—you still tell me seeing Bōkun trying to shuffle that night was one of your favorite moments of the trip—our movements unfazed by white eyes. None of us had felt such freedom, and maybe that is what unfroze our limbs. Still, you caught me stealing glances at X every now and again, wondering how nice it would be to move to her movements; to be embraced by her hands that risk being stabbed by the pins on my jacket, to be embraced by her despite being a target for her people's guns.

The fourth night of the trip, I wanted to go to a punk show. You and Bōkun wanted to come with to get away from the blondes, and X tagged along because she claimed she loved all music. Most people stayed behind when they looked at the map and couldn't find bars or clubs around the punk venue. The Tubes didn't go all the way to Hackney, so we walked a mile through streets less pristine than our flats—the graffiti reminded us of Los Angeles, as did the homeless asking for spare quid. You happily gave a few coins here and there, whereas Bōkun and I had nothing to give that we didn't save exclusively for the show and a possible bus ride home. X, as you pointed out long after we returned to America, kept her eyes lost to the scenery and her purse clutched to her chest. She stopped squirming when we reached the Macbeth.

The line outside flooded the sidewalk with leather jackets and beards. The four of us stood together for about a half an hour waiting for doors to open, talking about home and how much we didn't miss it. X lost herself

in the wonder of living on soil she wasn't yet familiar with, mentioning her desire to eventually move to London. She talked about her love of traveling, how she spent summers in Hawaii with her family, vacationed in Italy a couple of times, how she couldn't wait to visit *some Asian country* the following year. You didn't see Bōkun's face, the grimace that made me think some poison corroded her tongue. Instead, you reciprocated; you mentioned how long it took you to save up for this trip, how your endless work hours between school rarely allowed for such extended vacations. You and Bōkun shared a wish to spend more time in nature—your upbringing in the city let streetlights keep you warm instead of campfires, made sure smog hid the stars from view to keep them a surprise. Your elders finding sanctuary in the cities meant moving around risked a death sentence, so the city was the only home you knew. That didn't keep you from wondering how it felt to have the Earth's air sing you to bed at night, to listen to the streets and hear ghosts walk over the gravel rather than the vitriol of traffic. I could see a quiet jealousy infect your smile when Bōkun told us about a camping trip near Yosemite, how she escaped people for a weekend to sleep under the stars; how she slept on grass among a soundtrack of gentle river water as fireflies danced above her face.

We both said, damn, I wanna see fireflies! and owed each other cokes.

Later, years, you would tell me how annoyed you were with X when she interrupted Bōkun's story to tell us about her own family's semi-annual

camping trips and that she saw fireflies at the rate people watched movies. The line started moving inside the venue just before you said, ~~must be nice to be able to afford to be anywhere at anytime with no problem, white girl!~~ anything.

Inside, we all stood next to the bar area and spent way too much quid on pints, getting drunk before the first band even started. You give me shit all the time about how great my memory is, yet I could never remember anything about the bands that played the show. Honestly, I try to forget. You saw me drunkenly hop into mosh pits like it was my turn at double dutch, ramming into English punks as sweat drenched my smile, but I saw the three of you wallflower to avoid the chaos. Bökun tried to nod her head to the rhythm of the songs, but she could never find it among the distorted echoes. One of the bands was too Avant Garde even for me: seven white boys with one member wearing a giant football helmet and another member banging on the helmet with a mallet like it was a xylophone. The singer hopped off stage at one point and screamed his words directly in people's faces, including yours.

WHAT TURNS! YOU ON! WHAT TURNS! YOU ON! WHAT TURNS! YOU ON!

Some audience members were receptive, pointing to the singer and saying, you, mate! You tried to be so nice as his spit caked your glasses on TURNS! and his breath painted your lenses with steam on ON! You smiled and smiled and smiled. You didn't have to.

We all kept drinking as the bands kept on, your backs eventually loosened from the wall, but you didn't dare go into the pit—I don't blame you. The punks got too rowdy for me, swinging fists instead of hips, with a fight breaking out in the middle of the dance floor being our queue to leave. I remember all of us staggering out of the venue, pointing at street art glazed over the walls on Hackneys' streets. I held an arm over X's shoulders as she pointed toward different pieces on the wall and said, that one's a Banksy, right? That one's totally a Banksy!

You and Bōkun walked ahead of us, your legs just as noodled but at a further distance from one another. I asked you once what you talked about when X called everything a Banksy (even some fucking tree), and you said *art*.

You said, Bōkun told me the art in that city reminded her more of some Japanese artist named Yayoi Kusama. She's apparently someone who needs to make art, needs to express who she was and how she felt on the inside, otherwise she'd kill herself. It was kinda cool. While you and X drunk-flirted behind us, we looked at the walls and saw the art of a bunch of souls who were saved for at least one more day. Bōkun said it reminded her of how precious the little things were, then I swear to God the colors got brighter.

Mo', honestly, I don't even remember the paintings on the brick. I barely remember how you helped us onto a double decker bus when we were

all too drunk to walk the rest of the way back to the flats. I was upset that you weren't as drunk as the rest of us, and aided me and X to a seat like we needed canes, but I write now saying I appreciate it. The bus drove along the path we were planning to walk. At a stop, we saw some white punks from the show jump a brown man in a business suit, walloping him, tearing his business attire and stealing his briefcase. Someone on the bus screamed, Oh, shit, the towelhead got jacked!

You didn't stop staring at the violence, even as the bus drove away, and the rest of us forgot how to use our words as hands on your shoulder when we rode back in complete silence. The streetlights danced to the chorus of the night and the rhythm of my blurred vision, and I hoped you would turn away from the violence for a second to enjoy the music with me; hoped you would turn away from the brown mirror beaten and alone. The lights could have been the fireflies you wanted. Instead, we returned, and said nothing about the streets. Instead, I asked to borrow the bedroom so I could help X sober, and you happily slept on the couch ~~while X and I fucked on your bed~~ ~~I'm so sorry~~ while we slept ourselves.

When we returned to America, we all made a dumb *happy-ending* promise to stay in touch. X and I continued to date, and I do thank you again for your tolerance of her outside of vacation. I thank you for not laughing at her grimaces as she lied about enjoying Pineapple and Shrimp pizza with us. I thank you again for pretending to like her in the time we stayed together, especially when you came out to her parties with her other white friends, how

she aggressively tried to set you up with her only other brown friends.

I apologize and should have warned you. Two years after we came back from England, I had a dinner at her parents' mansion that could have been much worse without her intervention. George Zimmerman had just been acquitted for murdering Trayvon Martin, and I fumed to X for nearly an hour. We sat in her bedroom waiting for dinner—pot roast, tasteless potatoes, some sort of beat, other white shenanigans—and she stared at her childhood stuffed animals as I yelled. The version I told you was that she nodded politely and let me vent. Then dinner came around and her parents applauded the decision, happy that someone trying to keep his neighborhood safe from thugs earned his freedom. I told you she fought them, but that wasn't true. She doubled down on what her parents said and pointed at me as a prime example of a well-behaved minority. I didn't say a word as I ate their tasteless potatoes.

I should have told you the day before our two-year reunion camping trip, when you and I had a sober meal at Pizzamania during Ramadan. Again, I apologize for thinking fasting was easy; for saying Islam was the best religion because the discipline needed was one that whites could never adapt to. You clearly saw my want to fast with you for one day as a way to temper the guilt I'll always have for once being afraid of you. You told me, I feel like you're trying to piss off X's Protestant parents, but I appreciate you doing this even for one day.

Nonetheless, that morning I ate two eggs and toast, then drank nearly

a half-gallon of water before napping throughout the day to expediate the fast, per your recommendation. You said I looked like a ghost walking into Pizzamania.

You laughed. We ate. I felt Cherry Coke crawl down my throat like water hitting desert dirt. The bottom of the steel plate holding our entire pizza became visible in what felt like moments, and we left only thin strands of cheese and loosened pineapples to keep crumpled napkins company. At this point, I was between programs and growing a larger ‘fro, and you had just gotten an Engineering degree and grew out a full, victory beard. We didn’t need to be anywhere near the campus anymore, but it was a safe haven for us to forget how to starve, to talk the night away. You weren’t soured by the white frat guys staring at our hair while we ate, cringing at our voices when our laughter got too loud. No. We prepped for the reunion trip and talked about escape; we smiled despite pain.

Mo’, I know you absolutely hated the reunion trip, and often point to the trip as why you couldn’t live in California anymore, why you took the job in Michigan, so I won’t ink anything about the trip itself. But I wanted to say you are not a poser. You are not obligated to like anything to prove you understand something. Had Bōkun made it to the reunion, she would have said the same thing.

But the whole weekend, the blondes surrounded us, and you just needed to go home. You still tell me it’s ok that X asked for us to hitch a ride with

you in your Honda S2000 to and from the trip, but I think about our cramped bodies too much. How, on the way back, we left late in the night when the freeways were pitch black, and one of your headlights burnt out 30 miles from any rest stop. X and I argued most of the trip, most violently in your car as we shared the passenger seat of your two-seater car, and you say what happened was your fault for trying to get us back home as fast as you possibly could. Ramadan was still in full swing, but you should have stopped for yourself when the sun went down. Instead, you let us bicker inches away from your ear as the hunger tugged at your eyelids. We should have shut up and given you water, but X and I were too distracted by our own vitriol to notice you nod off. Your S2000 careened off the 5 and down a steep hill. The metal beaten by jagged stones, the second headlight gone blind, and the windshield became the fallen rain of shattered glass.

I know you hate this memory, too, but when the car stopped just short of a bigger drop, I became convinced we couldn't let this part of the weekend go. The three of us got out of the car, collectively clothed in minor cuts from glass. We did what we were supposed to do in accidents—ask if we're all ok, cry, check the damages, cry some more. Your baby would be deemed totaled, but you walked away from the wreckage as soon as you realized no one died, and you planted yourself at the edge. X and I took a break from anger to join you. Over the cliff, we saw a deep night; a canvas of stars washed over the Earth, but trees dressed as silhouettes and animals slept with shadows as blankets. We couldn't see a Goddamn thing.

Then you pointed at the sky—the dark blue tainted with rain clouds and the soft glow of our annual California grapevine fires. The purple made you laugh into the gorge, tears rolling into your mouth, your stomach cramping from hilarity. The darkness hid X from view, but we heard her ask, what are you laughing at, Mo’? This is so scary. I feel like the world is ending.

Then you said, Good.

Right now, I am still waiting for you to eat some Pineapple and Shrimp pizza like we used to. I am waiting to be reminded that you are live, and that your Red state neighbors hadn’t beaten the Islam out of you. In the time I have written this, I have seen students from our old campus walk in and out, satiated, and tinier than I remember. I expected a bigger crowd, but Pizzamania will be closing soon for the last time; the inside will be emptied without a tomorrow.

Whatever. More pizza for us, right? More space for me to show you how much room Los Angeles has for people like you and me. I want to convince you to come back, to save you from the exile that is the Midwest, but now I am not even convinced I am safe sitting on this blue bench alone as the sun starts dipping below the horizon. Now I am not convinced that you’re safer with me white people who’d use you to feel less racist.

I haven’t checked my phone since sitting down, as it has been on silent ~~so I do not get distracted writing this letter~~ so I can be pleasantly surprised when you eventually show up. I know you’re coming, and I know

you're coming *back*. You will bring you Hinde fiancée and find a better Engineering job near the ocean. We will find Bōkun and invite her and her husband out for drinks, and you will all meet my wife. We will all look like a painting; every color expressed with the vibrance of lights, the snapshots of euphoria we lost back in London.

I want to be right, but the only thing I'm certain of is that I *want* to be right.

Love,

[]

[],

Sorry I missed our lunch, but I am back in Michigan.

There is no blue in the sky tonight.

Just reds from flames that are too close to us.

But the fireflies are out.

Their bodies breach the night with bright lights that dim the burning crosses over the hill.

I think you would like them.

-Mo'

See You Wednesday *William Cass*

I relieved my son Jack's overnight nurse a little before six. She said the shift had been uneventful: a couple of short seizures, normal trach suctioning, a dirty diaper. It was another in a series of encouraging nursing reports for Jack's level of severe disability and related problems. I walked her to the front door, thanked her, and watched her go through the gate to her car at the curb. The sky above the middle school across the street where I taught was tinted with a pink-gray stripe of dawn. The day's opening breath was mild for early May in San Diego, so I was hopeful that it would be warm enough for the beach later on.

I checked next on my daughter, Rosie. Her bedroom door was ajar with a triangle of light escaping through it onto the carpet. I found her asleep in a tangle of covers, an open book at her side like usual and the bedside lamp on. She was eight, four years older than Jack, and still clutched her old stuffed bear every night around the neck where all the fur had worn off. I set the book on the crowded shelves next to the bed, straightened her covers, kissed her forehead, and turned out the lamp. I closed her door softly when I left.

After I'd made coffee and changed into clothes, I checked on Jack again. He was sleeping soundly, too. His diaper was dry and the O2 and heartrate numbers on his sat monitor were fine. I gave him an anti-seizure

med followed by a pulmonary one through his G-tube, refilled the bag that held his feeding formula, turned up the volume on his sat monitor's alarm, and repositioned him. I adjusted the mister cup at his trach and kissed his cheek. Then I went

into the living room, sipped coffee, and graded papers while the morning slowly unfolded. Except for the steady whir of Jack's feeding pump and the regular beep of his sat monitor, it was quiet.

A little after nine, Rosie padded into the room in her pajamas carrying her bear. She stopped a few feet from me, sandy-colored hair in her face and eyes still full of sleep. "It's Saturday," she said. "No day nurse for Jack."

I nodded and smiled. She did the same, then curled up next to me on the couch with her head against my upper arm, holding her bear with both hands. A few moments later, I heard her breathing slow into sleep again. I could only guess at how late she'd stayed up reading. With her leaning against me, it was difficult to keep working, so I sat still listening to her breathe along with the sounds of Jack's equipment and watched the morning's dusty, white light stretch through the windows along with a small, warm breeze. At one point, Jack's pump gave its prolonged beep signaling the end of his feed and powered down.

Rosie awoke again suddenly twenty minutes or so later, sat up, looked around wide-eyed and said, "It's nice enough for the beach."

“I think so, yes.”

“Yay. But the movie first. And donuts.”

I smiled and nodded.

She clapped her hands once, then went through Jack’s room to the bathroom. As she passed him, I heard her say, “Good morning, brother.”

She dressed while I got Jack ready and into his wheelchair. Then we used the lift on the van to load him into it and drove to the donut shop. Rosie ran inside ahead of me while I unloaded Jack and followed her with him. She was studying the display case when we entered. The big woman behind the counter gave her familiar smile and said, “Morning.”

I returned her smile and said, “Hi.”

She nodded towards Rosie. “Same thing as usual, sweetie?”

“I’m not sure yet.” She looked up at the woman and said, “We’re going to the movies and the beach afterwards. First time this year for the beach.”

“Good for you.”

Rosie ended up making her regular choice – a maple bar and an old-fashioned – and asked for hot chocolate. I got a toasted bagel and orange juice. We sat at a table by the window. The only other person in the place was an old man reading the newspaper and sipping from a cup of coffee.

Rosie kicked her feet under the table and hummed between bites. Jack coughed once hard, secretions exploding from his trach onto the top of his jacket, which I wiped away with the bandana I kept tucked into his collar. When I looked up, the old man was watching us with disgust, but then glanced back quickly to his newspaper.

We drove across the bridge and up the freeway to a theater in a mall that had a late morning matinee. The movie was a new fantasy based on a book Rosie had read and involved throwaway 3-D glasses for viewers that she thought Jack would like. We got settled in the section reserved for wheelchairs at the very rear. I put Jack's glasses on, tilted him back, and adjusted his headrest so that his gaze was directed at the screen. It was unclear how much he could see; since he was non-verbal, the ophthalmologist could only do limited testing, but she was pretty certain that he had close to normal visual acuity, and he'd become animated at the sights and sounds when we'd gone to movies before.

Rosie and I watched his response through our own glasses when the theater darkened and the film began. He got very quiet, then made his happy squawk, which meant he was engaged. She laughed, I took Jack's hand, and we sat back for the show. About halfway through it, Jack began to seize, so I took off his glasses, lifted him out of his wheelchair, held him on my lap, and gently rubbed the flat spot on the back of his head. Rosie looked over until

the seizure passed. It wasn't a hard or long one, only about thirty seconds. Afterwards, he nuzzled into my chest and fell asleep, which was his normal post-dictal response.

After the movie ended, Rosie reached over and squeezed Jack's leg. He was still sleeping. She asked, "Do you think he liked it?"

"The part he was awake for, yes."

"I liked it, too, but the book was better."

I settled Jack back into his wheelchair, and we waited for the theater to clear to begin trying to maneuver Jack through exit ourselves. The last group to pass us was a family of five; the parents led, followed by two older sisters, and, finally, a boy about Jack's age holding what was left of a bunched-up bag of popcorn. He stopped by Jack's wheelchair, stared, and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," Rosie said. It came out quick and hard.

"It's all right," I told her. I turned to the boy and said, "We don't know exactly. He was born this way."

The boy grimaced and said, "He has a hole in his throat."

"That's to help him breathe," I told him. "And it also works kind of like when you blow your nose."

The grimace remained. "Does it hurt?"

“No,” Rosie said. “It does not.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Jack,” she told him. “His name is Jack.”

The boy’s family had gone ahead of him and left the theater, and his father returned quickly through the exit doors. Relief flooded his face as he came up to his son and said, “We thought we lost you.”

The boy looked up at him and said, “This is Jack. That hole in his throat helps him breathe.”

His father put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and told him, “Come on,” Then he turned to me and said, “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “No need.”

They went out of the theater together as the credits ended. The theater lights came up, exposing a trail of drool on Jack’s chin. I used his bandana to wipe it off, and we left ourselves.

When we got home, I laid Jack in bed, changed his diaper, and got his breathing treatment started with the vibrating vest and albuterol through a nebulizer. Then I made Rosie her lunch of apple slices spread with peanut butter, string cheese, and milk. She read her book at the dining room table as she ate. I made myself a sandwich and sat in the chair next to her. I’d left the French doors to the dining

room open when I brought Jack up the ramp there, and the breeze that came through them had warmed further as the day had gone on. The leaves on the big orange tree next to the deck rustled on it. I ate and watched Rosie knit her brow as she read.

After we finished, I told her to get into her bathing suit and a sweat-shirt. She ran off with a squeal. I cleaned our dishes, then went back into Jack's room. The breathing treatment had ended, so I suctioned him three times without much production. I checked his diaper and his sats on the portable monitor; both were fine. I gave him his mid-day meds, then got him back in the wheelchair and changed myself into shorts, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and flip-flops. We got the beach gear and Jack into the van and headed off.

We went to our town's main beach because it had a cement walkway that reached almost to the lifeguard stand and the water, so I only had to navigate a short stretch of sand with Jack's wheelchair. I had a folding beach chair strapped to my back, and a satchel of sandcastle-building toys dangled from the handlebars of Jack's chair. Rosie carried her towel, boogie board, and book. We set up where the wet sand met the dry, and I sun-screened all of us. I adjusted the big floppy hat on Jack's head, reclined his chair, and positioned it so the back of it was to the sun. The marine layer had almost completely lifted, and it was pleasantly warm. There weren't many other people on the beach yet that early in the season.

Rosie immediately emptied the satchel and started building in the wet sand. I joined her when I had Jack settled, my chair unfolded, and her towel spread. She worked intently and randomly in her usual manner, constructing upside-down, cone-shaped towers with various sizes of pails and then topping them with shells, stones, and kelp she found nearby. I worked more slowly and finished a few of my own to form a kind of collective castle while she began digging the moat around its perimeter with scooped hands. She didn't say much while we worked except to give a few descriptions now and then about the inhabitants of the castle and the dangers they faced. Occasionally, Jack coughed. The small waves unfolded onto the beach making their soft whoosh towards us followed by their whispering retreat.

When the moat was finished, Rosie began scampering down into the shallow water, filling the biggest pail, returning with it sloshing onto her sweatshirt, and dumping it into the moat. This was her favorite part, so I just sat back and watched. The full bucket was a strain for her to carry, but I knew she would reject any offer of help; the look of concentration on her face was almost fierce.

She kept at it until the moat was filled to the brink. Then she dropped the pail, stepped back with her hands on her hips, and looked at me. "There," she declared with satisfaction. "They're all safe now."

I applauded. With her short blonde hair, round face, and big, blue

eyes, she looked so much like her mom that it was startling. I said, “Perfect.”

She took both her brother’s hands in her own and said, “See, Jack. See the castle?”

He gave one of his squawks, turning his head towards her and making his chewing motion of affection.

Rosie took off her sweatshirt, dropped it on the towel, and picked up her boogie board. She said, “I’m going in.”

“Stay close,” I told her. “Ride the foam.”

She nodded, velcroed the board’s strap to a wrist, and ran off. Her heels clipped up happily behind her as she entered the small surf. I’d taught her to boogie board a couple of years earlier when her mom was still around and could be with Jack. Her mom’s name was Jane, and she’d left when Jack went into the children’s hospital with the big pneumonia that almost killed him. That involved a thirteen month stay in the convalescent wing afterwards to recover and deal with a multitude of other medical problems. I rarely saw her name in the visitors’ log while he was there.

So now I spread out Rosie’s sweatshirt on the towel to dry, moved to the beach chair, took Jack’s hand again, and watched alone as she frolicked in the surf. When she caught a good wave that took her all the way up onto the beach, she jumped up, grinned at me, and raised her fist in triumph. I smiled and returned the gesture.

I checked my watch about an hour later, and then called to Rosie to come in. She did so reluctantly, stopping in front me and dripping on the sand.

“We have to go,” I told her.

“But I didn’t even get to read.”

“You read plenty.” I reached over and tickled her belly. “Come on, help me pack up.”

At home, Rosie showered and got into clothes while I changed Jack’s diaper, suctioned him, and gave him another med. Then I began shuttling his medical equipment out to the van.

As I was lifting Jack into it in his wheelchair, Rosie came out the back gate. Her wet hair was combed straight. In one hand, she pulled the little roller suitcase covered with Disney characters that contained the things she brought back and forth between houses, and she carried her bear in the other. I put her suitcase in next to Jack’s wheelchair, closed the van’s doors, and we drove away.

We were quiet until we were cresting the bridge. As we started the descent, Rosie said, “This has been a good day.”

I glanced over at her. She was smiling. “Yes,” I said. “It has.”

We drove in silence again for the short trip up the freeway, and then

off it through a neighborhood bordering a golf course and an adjoining canyon. Rosie asked, “Where is Mom’s new house again?”

“South Park.”

“I don’t like it as much. It’s cold and drafty.”

Something fell in me. I thought of the afternoon I was served with divorce papers when I was coming through my front gate after school and of the court documents that had arrived earlier that week finalizing things. “It’ll warm up,” I told her. “Summer is coming on.”

We made the last big turn past the driving range. “She’s getting better with Jack,” Rosie said quietly. “She doesn’t get so anxious anymore. She hardly ever cries now when she’s with him.”

I felt myself blinking. “That’s good,” I said. “He’s getting stronger every day.”

Jane had just begun taking Jack for her days each week about a month earlier. I thought of the morning she’d left during the first part of Jack’s long hospital stay. She said she just couldn’t do it anymore, that she was done being a martyr. When I asked if there was someone else, she said that was only part of it.

We pulled up in front of her house. Jane came down the ramp as I was opening the van’s doors, and Rosie ran into her hug. They both closed their eyes and swayed back and forth as they embraced. I looked over their

heads into the side yard where I could see the back of Jane's boyfriend, Don, painting a fence. He was wearing the same cycling cap he'd almost always worn when he used to come pick her up on Sundays so the two of them could go lesson plan together for the high school class they co-taught. I took care of the kids while they were gone. Often, he stayed for the dinner I'd prepared when they got back.

Rosie broke free of their hug and announced, "We went to the beach."

"That's nice," Jane said. She looked at me as I lowered Jack on the lift and gave one of her smiles that always seemed full of effort. I did my best to do the same. "I can smell your clean hair," she said to Rosie. "Smells like strawberries. Smells like my girl."

I pushed Jack up next to them. Jane looked down at him and said, "And here's our guy." She touched his knee with a fingertip. "How's he been?"

"Fine." I nodded. "Good."

The three of us carried the equipment up the ramp and inside the foyer. Then we came back for Jack where he waited on the sidewalk in the clean mid-afternoon light. Rosie gave me a hug and said, "I love you, Daddy. See you Wednesday."

My heart clenched. I said, "I love you, too."

I kissed the top of her head, and she ran off up the ramp and inside the house. Jane gave me a last sad smile as I bent to kiss Jack's cheek and then she pushed him up the ramp, too. Don had never turned around from his work on the fence. I waited until their screen door had yawned closed to get back in the van and drive away. As I did, the same, old, numb emptiness spread through me.

While I drove, I tried to think of what I'd do when I got home. I thought I might go for a run. After that, I had a biography I'd started that I could read. I thought I'd probably put something on the bar-b-que later for dinner. Then the evening would begin its slow descent into night. I could sit out on the back deck and watch the darkness deepen for as long as I liked. I'd done that many times. At some point, sprinklers would hiss on in a neighbor's yard. A dog or two would bark nearby. Cars would pass by slowly in the street beyond the hedge. I might hear a siren from the fire station down at the corner. Eventually, the ferry would belch its horn at the pier a dozen blocks away signaling its last crossing of the night. And, not too long after that, I'd become aware of the faint rumble of the final southbound train as it lumbered into the station downtown across the bay. Then I could head inside to bed and try to sleep in the silence that would become deafening. But I didn't have to. I could sit out there all night if I wanted. I had nothing but time.

Green *Camilla Lee*

My brother could be described as an Andover Man. In fact, he loves to describe himself as such. He attends their fancy alumni gathering every October, where people arrive in mini helicopters and vintage Bugattis, dressed in the colors of New England foliage. He still considers Philips Academy as the highlight of his life—although he earned his BA and MBA from the University of North Carolina. A red robin flapping his wings to join the gliding swans. Andover was on a tuition scholarship, but he still managed to drain our middle-class parents' bank accounts with his lifestyle. He's the son, so he can do that. It doesn't hurt that he is a good-looking guy—wide-shouldered and narrow-hipped. Fluent in Italian, Korean, and English. Dated beautiful girls from rich families. Not tall, but the boy knew how to dress. Most importantly he had an exquisite eye for color. He probably got it from the Italians. When I was in middle school, we lived in Rome for a while. Father was stationed there. We were Army brats.

Not only did the boy have a wardrobe full of monied suits and shoes, but on the rare occasions we shopped together, he picked clothes for me—the best colors—colors with fancy names: Eternally Blue. Dazzling Yellow. Heavenly White. Lucky Red. Who knew Burnt Orange looked good on me? I once used two credit cards to pay for \$1,387.99 (before tax) on a Valentino

peacoat (on a clearance sale) because of the boy. Not a wise choice on my temp paralegal's salary. But every time I wear that coat, I get compliments. It's like an Instagram filter that follows you everywhere you go.

The boy got a finance job in New York. After five years, he relocated to South Korea where my mother retired to. She reverse-emigrated for their wonderful universal healthcare. He started his own consulting company, and also gave up his American citizenship to take advantage of their healthcare and avoid foreigner-owned business taxes; a smart move. He was still an Andover Man, though. He even got engaged to his Andover sweetheart—a girl whose family had a library named for them at Yale—but they broke up after one year. He married some other girl who divorced him after eight months.

Something about his temper, they both said.

But I remember him as a sweet boy! My parents divorced when the boy was fourteen. Mother did not live with us fulltime, and after the divorce, we saw her even less. She was a professor at a community college in California while Father—who combated hard for and won custody—took me and the boy to where he was stationed. Mother conveniently agreed—it was very hard for her to get tenured or make money, being the only Asian in a tiny department at a small bumfuck college where all the tenured faculty were white. On our own, we sometimes hired help, but Father, being an old-school Korean American military man, considered a daughter a kitchen labor, so I was expected from age thirteen to housekeep and cook. I practically raised

the boy. Cooked him fat dumplings and spicy Bibimbap every day.

I even “helped” the boy with his application to Andover. Weaved a sob story about how displaced we minority Army brats were, moving every three years to different countries and cities. In fact, it’s the truth. There is no place to call home. You are always in-between, so you learn to never attach yourself to people. I salted his personal statement with details about our parents’ divorce and hot-peppered it with ethnicity. It was a brilliant. Won him a scholarship to a school whose semester costs more than two year’s tuition at any community college. I wanted to go to that fancy school myself, but my parents did not believe in spending that kind of money on a daughter. Even with a scholarship, it costs money, you know, to attend that kind of school with semblance of human dignity. Nonetheless, when the boy got in, they were overjoyed, happy to make sacrifices. We Asians are crazy about education—we believe that getting into Harvard is better than getting into heaven.

Several years ago, I noticed that the boy would turn moody and bad-tempered. It was soon after his divorce and Father’s death, both of which he took hard. We were in late twenties by then. I was in Boston, living a zombie life scratching away at my dead-end job. I had married my UMass sweetheart, but we separated after three years. The boy still visited once a year for his Andover meetings, pilgriming all the way from Korea. A week before his arrival, I would buy weed for him, at his request. Nothing else, of course, and he swore he only smoked joints—no coke, no hard drugs—just something to take the edge off after a long flight.

Two Octobers ago, we had a huge fight when the boy had a small packet of coke sent to my address. It arrived with his other Amazon packages. I instinctively knew that this was not your average Amazon delivery—no sender's address, postage from the Netherlands. When I opened the envelope, a small plastic baggie fell out. Tiny crystal powder inside. I flushed it down the toilet.

We had a raging fight over an international phone call that ended up costing me a new phone. Apple really should make tougher screens for their iPhones. But my anger wasn't uncalled for—the drug laws are different in South Korea. Drug possession *and ingestion* are serious crimes there. The Korean police can take a sample of your hair out or demand for a cup of your urine for analysis without a warrant. You have to be stupid to dabble with drugs in Korea. It's like spraying graffiti in Singapore or stealing road signs (remember Michael Fay?). I did not talk to the boy for an entire year. We only made up due to my sixty-year-old mother's pleadings.

Last October, the boy visited again and even before his arrival, I pilgrimed to the marijuana dispensary in Brookline twice. Always preparing to feed this boy. At the airport, he seemed to be in a foul mood. He took my merry gifts with a grunt and the next day went back there on his own.

And the next day, to another one in Lowell. And then to one in North Hampton and another small-town-Massachusetts. After his alumni thing, he stayed at my house for one more week, reclining on the couch. Did not talk

to me, just slumped on the couch. Dazed. I texted Mother. She said he must be stressed from running his own company. But he was in the exact same position when I returned home in the evenings. Not quite sleeping. Just...out of it. I wondered if he was on something else. I texted Mother. She replied that he must be adjusting to the time difference. I finally confronted him. You know the rules. Only weed is ok in my house. He swore that he was not on anything illegal, no hard drugs. Yes, only marijuana. He actually got quite mad. And then he got livid. He returned to Korea still pissed. I texted Mother. She chided: why can't you trust your own family?

The boy and I did not talk for a while.

Over Thanksgiving, I received a series of warm texts from Thailand where the boy was on for a business trip: how much he loves his dear older sister; how--yes, our family is a bit dysfunctional and estranged but--we could start rebuilding a sibling relationship. *It's a jungle out there and we family should stick together.*

Let's have a weekly chat, he suggested, I will call you when I return to Seoul on Friday.

Let's have a weekly chat, Sister, I heard about your dead-end job. Your pipeline dreams of being a writer. It's difficult when dreams die.

Let's have a weekly chat. I am here for you. Don't worry. You can lean on me. Do you need money?

Sure, I replied. Why not. Yes to all that. I actually got laid off last week. I did not get out of the bed for three days. My life was ugly before, but now Ugly just got acid thrown in her face. My cheap state healthcare doesn't cover out-of-network providers, so I can't get counseling from my usual therapist who doesn't work on a sliding scale. That's \$ 200 per session, or one fifth of a Valentino coat. Or is it one-sixth (with tax)? I don't hang out with friends because I cannot stand the pity in their eyes. I feel the punch of failure every morning when I make my coffee.

It will be wonderful to just talk to someone and feel safe.

On Friday, I am up early, calculating the time difference, and the coffee tastes sweet.

When the phone call comes, it is Mother instead. The boy was arrested at the airport in Korea. He had in possession 10 grams of coke and 13 grams of meth. He was in a holding cell. His urine test showed marijuana, coke, and meth. The bail hearing was scheduled for coming Monday. Since he had given up American citizenship, he'd be tried as a Korean. No handing over to the U.S. government to get a special treatment as a foreigner.

Fuck, no.

On Friday, I FaceTimed with the boy's lawyer and wrote a magnificent character letter for the bail hearing, asking the judge for leniency—detailing how displaced we Korean Americans are, always tagged as aliens in Korea and also in the United States. There is no place to call home. You are

always in-between. I salted the letter with my father's death and hot-peppered it with how the boy had once been waitlisted at Harvard (a lie). It was a brilliant character letter. I had to use Google Translator because I'd forgotten a lot of Korean. Over there, if you are found guilty of drug *ingestion* you get sent to jail for a minimum of seven years. To a *Korean jail*.

Mother sobbed over the phone.

How could he do this, she cried. *He promised he wasn't doing coke.*

Well, not only was he on coke but also meth, Mother, I said.

The judge denied him bail, and the boy was moved to a proper jail. Trial date to be determined. He will spend Christmas in a cell. Mother visited him. They were given ten minutes. She said he just cried and cried on the other side of the glass divider.

What was he wearing? I asked her.

Huh? Wearing? she replied, *he had some kind of jail uniform on.*

I looked out the window of my apartment. A squirrel scurried over the trash bins, dragging a piece of half-eaten cheese pizza. It left paw-prints on the snow-covered metal lids.

What color? I asked.

Parking Lot Professor *Ryan Hunter*

Alex Walker awoke on Friday, October 1st, \$46,381 in debt. The sun had yet to break the horizon, but the grey of the early morning was giving way on the fringes of the sky to a soft orange glow. He knew from experience that by the time he would roll off the mattress and arrive at his gym it would be a bright yellow Southern California sunrise. He had seen them almost every day this year as his morning routine had forbid him from sleeping in like he used to. He specifically chose his graduate classes in the evening so that he never had to worry about getting up and out of the house. He used to love the blackout curtains in his room that would allow him to sleep until noon without complaint. Now those blackout curtains were stapled into the upholstery above the back door of his 1987 dodge cargo van, giving him a nice privacy screen. They still worked just as well and kept the interior of the van pitch black, but he could no longer truly enjoy their effect.

He did not need to move far on the small mattress as his lengthy 6-foot frame hung off the sides and ends unless he found the perfect angle to cut the mattress diagonally. The mattress had been his nephews, but he had traded furniture to fit a reasonable sized sleeping area into his cramped new-age apartment. Along with the mattress he was able to secure a hot-plate and coffee maker from his sister and brother-in-law. Along with his two bedside tables which he had thrown in from his old apartment he had a fully furnished studio apartment on wheels. He reached over to the bedside table and pulled his phone off the car charger. The alarm which was building in momentum was quickly silenced with a swipe of his finger. He stared at the dark screen waiting for his eyes to adjust to the 6:01 time stamp. A deep, primal sound emerged from his soul and made its way out of his mouth as a low groan.

Alex rolled off the mattress onto the floor. He flung the two Coleman sleeping bags that he used as blankets into the far corner of the mattress onto

his pillow. He popped up on his knees before shuffling to the front of the van. His knees had developed callouses from the rug burn due to his early morning routine. He liked to get to the gym early before most of the morning rush came in and hogged the cardio equipment. More importantly, however, was the no parking sign near the Signal Hill Elementary School that he liked to frequent. He had memorized the sign as he read it every night before he parked to make sure that they had not changed it during the day to impound his home: “No parking 6am-9am and 2pm-4pm due to pickups and drop-offs.”

Alex had gutted the van the same day he paid for it except for the two front seats, which he split, pushing his legs first through the opening and swinging the rest of his body rather gracefully into the driver’s seat. The leather was cold against his flesh and he cursed under his breath as he flinched away.

Alex turned the key and listened to the alternator roar like a frightened housecat. It barely managed to turn over the heavy engine with the help of Alex’s foot slamming down the gas pedal to the floor. He had been advised not to do that or it would flood the engine. The van needed maintenance and Alex knew that he had to bite the bullet and ask his sister if he could use her garage for a few days while he tore into the beast once more.

Alex drove east away from the school and towards his gym. He wrote the price (\$27.99 a month) off as a business expense. His sole motivation were the showers, yet he figured that since he was already in the building he might as well get a workout in. He tried to negotiate a gym membership through the University when he was hired, yet even with the employee discount it was more expensive than the free-market option. Alex would typically walk a few miles each morning being careful not to break too much into a sweat to cut down on laundry costs as he could get a few days out of the same workout clothes, excluding socks and boxers.

“Good Morning everyone,” Alex said as he walked into his 8am lecture. He was thankful that this was the only one that he had for the day so he could spend the better part of the day in his office without his office mate being there. Edward, his office mate, rarely came to campus on Fridays and opted to work from home sending department emails and reaching out to his few troubled students who were always skirting the line between passing and failing the course.

“Hi, Professor,” a student said in the front row. Everyone else seemed asleep and a few were leaning their heads against the back wall with their eyes closed.

“Hello Ashley, how are you?” Alex asked her as he tossed his backpack up on the desk in the front of the room and pulled out a flash drive that had that day’s lecture on it.

“Tired,” she said weakly, “I was up all night writing an essay for another class that was due this morning.”

Alex sat in the chair at the front and let out a sigh. “were you wasteful procrastinating or creative procrastinating?” he asked her, referring to a lecture he had given the week before.

“Creative. I had to wait until the words came to me and that wasn’t until after midnight.”

The room began to wake up due to the conversation. Heads were rolling forward and eyes were starting to open once more. Alex always liked to start each class in an informal conversation with a student to give the others a chance to rouse themselves. Ashley was a good sport who was always willing to participate.

“Well, if we are to believe anything that Peter Elbow or our TED

Talks told us last week it is that deadlines are the enemy to good writing, and sometimes you have to skirt the line a little bit.”

Alex reached into his bag and pulled out his last working dry erase marker before going to the board and spelling out a single word in his messy, all capitalized letter handwriting.

RHETORIC

“Now, we spoke about this word a bit last week. Can someone give me a definition in their own words?”

Silence

The clock on the wall kept the pace of their brains working, attempting to either search for an answer or elude it. Alex smiled at his students knowing full well that he would out-perform them in this game of chicken. He had more practice than they had after all. He looked out the window of the room at the assortment of students wandering around and the few of them sprinting trying to get to class a few minutes late rather than take the absence.

“Isn’t it like when you argue something? Like the way your words persuade someone to do something?” said a student from the back of the room. He was hunched over his desk hiding the notebook that he spent portions of each class doodling in.

“Very good. Thank you, Mr. Isaac.” Alex said, recognizing his voice as one of the few who spoke up during his early morning lectures. Each student would participate in turn, but when he asked questions, he had grown

accustomed to the few them who would speak up first.

“Rhetoric,” Alex began, “is how you use your knowledge of your audience and your mastery of diction to persuade. It works in both verbal and written communication, and that is one of the main points of this course. Correct?”

A few heads nodded, half remembering their Professor discussing something similar to this a few weeks prior when the semester first begun.

Alex uncorked the marker and spun to face the board again. The smell of the ink hit his nose and the third-grade nostalgia of sniffing markers because one of his classmates told him it would get them high renewed itself in his mind as he scratched another word onto the board:

DICTION

“Now, diction if anyone has not heard of it, is your command of words. If I say the word ‘cat,’ you think of a cat. If I were to say the word ‘Garfield’, you would think of a fat orange cat that loves lasagna. The way that your brain works, making connections based on language is fascinating. *I still don’t know how it all works. One word used correctly can impact the meaning of an entire sentence, or an entire piece. Each and every one of your words interact with one another. Right?*” Alex asked, mirroring one of his favorite professors who would use the word to pause and give his students a beat to reacquaint themselves with his rhythm.

“Another way to think about this concept is building a house, to use a crude metaphor. Think about each word as a brick. And if each word is a brick, then each sentence is a layer of bricks, and each paragraph is a single wall, and if you use the right words in your essay then you will build, hope-

fully, a sturdy house. Thinking about diction and how your words interact with one another is one of the major aspects of writing in general.”

“When you speak, so long as no one is recording you, there is no record of what you said. Unless you are aware of the theory that all sound waves exist forever and just recess to a frequency that we are no longer able to access. When you write, however, you can go back and reread your work, or others can read your work years into the future. So, finding the perfect words to describe every idea is essential to making each essay timeless.”

Alex paused, hoping that he was not moving too fast.

“Am I moving too fast?” he asked, the room was still except for Daniel Isaac who looked up from his sketchbook and nodded his head. “Thank you for the feedback Mr. Isaac. Let us start with an example.”

Alex turned and wrote two words on the board.

STOMACH

ABDOMEN

“Which word is better?” Alex asked.

“Abdomen,” said one of his students, Ms. Kim, a lot faster than Alex had intended a student to respond. She sat in the front row and was not one of his regulars who spoke up.

He was intrigued and was afraid that by pushing her opinion he would force her to lock up and not want to participate further. He decided to expand on the relationship between these two words more.

“Stomach and abdomen both are words to describe the area of your body below your rib cage. They are synonymous so in Microsoft Word if you right click and find the synonyms tab, they both show up. And while they

both mean the same thing, they come from different languages.” Alex took a beat, not happy with the way he was phrasing the explanation. “They are both English words—now—but their root words are from different origins. Stomach is from French and Abdomen is from Latin. So, Ms. Kim, knowing all of this, why is ‘abdomen’ the better word?”

“I think because it sounds smarter. Like doctors do not say stomach, they say abdomen, so that one is better if you want to sound smart.”

Alex smiled without meaning to and nodded his head encouragingly.

“Great answer. Abdomen is used more in medical fields, so if you are writing for an audience of doctors or discussing medical conditions then ‘abdomen’ would be the right word choice for that audience. Similarly, you are touching on a hierarchy of language. Basically, certain words are more reputable than others and using them is the easiest way to elevate your diction.”

The room was silent, and Alex knew that he had lost them by throwing in too much in his explanation. He was still trying to figure out the perfect balance of explaining concepts to his students without causing their brains to turn off their ears because he was overloading the circuitry.

“Can someone give me a different example?” he asked the class. The silence that followed stretched indefinitely.

“Car park,” Mr. Isaac said from the back.

“Car park?” Alex questioned because he was unsure if he heard her correctly.

“Yeah. When I was in England over the summer visiting my extended family, they called them ‘car parks’ which I think sounds better than ‘parking lots.’”

Alex nodded and then walked back to his desk for a drink of water as his throat was drying out. He thought about his example and agreed that car

park and parking lot were connected to the same referent, but he was unsure if praising one over the other was a linguistic hierarchy or a stylistic opinion that him and his student shared.

“I agree,” he said, without giving a further explanation. “Anyone else?”

“Illustrates,” Ms. Kim said. Alex was excited that she was choosing to participate so much today. “You crossed out ‘for example’ on my last paper and wrote in ‘illustrates.’”

Alex felt self-conscious now that his editorial bias was brought into the classroom.

“Yes, okay,” he began, unsure how to swing this example his way, yet he attempted to with another too long lecture that he knew was too complicated but did not know how to simplify it enough.

Alex was exhausted from teaching as he slid his office key into the door. The lecture had not gone the way that he had anticipated but he felt as though his students had learned something after all. He was excited to read some of the worksheets they turned in after staring at the wall in his office for half-an-hour and giving his own brain a rest. He didn’t even access the lecture slides on his flash-drive because he was so caught up in the discussion they were having.

The door opened to the smell of weathered books and lingering coffee. Alex inhaled it deeply as it was the smell, he most enjoyed. Unlike the stale stench of his van and the sterilized atmosphere of his classroom, the aroma of his office was his own. The coffee (\$5.86 a can) was a hazelnut flavor that was so rich that it cut back on the need for adding creamer.

He dropped his backpack on the desk with a loud clang and pulled

the worn office chair out from under the desk. He placed himself into its worn and slightly discolored fabric and kicked his feet up onto the desk. The wall ahead of him was bare. He had wanted to put up a poster when he was first assigned the office, but he had never gotten around to it. Instead, he had grown to like the canvas and used it as an ever-erasable white board in front of him. He would draw out lesson plans and research projects on it and let his mind wander from point to point, never worrying about erasing his work after. He would use the space to brainstorm and only write down the truly memorable ideas that popped into his mind.

The door creaked open again and, in that moment, Alex remembered that he had gone straight to the classroom that morning and had not made coffee. He turned to see his officemate with a large cup with the University logo on it, fresh steam rising to fog up his glasses.

“Guten Morgen, Alex.”

Alex corrected his posture in his chair and spun around to see the intruder.

“Hey, Eddy, what brings you in on a Friday?”

Edward Adkins spun his own office chair around and sat down in it before attempting to take a sip of coffee. He pulled the cup away from his mouth after feeling the residual heat.

“Sorry about this, I know Fridays are your usual office days, but I have a student dropping by who couldn’t attend my normal office hours. You know how that goes.”

“Not a problem, this is your office too. What time is he coming? I can get out of your hair for a bit, so I don’t interrupt.”

“*She* will be here at noon,” Eddy corrected. “And I planned it that way because I know you typically take your lunch walks then and will be out

of the office.”

“Very considerate of you,” Alex gritted. Eddy was the only member of the faculty that knew about his living conditions. Alex parked in the farthest parking lot from the department office every day, yet it was Eddy who had reluctantly caught him unloading his books from the van over the summer. He was quite surprised to find the make-shift apartment in the back but was considerate enough to practice confidentiality.

Eddy was correct. Alex often went for a long walk down to the far parking lot on his lunch breaks to pull protein bars (\$2.00 each) out of his pantry. Alex enjoyed the walk across campus and back as it gave him the opportunity to stretch his legs and see the natural beauty of his workplace.

The silence that fell between them as they both returned to their work was one of mutual respect and consideration. Alex pulled the worksheets from his bag and pulled out his mechanical pencil while Eddy opened his laptop to start replying to department emails. Alex had noticed that Eddy waited until Fridays to respond to them because he only liked checking his emails once a week. He hoped that pattern was not the same for his students.

Eddy began humming a song that Alex didn't recognize and the soft symphony accompanied his mindless work of comparing his student examples from the lecture.

The afternoon passed with occasional conversation and comments between the two. Eddy had decided to stick around and keep Alex company. Eddy was now working through his large stack of student essays to grade, occasionally reading a spectacular or atrocious sentence out loud for Alex to comment on. Alex on the other hand, was replying to emails and download-

ing digital copies of his student essays so that he could grade them over the weekend without having to worry about having access to a printer and ink. He had made the switch the semester before and liked the simplicity and ease of it. He could return student essays as he finished grading them. While his students thanked him for the quick turn-around of their work, his eyes were becoming annoyed with the process of the backlit screen.

“As we see in this example citation, the author is not a supporter of the British ruling class,” Eddy read aloud, emphasizing each word to the room. “I swear some of these kids just need to read their bloody work before turning it in. How hard is it? its only four pages, read it over again you—doofuses.”

Alex was amused by the plural usage of the word ‘doofus’ but was unsure if it was correct. He chose not to comment on the sentence or the student’s intellectual ability.

“I can’t read another one of these today, so I think I am going to call it a day and go get myself some gin on the way home.” Eddy placed the essay that he was reading into a folder and then organized it properly and shoved it into his bag with great care. He cleaned up his work area and left to rinse out his coffee cup.

Adam glanced out the window at the darkening sky. The sunset was on the horizon, but he knew it was still at least an hour away. He closed the laptop and rubbed his eyes which were aching, but he had ignored it to keep working. He might as well leave. On Fridays he would always buy a few beers (\$6.95 for a three-pack) to celebrate the end of the week and read books that he checked out from the library.

Eddy popped back into the room with a heavy sigh. “Are you still camping?” he asked.

Alex nodded, understanding that Eddy meant living in his van.

“How much longer are you supposed to do that for? I remember you telling me, but I forgot. I think its wild you just said, ‘fuck it’ to an apartment and moved into your car.”

“A little more than a year,” Alex lied. “In total I planned for it to be about two years, so I am about half-way there. Then I can dedicate money back to an apartment and see what a debt-free life feels like.”

Eddy shuffled some stuff around his desk and moved other stuff into the drawers on the right-hand side. He was a meticulous person who liked to have all of his stuff in one place.

“Are you heading out, too?” Eddy asked. Alex Nodded. “Perfect, we can walk together for part of the way. I am over by Brotman Hall.”

The grabbed their bags, turned off the coffee pot and lights, and then locked the door, excited to not be back for a few days. The elevators were usually broken or on the top floor, so they never waited for them. Instead, they took the stairs, discussing one of the emails that they both had read and responded to during the day. The quad was quiet and the few students who could be seen were all walking North towards the student parking lots and away from their dedicated places of learning.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs at about the middle of campus, they split ways with a handshake as was their custom. The rest of the walk to the parking lot at the far end of the campus Alex made alone. The students that he found on campus on a Friday afternoon were always a random assortment. He wondered why they were here so close to the weekend. The Freshmen who lived in the dorms were obvious, as they had nowhere else to go, but the older students who were lying in the grass or reading at the benches and tables were a mystery to him.

When Alex reached his van, he climbed in the front seat and sat on his phone for a few minutes pretending like he was waiting for directions in a

text message or looking up a nearby restaurant. When he was sure that no one was paying attention to him any longer he slid back into his room. He closed the curtain by the front entrance and flipped on the small overhead light. It was enough for him to do most of his activities, and only when he was reading, did he turn on the small desk lamp in the corner. He was always worried about draining the battery of the van too much with his power consumption, yet he had found a decent balance of electricity use without killing the battery anymore. He had a few awkward meetings with AAA when he was still figuring out the formula and killed his battery.

Alex sat on his mattress and opened his laptop. He turned on the mobile hotspot on his phone which he used sparingly and made sure that he was able to log in properly. Alex opened an excel file that he kept on his desktop titled 'finance.' It was a gift from an old student of his when he was a writing tutor. At the time he told that student that he was having issues balancing his money—even before the student loan payments started hitting his account. The sheet had formulas in nearly every box. Every cent that Alex spent throughout the month he would plug into the boxes, ensuring accuracy across the board.

Alex opened an internet tab and logged into his bank's website. A few clicks of the mouse later and he saw his balance, \$2518.38. That morning he had received his once-a-month paycheck from the University for nearly \$1400. He had only received two classes this semester, which had already put him behind in his payment plan. He was hoping that in the spring he would get lucky and get four classes to put him back on track. His next step was to open his student loan portal and pay everything that was left over from the previous month's salary.

Alex copied the data over into his excel sheet once he was finished paying his bills and stared at the new number: \$45,246. Alex took a deep sigh before scrolling back to the top of the sheet. The formulas had already

finished their calculations and he felt the burdensome weight on his shoulders that he felt every payday.

Months until debt free: 39.4.

Alex closed the laptop, shut off his phone's mobile hotspot and put his technology aside. He reached for a book of poetry that he had checked out from the library the week before. He loved reading books from the library partly because they were free entertainment that he received for being a professor at the university. But mostly because of the annotations that students had written in the margins. Students like him, who used to check out books from the library because he was too short on cash to afford the pricey new editions at the bookstore every semester. He opened the page to his bookmark. The student who had read this one last had messy handwriting just like his own. Alex noticed the words that were underlined and their corresponding notes.

I WENT INTO THE MAVERICK BAR idk what this
one is about

1

2

3

4

5

6 My long hair was tucked up under a cap why?

7 I'd left the earring in the car. Is she hiding something? Her identity?

8

9

10

11

12 "We don't smoke Marijuana in Muskokie" *we do in LBC!*

13

14

15

16

17 Worked in the Woods *is this a man?*

18 Madras, Oregon *maybe a lumberjack?*

19

20 America—your stupidity.

21 I could almost love you again. *Anti-American?*

22

23

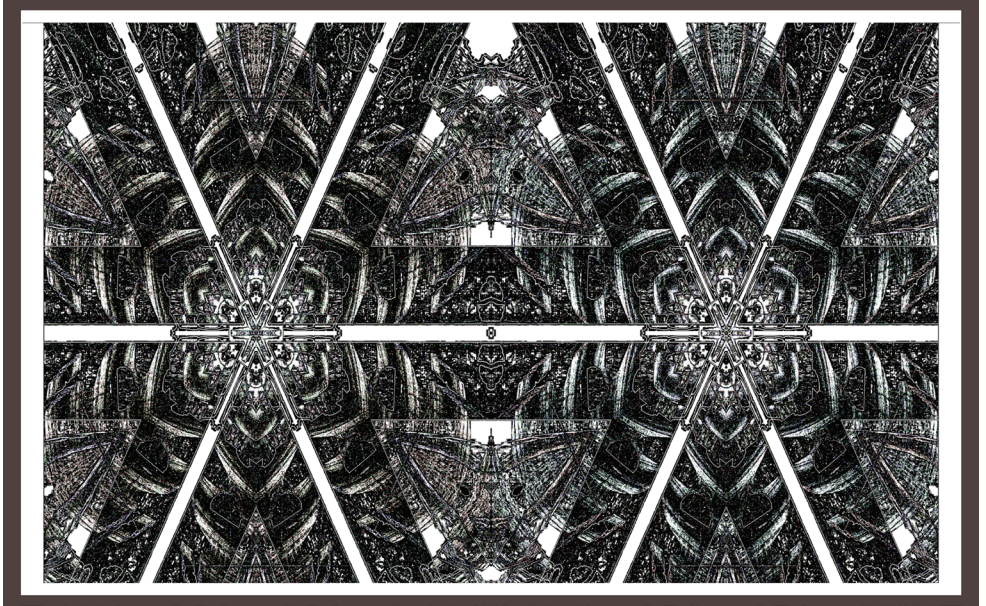
24

25

26

27 "What is to be done." *communist text.*

Art



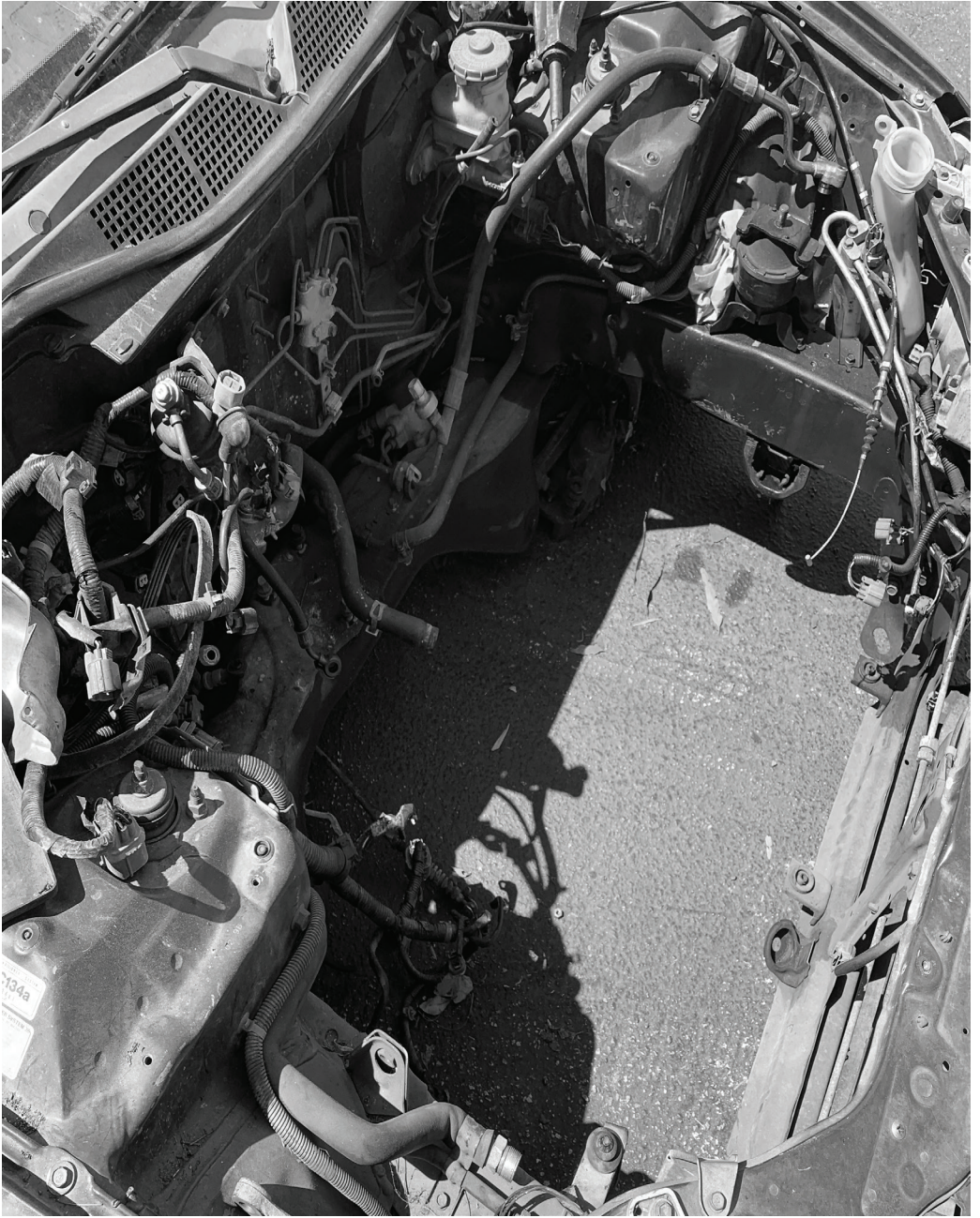
Xplanation 1b by Edward Michael Supranowicz



Ma Shares Her Song By Kathy Tun



Oil on canvas, Crow By Matthew Felix Sun



Unmotivated By Riley Wood



Enemies are everywhere by Rollin Jewett



RED MAN AND BUBBLES By NIKKI O



Little House on the No Longer Prairie by Terry Wright

Flash Fiction

As monsoon winds rolled over the Chihuahuan Desert, they brought not only moisture but also cooler air. Temperatures dropped thirty degrees over the course of a few hours. Small, dark clouds resembling black vultures gathered in the sky, only to give way to larger gray-and-indigo ones like turkey buzzards. They followed us down the Juárez-Porvenir Highway to the Valle de Juárez.

My friend Tonio and I were visiting the little town of El Porvenir in the Valle de Juárez. El Porvenir had once been quiet—until the drug trade arrived. Now the narrow streets surrounded by cotton fields and whitewashed cinderblock houses were lined with soldiers and armed police checkpoints. We had come to do research in the town archives housed at the *ayuntamiento* for a history project that Tonio was working on at a nearby university.

Most of El Porvenir was built between the Rio Grande and a rocky limestone hill where a group of cream-colored mansions with red tile roofs still caught the breeze in summer. Nearly all of them had seen better days but stands of tall mesquite trees still stood beside them. The mesquites had been a ready source of firewood back in the days when people cooked with wood in El Porvenir, and they still held

hearts the color of fire, not the sweet, perfumed fire of pine or cedar but the smoke and fury of hard work and sweat, fire as harsh as the trees' scaly, armadillo-skinned bark. Tonio and I walked to the foot of a cliff on the hillside facing the town's main district to get a better look at the aging, but still imposing, neocolonial villas erected in the air above.

A formally dressed old man stood at the base of the cliff, holding a large bouquet of yellow wildflowers. He was hovering on the edge of an annular rain cistern from the nineteenth century that had been built of blue-tinted granite. At some point, an amateur builder had transformed it into a fishpond, and the stones were coated with bright green algae. Cold monsoon rain was falling, a steady torrent, and we wondered why he was standing out in the open without raincoat or umbrella watching droplets dance on murky water.

Tonio, always forthright and gregarious, approached the man and asked him what he was doing all alone in the freezing storm.

The man smiled at him and said, "It is truly kind of you to ask me that. Anselmo Martinez, at your service."

"Antonio Lozano. *Mucho gusto.*"

The man shook hands with the two of us.

“I am a visitor from Rosales.”

“We’re also visitors here,” I said to him. “Antonio and I are from El Paso. Can I share my umbrella with you?”

“I’m sorry that you are troubled about me, but I have come here to pay respects to one who died an unnatural death.”

“What do you mean by that, Don Anselmo Martinez?” Tonio asked with a childlike mixture of curiosity and sympathy.

“There used to be a neighborhood of small wooden houses surrounding this *aljibe*,” he said, pointing to the cistern. They were homes of the poor. Rich families lived on the cliff above. They used to tell their servants to pitch the ashes from their ovens over the cliff. One day, the embers started a fire that burned down all the dismal little shacks built around here. People were asleep in their houses, and my grandmother, a young woman with four children, died in the fire.”

THE PARABLE OF THE FLOWER *Amadeu Marques*

And so, I'll tell you the parable of the flower:

A man gave a woman a flower. And she looked at it confused. They were at a pizza place probably and they were probably drunk and with friends and it was probably late and the man probably drove them even though he was drunk but no one cared and nothing came of it that night and he sat on the curb as the others went inside and he thought to himself. He thought about getting things for people and he thought about the honeysuckle and the blooming yellow and the warm summer night and how comfortable he was and how he wished it could last forever no matter what. And then he saw the flower and he knew it was a big deal to destroy its life—to rip its roots out of the surrounding city pavement—to take its life. But he thought it must be done. And he gave her the flower and she was confused and he felt the pain of trying he felt the pain and he thought in a yell *I THOUGHT I COULD BRING YOU HAPPINESS WITH THAT FLOWER, GODDAMN IT! I TRIED!* And he thought this with lightness, and he thought this with inner anguish. And the night wore on.

And they left the pizza place and dropped the other drunkards off and he drove her home. And she was half-unconscious and she may or may not have still had that flower—that yellow flower dying—and while he drove, she grabbed his hand. She held his hand and it was the first time she had done this and her eyes were nearly shut and he wouldn't know for some time that she slept with her eyes open so maybe she was asleep and he parked the car. And he sat there for a second not realizing she may be asleep and his heart pounded but it wasn't from the alcohol it was from the fear and the difficulty in expelling nice thoughts with truth and discovering something sincere or something maybe not. And he said her name and she did not respond so he said it again and he said *I need to tell you something* and then he realized—she was asleep. The moment passed and he woke her up to tell her she was home and they got out of the car together and looked into each other's eyes but the moment had passed and they parted into the night and his pain and suffering had to go on and it really hadn't even begun and the flower had changed nothing. *How badly do I want to be that source of bliss, that ray of sunlight that you are for me, I so badly want to be for you.* And she was a ray of sunlight but like all rays of sunlight she came and went passed through seasons laughed at the people hid from the people was a gift for all the people and most

importantly could never

be possessed. And he thought more thoughts about how you can't give to a ray of light even if you are a giver you can't do that because a ray of light is complete in itself it is whole and perfect and neither wants nor needs it just is and it is simple and it is perfection and it comes in different hues and different tones. And he knew he had no other way to bring that sunlight back to him because it was too busy shining elsewhere and it probably was happy and he thought *Through my memories, I hope to be able to recall its warmth forever.*

And maybe it was so

Tea in the Time of Trouble *Olga Murillo*

I remember the splintering wooden table and the chipped rose-decorated mug with its contents swimming around, making my stomach queasy. The smell was always stronger than the taste. Dry grass, herbs, and a hint of licorice - all the things my nose did not like.

My mother sat in front of me every time and would move the mug closer. My hands were still too small to grip the whole thing but strong enough to push the clear-ish liquid away.

“Mija, just a little bit.” She pleaded with me in her broken English.

After a drawn-out stare down, she would pinch my lips open and pour down the hot hay tasting water. My eyes would shut, and I could feel the tickle of my lashes on my eyelids. The mustard yellow wall behind my mother was still visible behind my closed eyes.

The chamomile tea made its presence known in my nostrils before the warmth soothed my throat.

“See, not so bad,” my mother reassured me, but my stomach thought otherwise. My tongue would fire out, and hot tears filled my eyes before the hay tasting saliva spurt out – red specks mixed with my spit from an earlier snack.

I could hear myself whine, “why mama,” as I shoved the mug back at my mother’s blistered hands.

It’s funny to think that now, I dry my own ginger, mint, and rosehip for my teas, but I still don’t drink chamomile.

I fill the molcajete with garlic, turmeric, and ginger. My hand, larger than the stone mortar, comes down with the pestle. The splintering wooden table shakes with every pound to the stone. It rattles for about a minute after each go, holding on to the last of its balance. The savory and sweet smell of the ingredients dance their way to my nose and fills my mouth.

My heels rock up to my toes, a habit I never got rid of when reaching for the cabinets. The second level was where the new mugs were kept. My eyes landed on the glossy red cup with painted daises. It was a gift from me to my mother from my first paycheck ever. I never understood her fascination with roses, but I shared her love of flowers.

I poured the boiled water into the molcajete and let everything sit.

The smell evolved with every second. First, it was savory like a chicken soup, then sweet like cinnamon water, then spicy. Just spicy. The aromas followed me to my mother’s room. She sat up in her bed as I entered the lowly lit room. Some hairs stuck to her forehead as well as her shirt on her chest.

“Hi Mami,” I whispered. “Teatime?”

She nodded, and the corners of her lips turned up towards her cheeks. I reached out and moved her feet to the floor and placed her pantuflas on. The soft plastic underneath made a small swishing noise when she moved her feet. With her arms around my neck, we got up and got moving.

The soft swishes echoed in the hallway – my walk silent against hers.

The sun covered half of the mustard yellow wall and made the notches and dirt noticeable. Her skin blended in with the wall. The only thing that was off-color were the dark circles forming under her eyes.

I sat her down where the sun’s warmth could fill her body. I leaned her forward. I slowly walked away, looking back to see if she was still sitting in the chair.

I spilled the yellow liquid into the red cup. Chunks of root and garlic floated to the top.

“Chicken soup,” my mother asked.

“No. Sopita, no,” I laughed with her.

I grabbed the honey and lime sitting next to the mug and made my way to the sunny area of the kitchen. I placed the warm cup in my mother’s wrinkled hands.

She lifted it to her mouth and, with closed eyes, inhaled the liquid

before taking a sip.

“See, not so bad,” I told her.

“Not so bad,” she replied.

Creative Non Fiction

The Ballad of Pigeon Pete *Sol Jacobs*

Seattle, Washington. 2006 ~ I remember shooing away an army of overgrown pigeons that'd laid siege to Pikes Place Market, remember how their flapping wings sounded like an audience in an amphitheater clapping for an encore. Maybe it was more like the rhythmic slaps of my parent's leather belt tanning my bare ass. I'd have to hear it again to be sure. It's strange to think they're one of only three bird species (the others being flamingos and male emperor penguins) that produce milk for their young and can fly faster than a peregrine falcon when it's not in a dive. To me, they seemed like a nuisance that had no purpose in life other than to laugh every time they shit on me or my stuff, arrogant fuckers that fluffed their tailfeathers every time I looked up to find the marksman. I knew a hippy in Olympia, Washington, who swore they were government surveillance robots. Don't be too quick to place a tinfoil hat on his head, though. Have you ever seen a baby pigeon?

The pigeons settled across the street, some on lamp posts, others on balconies and roofs of nearby apartments, but the majority commandeered the sidewalk and pecked away at nothing. After finding a place that wasn't stained white with bird crap, I looked up to see if the snipers had me in their sights. Then I set out my case, grabbed my banjo, and propped up a cardboard sign: "I'm Houseless, Not Homeless." I couldn't have been more mistaken.

Songs had beaten it into my brain that “home” was where you lay your head: the majority of Woody Guthrie’s songs, Tom Waits’ “Anywhere I Lay My Head,” Marvin Gaye’s “Where I Lay My Hat (That’s My Home),” Metallica’s “Wherever I May Roam,” and Mountain Heart’s “Freeborn Man,” to name a few. I believed I carried my “home” in a backpack, in a banjo case. I thought I lugged it up rusty ladders and onto roofs so I could sleep under the stars. I hauled it through snow, sleet, rain, through alleys, and into dumpsters that reeked of piss and decay. But now I realize that makes as much sense as calling my current four-walled prison, which I work the majority of my days to rent but never own, a “home.” I was homeless because I lacked the most essential thing, an aspect that those around me, those in my economic situation, those I looked down my nose at, seemed to possess.

Pete used to walk around with his head down, scouring the sidewalks for snipes. When he’d find a discarded, half-smoked cigarette, he’d put his cane—which he never used for walking—under his shoulder, lean down to pick up the snipe, and rush to my open case.

He’d point at the case and ask the same question: “Do ya got a light in dere?”

He’d repeat the question until I’d stop singing and answer, “It’s still in the middle compartment, where you done left it five minutes ago.”

Pete always jumped at the sound of my voice, and then he'd turn away and light his snipe. Sometimes I could play a full song before he was convinced it was lit. He'd slowly put the lighter back with shaking charred fingers and continue down the sidewalk, puffing away at his prize, often nothing but a filter.

Even though I was just another person living on the streets, I fancied myself a solo traveler on a low-budget extended vacation. I pretended I was better than those around me by labeling people like Pete "homebums." My weak justification for the term was their refusal to leave the neighborhoods, towns, and cities they'd grown up in regardless of what ordinances were passed to make their stressful lives even more unbearable.

I also referred to them as "pigeons" because they refused to migrate, were continually picking at the sidewalks, shit wherever they pleased, and would come out of the woodwork and flock toward me whenever I flew a sign or busked. They'd fly signs right next to me on off-ramps and sit on the sidewalk in front of my case, so pedestrians had to cross the street or walk in the gutter. I'd shoo them away with threats of violence—and, in some instances, had to follow through. They always justified those actions with the fact that I was an outsider and they were from wherever I was hustling. Now that I look back, they were right; I was an intruder, an invasive species who was taking their only means of survival. The same aspect of my life I prided myself on, traveling, made it so I couldn't claim any town or city as my own.

One day Pete asked the case to loan him a dollar fifty-nine so he could get some food.

“Sure, go ahead and grab it.”

He jumped from my voice, stared at me with a blank expression, and scratched his gray hair. Then he reached in, grabbed exact change, and disappeared around the corner.

A couple of minutes later, I saw Pete coming my way, swinging a loaf of Wonder Bread. He stopped about ten feet from me and threw a piece between three pigeons. They immediately converged on the offering, pecking, clawing, and flapping their wings. They were so preoccupied with squabbling that they didn't notice Pete sneaking toward them. He raised his cane and brought it down, knocking one of them out cold. He struck it twice more, snatched up the limp carcass by the neck, and held it up like a trophy.

A smile crept across Pete's bearded face as he said with a chuckle, “You ate yet?”

The constant stream of traffic did little to stifle Pete's periodic giggles, as we marched down Union Street toward the Interstate-5 Expressway. Pedestrians gave us a wide berth on the sidewalks. Drivers and their passengers craned their necks as they drove by. But who can blame them? I looked

like a road warrior with an oversized backpack toting a tattered banjo case. Pete was hunched over, walking briskly with a cane and a loaf of bread in one hand while that pigeon dangled from the other. I followed him out of a mix of curiosity and fear. I had to see how he was going to cook that bird and didn't want to be there when the cops came to investigate the clubbing of a pigeon in broad daylight.

Pete's camp rested in the shade of an overpass. It consisted of six tents clustered around a burn barrel sitting on an uneven, cracked plot of concrete. We were greeted by barking dogs and their owners, who unzipped their tents to investigate. I could hear them telling their dogs, "It's just Ol' Pete and that banjo player." The dogs immediately calmed down. Pete disappeared into his tent, which was covered in camo netting (a choice that did little to blend in with the concrete jungle), and reappeared with some kindling and a couple of small logs. After he asked my banjo case for a light and got the burn barrel going, he sat on a bucket and started plucking feathers out by the handful. Feathers were flying like someone had gutted a down pillow.

While I marveled at his nimble fingers and brute force, a young couple and their dog came up to introduce themselves. It was hard for me to pay attention while Pete took out a knife and cut the pigeon from its tail to its sternum. Entrails came spilling out along with the pungent smell of warm death. Then he looked at me and smiled as he scooped the rest of the intes-

tines and organs out with his hand. From that point on, he was coherent and was nothing like the Pete I had seen scouring the streets with a blank look on his face. He threw some guts to the couple's dog, wiped his hand on his pants, and embraced them while still clutching the pigeon's carcass. After they exchanged pleasantries, he asked the guy to get a piece of rebar from his tent and then cut off the bird's feet and head.

As Pete rotated the pigeon he'd impaled with rebar over the burn barrel, more people from the camp started congregating around the cookout to shoot the shit. Pete was talkative and in his element. They offered main courses (burgers, kabobs, hotdogs), side dishes (potato salad, baked beans, vegetables), desserts (Pike Place Donuts, smores, Hostess fruit pies), and beverages (soda, beer, vodka), all of which were welcomed with a smile and a quick embrace. I must have sat on my pack and jumped back up five or six times to shake hands with Pete's friends. I know it sounds strange to have all this commotion over a pigeon, but Seattle always had an abundance of overflowing trash cans near the central waterfront area, so they grew as big as chickens. And besides, that was the closest thing to a BBQ I'd attended in years.

While the small community busied themselves preparing our odd feast, I tried to figure out what was ruder: kicking back and watching them work or forcing my help upon an already cohesive unit. Pete eventually came over and handed me a beer. Then he introduced me, in the voice of a ring announcer, as a musician who must have sold his soul at the crossroads. Soon

the intro to “The Ballad of Curtis Loew” rang through camp. Even though Pete’s friends danced around me clapping and singing along, I felt alone. Music seemed to be my only purpose in life, my temporary connection to others, my fleeting moments of acceptance.

Pete cooked that bird to perfection. It tasted like a mix between greasy raccoon and squirrel, or frog legs and moist chicken. I’m glad I didn’t break out of my shell and offer help because I wasn’t even allowed to scrape my plate. I was met halfway between the dishwashing station by a robust woman with skin the color of chestnuts and the grip of a gator about to flip a death roll. She had the voice of a seasoned blues singer—you know, that seductive voice sitting on a barstool, the one you can barely see through the rolling clouds of cigarette smoke.

“I got jew, darlin’. Why don’t ya pick dem strings? Somethin’ classy. Classy wid a backbone.”

So I picked that banjo until my fingers were useless, sang until my voice sounded like it was soaked in bourbon, left hanging in the smokehouse, and then ran over by a car.¹

As the sun finished setting, a mosquito buzzed my ear, subtly reminding me that I was on the menu. The dying fire flickered through the holes in

1 **Critic Daniel Durchholz once described Tom Waits’ distinctive voice as sounding like “it was soaked in a vat of bourbon, left hanging in the smokehouse for a few months, and then taken outside and run over with a car.”**

the burn barrel, illuminating the campsite just enough that I was able to make out exaggerated glances and gestures aimed at getting someone to tell me it was time to leave. That's about the time when I "suddenly remembered" I had a place to be. After thanking Pete for his hospitality, I left his enclave and went back to the streets.

I can't blame them for moving me along after darkness fell. After all, I wasn't one of them. I was just another traveling musician, an unknown, a stranger in their camp. Pete and all the members of his camp were houseless, not homeless, because they had community, one that consisted of family, friends, and loved ones. Each member was expected to come "home" every night, and when they didn't, the others began to worry. They didn't stay in those cities because they were too lazy or too scared to travel; they stayed because their community was too large to be mobile.

I was homeless because I didn't have any of that. No one stayed up worrying about me, and other than a handful of people I'd recently met in the Emerald City, no one knew if I was alive or dead. And frankly, I don't think they cared. No matter how many towns I traveled to, I was always homeless, always alone.

A week had passed before I saw Pete again. I was setting up in front of Big 5, on University Way, when he stumbled past me without his cane. He made it to the bus stop, tentatively sat on the bench, cradled his head in his

hands, and started sobbing. As I began my set, he lifted his head and looked my way with swollen eyes. Then he got up slowly and started walking my way. For some reason, his legs gave out, and he toppled forward, smacking his head on the sidewalk. The pedestrians went on; some stepped over his motionless body while others walked around.

I grabbed my banjo, ran inside Big 5, and frantically waved at the nearest cashier. It took some convincing to get her to pick up the phone, but it's not every day that you have an out-of-breath street kid—carrying a banjo like a battle-ax—come through your door with a medical emergency.

As soon as I came out of the double doors, I saw a Yellow Jacket—a concierge/officer—standing over Pete with an open ticket book. He kicked Pete in the side and yelled, “Wake up and go find yourself a park.” Pete’s inability to respond angered the Jacket, so he kicked him harder, so hard that Pete’s body shook from the impact. “I said, get up and move along.”

Pete began to get up and then puked on the Jacket’s polished boots. The Jacket kicked at him with a swiping motion, like he couldn’t decide between lashing out or wiping off the vomit. Pete caught the kick, pushed the boot away, and sent his aggressor sprawling to the concrete.

Three squad cars pulled up. Five cops got out and ran directly to Pete. They dogpiled him and slapped on the cuffs. As the Jacket got up and dusted himself off, I ran toward the police, hoping to clear up the misunderstanding and get Pete some medical attention. My act of kindness landed

me smack-dab in front of the business end of a Taser. The square barrel was striped like a wasp, and I was close enough to see the spike tips peeking out of their chambers. The cop's mouth barely moved as he told me to move along or be arrested for interfering with police business.

As I stepped away, I tried to explain that Pete had hit his head and needed medical attention. Two of the cops pulled him to his feet while another informed him that he was being charged with assaulting an officer, resisting arrest, and public intoxication. I repeatedly yelled at the top of my lungs, "He didn't assault the Yellow Jacket. He was the one *being* assaulted," but they ignored me as they loaded him in the back of the lead squad car. I stood on the curb flapping my arms in the air until the last squad car drove away.

Those pedestrians, Pete's fellow human beings, chose to walk around and over his unconscious body. Then they called the cops instead of an ambulance. Sadly, if he'd have been a dog with a limp, a skinny cat, or even a pigeon, those same people would've fought tooth and nail to be the one to care for him.

While I never saw Pete again, I would like to believe his camp, community, flock, tribe scoured the city searching for him after he didn't show up for supper. I bet they lost sleep waiting for him to come "home" that night, bet the next morning they called Kaiser Permanente, UW Medical Center, Virginia Mason Hospital, Seattle Psychiatric, and eventually King County Jail. Maybe they flew signs on off ramps or worked day labor to post his bail.

I'm sure they put money on his books, wrote letters, and came to visit every weekend until they welcomed him "home."

Cowboys and Immigrants *Kareem Tayyar*

A man dressed in weathered jeans, dusty boots, denim shirt, and cowboy hat, walks into a bar. The saloon doors swing behind him, and the patrons, some of whom have been playing cards, others of whom are standing on the staircase, go silent. If there is music, it abruptly stops. The man approaches the bar, politely asks the frightened bartender for a drink, and proceeds to down the contents of his glass while being studied by those around him as if he had not ridden in on a horse but touched down on a flying saucer. It is a scene from a thousand Western movies, as recognizable as the Starbucks logo or the opening riff to The Rolling Stones' "Jumpin' Jack Flash."

I used to love those scenes, mostly because they were some of my earliest introductions to the existence of star power. Want to know why John Wayne remains the most famous cowboy in the history of American film? Because he could make walking into a bar as charged with drama, intensity, and intrigue as the entire Thrilla in Manila. I remember spending hours walking back and forth across the floor of our small living room, hand on the imaginary holster I wore at my hip, purple Lakers baseball cap standing in for a cowboy hat, and trying to mimic Wayne's slow-motion swagger. I may have been the size of a leprechaun, but I figured if I could move like the Duke did in *Stagecoach*, everyone in our apartment complex would fear me.

But for my father, those scenes of the lone gunslingers arriving into

strange towns reminded him of what it had felt like immigrating to America when he was 19 years old, with no money in his pocket, a borrowed coat on his back, and a language barrier so vast that for the first month or so he sometimes pre-tended to be deaf. While I was watching Wayne and Clint Eastwood and Alan Ladd and seeing models for the type of man's man I thought I wanted to become, my father looked at them and saw fellow travelers, individuals who understood what it felt like to always be on the outside looking in. Or, as he would later tell me,

“A lot of places in America feel like a saloon in Tombstone when your skin is darker than every-one else's and no one can understand your accent.”

As I got older, I began to watch Westerns through my father's eyes, whether he was in the room with me or not. They are the loneliest movies in the world. Men ride alone (or with a handful of compatriots who will likely be dead by the film's conclusion) across landscapes as barren and unforgiving as anything in *Mad Max* or *The Planet of the Apes*. The dominant language is violence. Men kill out of fear, out of pride, out of a misplaced sense of justice, or patriotism, or love. Even the communities that do exist are founded on exclusion (the incessant displacement of Native Americans) and exploitation (every town has its own brothel). The West isn't wild, it's nihilistic, and our heroes are driven mad by this recognition (Wayne in *Red River*), rendered obsolete by it (Newman and Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance*

Kid), or shown to be hopelessly old-fashioned as a result of it (Gary Cooper in *High Noon*).

In the years immediately following my father's arrival in America, he worked at a gas station in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. This was in the mid-1970s, when the Summer of Love had long since ended, the hippies had become junkies, the City was struggling with a burgeoning homelessness problem, Golden Gate Park was full of traumatized Vietnam Veterans, and public services were frequently suspended as a result of a series of labor strikes.

"I worked the graveyard shift," my father said. "We couldn't afford a car, so I'd walk to work with a chain in my pocket."

It was an experience, he went on to articulate, not unlike what The Man With No Name was constantly faced with when riding from one nowhere town to the next.

"That scene at the end of *A Fistful of Dollars*? When Eastwood puts a sheet of iron under his poncho to protect himself from the barrage of shots the bad guys are firing in his direction? That's what certain parts of San Francisco felt like after-hours. The only thing missing were the cowboy hats and Ennio Morricone music."

Many of my father's friends when I was a child were very much like him. They had fled from countries destroyed by civil wars, by political coups, by natural disasters. They were men who cut the lawns of the tract homes our

apartment complex was surrounded by; they were men who bused tables at the nightclubs up and down Harbor Boulevard; they were men who picked the strawberries that would later be sold at roadside stands all over the county. They cleaned bathrooms, washed cars, painted houses.

They came from Iraq, from Laos, from Belfast, from Palestine. They came from Saigon and from Mexico. They came from Egypt, Syria, Cambodia, and Somalia.

They were men, without exception, more in love with the idea of America than the majority of people I would later meet who had been born here. On the Fourth of July, they hung their flags in the windows of small apartments whose rents they worked impossible hours to pay; on Christmas, they bought and trimmed trees even if they did not believe that Christ was the Son of God; on Veteran's Day, they paid tribute to soldiers who had often died shooting at people who looked an awful lot like them.

Yet they were so often made to feel like interlopers, like trespassers, like threats to a previously idyllic way of life that their presence had somehow placed into jeopardy. They were men who the police so often said, after pulling them over for yet another unwarranted traffic stop, "fit a description." Salesclerks wanted to know why they had not learned better English; neighbors said they played their strange music too loudly. And, always, there were the bumper stickers:

America is for Americans

Jesus Was a Republican

Have You Killed an Iranian Today?

“A lot of places in America feel like a saloon in Tombstone when your skin is darker than every-one else’s and no one can understand your accent.”

We would sit on the sofa and watch *Jeremiah Johnson* make peace with the Indians and my father would say,

“It’s that easy. You look at the man across from you and realize he’s just as much of an outsider as you are.”

We would watch *The Searchers* and he would say,

“Ethan Edwards reminds me of Ronald Reagan. Neither one of them can see that what they call justice is hatred in disguise.”

We would watch *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and he would remark,

“That’s how it always goes. The free-spirits don’t stand a chance.”

I was 14 years old when we watched our last Western together. In the wake of my parents’ divorce and my father’s subsequent relocation, we saw each other less and less frequently, until we didn’t see each other at all. Although our drifting apart would have happened anyway. The days when a son would want to spend his time watching movies with his father were nearing an end. My father was being replaced, as fathers ultimately are, by friends, by

girls, by a teenager's increasing awareness that the world was larger than the length of the street he grew up on.

The film was *Unforgiven*, Clint Eastwood's tragic meditation on the myth of the American West. We drove to the Family Four Cinema, the local movie house that had been a mainstay of our family's outings for as long as I could remember. For the next two hours, we watched the film's main character, William Munny, an aging, widowed former gunslinger, struggle to provide for his children without returning to the brutal life he has long left behind. Naturally, he is pulled into one last job. Men like Munny were always being pulled into one last job. But all I could focus on was the way the film chronicled a man who had done everything he could to embody the best of himself, only to find that all it delivered was romantic longing, economic destitution, and communal isolation. William Munny, in so many ways, represented the central lie at the heart of the American narrative: that if one works hard enough, he will be rewarded with a seat at the National Round Table. But for Munny there will be no Camelot. There is only what Philip Roth would call "the American Berserk", populated by a murderous sheriff (Gene Hackman's Little Bill), a sociopathic mercenary (Richard Harris' English Bob), and an amoral scribe (Saul Rubinek's W.W. Beauchamp), the latter of whose propagandistic scribblings turn these killers into epic heroes. The movie's message is that the West—and, by extension, the country itself—was never the grand "City on the Hill" that we like to believe that it is.

"There were no telephones in our dorm rooms at the University of

San Francisco,” my father said on our drive home from the movie. “There was just one pay phone on every floor. I used to keep my door open at all hours of the day to make sure I never missed a call from your mother.”

We were on Brookhurst Street, sitting in the left-hand lane and waiting for the light to turn green. That light always seemed to take an eternity.

“Those were the best times I ever had in my life,” he continued. “It seemed like anything was possible.”

At the time I did not know what had inspired my father to tell me this story. But as the years passed, I have come to believe it was the end of the film that did it. William Munny, having gained his revenge by killing Little Bill, prepares to leave town. Only Munny does not ride off into the sunset; he disappears into a sweeping darkness as a hard rain falls upon him. He has killed more than the villain. He has killed the entire myth of the American Dream, and now all that is left is for Munny to be swallowed into the vast emptiness that exists when the Dream is revealed to be the mirage that it is.

A decade later my father would leave America for good, and move back to Iran, never to return. I still love the Westerns I used to watch with him when I was a boy. They make me feel as if he is still close to me. I turn on *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and the film reminds me of my father’s own capacity for good-natured troublemaking; I see *Jeremiah Johnson* and I cannot help but think of his own, often maddening, iconoclasm; I catch the last scene of *The Searchers* and think Ethan Edwards, standing in the frame of

the doorway, symbolizes my father's inability to ever truly feel comfortable in the country he tried so hard to adopt as his own. I guess, in a way, those westerns I grew up watching with him were pre-paring me for the life I was later to live without him. Indeed, as my father so often told me: America is, no matter where we are from, a saloon we are forever walking into alone.

An Overgrown Life *Anne Rudig*

On a warm August evening when our kids were little, my husband and I sat on our front porch at dusk, drinks in hand, and watched our neighbor return from work as a senior middle manager. Mr. Smale parked his black Mercedes, walked into the garage, and removed his jacket to don an orange jumpsuit. The jumpsuit seemed to invigorate him, much as a martini did for others on our block at around the same time of day. While we gazed out over our leggy, weedy yard, Mr. Smale climbed onto his lawnmower.

“What do you think?” my husband asked.

“About what?” I answered.

“Is he mowing away from something, or toward it?”

I took a sip of my cocktail. “Good question. Perhaps he was denied mowing privileges as a child.”

“It’s more than that.”

“Oh?”

“It seems more like an addiction than unrequited desire.”

“Ah yes. A primordial need for the intoxicating fumey mixture of gas and grass.”

“And the roar of a two-stroke engine.”

“An expression of manhood otherwise suppressed by corporate life and a big honking mortgage?” I asked.

My husband nodded as Mr. Smale continued cutting his grass until his wife yelled him to dinner when he took a brief break. Then he returned to his seat atop his shiny machine until it was too dark to mow.

We'd rented a house we could never afford to buy, owned by a CFO, in this tertiary midwestern city that had been the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan as well as a terminus of the Underground Railroad. The north-south divide was expressed in the landscape, too. Magnolias grew here, but not one hour north. Michigan pines did well but withered south of the nearby river. Botanically, it's what's known as a transitional zone. Most of our neighbors worked at Procter & Gamble or General Electric. We were lucky to live in a neighborhood with big yards and old trees. But it was transitional for us too.

Our kids ran in a pack and played capture-the-flag on summer nights with cicadas roaring. There was a long slope in front of our house that became the favorite sledding hill. At its summit, I handed out hot chocolate to about twenty roly-poly offspring from our dead-end street. We were New York-

ers, not suburbanites, touching down in the Midwest for a few years before getting ourselves jobs back in the city. Our yard looked like none other. We planted the flower beds next to our front door with weeds, a small act of aggression, perhaps. Milkweed and Joe Pye weed flourished there. Both are food and host plants to several kinds of butterflies. That first year our children watched five generations—from May to October—hatch from eggs into larvae, feed and fatten, spin gold-dotted chrysalises and emerge before heading to Mexico. Our native plant patch attracted Monarchs, Tiger Swallowtails, Checkerspot and Sulphur Butterflies. It stood in contrast to the insect-free, tightly defined plots of petunias and Kentucky bluegrass of our neighbors.

My Madison Avenue job had evaporated when the ad agency shut its doors after the famous founder retired. My husband had left a major New York art auction house when they eliminated his department. As we sat on our front porch with gin and tonics, we mused on our professional futures while viewing the neighborhood through our spikey front yard. A jack-o'-lantern from last Halloween had dropped some seeds on its way to the garbage can. Pumpkin vines reached across our lawn toward the street, further proof that we were unrepentant in how we presented ourselves.

The people on this street were well off and liked to think they were in control. One neighbor filled her basement, floor to ceiling, with gallon jugs of water in preparation for Y2K. Another locked kids in a bedroom while she babysat them, “for safety.” The lady next door bought her bras one hundred at

a time because, well, she could. We were juggling our nine-to-fives with our artistic lives. We may have wished for some control, but seldom experienced it. That may have been another reason our garden was more live-and-let-live and less like a tidy daily planner.

We discussed our prospects, juggling our juggling, at each cocktail hour. One of us could take a part-time gig and be home to greet the school bus by 2:30. The other might become a consultant, which involved lots of travel but would bring in more money. Both promised slivers of time for music, scholarship, and writing.

On Saturdays, Mr. Smale would emerge from his garage on a gleaming green mower and break the weekend calm to re-cut grass already clipped by the landscapers earlier in the day. We were impressed as he maneuvered expertly around his shrubs, sheared into disciplined shapes like ammunition stored around the base of his home. As the bees and butterflies buzzed around our heads, we considered not only what to do next, but also what to plant, while our neighbor achieved a close cut. Hot peppers to keep the deer off the welcome mat. A blueberry patch behind the house perhaps. Vines. We needed more vines.

Maybe Mr. Smale simply liked getting out of the house. His wife seemed nice enough, but sometimes we'd hear her shout out the top of her BMW convertible as she sailed by –

“I have vertigo!”

Well of course you do, I'd think. You're driving up the street in reverse in the wrong lane. Our neighbors may have been capable of maintaining a tidy facade, but there were quirks that sometimes expressed themselves regardless. I think all of us have an overgrown life waiting to bloom somewhere inside.

All summer Mr. Smale mowed. Sometimes we'd find ourselves shouting over our drinks at each other as evening fell. But we liked to think of ourselves as tolerant people so we carried on and didn't complain. We did not become fierce mowers ourselves. We had no desire to compete. Maybe that's why we didn't last long in the suburbs.

Labor Day came and went. Mr. Smale continued to mow, and the kids went back to school. The last time we saw him was the Friday after Thanksgiving. The change of seasons put a halt to his obsession, the days becoming short and cold. Quiet finally descended.

A few days after Christmas, I woke at about 3:00 am to the sound of a two-stroke engine. I pulled back the curtain, peeked out the window and saw Mr. Smale in his orange jumpsuit riding on his brand new snowblower. By the following Christmas, we'd left that house and headed back east.

I live in a very different neighborhood now, in a dying mill town. We've

shed our big jobs, or rather they've shed us, and our kids are grown. We moved around quite a bit, managing to hold onto our artistic DNA, hauling too many books and musical instruments wherever we went. We were chasing higher salaries and better school districts, like the good suburbanites we tried to be. The street we live on now used to be the boulevard of the rich a hundred years ago. A woolen mill was built here in 1813, followed by brass mills in 1834. The village, settled along the hills west of the Naugatuck River, was the birthplace of abolitionist John Brown. After WWII it became the birthplace of Naugahyde. More recently, the state university's campus was closed due to low enrollment. The old homes are in varying states of repair. Some look great, others could use some help. The same goes for the yards. Many people mow, but others consider it optional. The man across the street clips his two-story hedges while standing on a library ladder with a power saw. Up the road they've allowed their evergreens to grow for so long that their house has been swallowed, like a witch's cottage in the woods. Eccentrics are welcome here because there are few appearances to keep up. One of my neighbors flew at me in a rage because she thought our landscaper's leaf blower was traumatizing her chickens. I like her chickens, so I heard her out.

Our own grass is suspicious looking. We thought we had grubs. It appears there is either a tremendous sinkhole beneath it or toxic waste. After three years of seeding and feeding we still have brown patches where nothing grows. I thought of digging it all up and tossing wildflower seeds, but they probably won't thrive either.

No one had maintained our yard for years. I thought I liked a challenge until half of our 100-year-old maple fell on our stone wall. So I planted milkweed for the Monarchs. The average gardener is being asked to grow this plant because of habitat loss in the butterfly's breeding areas across the Midwest. Soybeans and corn are resistant to the herbicides used in farming. Milkweed is not. I heeded that call and also planted Orange Russians and Polish Giants—those are my tomatoes. All the pollinators arrived—gleaming blue-black wasps, honeybees, hummingbirds. I'm now guilty of cultivating a shrub that's taller than my porch roof—a butterfly bush—where Spangled Fritillaries zoom and dive. I should prune it. Our flowers are aphid-free because we have ladybugs.

I like to give nature a nudge and see what shows up, slamming the windows shut at 2 am for the surprise of skunk stink. I expect that the large red-tailed hawk circling our neighbor's chickens is more traumatic than the leaf blower. A jackrabbit lurks beneath my gangly hostas and was the first suspect when the parsley disappeared. Then I came face to face with the real culprit, a woodchuck. Now we hurl over-ripe eggplants out to the end of the yard where he waits. I cannot be angry with the woodchuck. He looks like one of my kids' pet guinea pigs, writ large, from years ago. The bear, though, that's a different story.

He tore at the lattice on a nearby basement, gave up and sauntered into our yard where he glugged the contents of a hummingbird feeder, then

chewed it to pieces and threw it over his shoulder. Strolling over to my other neighbor's patio, he had a sit-down and a moment of R&R before noticing the smells coming from the assisted living facility. I think it was bacon-for-breakfast-day there. He hopped over the sharp prongs on the wrought-iron fence like it was nothing. Several elderly ladies with walkers hot-footed it back inside.

We've finally landed where we belong.

It's been good to sweat outside every day, attempting to bring something to life in our yard. It's no different now that we're in a pandemic, which has a way of reminding me that the largest impact I make this year may be over a small patch of basil. This old mill town is still mostly forgotten, dying slowly, more shops on Main Street closing each month. It's a bit seedy and run-down. Many of us are self-employed—caregivers, handymen and women, artists, landscapers, house painters. No suburbanites here, at least until very recently. People are moving to strange places like my town because everyone works and schools remotely now. You can get a four-bedroom antique house with enough yard for flowers and a bear for not a lot of money. We're nowhere near the train line. That used to guarantee that our pleasant existence would remain uninterrupted by petunia growers and insect haters.

I have no complaint against the suburbs. It's the suburbanites who worry me. I fear an invading swarm of senior middle managers in orange jumpsuits

with their bra-hoarding wives. It may be my coronavirus-induced anxiety, but I can't help wondering whether we've finally escaped Mr. Smale only to have our unruly lives thwarted again by pandemic migration. In calmer moments, I realize he's probably mowing his way through Covid while his wife, like many women during this time, has abandoned her bra. She may have flung it out the top of her convertible while driving backwards. That thought makes me a little nostalgic for the old neighborhood. But it doesn't last. I'm protective of what I've got growing here. The man with the library ladder and power saw probably feels the same way.

Before we could land where we truly belonged, where our overgrown lives could bloom, we had to suffer. Or, as a friend once said, you learn the lesson until you learn the lesson. You can't be who you are not. Seems obvious enough, but as soon as you have kids, you start to do all kinds of things you wouldn't have done otherwise. At least we did. We took jobs with good salaries, even though the environments were poisonous. But we never took poison on purpose. It takes a while to figure out how malignant a job can be. My husband left work in Chicago one day, drove five hours to our home, and announced his boss was wanted by Interpol. Mine was sent home for misconduct two weeks after he fired me. Those jobs bought us a place in inhospitable neighborhoods so our kids could go to good schools. Later we discovered our son had been bullied every day at one of those good schools. The beatings stopped after one summer when he grew a beard and achieved over six feet in height.

We lived the middle-class dilemma. We had kids and wanted their lives to be better than ours. I understand that's less and less of a possibility. According to a Stanford study, 90% of kids born in the 1940s earned more than their parents. That dropped to 50% by the 1980s. I can only guess what the number is now. I took the fattest carrots dangled and hoped for the best, shredding my sense of self and losing touch with what really mattered. I had to get fired to get out. The workplace ejected me. I'm forever grateful.

Maybe this is what Anne Lamott means when she writes that she is unemployable. I used to laugh at that. How could anyone afford the luxury of being unemployable? You get up and go to work. Now I understand what she meant. And I wonder how many of us are unemployable, and what that says about the places we have worked.

My husband and I had some pretty good jobs. But as we took on larger roles, the dangers and difficulties within the workplace multiplied. Maybe senior management is noxious because the stakes are higher. As I got older, I was less willing to put up with it.

There is no work-life balance. There is simply life. You only get one. I'm hoping the pandemic will rearrange things that badly need rearranging. Some of the strictures around how we earn a living are disappearing. It's a lot more difficult to harass an employee if you only see them a few times a week on Zoom, despite Jeffrey Toobin. Many may decide they don't want a boss any-

more. Home sales are up here, along with investment properties that provide rental income.

We couldn't afford to raise a family in New York, so we tried the burbs. Yet life there wasn't all that comfortable either. Once the kids were out on their own, we left the scorched porch and found our place among the Monarchs and dead factories. It's a good place to practice renewal—both habitat and personal.

Many in our hamlet are unemployed, which is different from being unemployable. Yet we can all have some sort of garden. I drove past a peeling multi-family home in need of a roof the other day. Out front, six varieties of lettuces are thriving, recently planted in spite of the descending night temperatures that signal impending snowfall. That person knows what they're doing. Those brilliant leaves will brighten dinners, improve digestion and reward careful tending, no matter what the grower's work life throws at them. A garden is a small patch of self-determination when all else goes haywire. Maybe the pandemic migration will provide others with a path to an overgrown life too.

*I walk the front lawn, pretending
to be weeding. You ought to know
I'm never weeding, on my knees, pulling
clumps of clover from the flower beds: in fact*

I'm looking for courage, for some evidence

my life will change

– Louise Gluck

I'm still harvesting rosemary, sage and thyme but the rest of the garden is done for this year. In my usual unruly fashion, I've left the dead hollyhock flower heads intact to provide nourishment for birds over the winter. The milkweed pods have exploded, spreading their seeds for the spring. We've tidied up most of the maple leaves, but there are still some on the ground to provide cover for insects and other small creatures when it snows. A few nights ago, my husband saw a coyote saunter casually down the middle of our street at 3 am, probably looking for chickens. The surprises I encounter in the garden delight me. Those in the workplace did not. Everything I had to offer at work didn't matter, in the grand scheme of things. At the time, that made me sad and angry. Now the grand scheme is here, right in front of me, every day.

Plays

Adrift *Andrew G. Cooper*

Tagline:

After detecting a rogue asteroid and passing through a strange threshold, a small crew is stranded

in their spacecraft far from earth. Something unsettling stirs in their minds as they fight to

survive and grapple with what to do with the limited time they have left.

Characters:

ÉMILIE DESJARDINS - The ship's engineer and mechanic. Practical. Has something to prove.

MICKAIL ABDEL-ESSAM - The ship's technician and comms officer. Big heart, easy smile.

DOCTOR RICHARD STEVENSON - The ship's physician and scientist. Likes order

A.L.I.C.E. - The ship's Artificial Learning Internal Computer Entity. Utilitarian wants to help.

Playwright's notes:

A “/” in the dialogue represents the place where the following line interrupts the one preceding

it, causing an overlap in the actors' speech.

A “/” at the beginning of a line means the next line begins simultaneously with it. This is

sometimes used to show that a character continues speaking their lines uninterrupted by the next

speaker (usually accompanied by “—”s) or to have two characters speak at once.

A beat is one second, a pause is about three seconds, and a silence is five to seven seconds.

The intention for Alice is to have her lines come through the ship's speakers as a disembodied

voice. Because of the nature of live theatre, I believe Alice would be best suited to be played by

an actor with a mic offstage or elsewhere. However, they could be played on stage live, as

pre-recorded sound cues, or in any other fashion the production dreams up.

Some translations of non-English phrases are put in italics and brackets after the spoken text.

These are not intended to be spoken, they're simply to provide the reader with a quick reference.

*

Mikail works quickly and diligently at his station. Émilie watches from afar. A light blinks intermittently on one of the control decks. He finishes his task, presses a few commands on the control screen, then sits back in his chair with a sigh.

MIKAIL: There. All done.

Pause.

ÉMILIE: It's hard to believe.

Beat.

MIKAIL: Yeah.

ÉMILIE: I mean, you don't really think about it. / When it's about other people.—

MIKAIL: / Yeah.

ÉMILIE: —It just seems so...

MIKAIL: Abstract.

ÉMILIE: Yeah.

Silence. Mikail is growing increasingly restless.

MIKAIL: Are they comin' back?

ÉMILIE: Of course! I mean. Of course they are.

MIKAIL: Yeah. I just...ya never know. Y'know?

Beat.

ÉMILIE: Yeah.

MIKAIL: I'm sure they'll radio in again or get Alice to update us when they're done. Spacewalks can go

on for hours.

Pause.

ÉMILIE: Alice, how much do we...

Beat.

ALICE: Yes? How can I help you?

ÉMILIE: How much time until we arrive? Are we on course?

MIKAIL: / Are we on course?

ALICE: Yes, we are still on course. You're set to arrive at your destination in just under fifty-five day cycles.

ÉMILIE: Thank you.

ALICE: You're welcome.

Pause. Mikail stands up.

MIKAIL: I'm...gonna go look for 'em. I'm gonna go check on 'em.

ÉMILIE: No. Don't. They'll come back.

MIKAIL: I'm just gonna head down / and see—

ÉMILIE: I'd rather you didn't.

MIKAIL: Well, I don't want to just sit here. I'd just like to check on the cap / and see—

ÉMILIE: She told us to stay put. Come on Mikail.

Pause.

MIKAIL: Alright, alright. Wouldn't want you to get into any trouble while I'm away anyhow. We're gonna...yeah. Yeah... *(Pause.) Waqur rabbighfir warham wa'anta khayrur rahimeen. [Our Lord. Grant us forgiveness and mercy. For You are the Best of those who show mercy.]*

ÉMILIE: What's that?

MIKAIL: It's from the Quran. It's a prayer. For forgiveness.

ÉMILIE: Forgive me father for I have sinned...

MIKAIL: Somethin' like that.

Silence. Émilie tentatively looks out the viewport.

ÉMILIE: There's so much black out here. So much. I mean, it sort of... washes over you.

MIKAIL: It does. And way back there somewhere is our little earth.

ÉMILIE: I feel so small.

MIKAIL: So are stars from a distance.

ÉMILIE: Yeah.

There's a change on one of the screens. Émilie looks closer. As she does, the muf led yelling of a man can be heard of stage.

ÉMILIE: What the...

MIKAIL: What? / Oh ya ibn el sharmouta.

ÉMILIE: The airlock just closed. I didn't even notice it / was cycling.

MIKAIL: They must be / back.

ÉMILIE: It looks like...only one crewmember returned. Why would they—? The captain said—she said...maybe she needed more time to work.

MIKAIL: The cap has been—you know.

ÉMILIE: She's supposed to be with the doc! No solitary spacewalks, that's the rule. What are they...?

MIKAIL: I'm goin'.

ÉMILIE: Wait.

MIKAIL: I said I'm goin'! I'm goin' to check what happened.

ÉMILIE: Don't leave me alone here, please!

MIKAIL: Stay here or come with me, up to you.

ÉMILIE: I can't leave the console.

MIKAIL: Al'ama! I'm goin' to check the airlock.

ÉMILIE: Just, hold on.

MIKAIL: Let go Emma. I said. Let go.

Doc walks in. He has his suit still on but no helmet. He looks stunned. They both look at him.

MIKAIL: Hey. Hey, you okay? What happened?

DOC: She...left. She went out. I—I couldn't stop her.

ÉMILIE: Oh, damnit. God! / Just.... goddamnit!

MIKAIL: Hey, sit down. Whaddya mean?

DOC: After we got to the break in the hull. She must have—Oh, Christ! She must have undid her tether. Turned her boots off.

ÉMILIE: / Goddamnit!

MIKAIL: Al'ama...I'm sorry man. I'm / so sorry.

DOC: She kept saying she needed to go. She pushed off and then...there she was. I tried to call her back. I tried to reason...but she was slowly floating away and then her light turned away and it was all black again and she...she...

MIKAIL: Hey, sit down man. Come on. There ya go.

DOC: She couldn't take them anymore. Not stuck out here like this. Drifting. The voices. The...thing. It called to her. The void. She had to—what did she mean? / What did she...what did she...

MIKAIL: It's okay. We're gonna be just fine.

ÉMILIE: Alice. How much do / we...

MIKAIL: / Not now. Allaena!

ALICE: How can I be of assistance?

ÉMILIE: How much life support do we have left?

ALICE: You have approximately five minutes and forty-eight seconds remaining before the main life support systems fail.

Pause.

ÉMILIE: Thank you Alice.

ALICE: I'm sorry I can't be of further assistance.

ÉMILIE: It's okay. We're okay.

MIKAIL: We're okay.

Beat.

DOC: We're not okay. We're not fucking...we're not. The captain is gone. We've got...minutes? We're not okay.

MIKAIL: Listen doc, we're gonna be... We're linking the data package back to H.Q. It's uploading now. This is... yeah, we're / okay.

DOC: No. You know what? Fuck H.Q. Fuck Event Horizon. Fuck the I.A. and Luna and the fucking U.N... None of them *care*. They sent us out here but we're just numbers on spreadsheets to them. One datum in their grand exploration of the system.

ÉMILIE: That's not true. What we already found—what we discovered. And this! It's *going* to mean something.

DOC: What we...? What did we find about that damn rock? Huh? Or did I miss something as the project's astrobiologist? Did our esteemed engineer discover something?

ÉMILIE: That's not fair. / You said...

DOC: You're the tech guy. Did you find anything *concrete*? Anomalies. Unusual readouts. That's shit. We didn't find *anything*!

MIKAIL: We can't process it here, but they'll / do that back home.

DOC: What we discovered!

ÉMILIE: No, you said that we found promising evidence of carbon-based molecules at Point One. That seeding...a possible confirmation of panspermia / and—

DOC: I lied! To give you all false hope! To make this endless journey seem

less banal and meaningless. So that you didn't feel crushed by the weight and reality of the rest of our journey and the trip back home.

ÉMILIE: But Captain Sokolov said that / we were—

DOC: She knew the truth. It was my idea but she gave the okay. Nothing concrete of course, just a hope to keep us going.

ÉMILIE: You have to admit, though that *this* could be...huge. To learn that we're not alone!

DOC: What if it's nothing though!

MIKAIL: But what if it is something Doc! Discoverin' life outside earth, intelligent life? It would be equivalent to the tamin' of fire. Not only would it redefine our relationship with the rest of the universe, it would change our relationship to God.

DOC: What we found is whatever was in the captain's head. / Whatever is in my...no. No.—

MIKAIL: / She was sick Doc. We're all gettin' a little stir crazy here.

DOC: —No. I just. It's not fair. It's not.

ÉMILIE: I know, but this could be different. Whatever is coming from that asteroid is not normal. And we're sending the data back. It's going to / be—

DOC: Do *not* say okay.

Silence.

DOC: I'm sorry. I just...I want it to mean something. But I don't think it does.

MIKAIL: I guess we can't know now.

DOC: No. We can't.

ÉMILIE: ...unless. (*She stands up suddenly.*) We could try and reroute some of the ship's core system powers back to the engines. And...

MIKAIL: Can we...do that?

ÉMILIE: It's like rerouting on the grid, but bigger. All the auxiliary systems have been powered down, but if we were able to reroute the energy and give the ship one big thrust, we could alter our course. Alice, would we be able to reroute all power to the engines for another thrust?

ALICE: It would be for a very limited time, but it may be possible to start the drive again if we give it a big enough surge.

ÉMILIE: And if we calculate it well enough, we could catch a gravity assist / and then we—

DOC: The auxiliaries are down to extend the *life support* system, remember? We can't survive long enough for a gravity boost to get / us anywhere.

ÉMILIE: Not for us maybe but the ship at least. If we can get Alice back to Earth then maybe—maybe it can help.

MIKAIL: It's a nice thought / but I—

ÉMILIE: Well, *what* else are we going to do? (*Beat.*) I don't want to just sit here and die, I have to / *do* something.—

MIKAIL: / I know.

ÉMILIE: —I have to...try.

She can't speak anymore.

MIKAIL: You do it. Whatever it takes

Émilie nods and goes to her console. She begins typing quickly.

MIKAIL: We're here with you. Right doc?

Doc doesn't respond, he's looking out the viewport now. A faint glow is emanating from the window.

Silence. Émilie takes a deep, unsettled breath. She continues, but without the ardor she had before.

ÉMILIE: We're...far. It would just take too long and we don't have any *time*. Time! We've run out of the one goddamn resource we just can't get more of. Not here. Not anywhere. (*Beat.*) This mission is fucked.

MIKAIL: Yeah.

Doc is getting on his feet now, going to the viewport.

DOC: I see it now. *It's* out there. So many stars. When you're on earth you look at the sky but here it's...there's really nothing like it. Stars and...the *nothing*. I can't believe how many there are.—

MIKAIL: / What's up man?

DOC: —You look at them, but you don't really look at them. And then there *it* is. There they are. I see now what she saw.—

ÉMILIE: / Hey, doc. What's happening? Talk to us.

DOC: —I can hear what she—yes. The *void*. It's a mercy really that our tiny human minds can't correlate all of this. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity...and maybe he was right. It was not meant that we should journey far. But journey we did. Journey we do. With so many stars why shouldn't there be...some *thing*. Not in the spaces we know, but between them...It's prideful to think that we're the only life in the universe. Pure hubris.

Rate of formation, planetary systems, suitability, life, intelligence, technology, time! It's all there in that equation. Yes, microbial life outside of earth, sure, but *intelligence*. Life with a plan. They voice it. We're adrift on a chartless, resistless sea. Let us sing when we can, and forget the rest. Can you *hear* it? Can you hear *it*? Listen...

Silence. Then a faint beating drum and a low rumbling hum surround him. Émilie and Mikail share a look. He turns and begins walking out of the bridge, his eyes wide with a fervent terror. Émilie reaches out to him to stop him but Mikail places a hand on her shoulder and shakes his head.

MIKAIL: Let 'im go, Emma.

They stand in silence as Doc exits.

MIKAIL: It's his choice how he wants to go.

ÉMILIE: Alice... close the viewport.

The viewport closes. Mikail and Émilie hold each other. Silence. There's a change on the panel again; the airlock is beginning to cycle through.

ÉMILIE: And play us some music.

MIKAIL: Good idea.

ÉMILIE: Something nice. Maybe from the Golden Record.

ALICE: Alright.

Soft instrumental music begins playing on the bridge. Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 in B Flat, Opus 130, Cavatina, performed by Budapest String Quartet.

ALICE: And would you like to know how / much time you—

ÉMILIE: No. No, that's okay.

MIKAIL: We're okay.

ALICE: Alright.

ÉMILIE: Thank you.

ALICE: I'm proud of what you've done here. I'd like you to know that. You did all that you could and I'm proud of you.

The music begins to swell. Émilie and Mikail look at each other again. There's an ocean of things they'd like to say, but even with the growing music there is silence between them. Slowly, very slowly, the lights fade and all is black.

SILVER LININGS *Mark Sherstinsky*

CHARACTERS:

MARK male, 30s-50s, White, Clarence's podmate, optimistic

CLARENCE male 30s-50s, Black, Mark's podmate, fatalistic

LORRAINE female, 20s-60s, any race, 'supervises' the two men

HENRY (offstage voice) male, teens-20s, Black, Clarence's son

SETTING:

A minimally-furnished living room that accommodates 2 for an indefinite time period

Sometime in the future

PROPS:

Newspaper (Mark & Clarence)

2 lunch trays (Lorraine)

Landline telephone (Clarence)

LIGHTS UP on MARK and CLARENCE in their “apartment”. CLARENCE is trying to read a newspaper while MARK talks.

MARK

She...(BEAT)...This is going to sound...(BEAT)...When I met Sara... (BEAT)...you know how when you see a person’s face for the first time, you, well, at least, I do this...It’s like, you’re processing one part at a time, you know? The shape their hair settles into when it drops from their head, like a coat on the back of a chair. You know, the tiny bend in the septum of their nose. I would just zone out on each part of her. In the beginning, I couldn’t help but think, like, once in a while, this thought. It would pop into my head, kind of uninvited. That she had the face of her...and it’s funny, because I hadn’t even met her parents. But I just always saw, in her face, the face of her father.

CLARENCE

Uh huh.

MARK

Do you know what I mean?

CLARENCE

Nah, man.

MARK

That thought...it kept popping into my head...all the time. When I first met her. Her father's face was just appearing in hers. And that's why I fell in love with her.

CLARENCE

That's some fucked up shit, man.

MARK

I don't have a strange thing for fathers. I just kept seeing her father's face in her face.

CLARENCE

It's all good. We all need things that help us make our dick hard.

MARK

Like, who do you take after? Did you get your mom or dad's face?

CLARENCE

Not my mom's. Never saw my dad's. My face is my own.

MARK

You never saw your dad's face? Like, no old photos or anything?

CLARENCE

Never met my biological dad. Will never know him or want to know him. Not sure my mom ever got a good look at his face either. There was no official courting or honeymoon period prior to, or after when, or in the middle of the act during which I was made. I was just produced. And that's how I got my face.

MARK

Wow. That's rough...I mean...your childhood...you're, like this, I mean... you turned out, like, despite it all, amazing.

CLARENCE

(indicating newspaper) Damn. they're messing with Podmates, man...
(Reads)...“The Federal Department of Resurging Infectious Disease announced Thursday that applicants for an upgrade from the Podmates Program to the Family Pod program would start receiving their response letters this week. The first Family Pods are scheduled to assemble by Christmas day, according to a Department spokesman. The upgrade would be available to current Podmates applicants who have not tested positive for the Technovirus in the five years prior while residing in the Podmates Program.”

MARK

(Beat...to himself) It's happening?

CLARENCE

(Continues reading) “As scientists have learned, after the Technovirus infects a human host, it embeds a section of that individual’s genetic code into its own RNA. After replication and infection of the next human host, the virus inserts itself into the same genetic region of the new susceptible individual, causing severe illness and likely death. Only those with an identically-matching genetic variant code on the 4q24 region are protected from infection from another individual with the same variant, which explains why Podmates with these so-called “matching variants” have survived infection and death while living under the same roof: they are immune, as long as each person contains the matching variant. Unfortunately, it is extremely rare for family members to have matching variants. For acceptance into the Family Pod program, all current Podmate participants must have not only confirmed a matching variant with their roommate, but must have been kept in a controlled environment—free from electronic devices—for five years, in order to remove the main source of infection of the deadly Technovirus. Phase Three FDA trials have shown that expanding into a Family Pod of four individuals with the same matching variants would still allow for immunity against Technovirus infection.”

MARK

The Family Pods are safe!?

CLARENCE

I suppose you’re gonna apply for that upgrade now. It’s what you’ve wanted.

MARK

There’s no way I’d even get accepted into the program. There are millions of applicants.

MARK grabs newspaper from CLARENCE.

MARK (continued)

(Reads) “The virus has killed 50 million people over ten years, primarily affecting family clusters living under the same roof. In 2046, to curb deaths, the federal government started separating families, including children, and ultimately placed surviving individuals in electronics-free cells with Podmates, those who contained matching variants. The new Family Pods will consist of two adults and two children with matching DNA variants. Final guidelines are being determined by the Technovirus Task Force and the Department for the Ethical Treatment of Humans. President Gibbs added, ‘This is, at long last, an opportunity to shine a light through the cracks of our humanity’s darkest period. This is our chance...for being with family.’”

CLARENCE

You think you’re choosing a family. But you’re not choosing. This is the government playing matchmaker. A matching variant does not a family make! I would rather live out the rest of my life in this fucking cell and die of whatever the fuck in your arms, Mark, than get placed in another cell with some strange woman I don’t know or love and some mopey-ass kids who’ll end up thinking I’m an asshole.

MARK

You would die in my arms? You see, I mean, we were strangers once? You and me, we’re different. But we’ve...become pretty close, right?

CLARENCE

Alright, when you go join your new Pod, you make sure you send me a holiday postcard of your fucked-up arranged family, ok?

MARK

I'm not you, Clarence. I need this. I need to see the light in all of this, you know? The silver lining.

CLARENCE

When does a silver lining stop being a silver lining for you?

MARK

(BEAT...indicating newspaper) This always makes me sad, man. These aged photos with the "Have you seen me?" kids who've been missing for years.

CLARENCE

Yeah. Poor fucking kids.

MARK

I can't help but think about those moments of terror, you know, when they're abducted. ...And why do their photos always have to be underneath a coupon for ham?

CLARENCE

Well, if it makes you feel better, those kids were most likely abducted by their parents.

MARK

(Thinks about it) Yeah, it does actually make me feel better.

CLARENCE

There you go man, your silver lining.

LORRAINE ENTERS, with two tray lunches

LORRAINE

Well hello, gentlemen. Are we hungry for lunch today?

CLARENCE

The *only* reason I eat, my dear Mother Protector, is to be able to live another day so I could see your face.

LORRAINE

Clarence, I appreciate how you are always not taking for granted the fact that you are alive and well-fed while so many others are not. And you're always so not sarcastic. We have something special today! Chicken-fried chicken!

CLARENCE

I do look forward to chicken-fried chicken. It's the one meal that doesn't remind me of the normal world. Because, well...it's just so not normal.

LORRAINE hands tray to CLARENCE, then to MARK

LORRAINE

Mark. Here you go, sweetheart.

MARK

I'm not picky. It's my blessing and curse. My wife and kids always called me 'the garbage can' because I would eat all leftover scraps. When Leo was a baby, I would crawl under his highchair after he ate to clean his food off the floor, and I'd just end up eating everything because I didn't want to waste it. Sara made fun of me...*(Stops, realizes he's remembering a time lost forever)*... This chicken looks incredible, Lorraine, thank you.

BOTH eat while LORRAINE talks.

LORRAINE

Can I tell you something, between us? I love watching a hungry man eat... You'll be surprised to know, gentlemen, that, in the before-times, I was a really good cook. I was really good at many things. That's one of the reasons I got this job. Competency. That's my secret. I'm a self-driver. Little to no guidance required. They know they can leave me alone and that I'll get them their deliverable. But my job back then was in IT. At Facebook, can you believe it?! And when the Virus first came, I *knew* it had something to do with the hardware. I started mapping out the disease from our building: all the cases, the exposures, the contacts, the incubation periods. And all the deaths. Shoe leather epidemiology, gentlemen! I figured out the patterns: the source was coming from our PCs and our laptops and our smart phones. I told my people in IT that we needed to remove ourselves from all devices, start doing everything remotely. I told them: only bluetooth and wifi and just

don't touch anything, the virus is in *there*. Just...disconnect. And I tried to tell this to the people on the top floor. And they said to me...(imitating)... "You believe there is something in the computers that's making people sick?" They thought I was losing my mind. They were like, "Uh, we're Facebook. We bring the world closer together." And I was telling them that people need to distance themselves from their products. They laughed at me. Then they placed me on admin leave. And then they furloughed me. I lost my home... And then I lost my family...I mean, why would a virus originate in a motherboard? And then spread to *people*? Absurd, right? But if all my colleagues in HR and in the Executive suite and in the whole place were still alive and I could speak to them, you know what I would say?...*(with glee)*...HOW YOU LIKE ME NOW!?!...*(BEAT)*... Clarence, you remember that you're scheduled for a phone call with your Henry, right? I'll put him through in a minute. He seems like such a nice boy...*(mocking)*...Hard to believe you raised him! See you all tonight at dinner, fellas. It's Friday!

LORRAINE EXITS. BOTH stop eating.

CLARENCE

I'd furlough that creepy lady the fuck away from me too if could.

LANDLINE RINGS. CLARENCE picks up receiver. MARK tries to give them privacy by burying his nose in the newspaper. HENRY's VOICE is heard (offstage).

HENRY (offstage)

Hey Pops.

CLARENCE

Little man!

HENRY (offstage)

Hey. How you doing in there?

CLARENCE

Good, good. Just, you know, getting by. Getting through. How you been, how's your new Podmate?

HENRY (offstage)

Oh yeah, he's a nice guy. Super chill. You know, reads a lot of books. Reminds me of you in that way...Oh! And he's from Mississippi!

CLARENCE

No shit!

HENRY (offstage)

Yeah yeah...we get along.

CLARENCE

Damn. You told him we have family there. I mean, *had* family there.

HENRY (offstage)

Yeah, of course. I mentioned. He said he'd ask his mom if they knew the Robertsons from McComb. His people are from Magnolia.

CLARENCE

Get out! Small world, man! Tell him to ask if they know Teddy. Everyone in Mississippi knows your uncle!...You, uh, doing alright?

HENRY (offstage)

Yeah...I'll be alright.

CLARENCE

You'd let me know if you're not alright?

HENRY (offstage)

Yeah. I mean, if I wasn't, what could you do anyway? From over there?

CLARENCE

I'd think of something...Anyway, how's your mom?

HENRY (offstage)

Oh I know you don't mean that!

CLARENCE

Oh come on...You know, things between your mom and me weren't as bad you think...(BEAT)...Okay, it was a little rough...Man, you know, two people in a relationship, they sometimes don't see eye to eye, even in normal times. There are disagreements and there are little cracks. But that's just how people are, Henry. Even when they love each other...But then you add all this

fucked up shit to the mix, and that shit is just a hammer blow through it all.

HENRY (offstage)

Don't sweat, Pops. Mom's good. She asked about you too. I'm ok with how things went down with you two, in the end. I mean, I wonder if...*(reconsiders)*...Nah never mind.

CLARENCE

What? Go on, man.

HENRY (offstage)

I wonder if the world kind of...stepped in? To separate you and Mom. I mean, how you and her don't have matching variants. And so you were, you know, forced, in the end, by *them*. To finally split up for good. I wonder if them stepping in ended up, you know, saving you both.

LORRAINE (offstage)

Ten seconds left Clarence!

CLARENCE

(Thinks on it)... Yeah. I think you're right Henry.

HENRY (offstage)

Sounds like our time is up, Pops.

CLARENCE

You take care of yourself, little man.

CLICK. Call ends.

MARK

Last time he barely talked. He's opened up more. Probably a little less scared now, right? Your son's like me. Looking for the silver lining...I miss my kids. But at least I know they're being taken care of. *We* can't keep them away from devices, right?... *(Points to the outside)*...But *they* can. I wouldn't be a good dad, I mean, I couldn't live with myself, if my kids got infected.

CLARENCE

You know, when Henry was, like, five, one morning, he saw his mom and me having this really ugly fight. And later that day, he and I were passing this guy on the street selling hot dogs and chips, so Henry threw a tantrum because he wanted me to buy him a bag of chips. But I was in a bad mood and I wouldn't. So Henry just lost it, in the way little kids do. Started hitting me with his little fists, snot coming out of his nose...*(imitates little HENRY crying)*... 'Get me chips, get me chips'. I knew in my head that he just wanted to be understood and to feel safe amid all the shit that was going on at home, and I knew that he just needed to be held, to tell him it was going to be okay...but I couldn't do it. *I* didn't think it was going to be okay. Something inside me wanted to take all of that negative shit out on him. So I just let him cry, and I didn't hold him...What I wouldn't do right now to have matching variants with Henry.

LORRAINE ENTERS.

LORRAINE

Gentlemen! I have a wonderful surprise for you!

CLARENCE

There's leftover chicken-fried chicken?

LORRAINE

Mark! Your application. For upgrade...has been approved!

MARK

For the Family Pod?

LORRAINE

You're going to be a husband! And a father! The administration is moving fast on the rollout and you're in the first batch of applicants. You're going to meet your new family next week. Just in time for Christmas! They told me to wait to tell you, but I couldn't wait. We'll have to celebrate! Congratulations, Mark. I'm sure Clarence will never find another Podmate as great as you.

LORRAINE EXITS

CLARENCE

Damn. Congratulations, Mark.

MARK

Clarence, I'm sorry. That I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't know how long it might be before I saw Sara, or my kids. Years? Never? I feel—

CLARENCE

—Hey. I'm happy for you, man. You deserve this. I'm sure it'll be great.

MARK

I can help you, with your application, you know, before I go. If you want. Maybe think about it? Someone to call your son again. Or daughter?! An opportunity to be a father. To not be alone anymore. To bring some light, you know? For *your* silver lining?

CLARENCE

Alright. I'll think about it, Mark. But only if you promise me one thing when you meet those new strangers you're going to have to live with and take care of for the rest of your lives...you better have a merry fucking Christmas.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK

END OF PLAY

DEAR CROSSING *Lisa Kimball*

CHARACTERS

BRIAN: Male, thirty seven

TRACEY : Female, thirties

SCANNER VOICE #1: Male or female

SCANNER VOICE #2 Male or female

PLACE

The shoulder of a road in a truck.

TIME

October night. 1.

Dear Crossing

TRACEY and BRIAN are seated in their truck on
the shoulder of the road.

BRIAN

Damn deer.

TRACEY

Why do they build roads where they cross?

BRIAN

Good thing we were in this truck.

TRACEY

You should check and see if there's damage.

BRIAN

It's a truck.

TRACEY

I'm still shaking, and my heart is pounding.

BRIAN

You got a heart?

TRACEY

What?

BRIAN

I wanted the truck; you wanted the Subaru.

TRACEY

The Subaru would have been fine.

BRIAN

You'd be dead, you'd be dead right now if we weren't in this truck.

TRACEY

You don't know.

BRIAN

I wanted the truck for safety.

TRACEY

So, you got the truck.

BRIAN

Yeah, but I thought about safety, you thought about your kayak. You thought warm, fuzzy,

driving around wearing a big smile, seeing who you want to see in your magic Subaru, full of happy bubbles.

TRACEY

You won, Brian, you got the truck.

BRIAN

You didn't want it, but you sure made use of it.

TRACEY

Can you get out and see if there's damage?

BRIAN

Lot of room in here, lot of room to stretch out, lay down.

TRACEY

Why are you sitting there?

BRIAN

I'm waiting a minute, alright?

TRACEY

Okay, we'll sit on the side of the road for no reason, even though it would make sense to go and

check the front of the car, then if nothing's wrong, we can be on our way. Makes sense, to me

anyway... Brian, you should really check if there's damage

BRIAN

I'm seeing it.

TRACEY

Did you hit your head or something?

BRIAN

I'm seeing the damage.

TRACEY

I wish you would tell me what your trying to say.

BRIAN

I play by the rules. That's what I do. State law, you hit a deer, you can't leave until a trooper comes.

TRACEY

Well, is the deer dead? You didn't even look.

BRIAN

I don't have to look, sitting next to you, I feel it, and it feels dead.

TRACEY

Fuck you, Brian.

BRIAN

Fuck you Tracey, fucking in my truck.

TRACEY

You're an asshole.

BRIAN

You don't even feel bad about it.

TRACEY

I asked you for a divorce last year.

BRIAN

How many times?

TRACEY

More than once.

BRIAN

No, how many times in the truck?

TRACEY

Don't be stupid.

BRIAN

Five, seven, twenty, twenty five-

TRACEY

Stop.

BRIAN

Ninety-nine, one hundred...

TRACEY

Seven.

BRIAN

Seven.

TRACEY

Yeah, seven.

BRIAN

Seven times. Where?

TRACEY

Oh God, can't we go home?

BRIAN

No. Where?

TRACEY

I don't know.

BRIAN

You know.

BRIAN

Where?

TRACEY

Different places.

TRACEY

The beach parking lot.

BRIAN

Seven times in the beach parking lot, in the day?

TRACEY

Seven times in the day, at the beach parking lot. What's the point?

TRACEY

It's done.

BRIAN

It's against the rules.

BRIAN

Illegal, indecent exposure in a public place-

TRACEY

I want a divorce-

BRIAN

Where?

TRACEY

I told you-

BRIAN

Where in the fucking truck?

TRACEY

Where in the fucking truck? It depended on how we were fucking. Sometimes in the back, sometimes right where I'm sitting, sometimes right where you're sitting. The time, before lunch, and afterwards we'd get something to eat, and then we'd go back to the beach and fuck some more. Eight months of fucking, eight wonderful months of fucking someone that I love and who loves me back. Eight months of actually feeling alive inside, instead of dead, dead in a dead marriage.

BRIAN

Eight months, seven times. Those numbers don't fit together. It was more than seven.

TRACEY

I didn't keep a log.

BRIAN

Why did you pick the number seven?

BRIAN

Why seven?

TRACEY

Never counted.

TRACEY

A random number.

BRIAN

What, one fuck for every year of our marriage?

BRIAN

You could have picked six, five, a hundred and five.

TRACEY

A random number.

BRIAN

Seven is my lucky number, and you picked seven.

TRACEY

Maybe it's not your lucky number anymore.

BRIAN

It's been my lucky number for thirty years.

TRACEY

Time for a new number.

BRIAN

Since first grade it's been my lucky number.

TRACEY

I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry, alright? Hey, I'll say it seven times for you. I'm sorry,

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

BRIAN

...You destroyed it, destroyed everything.

TRACEY

I didn't set out to. I really didn't.

(Pause)

TRACEY (cont'd)

So, how did it become your lucky number?

BRIAN

Why do you care?

TRACEY

I want to know, that's all.

Pause

BRIAN

First grade... I picked the number seven and won a goldfish. Shouldn't have taken it home though. I should have left it in school.

TRACEY

What happened?

BRIAN

I had it in a bowl. I was supposed to change the water, never did. It started to struggle. Everyday

I'd watch it struggle even more. The water wasn't right, it couldn't breathe.

TRACEY

It died.

BRIAN

I thought about letting it go, but I couldn't. I had won it, it was mine.

TRACEY

You could let me go though.

BRIAN

You're not a goldfish. You're a whore.

TRACEY

Okay, I'm a whore, but let the whore go.

BRIAN

...You said all that stuff, you didn't have to.

TRACEY

You asked.

BRIAN

I asked you for details.

TRACEY

And I answered to the best of my ability -

BRIAN

No, Tracey, you said that he loved you back. You didn't have to say that. I loved you back for

seven years.

TRACEY

(sincerely)

I'm sorry.

BRIAN

I'm sorry too.

TRACEY

I tried. I know that you don't believe that, but I really, really tried to do this marriage, but..

BRIAN

I know, dead, dead inside.

TRACEY

Yeah, yeah... I think once it's over, and we're living our separate lives, you're going to understand. You will feel better.

BRIAN and TRACEY sit for a moment in silence

before BRIAN opens the car door.

BRIAN

Hand me my scarf.

TRACEY

Be careful.

TRACEY hands BRIAN his scarf, he takes it,

closes the car door, then walks around the

truck, temporarily out of sight. He returns

without his scarf and starts the car.

TRACEY

Dents?

BRIAN

Nothing.

TRACEY

Good. It did sound bad though... So, let's go.

BRIAN

No. I'm going to wait for a couple and see if a trooper comes by.

TRACEY

Okay. Did you see the deer?

BRIAN

Yeah, it's dead, totally dead.

TRACEY

Brian, I'm glad about the truck, that we bought it. I think you're right. The truck was a life saver.

BRIAN

You're right too.

TRACEY

About?

BRIAN

Us ending.

TRACEY

Yeah...It hurts, I know, but it will be the best.

BRIAN

Yes, the best for the both of us.

FADE TO BLACK.

Radio static (O.S.)

SCANNER VOICE#1

I got a car parked by the side of the road. It's running.

SCANNER VOICE #2

What you got?

SCANNER VOICE#1

Stuffed tail pipe.

SCANNER VOICE #2

Unreadable.

SCANNER VOICE#1

A running car, blocked tail pipe, two people inside, unresponsive. Mile 77, interstate seven, marker 77.

SCANNER VOICE#2

Need backup, Interstate seven, marker 77, marker 77.

SCANNER VOICES fall silent.

BLACKOUT

SAM'S LAMENT *Robert Wray*

CHARACTERS

Sam

Clem

Leonora

TIME

Eternity

PLACE

Ghost train

NOTE

Until the very end, Leonora remains frozen still in her various poses

(Darkness. Sound of a rushing train. Sound fades while lights rise on a shadowy train compartment. LEONORA, a numinous beauty in a black dress, stands frozen in an alluring pose. Sitting nearby are SAM, a distraught man in a suit, and CLEM, an existential cowboy. LEONORA gazes keenly at SAM)

LEONORA

I just got my nipples pierced. I feel great. Want to see?

(Silence)

SAM CLEM

Yes! No!

(CLEM shoots a concerned look at SAM)

(Blackout. Rushing train. Lights rise. LEONORA is now in the pose of a classic 1940s film star)

CLEM

Your name's Sam?

SAM

How did you know?

CLEM

I recognized your hair in the darkness. My name's Clem.

(Shows a "Clem" tattoo on his arm)

See? Clem. Good name. I'm from Texas.

SAM

(Laughs nervously)

You know where we're headed?

CLEM

Depends. How'd you die?

SAM

Swallowed poison.

CLEM

Well you're riding the right train. The Train of Suicides and Other Untimely Exits.

SAM

Are we all going to the same place then?

CLEM

(Shrugs, points at LEONORA)

Why don't you ask film noir?

SAM

Who is she?

CLEM

She's the ambience.

SAM

She's beautiful.

CLEM

She's filled with wreckage. With denial. Claims she don't belong here, but you can tell by the

guilty wash on her face she's a hundred percent soaked in suicide.

LEONORA

(Glaring at CLEM)

Don't you ever, EVER talk about me! EVER!!!

(Smiles coyly at SAM)

Hello, I'm...Leonora.

(SAM smiles back)

CLEM

(Leans close to SAM, whispers)

Sam, whatever you do, don't let her seduce you with song or kiss you. 'Cause then, well, it's just

over.

SAM

Why, what would happen?

LEONORA

Nothing.

CLEM

Nothing except the galaxies would split themselves open in shock and the

universe as we know it would collapse to fucking pieces.

SAM

(To himself, somewhat aroused)

That's quite a kiss.

LEONORA

I'll take that as a compliment.

CLEM

I'm sure you'll take it any way you can.

LEONORA

(Sings a slow bluesy melody)

“Yellow moon, high up and over...

(CLEM covers his ears)

LEONORA (cont'd)

Sun-soaked and beaming, shining on lovers...”

(CLEM winces in pain. SAM and LEONORA fix eyes on each other)

(Blackout. Rushing train. Lights rise. LEONORA is in a pose reminiscent of
an

Egyptian hieroglyphic)

CLEM

Between her singing and all the other comings and goings on this train, it's a
wonder I don't start

devastating the entire ride.

(SAM stares at CLEM)

CLEM (cont'd)

What.

SAM

Nothing...Are you sure you're not from New Jersey?

CLEM

I'm from hell. Why.

SAM

You remind me of someone. I have a lot of nightmares and, you're in them. You're not a real person, are you?

CLEM

Come here and touch me.

(SAM tries to move but finds himself paralyzed from the waist down)

SAM

I can't move my legs.

(LEONORA sighs)

SAM (cont'd)

Why can't I move my legs?

CLEM

Ah, sweet mysteries. Touch me and I'll tell you.

(SAM hesitantly extends his hand towards CLEM)

(CLEM grips his hand and shakes it violently)

CLEM (cont'd)

See? A real honest-to-goodness living dead person. Fuck if I know the answer to your legs. You'll figure it out when it's your turn to get off.

SAM

My turn? How will I know it's my turn?

CLEM

You'll know. Why'd you suicide yourself in the first place?

SAM

Guilt-ridden by...illicit desires.

CLEM

(Puts his feet up on a seat)

Hm. My exit was more or less conventional. I seduced a woman whose husband was sleeping in

the next room. She said it'd be safe, and I believed her. But sure enough, her old man woke up,

caught us all lip-locked and all, got a gun, and shot me over and over again to a chorus of, "You

motherfucker, you motherfucker." And that was the whole song, baby. Her husband just flipped.

Of course, looking back on it now I can see how it could've been a problem. But, oh well.

LEONORA

He's an off-the-shelf junkie, Sam. Don't listen to him. He overdosed on drugs.

CLEM

Will you stop witch doctoring up the train? Pay her no mind, Sam. She's sexy and smiles by day,

but by darkness she's always night.

SAM

...What does that MEAN?

LEONORA

There's no day or night here.

CLEM

There's no sun or moon either, but there's still bullshit on board and you're simply dumping it on

him. Trust me, Sam. I happen to be a semi-ecstatic. I experience God vicariously on many levels.

This ain't one of 'em.

SAM

You're a tad rough on her, aren't you?

(LEONORA smiles)

CLEM

What, she got you spun already? Listen to me: Her whole being, from her porcelain toes to her

ruby lips, is nothing more than a trap set to lovingly turn you into a motionless sliver of--

LEONORA

(Sings)

"The sun, you drove her...

(CLEM covers his ears)

LEONORA (cont'd)

...to days of dreaming, yellow moon, high up and over."

(CLEM screams. SAM stares longingly at LEONORA)

(Blackout. Rushing train. Lights rise. LEONORA is in the pose of John Singer

Sargent's "Madame X")

(CLEM is unconscious. SAM is now paralyzed from the neck down)

LEONORA (cont'd)

You were a creative person, weren't you. An artist perhaps? A poet?

SAM

Computer salesman.

LEONORA

Yes, I can tell: The eyes...Do you mind if I touch you?

(Nothing happens)

LEONORA (cont'd)

Guess you can't do that to people here like you could on earth.

SAM

Guess not.

LEONORA

So, you composed music.

SAM

No. Computers. Sold them.

LEONORA

Oh.

SAM

Were you? A creative person?

LEONORA

Mais oui...I wish I could touch you. I'm getting excited.

SAM

Why is it so cold in here?

(LEONORA smiles)

SAM (cont'd)

I think I need to get the fuck off this train.

LEONORA

Me too. I hope we “get off” in another universe, so to speak...I understand your struggle,

your...illicit longings.

SAM

It's hopeless.

LEONORA

Nothing's worse than hopelessness...Do you like short stories?

(SAM nods)

LEONORA (cont'd)

Well, I was the little girl in a story about a family that goes to the woods to cut down their family Christmas tree. So we find the perfect tree, but my father forgot his axe at home. So then he decides to go back to the car, gets a twelve-gauge, and proceeds to shoot down the Christmas tree with his shotgun. I mean, what the fuck? It's a stupid story. I actually wrote myself out of it and, voila, here I am.

SAM

So you're not a...?

LEONORA

Real person? No. I could be though. I could be made real. If I could tell you how.

SAM

Don't tell me.

(Thinks it over)

How?

LEONORA

A kiss. Kiss me.

SAM

Can't. Bound to this seat.

LEONORA

Blow me a kiss then.

SAM

Can't...lift my arms.

LEONORA

Well that sucks...Purse your lips. Kiss me in the air...

SAM

I...I uh...

LEONORA

C'mon, don't you want to kiss someone who cares for you, who wants to... save you?

SAM

I, I want to, but I...

LEONORA

Can't you see I'm on fire for you? That my only desire is for you to climb inside me and--

SAM

Wait, that's quite a jump from a kiss to climbing around inside somebody.

LEONORA

Please, Sam. Just pucker up and blow...Please? Just a smooch?

SAM

(Making a final decision)

...No.

(LEONORA sighs. CLEM awakes. SAM regains feeling)

SAM (cont'd)

Look...I can move again. My hands. My legs.

CLEM

It's your turn, Sam. You passed the test.

LEONORA

Bravo, Sam. You've been saved. You can save me now too--

CLEM

--And be lost forever—

LEONORA CLEM

--with a kiss. --with a kiss.

LEONORA

(Sings)

“Lingering on, like a song of splendor...

(CLEM, covering his ears, grimaces in agony)

LEONORA (cont'd)

Pristine stars gleaming, shining on lovers.”

(SAM slowly stands)

LEONORA (cont'd)

Just a quick kiss goodbye...?

SAM

If it's any comfort, your lips do look warm and sweet.

LEONORA

They ARE warm. They're burning.

(SAM smiles, and begins walking away)

LEONORA (cont'd)

I'll miss you. Maybe another universe then?

SAM

Maybe.

(LEONORA lets out a heart-rending sigh)

(SAM stops, and looks back at her)

SAM (cont'd)

Here...

(Blows her a kiss)

LEONORA

See? Nothing. A kiss is just a kiss...Bye.

(SAM tentatively crosses to LEONORA. He kisses her lightly on the cheek)

LEONORA (cont'd)

(Turns her face to SAM)

Felt just like Christmas.

(Silence)

(SAM grabs her, kisses her passionately)

(LEONORA slowly wraps her arms around SAM)

(Blackout. Rushing train. Lights rise. CLEM is reclining back with his feet up.

SAM is frozen in an Egyptian hieroglyphic pose, holding in his hand LEONORA'S

black dress. LEONORA is gone)

(SAM sighs)

CLEM

Dumbfuck.

(Blackout)

THE END

HOUSEKEEPING *James Armstrong*

CHARACTERS

JERRY, a well-dressed man

MARIE, a clean but shabbily dressed woman

TIME

The present.

PLACE

A hotel room.

(As the lights come up, JERRY is in a hotel room, going through some papers. There is a knock at the door.)

MARIE (offstage)

Housekeeping!

JERRY

Come in!

(MARIE enters.)

JERRY (cont'd)

I'm just going over some presentations, so don't mind me.

(MARIE goes straight to the bed, lies down upon it, and curls up into a fetal position.)

JERRY (cont'd)

Um... what are you doing?

MARIE

Housekeeping.

JERRY

Shouldn't you be... changing sheets or something?

MARIE

No, that would be sheet-changing. I'm housekeeping.

JERRY

But you're....

MARIE

I'm keeping house.

JERRY

Excuse me?

MARIE

You asked me to come in.

JERRY

Yes, but I....

MARIE

To keep your house. That's what I'm doing.

JERRY

I anticipated... this is not what I anticipated.

MARIE

Me neither.

JERRY

But you can't just come in here and lie down.

MARIE

Why not? You weren't supposed to be here. Besides, all the other rooms were full.

JERRY

Do you work here?

MARIE

No. Why would you think that?

JERRY

I'm going to call security.

MARIE

Okay.

JERRY

I'll call security, and then... you could be thrown in jail! You... aren't you afraid of security?

MARIE

No. I like security.

JERRY

You do?

MARIE

Security. Tranquility. Prosperity. My favorite things, really.

JERRY

But you can't stay here.

MARIE

You said I could. I said "housekeeping," and now I'm keeping the house.

JERRY

First of all, it's not a house. It's a hotel room.

MARIE

It's a nice house.

JERRY

Hotel room!

MARIE

And I think I'll keep it.

JERRY

I don't know who you are, but I've been working sixteen-hour days, I'm exhausted, I have a very important presentation tomorrow, and I want you to leave me alone.

MARIE

That's fine. I won't bother you.

JERRY

You're in my room!

MARIE

It's mine now. You said I could keep it.

JERRY

I said you could come in.

MARIE

For—

JERRY

—I don't care what it was for. You have to leave. Go back to your... are you homeless?

MARIE

Do I look homeless?

JERRY

Not really.

MARIE

That's because I have a home. Here.

JERRY

This is a hotel room. Do you have an apartment? A house?

MARIE

I did.

JERRY

Well, this is my hotel room. Mine. I booked it. I paid for it.

MARIE

I paid for my house, too.

JERRY

Then why don't you go back to it?

MARIE

Can't. They changed the locks.

JERRY

Who did?

MARIE

The bank. But not the bank I took out the loan from. And not the bank that bought the mortgage from the first bank. That bank doesn't exist anymore. It was the bank that bought the bank that bought the mortgage from the bank I took out the loan from.

JERRY

I'm confused.

MARIE

Try being me.

JERRY

So your house was foreclosed on?

MARIE

Foreclosed is such a harsh word. One day they just came for....

JERRY

Yes?

MARIE

Housekeeping.

JERRY

I'm sorry to hear that.

MARIE

So was I.

JERRY

That's terrible. It really is, but—

MARIE

—I'm going to lie here for a while if you don't mind.

JERRY

Actually, I—

MARIE

—I'd nearly paid off the first mortgage, but the house needed repairs. Those cost money.

JERRY

I'm sure they do.

MARIE

The amount of work I put into that house over the years. Gone....

JERRY

Ma'am, while I—

MARIE

—Marie.

JERRY

What was that?

MARIE

My name's Marie.

JERRY

Jerry.

MARIE

Pleased to meet you.

JERRY

While I sympathize with your plight, Marie...

MARIE

I'm just not ready to go out there yet.

JERRY

Out... where?

MARIE

I want to lie in bed, turn off the lights, and forget about it all. To just... be. Existence is hard enough, don't you think? Without worrying about people taking away everything you have. I want to lie here, close my eyes, and pretend that the rest of the world doesn't even exist.

JERRY

Pardon me for saying so, but maybe that's why you're in this situation to begin with.

MARIE

I'm just tired.

JERRY

And so am I! I've been working non-stop since I got up this morning.

MARIE

I put work into my house!

JERRY

And I put work into my job.

MARIE

At least you still have your job.

JERRY

Yes. For now. They laid off half the sales force last year, which means those of us left are doing the jobs of two people. Only there's more work to do than ever, because every sale is harder, and every client is looking to get twice as much for half the money.

MARIE

Sorry.

JERRY

Plus, my wife's mother just moved into an assisted care facility, which is supposed to be one of the better ones, but is quite frankly depressing, but it's not like Kate can take care of her when they've been axing people at her company, too, and my daughter's looking at colleges, and do you know how much they cost now?

MARIE

Yes.

JERRY

I am killing myself, a little bit each day, trying to keep a job I have never liked that has turned into a nightmare, so I can scrape a little money together for my wife, and my daughter, and my mother-in-law, none of whom do I even see any more since I'm on the road half the time, and you come in here into my hotel room, mine, and plop down on the bed—

MARIE

—It looked comfortable.

JERRY

And how would I know! I don't even have time to sleep!

MARIE

My woodwork was beautiful. The molding around the doorways. All original.

JERRY

I'm sorry you lost your house.

MARIE

Some idiot had put wall-to-wall carpeting over these magnificent hardwood floors. It took forever to get up.

JERRY

Lying in bed is not going to solve your problems.

MARIE

I know.

JERRY

I need to get work done. I need for you to leave.

MARIE

And will that solve your problems?

JERRY

What do you mean?

MARIE

Will my leaving make your job suck any less, or your company stop acting insane, or your clients be willing to spend money again?

JERRY

No.

MARIE

Then it doesn't make much of a difference, does it? Whether I go or stay.

JERRY

It would give me some peace and quiet.

MARIE

Quiet, maybe. But from the way you sound, I severely doubt it would give you any peace.

JERRY

Sometimes quiet is the best we can hope for.

MARIE

Yes. Quiet. That's nice.

JERRY

With these constant meetings that go nowhere....

MARIE

Rest.

JERRY

There is no rest.

MARIE

But there should be, shouldn't there? There should be someplace where you can lie down and rest. Some house where you can go and leave the world outside, not even think about it.

JERRY

Even home's not like that anymore. Kate's always running around, making phone calls, yelling at Jennifer...

MARIE

There should be someplace without all that. A place that's yours. Where no one can harm you. Your own house, or maybe just your own corner of a house, but yours, that you get to keep just how you want it.

JERRY

Every time you make a little progress, start to get your head above water, they take it away from you.

MARIE

They make you leave.

JERRY

Pull it away just when you think you've....

MARIE

When you were so comfortable there. Warm. And safe. And at peace.

JERRY

Are you...?

MARIE

Peace... peace....

JERRY

Move over.

MARIE

I'm tired.

JERRY

Scoot over. There's room on the bed.

(JERRY crawls into the bed next to MARIE.)

MARIE

You're married.

JERRY

And you're not my type, anyway. Now scoot over and give me some of that pillow.

MARIE

They'll find us.

JERRY

Eventually.

MARIE

You gonna fall asleep?

JERRY

Doubt it, but I want to close my eyes.

MARIE

Ah. Darkness. Silence. Oblivion... that's nice.

(There is a knock on the door.)

VOICE (offstage)

Housekeeping!

JERRY and MARIE

No thank you!

(Blackout.)

Contributors

Bios

Ryan Hunter was born and raised in Southern California. He earned his BA in Literature, BA in Creative Writing, and MA in English all from California State University, Long Beach. He is an adjunct professor by day, and in his free time he mostly writes stories about humans and their problems.

Marcus Clayton is a multigenre Afro-Latino writer from South Gate, CA, who holds an M.F.A. in Poetry from CSU Long Beach. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California and is an executive editor for *Indicia Literary Journal*. Some published work can be seen in *The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *[Pank] Magazine*, *Apogee Journal*, and *The Latino Book Review* among many others.

Olga Murillo was born and raised in Compton, California. She completed her undergrad at UC Irvine focusing on Film, English, and Creative Writing. She has recently received her MFA in Creative Writing from Cal State Long Beach. Olga is the former Fiction Editor of the Zharmae Publishing Press and Flash-Fiction editor of RipRap. She was awarded the Selected Writers award in 2020 from the Literary Women of Long Beach program. She loves baking, her cats, and her family.

Kathy Tun is a writer, photographer, and friend. She is currently based in Chicago

Robert Wray, a Navy brat originally from Norfolk, Virginia, Robert's a graduate of the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, has won awards and been published as well as produced in New York, regionally and abroad. Other works include: *Bullet for Unaccompanied Heart*, *All is Always Now*, *Ground Streaming Blood* and *Melancholy Echo*

Riley Wood is a writer, designer, and visual artist based out of the Long Beach area. Most of his creative work can be found on his website at dreamden.org

Mark Sherstinsky is a current member of the PlayGround-LA Writers' Pool (playground-la.org). His staged plays include *The Mission* (2019 Best of PlayGround-LA Gala); *The Valley* (Pittsburgh New Works Festival Original Play Readings, 2019 and Inner Voices Social Issues Theatre selection, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2018); A

David Lynch Family Christmas (2014 Best of PlayGround-LA Gala); Hell for Dummies (Strawberry One-Act Festival finalist, NYC, 2006); The Docent (2001 PlayGround Emerging Playwrights Festival, San Francisco, and 2002 Finalist for the Humana National Ten-Minute Play Contest); and No Tree (radio play, aired March 2020, Shoestring Radio Theatre, KXSF 102.5FM, San Francisco).

William Cass has had over 200 short stories appear in a variety of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and Black Hill Press, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and *The Examined Life Journal*. He has received one Best Small Fictions nomination, three Pushcart nominations, and his short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was recently released by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Terry Wright is an American artist and writer whose art has been featured widely in print and digital venues, including “Club Plum,” “Full Bleed,” “Glassworks,” “Neon Garden,” “Riddled with Arrows,” “The Penn Review,” “Queen Mob’s Teahouse,” and others. Exhibitions include the 57th Annual Delta Exhibition.

Anne Rudig was born in San Francisco, spent over twenty years in advertising in New York, received an MFA in Nonfiction Writing from Columbia University in 2018, and is currently working on a memoir. She resides in northwestern Connecticut with her husband and finicky cat.

Rollin Jewett is an award winning playwright, screenwriter, singer/songwriter, poet, author and photographer. His screenwriting credits include “Laws of Deception” and “American Vampire”. His short stories, poetry and photography have been published in numerous literary magazines and anthologies and his plays have been produced all over the world.

Andrew G. Cooper is an award-winning playwright and theatre director based in Calgary, AB. They are delighted that their plays have been produced across North America and around the world. They have an affinity towards fairy tales, myths, and speculative fiction and their playwriting often reflects this. Andrew received their Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts and English from Thompson Rivers University, are

a member of the Playwrights Guild of Canada, and are a recipient of the Kamloops Mayor's Emerging Artist of the Year Award. They are a lover of animals and outer space.

NIKKI O ANCIENT BABY

Iris Jamahl Dunkle is an award-winning poet and literary biographer. She has published four poetry collections, including *West: Fire: Archive*, The Center for Literary Publishing, 2021, and the biography *Charmian Kittredge London: Trailblazer, Author, Adventurer*. Dunkle teaches at Napa Valley College and is Poetry Director at the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.

Alan Elyshevitz is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), a full-length collection of poems, *Generous Peril* (Cyberwit), and three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Imaginary Planet* (Cervena Barva). Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. For further information, visit <https://aelyshevitz.ink>.

Lisa Kimball has had her plays produced throughout the United States. A member of the Dramatist Guild, she resides in the Hudson Valley where she is an active participant in A Howl of Playwrights. She is currently working on her new full length play *Spin the Donkey*: a political love story during Obama's presidency.

Amadeu Marques is a poet and writer from Providence, Rhode Island. He has written some novels but they are not yet published. Prior to that he studied at Columbia University.

James Armstrong has had plays performed by such theaters as the Abingdon Theatre Company, Sundog Theatre, Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, and Detroit Rep. 'Housekeeping' was premiered by the Aching Dogs Theatre Company in New York City.

Matthew Felix Sun depicts life frankly and critically, as visual surfaces and interior qualities. Instead of verisimilitude, he strives to discover and capture what is hidden, emphasizing the implicit and the unspoken. In recent years, he has moved away from purely representational work, leaning into shifts of pattern, color, tone, and shape. His portfolio embraces diverse subject matter; lately, his work evokes

historical and social commentary on current environmental, social, and political conditions. Sun's work has been published by art and literary reviews and his works are collected in the US, Canada, and China, and his portfolio can be viewed at matthewfelixsun.com.

CJ Lee is a first-generation Asian American emerging writer and a Third Culture Kid who moved twelve times before age eighteen. She lived in countries in Asia and Europe. She received an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department. Her writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Situations* (South Korea), *Between Literary & Cultural Studies: Asian Explorations* (Singapore), and *236 Magazine*.

Jonathan Greenhause won the Telluride Institute's 2020 Fischer Poetry Prize and has poems appearing or are forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *Moon City Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and The Poetry Society website. He is currently – joyously – wearing a mask with my wife and 2 children. This is his 2nd time appearing in *RipRap*

Sol Jacobs is a creative nonfiction writer with work published in *Inverted Syntax*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Flint Hills Review*, and other fine journals. He has also been a featured playwright/director for Emporia State University's Short Play Festival (2015), the William Allen White Festival (2016 and 2017), as well as the Valentine's Day Play Festival. Jacobs graduated from Emporia State University in 2017 (BA in English and a minor in creative writing), Sierra Nevada College in 2019 (MFA in creative writing), and is currently attending the Institute of American Indian Arts. He is also the co-creator/editor of the *Tittynope Zine* and presently lives with his wife and two children at the foothills of the Rockies in Colorado.

Severin Allgood's fiction and poetry has appeared in the *Coachella Review*, *Glint Literary Journal*, *Rubbertop Review*, *Crow Hollow 19*, and the *University of Memphis Magazine*. He has taught writing and literature at the University of Memphis and Christian Brothers University. He is a firefighter who lives in Germantown, TN with his wife and two daughters.

Mark Simpson lives on Whidbey Island, Washington

Kareem Tayyar's novel, "The Prince of Orange County" (Pelekinesis), received the 2020 Eric Hoffer Award for Young Adult Fiction, and I am a recipient of a 2019 Wurlitzer Poetry Fellowship. My work has appeared in journals such as Alaska Quarterly Review, Brilliant Corners, Prairie Schooner, and The Writer's Almanac.

Les Wicks Over 40 years Wicks has performed widely across the globe. Published in over 350 different magazines, anthologies & newspapers across 28 countries in 15 languages. Conducts workshops & runs Meuse Press which focuses on poetry outreach projects like poetry on buses & poetry published on the surface of a river. His 14th book of poetry is *Belief* (Flying Islands, 2019). leswicks@hotmail.com
<http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm> Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet.

Charles Haddox lives in El Paso, Texas, on the U.S.-Mexico border, and has family roots in both countries. His work has appeared in a number of journals including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Folio*, and *Stonecoast Review*.

IN THROUGH THE NOSE OUT THROUGH THE MOUTH