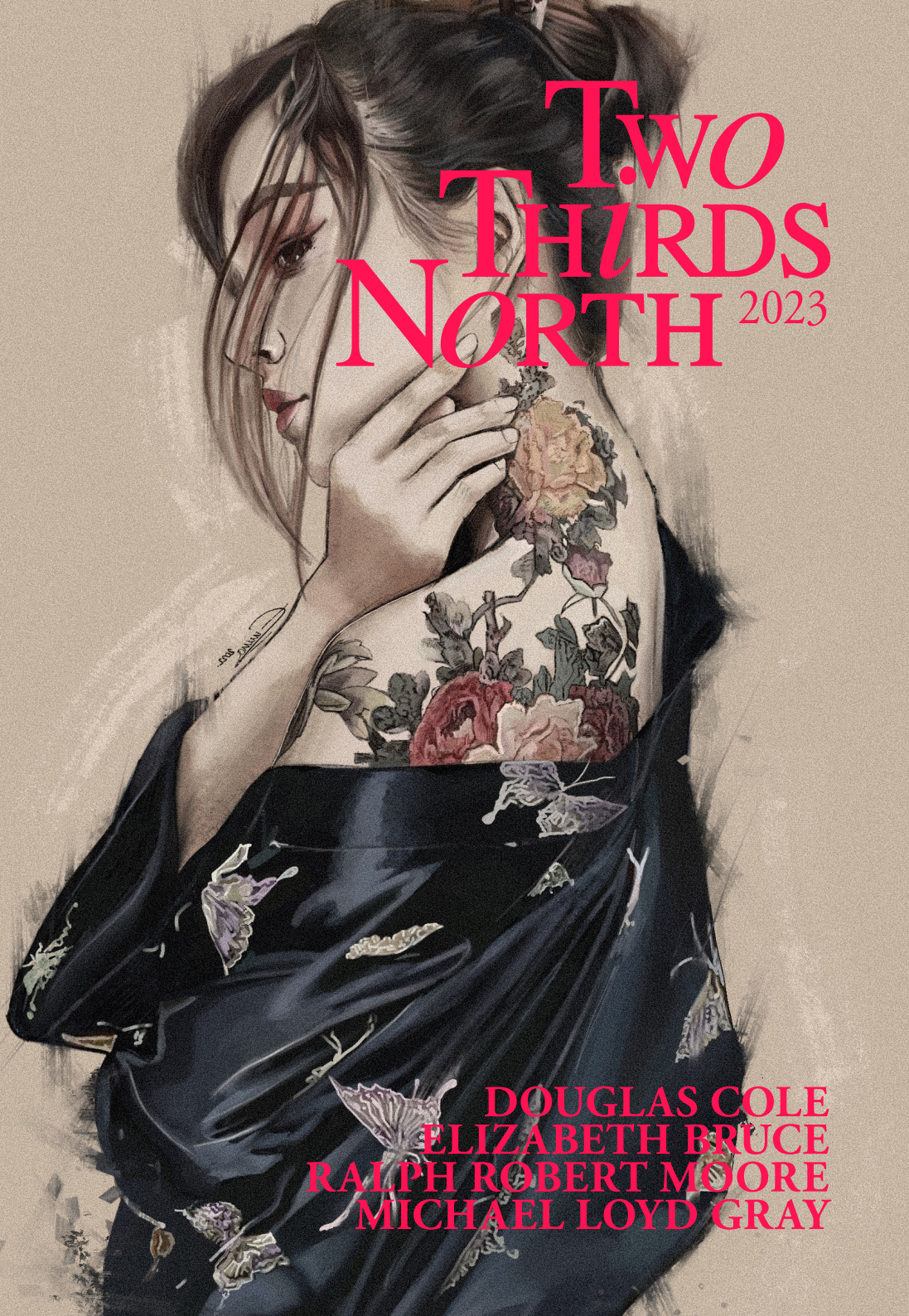

Two Thirds North 2023

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TWO THIRDS NORTH

2023

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Editor's Foreword

Look at us, a year ago, so sure we were on the brink of something better, the promise of a more open world—the hope of building and rebuilding relationships after the pandemic. It is almost endearing how we thought we were safe.

When my children ask me if there will be a third world war and if the bomb shelter that is our garage will hold, I say no, there won't, and yes it will, even though it was built in 1983 and it won't. When friends buy canned goods in bulk, either because it happens to be cheap that week, or because they feel better knowing there are tomatoes and sausages in the basement, I say, good for you. Many Swedes have opened their homes, gathered clothes and goods for Ukraine, helped how they could. Ukraine is close to us, and our flags share the same colours. Many Swedes have closed their doors, and began closing them before the war, well, before this war. They speak of helping our own, and us and them. Where the money should be going, especially in a recession, is tricky business. Is business. Fear is a business. On the scale of worth, the Other weighs lightly.

Our first section in this issue—our largest to date—is titled "Battles and Their Wounds," and our authors here investigate the complex relationship between past and present, war and peace, visible and invisible injuries. M.A. Schaffner's "Heimat Sicherheitsdienst," sets an uneasy tone for the whole issue—so many of the lines open-

ing doors to new poems, or eulogies: "Set watchtowers." "Fortify schools." "Watch for migratory birds." These lines hurt, as they should. The section contains so much loss, yet voices that are willing to call out, in every sense of the word.

In "From a Distance," temporal and geographical dislocations are the dominating themes. From the haunting memories of a traumatic past to the recollections of loved places and people, these texts explore not just the past and the present, but the aspect of the distance between then and now. How much distance is too much distance? How much is not enough? "Remember all the mistakes you wanted to make," writes Kurt Olsson in his poem "Chevrolet Tango." Perhaps it is a statement, a question, an appeal, an order, or all of the above. The exploration here turns not just to that which is lost, but all that could have been lost, had other roads been travelled.

In "(Im)Permanence," the authors explore the notion of, need for, and fallacies of performance. For writers especially, the work we do is about making permanent that which we lost. Some things just cannot be salvaged, and yet, here we are, desperately trying to do just that. Some things we salvage for salvaging's sake. Ralph Robert Moore's lines remind us that everything must fade, including our words and their meaning:

> Once you're at the end of the exit ramp, you'll come to a four-way intersection with ruins at two corners. Used to be a gas station, used to be some kind of diner, but now they're just white stones rising a few feet above weeds, and a big metal sign in front of the diner that's lost almost all of its letters. Impossible to tell what it once said. And at this point, who cares?

A similar contempt and self-awareness can be found in the last lines of Beth William's poem, in which the narrator laconically ascertains:

> City leaders named the mall after a war
> hero. They paid me a lot of money
> to put words on the ground of a sinking
> city. They had this grand idea
> for folks to walk on poetry, as if that's what
> it would take to lift us up.

"In Sickness and in Health" holds so much resistance and so much acceptance. Gracefully, our authors here balance the line between life and death. There are questions here that we seldom want to ask ourselves and only do when we are faced with serious illness or harm. The obvious question is of course 'What if we die?" The equally frightening one may also be "What if we live?" The question grows ever larger, until we have to acknowledge that it is a matter not only of whether we live or die, but whether we live with regret or die with it.

The constant tacking between inside and outside, self and Other, choice a) or choice b) fills this edition to the brim. The book straddles the line between here and there, now and then, that which we must accept and that which can still be salvaged. So, here we are, then, on the brink again, always on the brink. Let us pick the side of goodness in the cases when we have a choice and let this year be more of kindness and less of regret, whether we live or die by our words.

Maria Freij

Battles and Their Wounds

Heimat Sicherheitsdienst

M.A. SCHAFFNER

Mow the grass low so evildoers
can't infiltrate unseen. Set watchtowers.
Check for ID at all points
of ingress and egress. Fortify schools.

Arrest suspicious individuals, sanction groups
known to have expressed hostility to
our republican form of government,
while arming against that government's tyranny.

Compile lists and cross-index
with or against other organs. Fog for insects,
follow the prints of herding ruminants,
and the nocturnal wanderings of predators.

Watch for migratory birds as they enter
and transit unusual cloud formations.
Note newly arrived songbirds as they perch
like eighth notes on power lines and call them

to see if they have the code. Vultures coast,
feigning indifference. They work for us.

A Navy Wife

M.A. SCHAFFNER

That train never left and the photographs
remain forever just as they'd always been,
in a Tokyo we thought we gently ruled.

Flying Pan Am to Taipei and Hong Kong,
later to Thailand, even India—
I stayed home with the Navy watching waves

constantly scrubbing the shores where sea birds
flashed white and gray above the gray warships
that made us guests on our native planet.

There is no home after that, no mother,
no father, only refugees seeking
a comforting semblance of permanence.

To this day I rarely walk on beaches
without the sea foam and the shattered shells
spelling a thousand versions of her name.

Bloody Rabbit

ELIZABETH BRUCE

One dollar. That's all he wanted, the still trembling boy with the black rabbit bloody in his hands. A baby rabbit so black its blood shown only on the small pale hands of the boy.

"One dollar," the boy smiled at her. "For da rabbit," he said in a Balkan accent thick with purpose.

Too young for death, she thought. The rabbit. Oh, and the boy. He's too young for death as well. Like everyone in this war-torn place the global technology foundation had decided they should visit for reasons that seemed apocalyptic to her now. All of them, the people here and even the anemic cows in the fields were wading in death like fishermen hauling in their nets. Especially the thousand-year-old-looking women whose suffering seemed to hold all life together. They wallowed in death; it was the air they breathed and the phlegm they spat out at her and her colleagues as they passed. It was suffocating.

Get me out of here, she thought.

"One dollar," the boy shouted again at the group of them, the visitors, salesmen really, opportunists, their translators whispered, come from realities far away, bringing their technology with them. Magic elixirs—they touted them as panaceas for devastation, these modern digital devices their group waved before the battered local officials like the boy was waving the dead rabbit.

"One dollar buy one rabbit." The boy stepped toward her. The blood slid down his arms.

She stepped back and the boy stopped. They looked at each other. She glanced at her colleagues, but she was the only one watching the boy.

"One dollar disemboweled," the boy added, keeping his distance now and gesturing at the underbelly of the baby rabbit.

Disemboweled? She marveled at the word. How does a boy here among the illiterate rabble learn a word like disemboweled?

In her peripheral vision she saw her colleagues—all men—glance at their watches and inch back toward their hired cars and drivers. The technology foundation had spared no expense in their quest for post-war reconstruction dollars. The men regarded the boy from a distance, holding their tongues and averting their eyes like the enlightened travelers they fancied themselves to be.

The boy too saw the visitors' retreat. "One dollar," he shouted, again moving toward the men, swinging the dead rabbit before them like a bloody flag of surrender.

Poor boy, she thought. Does he really think we will buy his bloody rabbit? Who does he think we are?

Her colleagues were openly retreating now away from the boy. Everyone in the global vanguard sales team was moving from discreet withdrawal toward flight mode.

An adventurous getaway to the boundary lands, they'd told their consorts. This far-flung place would be in bloom this time of year, their expat colleagues had said, before the rains come and all hope turns to mud and pathogens. And besides, the tech foundation will pay for everything.

The boy, looking defeated, turned and fixed his gaze on her, the lone woman in this swell of pompous men. "One dollar?" He stretched out his hand toward her, bloody palm side up like a beggar.

The dead rabbit hung limp behind him.

She reached into the compartment hidden beneath her waistband and slid out one dollar American to give to the boy.

"One dollar," she said, smiling. "For you, young man."

The boy snatched the dollar from her hand and thrust the rabbit toward her.

"Oh no," she said. "A gift. You can keep your rabbit."

The boy cradled the dead baby rabbit in both hands and looked at her.

What a sweet child, she thought.

And then the boy, muttering something, leaned forward on one foot, and hurled the dripping rabbit at her feet. Blood and sinews splattered up, covering the white calfskin boots she'd bought only that morning at the hotel boutique.

"One dollar for one rabbit," the boy shouted and ran away.

Breaks in the Clouds

STEPHEN PAGE

The full moon was a bright white disk—its light providing a black-and-white quality to the tops of the palm trees and to the asphalt road that twisted through the jungle. Thousands of toads and crickets sounded in chorus. A light wisp of white danced between two trees near the road. Two Marines, Lance Corporal Jones and Private First Class Barks, were walking on that road, one in front of the other, about fifteen meters apart. They wore camouflaged utilities, helmets, cartridge belts, harnesses, and they carried black M16 rifles at sling arms. Jones', the Marine in the lead, sneered. His cheeks were pinched and his nose was thin. Barks' face was rounder and wet with sweat. As they approached a Quonset hut, their footsteps silenced the toads and crickets in the immediate area. A mosquito buzzed around Barks' ear.

Jones stopped in front of a Quonset hut and extracted a two-way radio from a leather case that hung upon his cartridge belt.

"Hotel India, Hotel India, this is Foxtrot Papa."

"This is Hotel India, go ahead Foxtrot Papa."

"Sierra Bravo Three, all secure."

"Roger that, Foxtrot Papa."

Jones gestured with his radio toward Barks. He spoke in a loud whisper, "C'mon Newbie. Let's take a break."

Barks double-timed toward Jones. He stepped over

a large cow pie in the road. A sharp bark echoed over the tops of the trees and Barks flinched, looked around, then walked the rest of the distance to where Jones was standing.

Jones lifted the radio again and spoke, "Hotel India, this is Foxtrot Papa. We're Delta for a Bravo."

"Roger that, Foxtrot Papa."

Jones hung the radio back on his belt.

"Hey Jones," Barks said. "Was that one of those boonie dogs?"

"That's Lance Corporal Jones to you, Barks, if you're gonna address me by name."

Barks repeated the question. "That bark. Was that one of those boonie dogs?"

Jones sat on the cement steps in front of the Quonset hut.

"Was it a sharp bark? Or, was it a yapping bark?"

Barks sat next to him. "I don't know, I guess it was kind of sharp-like. Didn't you hear it?"

Jones pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"Nah, when you been on this island for as long as I have, you don't notice the jungle sounds so much."

The sharp bark was heard again.

"There it is," said Barks.

Jones slid a cigarette from the pack, and placed it in the corner of his mouth.

"That be one of those barking deer," he said.

"Barking deer?"

"Damn, Newbie. Ain't they taught you nothing yet? Look at you. You're so green you even got issued those new heavy utilities." He pointed at Barks' uniform. "Bet you're sweating your ass off in this jungle."

"It's not so hot," Barks said, wiping his face.

"Yeah, but it's humid as hell on this God-forsaken

jungle island, even at night. The only break we get is the rain. If you was from the Old Corps like me, you would'a got issued these tropical cammies." He pulled at his blouse. "Thinner. Rip-stop cotton poplin. Like wearing air-conditioning." He lit a cigarette, the light from his match bringing flesh tones to his face. "Yeah, that bark was a deer. Boonie dogs mostly howl. If they bark, it's a yapping bark. Kind'a wimpy-like. Not very big, those boonie dogs, problem is, they travel in packs. Chase down and eat the deer mostly. But sometimes, early in the morning, if they're hungry enough, they come out'ta the jungle and dig through the garbage on base. Sometimes you can see them sitting on the side of the road. Ugly things. Looks like they all come from domestic stock, like they was left here by the military families. You know, like Benji and Fido and Rin-Tin-Tin, 'cept they're lean and tough looking, and they're all ragged and scarred up. They have this look in their eyes, you know, kind'a wild, yet, more than that: heartless, unfeeling. Jeez. You know if you met them alone in the jungle, they'd tear you apart. Seen a pack of them next to the old airport runway last month when we ran the Physical Fitness Test. They was just sitting there, watching me run by. Their eyes. Damn. I could swear they was devils from hell. Gave me the willies." He offered his pack of cigarettes to Barks. "Wanna smoke?"

"No, thanks. We're not supposed to smoke on duty."

Jones laughed, then said, "So? I'm in charge on this patrol and I say you can smoke." He pushed the pack into Barks' chest.

"No."

Jones mimicked, "No, thanks. No." He put his pack away. "Oh yeah. I forgot. You're the Marine meritoriously promoted out of boot camp. You would never do anything

against the rules. How'd you get promoted meritoriously? You kiss the Drill Instructor's ass? Bet you was one of those duty-hut privates. Bet you stayed in the D.I.'s duty hut all day shining his shoes and shining his brass and mopping his floor and saying, 'Yes sir, Drill Instructor, sir. Is there anything else I can do for the Drill Instructor, sir?'"

"No," Barks said. "I wasn't a duty-hut private. I just did my job like I was supposed to. I stayed squared way. I was locked-and-cocked, and I kept all my shit in one bag. I did it because I liked what I was doing. I believed in what I was doing. I felt good being a Marine. So, if you call that kissing ass, that's just too Goddamn bad."

"Listen to you. You sound like a lifer. You a lifer?"

"No. But I really believe our job is important. We're a force-in-readiness. We have a vital mission on this duty. We're out here away from home and we're on the front lines. If a war starts in the Pacific, we have to be ready to defend this island at all costs. It's because we're here that the people in the U.S. can sleep safely at night. We are the night sentries of democracy."

Jones jumped to his feet and held his hand over his heart. "And Chesty Puller is my savior. Goddamn. They sure brain-washed you. How can you believe all that gungy shit?"

"Because it's true."

Jones looked away and shook his head, then sat back down. They sat gazing into the darkness of the jungle. The sounds of the toads and crickets resumed. Jones spotted something white in the jungle. Barks sniffed the air.

"What's that smell?" Barks asked.

"Caribow shit."

"What?"

"Caribow shit. There. Like that pile you just stepped over."

Barks looked at the pile. "No, not that ... Caribow shit? You mean caribou?"

"No. Caribow. Caribows are wild cattle that roam all over this jungle. Big sons a bitches. Wide as a brick wall. You can hear them crashing around at night, they're so blind and stupid. They was brought over here from the Philippines as domesticated stock, but the Islanders here didn't know what to do with them. Now they just run wild. Shit all over the place." He sniffed the air. "Yeah. Caribow shit."

Barks lifted his nose and closed his eyes.

"No," he said. "That smell. That fine smell. It's kind of sweet and musky. Reminds me of my girl back in the states. She wore perfume like that."

"Oh, that," Jones said. "That's the princess."

"The princess?"

"The dead princess."

"The de ... Get out of here."

"No shit man," Jones said. "There's a dead princess that walks this jungle. Her ghost anyway. They say you can smell her perfume when she's near."

Barks warily eyed him. "Can't you smell it?" he asked.

Jones sniffed.

"Nah," he said. "They say only her next victim can smell it."

"Now I know your shitting me," Barks said.

"Really?"

"Dead princess? A ghost wandering the jungle? C'mon."

Barks looked up at the moon. It appeared nebulous. The air felt cooler and damp.

"Want me to tell you the story?" Jones asked.

"Hell. I don't care."

"Thought for sure you'd want to hear a good story. You're a reader, ain't you?"

A toad hopped near Barks' feet. "Yeah, you are," Jones continued. "I seen those books in your room. Shakespeare and Poe and what's that other one? Beakit?"

"Beckett. Anyway, I just like to read."

"Yeah, well, I thought a literary man like you would want to hear a story, especially a weird one about the jungle he's presently in the middle of."

Jones stood up and ground out his cigarette.

Barks began to stand up, then, sat again. A deer barked and three or four long baying howls lingered in the air. A mosquito buzzed in front of his face. He waved it away. "You have any bugfuck?" he asked.

Jones seated himself again and pulled out a green bottle of insect repellent.

"This is a no shitter," Jones said. "It was back in the end of '41, right after Pearl Harbor. There was a small platoon of Marines on this part of island manning the anti-aircraft guns near the old air-strip. Well, that old airstrip wasn't used anymore, but it was there for emergencies. The Marines woke up one night to air raid sounds, and they could hear bombs exploding far up north where the new airstrip was. Then these Marines got the word that the Japanese landed a company of soldiers on the west side of the island. They heard there was an American reinforcement ship gonna land, but it wasn't gonna arrive 'til the next day. Since there wasn't any aircraft bombing their area, the Marines couldn't do anything but sit around on their thumbs. They was bored and worried about their fellow Marines up north, and they was itching to get at the Japs, see, so this gungy corporal volunteers to take a patrol into the jungle for a little reconnaissance, you know, get the stats on how many they were and what they was doing and where they were. Well, he was given permission to do a little hit-n-run mission along the way—because four

Marines can take on a whole company of any enemy, at least that's what they teach in boot camp, isn't it?"

Jones slowly pulled another cigarette out of his pack. Barks watched him out of the corner of his eye. Jones offered him the pack again. Barks kicked at the ground. Jones slowly lit one.

"Well, this gung-ho Marine walks into the jungle with his four-man fire squad, and ... He dragged on his cigarette, eyeing Barks' face.

"And?" Barks asked

"And ... he never walks out again."

Barks glared at him.

"It turns out the scuttlebutt was wrong. It wasn't a company of Japs that landed. It was a whole fucking regiment."

"What?"

"Yeah. He didn't have a fucking chance. The scuttlebutt about the reinforcements was wrong, too. They never arrived. So, the rest of the platoon got wiped out after holding their position for one night, in fact, every American on the island got killed, except for one gutsy squid that hid out in the jungle for thirty months or so."

He puffed on his cigarette and looked about at the tree line.

"Wait a minute," Barks said. "What happened to the princess? This whole thing began because you were talking about a princess."

"I was getting to that. There was this princess, see, the daughter of the big chief of the island. Pretty young thing. Beautiful as a matter of fact. Eighteen years old. Pluckable as a ripe mango. Hair and eyes black and shiny. She was gonna be queen of the island, next in line after her father. Well, after the Japs took over the island, the Jap Colonel in charge, see, he marches into the main village all proud

and pompous on this white horse that he takes with him wherever he goes on his campaigns. Well, he prances into this village, and he sees the princess. Right away he wants to marry her. He calls for a big dinner that night and he announces in front of everybody his intention to marry the princess. Well, the princess is there, and she hears this and she storms out of the party and goes back to her hut and cries on her pillow all night. The Colonel, well, he's a bit offended, but the chief, see, he's afraid of the Colonel, so he apologizes for his daughter, and the Colonel ends up believing it's all because the girl is shy and a virgin and everything. But, it really wasn't that at all."

Jones took another drag on his cigarette. Barks tightened his jaw.

"What was it?" Barks asked.

"It turns out she was in love with the Corporal who died the week before." He flicked his cigarette on the ground. "Yeah. She'd been seeing the Corporal on the sly, see. They'd each sneak out at night and meet each other in the jungle for a little loving rendezvous. So, you see, she's still in love with this Marine, see, and the next day, when the Colonel calls on her, she tells him the truth, right in front of his entourage, his private guards and half the village. Says she loves a United States Marine. Well, the Colonel feels slapped in the face, see, so he smiles kind'a evil-like and tells her that all the Marines are dead. That he personally saw that each one of them was cut open while they was still alive and had their guts thrown in the sand at their feet. He says he watched them all slowly bleed to death and listened to them scream for mercy. Well, the princess, see, she shrieks and breaks down crying and falls on the ground. And the Colonel says she has to marry him, see, since he's now the reigning officer on the island."

"And?" Barks asked. "What did she do?"

"Well, she looks up at him and she looks him right in the eye, see, and she spits on his boots. These big, high, polished black riding boots. She says she doesn't care if her Marine is dead, see. She says she is still in love with him no matter what. She says she refuses to marry the Colonel and that she would kill herself before she gave herself to such an ugly toad."

"Well. A tenacious and virtuous spirit," Barks said.

"Yeah, well, maybe she's that, you know, but, maybe she's just stubborn and a cheerleader type, but anyway, she offended the wrong man. The Colonel, see, he's all embarrassed now, in front of his entourage. He's sure the rest of the regiment is going to hear about it. He feels his honor is in jeopardy. So, as an example to the rest of the island, he orders the princess to be executed. They get the entire regiment and all the people on the island together in this big field, see, and they build this big platform. Then, right in front of everybody, they cut her head off with the Colonel's ceremonial dress sword."

"Barbaric," Barks said. "O.K. But, why is her ghost wandering the jungle?

"Figure it out, man. She's looking for her dead Marine."

Jones got up and reached for his radio.

"Wait a minute," Barks said. "You still didn't finish the story. You mentioned something about her next victim."

"Well, she can't see so good, since she ain't got no head. So, sometimes she mistakes us live Marines for her Corporal."

"Get out of here."

"No shit, man."

"Come on."

"Really. She's been known to snatch a Marine on duty and drag him off kicking and screaming to the deepest

part of the jungle, and do with him, God knows what. They never find the body."

"Bullshit," Barks said. "That doesn't make sense. Why should she want to hurt someone?"

"Don't know. All I know is they never find the bodies."

Barks got up and adjusted his gear.

"You know the abandoned guard towers in the jungle," Jones said.

"Yeah. So?"

"They used to be manned every day, but only by one Marine at a time."

"So. What happened?"

"Well, they stopped manning the towers 'cause a Marine disappeared a few years ago. The Sergeant of the Guard heard some shots coming from one of the towers, but by the time he got there the Private on duty was gone. His rifle lay on the ground, a whole clip emptied. Not a trace of blood around."

"So. Just because there wasn't any blood doesn't prove anything."

"The only thing that don't bleed when it's shot at is a ghost."

"Maybe he was a bad shot."

"He was a Marine, wasn't he?"

Barks looked down.

"Besides, what happened to the body? How could he just disappear like that? To top it off, the Sergeant of the Guard checked the Marine's logbook, you know, the one where the sentry writes down everything that happened on his post? Know what it said?"

Barks put his hand on top of the magazine holder on his cartridge belt. The two magazines inside held twenty rounds apiece.

Jones continued. "The last entry said, 'Smell some kind'a beautiful perfume.'"

Barks looped his thumbs inside his harness straps.

Jones smiled.

"She got another Marine right here on this patrol last year. In fact, it was right around this structure, they say. Word is, he talked to his partner right before he disappeared. Know what he said?"

"Said he smelled some kind of perfume," Barks said.

"Right!"

"You're making all this up. What happened to his patrolling partner? This is a two-man patrol. Why didn't his partner try to help?"

"He said he heard a scream and a rifle shot, but by the time he turned around, the Marine was gone. Only thing he saw was a wisp of white between the trees."

"Right. You're just saying this shit to make me nervous."

"O.K. You don't have to believe me," Jones said. He walked away from Barks. "Meritorious Marine. Shit. C'mon. Let's go. Time to get back on patrol. And keep your interval."

Barks fell in fifteen meters behind Jones. They carried their rifles at sling arms.

Jones spoke into his radio, "Hotel India, Hotel India. This is Foxtrot Papa."

"Go ahead Foxtrot Papa."

"We're Five-Nine and Three-Two for Charlie Papa."

"Roger that Foxtrot Papa."

Barks regarded the stiffly swaying figure of Jones. Jones adjusted a canteen on his hip. Barks adjusted the rifle over his shoulder and looked at the jungle. Something exploded and squished beneath his boot. A toad. They were all over the road. Their throaty noises vibrated inside his helmet. Jones was zigzagging across the road, lifting his right foot and slamming it down on several toads. Barks now stepped over each one he came across. A disgusted look crossed his face as he spied the dead ones, their white guts

and black blood spread out around their flattened bodies. After a few moments the toads thinned out, then they disappeared altogether from the road. They still held to the surrounding jungle, however, as attested by their croaking. The crickets kept up their light duet with the toads, and at times, it seemed the toads and crickets were calling back and forth to one another.

Barks watched Jones call in something on his radio, then, glimpsed a fleeting flash of white between two trees on the left. He spun to the left, but there were only the trees. He caught the faintest scent of perfume. He tightened his grip on his rifle sling. The sounds of the crickets grew louder. A deer barked, sounding louder than before, and then the boonie dogs bayed. He glanced to the edges of the jungle on either side of the road.

He saw a wisp of white to his right. He slipped his arm out of the sling and pulled the rifle to port arms, diagonally across his chest and out in front of him. He listened. The toads increased their volume to keep up with the crickets. The bark of the deer again, sounding right next to him; then a boonie dog howl, then a second, then a third, till it seemed a whole pack of twenty or thirty were howling together. Jones was walking undisturbed with his head to the front.

He heard light footsteps in the jungle to his left. He pulled his rifle down, placed it at his hip, and pointed the barrel in the direction of the footsteps. He continued to walk, trying to increase his pace and keep his interval behind Jones. He heard footsteps to his right. He pivoted with his rifle. He saw a wisp of white to the left and jerked the rifle toward there. There was a wisp of white to his right, to his left, to his right.

Barks swung his rifle and directed it at a large body that had appeared at the edge of the jungle. The deer

stood facing Barks, its thorny rack of antlers spread above it crown-like. It took a timid step toward the road, stopped, then recoiled and tensed its muscles spring-like and leaned as if it would run back into the jungle whence it came. Barks lowered his rifle. The deer took another step forward, then another, feigned to the right, then sprang to the left and ran across the road behind Barks, its majestic body flowing rhythmically and smoothly. Silently, it slipped into the jungle on the other side.

Barks ran to catch up with Jones. Jones had lit a cigarette and was puffing small trails of smoke behind him. Barks looked relieved. He put his rifle back at sling arms.

He felt them at first, then saw them, the pair of yellow eyes at the edge of the jungle to his left. Then, as he continued to walk, another pair of eyes caught the moonlight. Then another. Each eye glinted and glowed. They bore into Barks. Around each set was an unfathomable darkness that blended into the cavernous shadow of the jungle below the trees. It was a chilling, black nothingness that gave the yellow eyes a floating yet solid, fiery substance. Boonie dogs. There must have been thirty or forty of them, all lined up, one between each tree, and each seemed to carefully measure Barks' figure as he passed in front of them. Jones was still looking straight ahead, puffing on his cigarette.

Barks reached down and scooped a clump of earth from the side of the road and threw it at one set of eyes, but the clump only fell apart. None of the eyes moved. Barks reached down and grabbed a small chunk of asphalt and flung it. He heard it slice through some leaves behind the eyes. He picked up another and heard it chunk off the edge of a tree. None of the eyes even blinked. He reached down and chose a stone that lay at his feet, took aim at the nearest set of eyes, breathed in slowly, drew his arm back,

then exhaled as his arm came forward and his fingers released the projectile. A hit. He heard the thud and the whelp. He raised his fist in the air. The set of yellow eyes belonging to his target drew back, then returned glowing brighter than before. A low growl emanated from directly below the eyes.

"Jones," Barks said. Jones did not answer. Barks turned and saw that the road ahead veered to the left, and Jones was nowhere to be seen. Barks began to run. He looked behind him and saw that the first dog was out of the jungle, and each dog in succession was exiting the jungle and joining the first.

"Jones," Barks shouted. He ran. He could hear panting behind him. "Jones," he screamed. In desperation, he looked over his shoulder again, but the dogs had disappeared. He stopped to catch his breath. One of the dogs was on the opposite side of the road. It stared at him, then turned and walked into the jungle. Barks, remembering his rifle, took it off his shoulder and cradled it against his chest.

A large wisp of white appeared between two trees on the right. Barks could smell the sweet-musky perfume. He fell to one knee and pointed his rifle. The wisp began to look like a shapeless cloud.

"Jones," Barks screeched.

The white cloud began to take on the form of a young headless woman. Barks fell to the prone firing position and pointed the rifle, placing the sights upon the heart of the apparition.

Out from the jungle, through the apparition, stepped Sergeant Bockwaller, the Sergeant of the Guard. He was a stout man, maybe five-foot-seven and wide as hell, all muscle, and probably weighed about two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. Behind him was Corporal Walcott, the Corporal

of the Guard. He was taller and leaner than Sergeant Bockwaller, and intelligent looking. They had the same uniform and gear that Jones and Barks did, but instead of carrying rifles, they had .45's strapped to their cartridge belts.

Barks recognized Sergeant Bockwaller at the same instant that the Sergeant noted Barks had a rifle pointed at him. Barks, taking a breath, took his finger from the trigger as Sergeant Bockwaller barreled toward him, grabbed the rifle out of his hands and swung the butt in a low arc, smashing it into the side of his helmet.

"What the hell's your fucking problem?" Bockwaller demanded.

Barks did not answer. He shook his head and cowered on the ground.

"What was all that yelling?" Bockwaller continued.

"There were boonie dogs, Sergeant, tons of them, thousands. They were going to attack me," Barks said.

Sergeant Bockwaller cast his eyes around the area. He checked the rifle. There was no magazine. He pulled back the bolt. Empty.

"No magazine. Not even a round in the chamber. Next time you point a rifle you better have it locked-and-loaded. Goddamn boot. Jesus Christ. Don't they teach you anything in boot camp anymore?"

Corporal Walcott walked up behind Sergeant Bockwaller. Sergeant Bockwaller addressed him. "Got a boot here who doesn't even know how to load a weapon."

Corporal Walcott looked down at Barks.

Sergeant Bockwaller addressed Barks. "So, you just wanted to go and shoot some boonie dogs. Don't you know that's against regulations?"

"Well, Sergeant, not exactly, I mean, I didn't think about that exactly. There was this white ..."

"Where's Jones?" Bockwaller asked.

Jones ran up to them.

"Sergeant Bockwaller. What's up? Heard some noise."

"What's up? What's up? Is that any way to talk to me?"

Jones flinched. "No, Sergeant," he said.

"We just want to act stupid today, don't we?"

"No, Sergeant."

"You're in charge here. What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know, Sergeant."

"Your newbie just pointed his rifle at me."

Jones shrugged.

Barks spoke. "Sorry, Sergeant, I thought you were a ghost."

Jones rolled his eyes.

"A ghost?" Sergeant Bockwaller asked. He looked over his shoulder at Corporal Walcott. "He thought I was a fucking ghost." They laughed.

"The princess, Sergeant," Barks continued.

Sergeant Bockwaller again looked over at Corporal Walcott, "He thought I was a princess." They laughed again.

Sergeant Bockwaller kicked Barks in the helmet.

"Do I look like a fucking princess to you? Jones has been telling you a fairy tale. Jones! Only three months on the island and you think you're all salty and shit. Think you can fuck with these newbies. What the fuck do you think you're doing telling these stories for?"

"Just having a little fun, Sergeant."

"A little fun! A little fun!"

Sergeant Bockwaller moved toward Jones. He drove the butt of his hand into the front of Jones' helmet.

"Your little fun just about got me killed!"

"Sorry, Sergeant."

"Sorry isn't good enough. Your supposed to be in

charge here. That means you're responsible for this newbie, understand? Come see me tomorrow morning when liberty is sounded. Make sure your wearing utilities, boots, full canteens, and a pack. You got all that? Or is your brain-housing group too fucked up to register more than one thing at a time?"

"Yes, Sergeant. No Sergeant. I mean, got it all, Sergeant."

"I'm gonna run you till you drop. You're gonna wish you never saw me. You're gonna pray for your mommy and wish you was back home sucking your thumb. You're gonna wish you never told stories about dead people rising and walking. You're gonna wish you never fucked up when Sergeant Bockwaller was the Sergeant of the Guard, 'cause when I'm on duty," he made a sweeping motion with his hand, "this is my jungle, my asphalt, my air you're breathing. And I'm on duty all the time. Understand? As long as you're on this island you're never gonna get away from me, so you might as well get your head out'ta your ass."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Otherwise, I'm gonna make you wish you was dead just so you could get some rest."

Sergeant Bockwaller bent down next to Barks.

"As for you, you maggot. There ain't no fucking such thing as a ghost. Dead princesses walking the jungle. Shit. I'm a local. I was born on this island. That story's just a tale, a legend, something made up to put fear in the hearts of you newbies. It's an initiation, don't you see. Dead people don't rise and walk. How can you believe a story like that?"

"I saw her," Barks said. "I saw her. She was walking around. She was all white and wispy. You walked right through her. I ..."

"You didn't see nothing. That was the fog." Sergeant Bockwaller pointed at the trees. A white fog, thick and pulsating, was pushing out on the edge of the tree line.

"But I smelled her, Sergeant," Barks said.

"You rock. That's the flowers. It's a natural ... natural ... Corporal Walcott. Tell him."

"It's natural phenomena," Corporal Walcott said. "Under certain atmospheric conditions, like these tonight—just the right temperature, humidity, and always at night—a certain tree flower opens and releases its scent. Smells like perfume. It just so happens that these same climatic conditions produce fog."

Sergeant Bockwaller said, "Now get up. You two get back on your fucking patrol." He threw the rifle into Barks' chest. Barks caught it. "And don't let me hear about anymore fuck-ups." Jones and Barks answered, in unison, "Aye, aye, Sergeant."

Sergeant Bockwaller, animal-like rage in his eyes, kicked Jones in the behind as he turned to run. Jones and Barks double-timed away. Sergeant Bockwaller watched them. Their footsteps, marching at double time, faded away. Corporal Walcott walked toward the fog and jungle. He stopped at the edge and studied Sergeant Bockwaller, who was still staring in the direction taken by Jones and Barks. Sergeant Bockwaller's eyes were in the shadow of the front lip of his helmet. The rest of his face was lit by the moonlight.

"Coming, Sergeant?" Corporal Walcott asked.

Sergeant Bockwaller stood unmoving, his eyes still in shadow. There was a bleating cry from the jungle; a proud, noble, helpless cry; then a moan that was cut off as quickly as it began. There was a rustling, as if some great weights were being brought to the earth, then snapping and crackling and teeth gnashing. A boonie dog began to howl, then another, and another.

Sergeant Bockwaller pivoted and marched toward Corporal Walcott. Corporal Walcott stepped into the wall of fog. Sergeant Bockwaller halted at the edge of the fog, turned, and surveyed the area behind him. His eyes were still shadowed. He then entered at the same point Corporal Walcott did. The fog slowly retreated into the jungle.

Reparations

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

"Other children, and they are fewer, seem driven to search out and experience the unlived life of their parents. These are the voyages of discovery that broaden the mind and enrich the spirit of the race. But even when successful—and most of them are not—they are always paid for in suffering, as if the children must make atonement for the sins of the parents, and perhaps most of all for their sins of omission."

– William Barrett, "Time of Need"

We come back, and we come
back, and we come back, even
years later, even after what it
once was—and what was it,
in the end?—is just a hole
in the ground, what looks like
it might once have been the entrance
to a mine but wasn't, because
there is no place farther down
we could have gone. All that remains
are splinters, parched dirt,
the rime of frost that makes
the ground shine but offers
no extra worth.

The trees are
broken, the metal bent, and what
tools we have are pocked
with rust, handles knurled
by generations of termites. Still,
it is no matter; we take two boards,
however rough-hewn they may
be, and pound as many nails
as we need to make them
stick together. And we do
this again, and again,
and again until we have a shelter
from the rain where we can craft
a concrete cap for what may have
once been a place to live but now
swallows children who get too close.

Remember the Alamo

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

In the basement, you've stored
memories, packed
in grease like carbines.
Years of transcripts,
photos, teenage lust
and Nat King Cole albums

and it would take just one
spark from your cigarette
however inadvertent
to send it all to the flames.

You think about it sometimes.

Selling My Soul for Fame

DAVID ROMANDA

Satan took a quick look
Through my manuscript
Raised an eyebrow
Handed back the stapled pages
Yet another rejection

Fist Fight with Older Sibling

HONUS COMBS

blood back then
tasted like pennies

it was only red
in your mouth

once dried
on your shirt

it looked brown
as any mud

closer in color
to your brother's hair

remember
you are remembered

as the one
who always lost

no matter
remember anyway

how closely love
walked with cruelty

how when they said
stay down

they meant
the opposite

Blackberries

CHRIS SHORNE

Part I

It's the summer of my twelfth year and I've left my little brother at the campsite and gone off to pick blackberries. I pluck the darkest and plumpest berries I can find. My younger cousin Tara, who has tagged along, crawls into the opening of a rabbit-sized trail, scoots back out, and drops a handful of half-ripe berries into the basket I hold.

Every summer, except for those first few years in which he was not yet born and which I cannot remember, my brother and I have gone camping together. Most things we do, we do together. At home, we stamp catalogs, fold order-forms, pack Tupperware into boxes for our parents to deliver; we make GI Joe forts, race Barbie's convertible, and best each other's Sega scores. Here in the Cascades, we fish in streams and jump in lakes, make logs into teeter-totters, and back away from brown bears, together. This trip our cousins have come too, with their parents and grandparents. On the other side of this blackberry bramble, our families share adjacent campsites, our tents spread out like the teepees of a small white tribe.

We are surprised when the boys appear.

"What're you *doing*?" asks an older boy, his sneakers making indentations in the dirt.

It is hot, but the heat is a recent arrival. In July, the summer of the north is not done accumulating itself. The pine trees breathe the still-damp air. My breath comes shallow. My body tightens. The faces of the boys blend into a blur of peach and pink. They have silly putty faces and silly putty hands and they are trying out, maybe for the first time, the shapes of power.

"What're you doing?" he asks again, stepping forward.

"Um, picking blackberries." I lift the basket for emphasis.

I can picture my parents sitting in their lawn chairs on the other side of this wall of Himalayan blackberries, salal, and sword fern. I know that if I scream, they will hear me.

The boy repeats me, trying to make his voice higher than it already is: "Um, picking blackberries."

My hand holds hard to the handle of the basket. The boy takes another step and tips my basket. Next to me, Tara is still and silent. The berries tumble onto the ground around our sandaled feet. The boys laugh.

I look at the berries on the ground: some plump and some piddly, black and red mostly, but a few still splotched green. There's even less than I'd thought. They wouldn't amount to a pie. It makes me cry. Then feel ashamed to cry.

Through the slur of the boys' laughter and the blur of my tears, I see my cousins, Austin and Dallas. And then I find my little brother, partially concealed by the shoulder of a taller boy. His eyes, like mine, are brown as the branch of a spruce tree. Briefly, our eyes hold one another, and it hurts. He does not laugh; and he does not move.

***

I'm thirty-six and will spend next year in Guatemala as an international human rights accompanier. I've visited the country twice. The first time was to learn Spanish at the cheapest language school I could find. During my summer at La Escuela de la Montaña, I sat at a desk in an open hut for my one-on-one Spanish lessons; yellow butterflies flitted in and out as I learned history I never wanted to know. Certainly, I am not the first U.S. citizen who had to travel outside their country to learn their own history, but this was the first time it happened to me.

My second visit was to support communities defending their land. To get to the first community, Copal AA (pronounced Copalá), our delegation traveled most of one day, two hours the second day winding through mountains, then a left off the paved road, and another hour on an increasingly bumpy dirt road until the driver said he could take us no further. We hired a pick-up, loaded our gear into the truck bed, and climbed in behind it; for another hour, we stood holding the bars above our heads as the dirt, rocks, and gravel devolved into a state that seemed more pothole than road. Still, I didn't close my eyes as I bumped along in the back of that pick-up through the richest land I had ever seen. I live only a few hours from the world's largest temperate rainforest ecoregion. I thought I had seen every shade of green there was to see. I had not.

***

When I told my parents how my brother stood with the boys while they laughed at us, they called him over. Usually, when we'd tell on each other, my parents would wave us away with an order to

"knock it off with the tattling." But this time, right there in front of me, they scolded him. In the open area in front of their tents, with the coolers and the lanterns and the lawn chairs, where cousins, aunts, uncles, and strangers on their way to the restroom could hear, they told him what he already knew. "But I didn't *do* anything," my brother tried. "I was just standing there."

It was clear from the sound of his voice that even he knew that made no difference.

"Never," my father said. My brother moved his eyes to the pine needles on the ground. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, son!" He moved them up again. He looked like he'd swallowed a mouse.

"No matter what," said my father. "You always stand with your sister."

***

After two days travel, the pickup carrying our delegation stopped at a long building behind a row of trees that looked like the pineapple trees I'd seen in children's books. We'd arrived in Copal AA. I climbed out, layered in dust and sweat, and a Mayan woman put a coconut in my hands. I'd never held a coconut. The husk was cool and stringy, like cedar bark, but softer. It was cold. Between the 130 families in Copal AA, there are three medium-sized refrigerators; one of which was used to make our coconuts cold.

We walked into the building for our first meeting, husks in hand. "Throw them out the back window," we were told. "They'll compost." We did, then sat down for our meeting. Out of the fiftyish communities that make up the coalition, twenty had sent representatives. Before we discussed what we'd come to discuss—their organizing

against the construction of a giant hydro-electric dam that would flood their communities to export electricity—each person introduced themselves and their community.

When, four hours later, the introductory meeting ended, we were invited to tour their land parcels. Someone pointed out a line of short trees to our left; the primary school children had planted them and, when they got older, they would use them to build their family homes. Someone else pointed out the pineapple plants (not trees). But it was only when one of our hosts bent down to run his palm over the newly growing bean shoots—natural, nitrogen-rich fertilizer—that it registered that although no one had said "Here we are at the land parcels," we had been walking right through them, perhaps the entire time.

The land I'd thought wild and untouched as we drove through it was actually cultivated and cared for, just like the land I was standing on.

"There's no land like this left in Guatemala anymore," he said, his knees resting in the spongy soil. "We don't need chemicals. The forest is its own fertilizer. If they flood it, if we had to leave, we'd never find land like this again."

***

Though I felt awful about my brother's public shaming, my parents' admonishment clarified my own values. I, too, had thought my brother embarrassingly weak for standing there with the big boys, trying to glean power from a more powerful group. I thought he should have crossed, should have stood with me and with our younger cousin. And I wasn't wrong.

My brother did not cross that day in the blackberry patch. And I was fine. I had so much already: my cousin,

my height, my parents in their lawn chairs. I didn't need him to punch the kid, didn't need him to stoop down and pick up the fallen fruit. I didn't even need him to cross to my side. But I wish he had. If he had stood there, beside me, in his quiet way, nothing would have changed. And everything would be different.

***

People ask me why I chose Guatemala. But rather than choosing the country of Guatemala, I feel I've accepted the invitation by people in Guatemala. First, by the language school in the mountains and then by the communities that invited our delegation.

The third invitation I received from people in Guatemala—to be an international human rights accompanier—was sent while I was still in high school, years before I would receive it. It was sent by the people of Copal AA. They had fled to Mexico during the Internal Armed Conflict. In the 1990's, as the conflict lessened, they saw that an international presence could give them some security. With foreigners from powerful ally nations, such as the U.S., observing and documenting in Guatemala while educating people in our own countries, the community leaders were less likely to be threatened as they returned to their homes, the bus of returned refugees less likely to be pushed off the road. Our presence could offer them a little more space to do their work: buy land, plant trees, catch fish, and organize with neighbors to take care of their land and water. For over thirty years, Guatemalans have worked with the U.S.-based NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala) to provide this international presence.

In the 1990's, Guatemalans called for foreigners to stand with them as they crossed back to their homeland and, more than twenty years later, they were calling still. In response, I spent months improving my Spanish and weeks answering the thirty questions that made up NISGUA's application. I requested letters of recommendation and sent them in, then had a two-hour interview and Spanish assessment.

Five days after my interview, the director emailed asking if we could "follow up." Had I done something wrong? Was my Spanish not quite enough? I was sure I *was* qualified. I'd already learned another language (American Sign Language), spent time in rural Guatemala and learned its basic history; I'd always lived collectively and had spent years doing community organizing.

In my own communities, I was involved in decision-making. At seventeen, I organized panels of LGBTQ youth. At my community college, I worked with other students to put a cap on tuition hikes. But in other people's communities, it didn't make sense for me to lead. How should I know what's best in contexts and cultures unfamiliar to me?

Still, I had connections with people whose communities I wanted to support. I chopped vegetables for DeafBlind Community Class, phone-banked for the people-of-color-led Coalition to Undo Racism Everywhere, and pulled invasive blackberries from the banks of the city's river with Friends of the Duwamish—Duwamish being the name of the river and of one of the native peoples in the area. As an accompanier, I would also be organizing and educating in my own communities while supporting organizing other communities were already doing. Instead of standing with parents of color as they spoke out at a school board meeting, I might be standing with indigenous survivors

at a trial for war-crimes, but the concept was the same. It seemed that, without me realizing it, a good part of my life had been spent preparing to be an international human rights accompanier.

I sat down at my desk five minutes before our scheduled phone call.

"I just wanted to let you know in person, in real-time," the director said when I answered the phone, "that you've been invited by NISGUA to be an accompanier—"

"Really?" I squealed.

"We want you to think about it. Talk to your people, your family, friends, then let us know your decision."

"Yes yes yes," I said. "Yes is my decision."

The director laughed and told me to sleep on it. I emailed my yes before getting out of bed the next morning.

***

The day after we toured the land parcels of Copal AA, we rode a wooden boat down the Chixoy River. We then began a 30-minute hike up to Las Margaritas Copón, the community just above the confluence of the Chixoy and Copón rivers, the site of the proposed dam. Unlike the returned refugee community of Copal AA, comprised of several indigenous groups, each with a different language, Las Margaritas Copón is and for generations has been Q'eqchi'.

During the Internal Armed Conflict (1960-1996), the Q'eqchi' of Las Margaritas Copón, unlike other communities, were not interned in so-called "model villages;" had not fled into the jungle to live off malanga root and wild plants for years; had not been rounded up and shot, kidnapped and tortured, or forced into domestic and sexual slavery. They were not, as were their neighbors

upstream at Rio Negro, massacred to make way for a hydro-electric dam. Though they were not untouched by 36 years of the government's rifles, machetes, and matches, the Q'eqchi' of Las Margaritas Copón continued to live with their land, care for their river, and organize themselves to meet their needs, just as they were doing the day we visited.

As we hiked up to Las Margaritas Copón, teenagers in shorts scooted past us. When we arrived in the center of the community—a large flat field—we found a soccer tournament underway. A hundred people from surrounding villages were there. We were invited into the home of Víctor Caal Tzuy, a member of the coalition to prevent the dam's construction. We sat in his wooden house, which his community had recently built. We ate squash from their food parcels while Víctor bounced his baby on his lap.

After lunch, we walked around the soccer field to another wooden building for our meeting. The ancestral authorities set their staffs on the long wooden table and spoke first, Víctor interpreting from their Q'eqchi' into Spanish. The first elder thanked us for accepting the invitation that Víctor had sent on their behalf when he had toured the U.S. with NISGUA.

"I want to thank you for coming," began a second elder. A three-year-old stood on the bench next to him, elbows on the table and chin in hands. "A few years ago we had some other visitors from the United States come and bring us shoes. And so, we thank you for that also. But we want to thank you—the delegation—especially, because you are helping us keep our land. Shoes are great. But shoes wear out. Land is forever."

Part II

It is late summer in the Northwest when the fruits are full and free for the taking. I walk to a patch of old growth that juts into Lake Washington. Along the water's edge, blackberry brambles dominate; but this is a popular summer spot and most of the berries have been picked by walkers, joggers, bikers, kids and their parents, sweethearts out for a day at the lake. Twenty-five years have passed since that day in the woods with my little brother; I know now how to find all the best berries.

Leaving my sandals on, I wade into the gently sloping lake and walk around to the water side of the brambles. On this side, branches bloat with bursting black berries, ripened by the sun reflecting off the water. There are no bears in these parts anymore; the picking is easy. As I pluck one at a time, boats buzz past and the sun floats in and out of the clouds. Somewhere in the tops of these trees Bald Eagles land and the Great Horned Owl nests. My fingers and hands turn deep red with juice. I can eat no more. Even empty, my mouth trembles with the taste of blackberry. I lean back and let myself float under the sky of the Pacific Northwest in the water of Lake Washington and think: there is nowhere I'd rather call home.

***

During our delegation's last gathering in Guatemala's mountain villages, the school kids re-enacted the day representatives from the dam company showed up—via helicopter. The pilot was played by a teenager wearing large headphones and twirling an umbrella, making a buzzing sound with his lips that mimicked the helicopter's blades. A farmer and

child, hoeing their corn field, saw the helicopter land and announced it via the community loudspeaker. The representatives from the community then went to the representatives from the company and asked them to come only when invited.

This was how I learned that permission was either given or denied, that everyone I had seen at that soccer tournament and thought strangers were actually guests, invited. Before leaving, we, the guests, ate Chopa fish pulled by the Q'eqchi' who have always lived here, from the river, Copón, from which they have always fed. The fish came from a net slung out into the river I'd waded in, right at the confluence where, if plans go through, twenty-four stories of wall will stand.

***

In the fall of 2014, before I'd visited Víctor Caal Tzuy and his community of Las Margaritas Copón, he had come to my city with NISGUA's Rivers for Life Speaking Tour. I didn't hear him speak but heard about it from NISGUA staff who did. He gave a talk with Ken Workman, descendant of Chief Se'alth, after whom the city of Seattle is named.

The Duwamish Longhouse, where Ken and Víctor gave their talk was built in 2009, about a hundred years after European settlers and their descendants had burnt down every longhouse the Duwamish built.

***

In our family of six, violence descended the birth order like stairs. I was no exception, and my little brother suffered for it, my hounding of him relentless. I was

twelve years old in those berry bushes. I had years before he would outgrow me, before he, like his brothers before him, could have his retribution. The day it happened he was sitting on the footrest in the family room playing *NBA Jam* on the Sega.

I asked him something from the doorway. He ignored me. I asked again, then demanded. He said No and No again. I lunged and knocked him backward. He landed on the floor between the footrest and couch, with me on top of him. The carpet was dirty. There was a hot wheel under the couch. I was sixteen years old.

Whatever combustible material had propelled me toward him just as quickly burned itself up. My arms felt stringy and weak. I wanted badly to be free from this awkward intimacy, but our legs had somehow entrapped each other: my left leg between his legs, my right foot hooked under his left ankle.

He was the youngest and had nowhere to turn the violence I turned on him. And when the time had come for him to give it back, he didn't. He just didn't. Didn't push me off or smack me. Didn't scream for me to get the hell off. Didn't even adjust his legs or rub his head where it had hit the floor. He just looked at me with those same brown eyes that had looked at me in the blackberry brambles, but this time I could find in them no shame.

***

It used to be—before the invasive blackberry or their people crossed the ocean en masse—that one could not walk to this patch of old growth jutting into the lake, the strip connecting it to land being underwater. Lake Washington, at that time, was called Xacuabš, meaning basically "a lot of water," in Lushootseed, the language of

the people who fed from it. At its southern end, where my head points as I float on its surface, the lake poured its excess into the Black River. The Black River, in turn, fed into the Duwamish River and together they emptied into the south end of Elliot Bay where today stand the cranes of the shipyard.

Duwamish, roughly translated, means "the people inside the bay." This includes the people of the Black River. "The *What* River?" my neighbors ask. The reason my neighbors have never heard of this river is because of the ship canal that now connects Lake Washington to Puget Sound. With the digging of this canal in 1916, the "lot of water" of Lake Washington dropped and the Black River which fed from it—and from which the Duwamish fed—dried up.

The people who used to fish the now dry Black River and the now toxic Duwamish River are still here. After their longhouses were torched, they were banned from the city that would be named after their chief. In 2015, President Obama denied to the Duwamish the federal recognition they'd previously been granted. One reason cited was that they had not lived continuously in their traditional ways.

Banned from the city, the Duwamish spread out. Offered land on reservations, many declined, believing in staying close to the burial place of one's ancestors.

"Down Rainier Avenue, out by the Fred Meyer, some of our people are buried," Ken Workman said at a public event recently, then added, "Seattle put streets right over the top of 'em."

Literally speaking, the land on which I stand holds the bones of the Duwamish ancestors; legally speaking, the Duwamish have no land and no standing.

***

We are transplants, my people. My maternal side fled France during the massacres of Protestants, then called Huguenots. My mother's father was the last of the Protestants I knew, the only grandparent to have lived long enough that I can fully bring him to mind as an adult. To remember our grandpa's smile is to feel the muscle and bone of my own jaw shift itself into the smile I remember. To look at the creases my brother's smile makes in his cheeks is to see our grandfather's life inside his.

As far as I know, all my ancestors were at one time indigenous to that great continent that today is named in two. But who can be indigenous to a landmass as large as Eurasia? The mounds and mountains, rivers and watersheds may still exist—in what is now called France, Germany, Ireland—but even if they do, I will never know them as my own.

What does it mean to want to save forests and rivers when I have not known a single tree shaped into a plank of wood in my home, when there has never been a river that I have both needed and known? What does it mean to kneel in soil that is bare of the bones of my kin?

***

It happened in a day; the canoes dropped and dropped, then stopped floating. The moment the Black River dried up. That was when white people came with sacks, grabbing at the fish left flopping in puddles between dry land.

On that late summer day, I walk back out of Lake Washington, the lake of the dropped water and unfed

river. I walk a peninsula that was once an island, my eating of Himalayan blackberries made possible in the same shaping of earth that made the catching of pacific salmon impossible. When they spoke together at the Duwamish Longhouse, Ken Workman of the people inside the bay said to Víctor Caal Tzuy of the river Copón: "Don't let them take your river; we lost our river and look at us now."

***

I pulled blackberries with the Friends of the Duwamish just the once. And when the Duwamish asked community groups to fundraise to help build their longhouse, instead of fundraising, I just dropped a few dollars in a hat. When I found out their federal recognition had been revoked, I told myself I'd gather signatures for the letter of support. But I only put my own name down.

Recalling my brother's face there in the blackberry brambles sends a sheet of electricity through me. It is not that he looks like me, or not that only, but that I am not sure it is not me standing still in that crowd of powerful pale faces.

***

Why do I go to Guatemala? I go because there is a 90% chance that I would not exist, and my brother would not exist if our ancestors had been on the other side of that contact. I go because the banana republic made people in the U.S. rich by making peasants in Guatemala landless. I go because while I was camping as a kid, our CIA helped fund a campaign that would take two hundred thousand lives while we went on

unharmed. I go because today the big dams bring money to the bank accounts of foreign stockholders instead of electricity to the homes of the poor.

When I shop at my local food co-op with my nephew, they give him a free banana. I have met the children who pick bananas for export, and I have met their parents and it is not often that they can afford to buy fruit. For those things from which I benefit at another's expense, I am responsible. I go because I can.

***

I bought my plane ticket a few days ago, then I sat on the couch next to my brother, slapped his knee and said, "Guess I gotta go to Guatemala now. Do this accompanier thing."

"Guess so," he said. His eighteen-month-old sat on the floor playing with the Tupperware Pick-Up Truck that he and I had played with as children.

"Remember, we used to try to make it pick up blocks while driving backward?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Well, we did," I said. And then, "People keep asking me why I'm going to Guatemala."

"Really?" he asked, surprised. "Sometimes people think too hard," he said. "I mean, there's a need, right?"

His daughter brought a block over and put it in his hand.

"Well, there's need all over the world," he added, "but Guatemala, I mean, it's just, that's where you have a connection."

***

How can the Q'eqchi' of Las Margaritas Copón be separated from the river Copón after which they name themselves? The Duwamish from the Duwamish River? How can I separate myself from my brother? In his eyes, I am chastised and I am chosen.

That day in the blackberry bushes with my brother is the only time I felt betrayed by him. I go to Guatemala because I would like to take after him, to be someone who is so often on the right side that a single mistake from childhood is from then on remembered.

And why couldn't I be? Both of us lived, in the beginning, floating in a bed of water inside the same woman. He carries in his watery cells the same generations I carry. He holds the memories I cannot remember. And I for him. He looks like grandpa. He is as close as I get to a world in which we live once again alongside our ancestors, walk the land they walked.

As I cross over, with my backpack and my passport, water sloshing in my water bottle, it is him I walk toward, toward the person I want to be in his eyes. Wherever I stand, I stand with him. I stand because of him. He is the river I fight for, what's left of my place.

Manoeuvres

PAUL BROWNSEY

He had stayed overnight at his mother's to make sure she got her morning train down to England and the relative safety of his sister's house near Crewe while the war scare lasted, and after that he was getting milk and bread for us plus the courgettes I needed for the courgette bake I was going to cook that evening. Even so he was a lot later coming home than I'd expected.

"Where've you been?" But the canary-yellow armband of yellow electrical tape on his jerkin told me.

"Maryhill Burgh Hall." He spoke as though something totally ordinary were involved, like going to the dentist. "Where's my framed rucksack?"

"You're not *really*…" I couldn't finish it. In any case, it was best to appear to play along with him, so I said, "It's in the basement. I'll get it." Drummond and I have—no, had—one floor of a large old house in Glasgow's West End that had been converted into flats. The basement was too small and low to be converted into a garden flat so it became a sort of lumber room for the owners of the flats above.

But instead of going to fetch it, I said in what could have passed for an admiring voice, "So what decided you?"

"Didn't you listen to the news?" Having carefully put the shopping away in the fridge and breadbin, he was now rooting around in the under-sink cupboard.

"I haven't. It just leaves me so—" I couldn't finish that in a way he wouldn't despise, and already I knew that he regarded his husband as a selfish coward.

"They've landed. At Helensburgh. They've surrounded Faslane and a huge convoy is heading towards Glasgow."

"What can you do?" I didn't emphasise "you"—it wouldn't be good diplomacy to suggest he personally was inadequate to the task.

"Stop them."

"Can you? I mean, isn't this a bit, well…" I was going to say, "*Dad's Army*?" but I didn't want to get his back up. "I mean, volunteer soldiers against a professional army—"

"Regulars are setting up a blockade at Dumbarton and we'll join them once we've had some training. We start training tonight. Battlefield rifles and anti-tank missiles. Anyway…" That word was an intimation that he had too much to do to waste time talking. Having got from the under-sink cupboard the water-bottle that he clutches on his runs, he headed off to our bedroom, where I heard him opening drawers. But the fact that he hadn't stayed to listen to any more from me was encouraging. Perhaps he was afraid to hear it. Perhaps he wanted to be persuaded to give up.

I followed him in. He was sorting underpants on the bed. At least my Drummond would do what he could to maintain personal hygiene during war. My best weapon was his sense of responsibility to others. During the early days of the pandemic, when supermarkets were running out of rice, toilet rolls, tins of tomatoes, he'd refused to stockpile, saying, "We shouldn't take more than our fair share," and I'd hid the stuff I bought in the basement. Now I said, "I'm going to get the rucksack, but, look, you're fifty-nine. Yes, you don't look it, you're trim, but the arthritis in your knees ... You could be a liability. Tell

them that. Other people could die helping you." I realised that I was saying that I wouldn't be one of the ones helping him.

"If it comes to that, the solution's clear. I hope by then I'll have done something to keep the bastards back," he said. There was no emphasis on "I'll" to imply a contrast with cowardly me, but the simple determination in his voice to fight gave me a different line of attack. "Isn't this the macho response? 'I'm a man so I fight.' Male violence. Toxic masculinity." I'd seen him carefully read articles in *The Guardian* about those. "Fists, clubs, Kalashnikovs."

"They're not Kalashnikovs. They're AX-something-or-other, I can't remember." He seemed ashamed he'd forgotten, and I extracted another manoeuvre from this, suggesting he'd be more likely to forget his weapons training than a younger man, so, again he'd be a burden to his fellow fighters. "And there are bound to be diplomatic moves and the Americans won't be backward to bring some heavy-duty diplomatic pressure to stop Scotland becoming a base for them."

He didn't reply, not even to point out, as I'd have done, that volunteering to fight in a defensive war isn't the same as male violence against women and just beating up other people for the hell of it. Which suggested he was weakening. I switched to another weapon to drive things home.

"Is it worth wasting men and resources trying to stop them getting to Glasgow?" He'd started sorting T-shirts, which smelled clean and fresh even from where I stood, but halted and stared. "I mean," I said, "they've got an interest in not damaging Scotland. That statement they put out last week that they had no plans to invade, only to 'negotiate the voluntary grant of a purely defensive base in a beautiful country where the dream of free nationhood

is alive again', something like that. Sounds like they're counting on nationalist feeling to support them against the UK. Hinting at a promise of independence in return for collusion. Co-operation. People are not going to co-operate if they reduce Glasgow to another Mariupol."

Or maybe, I suddenly thought, they'll destroy Glasgow to make clear the penalty for non-collusion.

"A stand needs to be made and it's not for me to decide where."

I backed off into, "I think your rucksack is behind that pile of garden furniture we got when your mother downsized." That was a mistake because now he knew where it was. To stop him going down to get it himself, I said, "Who knows, though? It could be anywhere," and that was a mistake, too, because now there was no reason why I was the one who had to get it. I lurched into another line. "You know, you are so atomic." I attempted a laugh.

"Atomic?" He looked up from separating his socks from my socks out of a pile that had been washed together. Nice but rather symbolic. "Is that some kind of joke?" The voice could have been threatening.

"Joke?"

"To do with the fact that they've surrounded the British nuclear submarine base at Faslane?"

"No." I dragged out the word comfortingly. "But, see, it's like when you gave up your teaching job—yes, I know you hated it—and enrolled to retrain in IT. Living together, joint bank account, joint mortgage, but not something to discuss with me before you did it. So you were atomic. Not part of a molecule. And I'd have supported your decision. I would. But I mean, don't you think becoming a volunteer soldier and probably getting yourself killed is something to mention to your husband, if only, like, in passing, before you did it?" I laughed again.

He gave me a black look, but he was now pairing socks, and it was sweet that he was pairing mine as well as his own. Spinning things out, knowing that it was silly to go off and get himself killed for no good effect?

"Neil, this country is under attack and you're raking up things from twenty years ago."

He sounded unhappy, not contemptuous, so I switched tacks. "'This country'. Fighting for your country. I'd never thought of you as the type. 'Ask what you can do for *your* country.' Dulci et decorum to die for your country. All that stuff. Gosh, so that's you, and I never knew in thirty-two years."

He'd finished sorting the socks and was now looking about him in a slightly distracted way.

I went on, "Countries are artificial things. Not things to die for. Historical accidents, resulting from some royal thug's horses unable to charge in 1497 or whenever because the ground was too muddy."

"It's just a way of talking about things that are important. Freedom. Justice. Peace." He banged a cupboard shut—the cupboard where he keeps his blood pressure medication. Anger? Anger that I was getting through to him?

"And the people you care for?"

"Of course." He muttered it.

"Okay", he said, which was the last thing I heard him say. It could be taken in two different ways. One: he's completed all he needs to put together, he just needs the rucksack, and then he'll make his forever farewell to me before walking out the door. Two: he's come back to himself, he's abandoning his death-wish, he's about to embrace me, we'll lie on the bed, at peace among the irrelevant piles of socks and underwear and shirts, etc. I didn't want to know which of these possibilities he intended. Quickly, I said, "Your rucksack," and exited the bedroom.

In the basement, things seemed to be resting quietly, away from an unsympathetic world. I remember there was a cold, slightly metallic smell, and that I wondered whether it could be the smell of dry rot—the flat owners had had to get dry rot treatment in the roof. I soon found the rucksack. It was on one of his mother's garden chairs, on top of some packets of rice I'd stockpiled that were now beyond their use-by date. He'd acquired the rucksack as a teenager for a school trip walking in the Salzkammergut, and in the album I put together a long time ago of photos of each of us before we met, there were ones of him on the trip, the colour somewhat bleached out, Drummond staring rather moodily at the camera as if there were lacks in his life that, without realising it, he was waiting for me to fill. I could hurry back upstairs with the rucksack and a supportive smile and that might tip the balance, making him unwilling to abandon someone so ready to take on his concerns. On the other hand, he might thank me, stuff his things into the rucksack, go into the ensuite loo for a last pee, and that would be my last memory of him.

It flashed upon me that perhaps he'd joined up without telling me because he knows I'm too cowardly and selfish to do a thing like that so wanted to save me from feeling under pressure to join up with him, and again I knew why I loved him.

I inspected the straps and canvas, looking for rot or decay that might make the rucksack unusable. I decided to tell him I couldn't find it. If I'd hurried back up to our flat with it, enabling him to dash off to war a good many minutes before the missile landed, I wouldn't have killed him. But I mooched around the basement, delaying for as long as possible going back up to Drummond, pleased that there was no sound of him coming down to look for it himself.

I think I did hear the blast. There wasn't much left of the house above the basement, and the two Henderson children and their mother also died. I was in the one corner of the basement that wasn't totally buried in rubble from above.

Somehow, the fact that there was not much body for a funeral made easier to decide what Drummond meant by that last "Okay."

I don't think he said anything that expressed contempt for me for not joining up. Doesn't that mean he wasn't as sure of his decision as he pretended? If he was sure of his decision, he'd have tried to persuade me to join him. You don't leave others to make their own decisions about things like that. If you really think that foreign troops landing requires a guy like yourself, nobody out of the ordinary (except to me), to sign up for the military, even though you're getting on in years and will be part of a barely-trained gang of amateurs, can you really avoid thinking that all the rest ought to do the same and that anyone who doesn't is a contemptible shirker? Unless, maybe, they're a key worker like a firefighter or a surgeon. If he really thought it was his duty to join up as he did, so it must be anyone's duty. Including mine. So the fact that he made no attempt to persuade me I should join up, too, meant he must have had doubts about what he'd done. So when he said "Okay", the last thing he ever said, he was going to agree with me and not leave me.

Guts

AMANDA STOPA GOLDSTEIN

One time
someone called
me beautiful
and I
felt it
so deeply
that I
had to
cut it
out starting
with an
incision above
my belly
I tore
into myself
and dizzied
as I
sifted through
all the
pink cords
and found
that they
were wrong
all along
so I
sewed myself
together with
leather and
the mirror

I broke
when I
was 14
whispering *there*
there now
they didn't
mean it

From a Distance

First Visit: South Carolina

JERRY WEMPLE

You have your picture taken with the bronze statue of the jazz man, a native son, now a claim to fame. He is larger than in life. He stands thirty yards away from the main corner of town with its four pillars: the church, the town hall, the bank, the market. The market is the old slave market. They don't use it for anything anymore but keep it up just the same. Its paint is blazing white in the summer sun. Later, you drive to the cemetery to look for family plots, find a few, but not the ones you seek. You spot sink holes near graves bearing the same last name as the famous jazz man. It is all unkempt: unmown, littered with fallen branches from dead trees, divided by a dusty, rutted two-wheel path. Were it near dusk, it might remind you of a setting in a B-grade horror movie, but it lacks irony. Traversing the town, you cruise through the business district. You remark at businesses with your family name. *Those aren't our people*, your cousin says in a way that implies something more. It is in the same manner an uncle side-smiles at you, doesn't say much, like he is figuring whether you should be let in on the family secret that isn't much of a secret. You already know parts of it: upon graduation, a collection is taken, and by bus or train the young head north to Baltimore or New York, are told to make a life away from here. When your uncle does talk, he points across the road at overgrown fields, says whose house used to stand there, talks about places in the neighborhood taken for taxes when the occupants got old, put in a home. *Your daddy used to stay over there*, he says, and nods toward an indistinct spot.

The next day you travel a boulevard where the houses are on large lots and set back from the street. They are two-story, with wide steps leading to wide front porches. On one set of steps are guardians, dual three-foot high gray sentries. You recognize their countenance. Soon you take a left, toward the river and the railroad tracks. Steamboats used to carry cotton and tobacco downriver to the docks in Charleston, sometimes human cargo back upriver. There is an old brick church. You are not sure if it is still used. This is where Sherman encamped, after Atlanta, after Savannah, on his way to North Carolina. You wish there was a way to time travel, to whisper in Sherman's ear, to tell him to finish the job. It doesn't matter. He wouldn't have listened; he was already dreaming the American dream, of commerce, of going West and killing Indians.

Interlude

DOUGLAS COLE

Sound of a dinner bell ringing in the distance,
that feeling that I must go,
the pounded, dusty, root-worn entry
to the forest, the minister on a tyre swing.
What am I doing back here again,
shirtsleeves rolled, playing ping pong on the porch
with no other word for this?

Rain clouds moving in,
bats fluttering through the evening shadows,
part memory, part dream, vespers in the rays,
a hymn in the alder grove.
I am passing through everything,
reach to touch but before I do it all dissolves
back into the conversation we were having,
sound of a dinner bell ringing in the distance.

A Distant View

VERONIKA KOT

"I shouldn't have to live to see this happen twice," Dad grumbles at me by way of greeting.

I have just barely arrived. The flight from La Guardia was delayed of course. I have already washed my hands at the kitchen sink, after removing my mask. I sit down with him at the dining room table and squeeze his arm hello.

He is tapping his finger on the New York Times which is draped over the pill box and the orange juice. He shakes his head, grim, and a little angry. As expected, the front page is plastered with the news of Ukraine, the Russian invasion just days old. It's all anybody talks of now, so much so that pandemic news is swept to the back pages where old forms of dying are now relegated. He's right, it truly isn't fair, I reflect.

When we were kids, I recall him telling me and my older brother that, at the age of six, he was a small and sickly child, anxious about school starting in September. He worried and wished it could be postponed.

He got his wish. School did not start. The War did. It was Poland, September 1, 1939.

He heard the adults talking and learned there were bombings. Then there was the frantic packing, the getting away in the car. They were lucky to have the car, everybody said so, the new car that his father bought in anticipation of his new job that also didn't happen. The adults were

clearly scared and not even hiding it, so that he was truly frightened. He wished that school could have started after all and felt guilty for wishing it wouldn't. Afraid of getting in trouble, he was very careful not to tell anybody what he had wished.

I remember he laughed a little telling us this, my brother Mikey and me. I must have been ten or so because I remember thinking I was too old to have been guilt-tripped that way and feeling a little sorry for and superior to the six-year-old he had been. That he chuckled at himself from that very distant viewpoint was somehow reassuring.

Today, the news is bringing it all right back for him, the stuff of more than eighty years ago.

"Another Hitler," he growls. "But the world forgets."

I can see the parallels taking shape in his mind. Poland, September, 1939. Ukraine, February, 2022. History repeating itself? World War III?

He takes off his reading glasses and places them by the orange juice. Only now does he pull himself away from the headlines enough to fully acknowledge my presence.

"Bolek," he says. "How was the flight?"

I start at the sound of my name. Nobody calls me Bolek or Boleslaw, anymore. Not even my brother. I go by Bill and have for decades, and I call my brother Mikey even though it's Mieszko. Ever since Mama's been gone, it's only Dad. I wonder if I will forget my name when he is gone.

I'm startled every time I visit. Part of me expects the old apartment, the one where we grew up. The one from which we had to help him and Mama move because of the stairs they couldn't handle anymore and because there was no dishwasher or washer dryer and the plaster was coming down in the kitchen.

"The flight? A little late, nothing terrible," I tell him.

"Crowded."

"And everybody wore masks?"

"Mostly. They kept announcing it. But you know some people…"

He shakes his head. "They won't cover their noses," he scoffs. "And what use is that?!"

It confirms his worst suspicions of humanity. I wish I could say more to reassure him but words always escape me. They are more my brother's strength. He's the journalist, the travel writer.

You are the artist in the family, Mama would say, approving of my childhood drawings and then my early photos. Mieszko is the writer.

She had it all planned out like she always did. Mikey carried through, sort of, though I suspect Mama imagined a literary career for him. I must have been a disappointment. Photography remains a hobby, but I'm hardly an artist.

Just then Jadzia, the live-in Polish lady who takes care of all things practical around here, erupts into the dining room with coffee and a platter of home-baked coffee cake.

"I knew you were coming, here's something for you, you probably haven't had breakfast, it must have been very early when you left, you must be so tired?"

All of it is one run-on sentence, none of it a question. I mumble my thanks and accept coffee and pastry. It's buttery and filled with gooey poppy seed paste. It reminds me of childhood and Makowiec, a Polish poppy seed cake.

"So good," I mumble at her, mouth full, and she lights up. She wipes away invisible crumbs from the tabletop and trots away commenting loudly about chores and Ukrainian news. We can still hear her when she gets down the hallway and into the other room.

I look around for something to distract Tata from the

news and see the picture of Mama. It's the one I took in my early days of college although honestly, I can't remember. The one we had at her Memorial Mass where everybody had to socially distance and I couldn't even hug Tata, and there was no meal to share afterwards with old friends for the traditional reminiscing.

That photo's been standing there on the small table in the corner of the living room for over a year and a half. The urn stands behind it in a velvet drawstring bag until Tata decides what to do with it. It will probably be up to us though, Mikey and me.

"Nice orchids," I say, just for something to say that isn't Ukraine.

They look perfect enough to be recently store-bought, standing guard next to the photo.

Tata waves a hand, a little sheepishly. "I try to keep the flowers fresh," he says. "You know, just a little something."

And so it has become a shrine of sorts to one more COVID death, as the count inches up to a once unfathomable million.

He pushes away his cereal bowl, reaches for the coffee cake. I watch him eat, and the relish with which he does so makes me disproportionately happy.

"Your mother," he tells me, wiping his whiskers and beard with a napkin, "your mother never liked poppy seeds. Me, well, I love them."

Momentarily he looks gleeful, like a little boy getting away with something.

He glances down the hallway then leans in towards me and lowers his voice. "Jadzia, she talks too much. You know? All the time, all the time. Talk, talk, talk. But," and he lets out an embarrassed chuckle, "she can make a really good poppy seed cake."

There is a satisfied gleam in his eyes which are as pale blue as today's Chicago winter sky.

I try to return the conspiratorial grin. But I'm already suffocating. It's too hot in the apartment. It always is. I just got here and I'm already looking for an errand that would let me leave.

Feeling guilty, I stifle that urge. Instead, I stand up and stretch and walk over to the photo. The Mama in the picture must be late forties, early fifties. She's looking straight ahead, her eyes focused on the photographer, on me. It's oddly disconcerting to be standing exactly where I was in relation to her when I took that picture more than thirty years ago. She regards me intently, a once lovely woman, still handsome in middle age. Dark hair neatly and professionally clipped. No smile. A little defiant, disapproving even. She didn't like having her picture taken. She probably told me not to.

And as I stare back at the ghost of her memory, I realize for the first time it's not defiance in the familiar features, not disapproval. Maybe it's because I'm so much older now that I can, for the first time, recognize self-consciousness, insecurity masked under a show of strength. And is it any wonder? By sixteen she'd been a refugee in eight countries, known starvation in Siberia and typhoid in the Middle East. They didn't have a word for PTSD back then, you powered through or you perished. It was chin up and carry on, as the English would say. The only thing she ever conceded she liked about the English.

Tata nods to himself, watching me watch her. Then, he is drawn again to his newspaper. He mutters as he reads, following the lines of print with his finger.

I move back to the dining room and take in the view behind him, several miles of single-family homes and two and three flats that stretches all the way to the Lakefront,

where I can see the high-rise condos that line it. Those were just a few blocks from where I grew up. I could see them from the bedroom I shared with Mikey on the top floor of a three-flat just west of Broadway. They got the view and blocked ours. But as a kid I never thought of it that way. It just was.

It's an unusually clear day, especially for winter in Chicago, the sky scoured by yesterday's light snow and today's wind. The view is crisp, and suddenly I'm startled to realize I'm seeing a sliver of actual water, actual Lakefront. It's just a sliver – no, two or three slivers --- between the buildings, but there, undeniably -- blue water!

"Tato!" I exclaim, excited. "Did you know you can see the lake from here?"

He looks up at me over his reading glasses and shakes his head.

"No, you can't." Scoffing the way he does, not even glancing towards the window.

"But yes! Only a little. But you can!"

He shakes his head at my foolishness, still refusing to look. To him, I am always a child. And the younger one, the one with the "great imagination."

"Dad, just look. I'll get the binoculars."

He resists. He explains, patiently, that there is a slight rise in elevation between us and the lake, and therefore it wouldn't be possible to see over it, that I must be imagining it.

I insist. I finally get him to look. There is nothing wrong with his distance vision. The binoculars should help, I hope.

It's just like the time I told Mikey he had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and he scoffed and told me he didn't. He was a college student living in Oakland, in one of those cheap, motel-like ugly apartments with stairwells

at each end and the walkway along every floor. I was visiting, excited by the magic name of California, the myth of the Golden State. I was enchanted and chose to ignore the roaches scurrying around the kitchen. Mikey so obviously enjoyed showing me around the Bay Area and his enthusiasm was contagious. His windows opened out on the ugly expanse of Oakland's semi-industrial, semi-residential decrepitude. But at the outermost edge, at that most distant horizon, there it was, unmistakable, though admittedly so small it was easy to miss.

But *I* didn't.

And when Mikey was finally convinced to look and then to acknowledge, we argued about whether that could even be considered a "view." He joked I should go into real estate.

At long last Tata admits that it "could" be the lake we are seeing. I can tell he is still trying to puzzle it out, convinced that this can't and shouldn't be. Why can't he just trust his eyes?

"Okay," he says finally. "It's because we are so high. Eleventh floor. We see over the ridge. You know, where Ridge Avenue…" He nods, satisfied at last, the mystery solved.

I shrug, disappointed. I'm fascinated and still excited by my find, but I can tell now that he has his answer, he is done with the topic. He is simply not interested in the view. If – as my brother would argue – it qualifies as a "view" at all.

"I have something to show you," he tells me instead, and I follow him to the spare bedroom which is a TV room and study where he has laid out a folder of old postcards and family photos on the desk. "You wanted me to tell you who is who."

We had talked about that on the phone. I had asked him to organize and label his old family pictures so I would know the faces and the names, the great-grandparents and cousins from a distant time and place. I am at the age now where my friends are regularly burying parents and regretting unanswered questions of this kind. With Mama's death I realized how limited time might be. Without Dad I would be at a loss to know the faces in the photos he has stashed everywhere and in no particular order.

And so we embark on the task of translating strangers into kin. He hands them to me one by one. I pencil in names and relationships on the back and jot comments and clarifications in a notebook for later. Maybe, I think vaguely, I can actually draw that family tree. Get a visual on this procession of unfamiliars whose blood trickles through my veins. It seems that I should know them somehow. What would any of them think of our harried lives today? Could they even imagine my Manhattan existence, my job as a website designer, perched twenty-five stories above an urban space so dense that nothing in their world could have prepared them for it?

Dad's fingers tremble slightly as he passes and then carefully retrieves each faded black and white from another continent and century. The relatives in them are unsmiling, focused, the old-fashioned seriousness of formal portraiture still sitting heavily on their shoulders. No candid shots here, no selfies, no frivolity.

Or maybe it is an old Eastern Europe sort of thing? A bit of it still there in my mother's unsmiling stare-back in the living room? I cannot know with certainty.

But I am cheered to see how animated Dad becomes, how the identification of the long dead and gone morphs gradually with childhood memories. And how crisp those

memories are. *I remember my grandfather, he was a very kind man, he spent all day with me the day my younger brother was born and nobody told me anything about what was happening.*

He was eight. They spent that day in his grandmother's garden which brimmed with gooseberries and blueberries and asparagus. Grandfather gave him blueberries, he tells me. Grandmother sprinkled precious rationed sugar and poured rich cream on top. It still makes him smile.

Already it is lunchtime and mealtimes here are the punctuating moments of existence. Jadzia justifies her existence making sure they are precisely on time, healthy and consistent with Tata's exacting preferences. The cheeses must be good, specific brands and varieties, the ham comes from a Polish deli, the rye bread too. And, regardless of the season and the price, there are blueberries.

"Antioxidants," Jadzia insists very seriously. "Like medicine, only delicious." She has looked it up on the internet so she knows.

Tata likes his blueberries with just a dollop of Greek Yogurt. In Poland it was cream. But that day in his grandma's garden was a long time ago.

After lunch, Jadzia clears up and Tata and I go for a walk. There is a small park nearby and we take the path where there are benches at regular intervals. This is important because his back pain has returned and he needs to sit down when it is bad. Sometimes, he explains, it is better, but even then -- you never know. The benches are insurance.

It's blustery. The bare branches whip around and the wind drowns out the sound of traffic on the busy thoroughfare that borders the park. Tata adjusts his hat, pulling it down further over his ears. He faces resolutely into the wind. His cane, clutched tightly, sets our pace with rhythmic thumps. We make small talk, very small,

the weather, the apartment repairs and maintenance. Momentarily we leave aside the recurring meanness of a world that just won't learn. I do not mention that I have reduced my work hours and transformed a bedroom vacated by a now-adult child into a studio where I can print and mount exhibit-quality photos. Or that such an exhibit may actually be in the works. There will be time to speak of all that later. It is best to wait until success materializes. Otherwise he will be wary of the indulgent luxury of such risk.

After the walk he is tired and excuses himself to rest. He sits quietly on the couch with his Chicago Tribune and his New York Review of Books and the latest non-fiction he is reading for his virtual book club. For the moment, he has reached his limit on sociability. I expect he might nod off under Mama's watchful gaze from a photo I took when the whole world was still before me and I already knew that I would leave to find it. But I don't think Mama ever quite forgave me for leaving or could remotely understand why one would voluntarily put distance between oneself and family. *We spent the whole War trying not to be separated*, she would tell us with reproach. She stares at me still, uncompromising and proud. Before her fierceness, Tata and I were silent allies. I glance in his direction and see him nodding off, and I know suddenly and with a pang that there is so little time left.

And still, I am relieved to be dismissed. The blustery weather and the clarity of the day have made my father tired, but they have made me restless. Reluctantly, Tata tells me where to find the car keys for that longer walk by the lake. It always feels odd, as if I am still sixteen asking to borrow the car, a privilege conceded only grudgingly.

Before I go, I glance out the dining room window again, assuring myself of the vision of water on the horizon. I take a mental picture, guessing at the exact locations.

The long hallway outside the apartment door is empty, the elevators fast, even the lobby harbors only a few residents seeking out their mail. Outside the wind has picked up even more and I imagine it tearing mercilessly at the shore, whipping up the water, driving sand across the deserted beach. It is exactly what I need right now.

The car, an old Accord, rumbles to an easy start. Despite Jadzia's pleading, Tata still insists on driving. I don't want to be dependent, he tells me. I don't interfere. Tata is exacting, even of himself. I think that he will know when it is time.

I head east towards the memorized slivers of blue. *I* think it is a view. And I think I will find, up close, those chinks between the buildings where the water meets the shore.

The Year of Astronomy

NORMAN (BUZZ) MINNICK

What is this dark matter
that makes up 90% of our universe?
It surrounds us, they say, binds us together;
contains memories, pleasant and un,
all notions of good and evil, fears,
inhibitions, suppressed desires, or worse—
inconceivable dimensions where we may find
ourselves unencumbered, traces of beginning and end.
Making love last night, we attempted
to look into each other's eyes
without looking away
through and beyond the moment of climax.
Have you ever looked directly at a star
only to have it disappear?

A Revised Answer for Mr. Rowan

SEAN MADDEN

You wrote it
on the white board, spidery black
Expo marker cursive, the passage from
Matthew wherein Christ tells his disciples:

"Amen I say to you, unless you turn and
become like little children, you will not
enter into the kingdom of heaven."

On the cusp of adulthood ourselves,
we made valiant guesses, per your
expectation, at the meaning
of the Rabbi's words. I waited,
smugly confident, for you to call on me—

me, a cradle Catholic mere weeks away
from confirmation; the only churchgoer,
to my knowledge,
in fourth-period Humanities.

I was permitted to speak, finally, after so
many interpretations, like makeshift rafts,
were floated. My well-informed erudition
would settle the debate;
the New Testament wasn't new to me.

But no.

You sunk my insight with a shake
of your head, your eyes betraying
a harsh assessment
of my answer—

off-the-mark; sophomoric.

Innocence, you said, was not at the crux
of Christ's teaching. Innocence was no
prerequisite for salvation.

Dumbfounded, wounded, I listened to
you entertain other ideas only to admit
in the end that none of us could be truly
certain of Christ's instruction; there was
wisdom in making peace with
the unknowable.

Nine years, Rowan, I lived in denial,
refusing to accept that my thinking
could have been so wrong; nervous,
honestly, to go looking for proof that
you had been right—

until the aims of my art exposed, to
my chagrin, how little I really knew
of Scripture; until Romano Guardini's
The Lord affirmed for me, during
a period of spiritual investigation,
the presence of evil at birth; we lost
our innocence, irrevocably, in Eden.

But children, unlike adults—I observe
this now firsthand as a father, and
consider this my bid for redemption, sir,
seventeen years late—
children don't come to faith
with misgivings, with grievances.
My six-year-old might spend an afternoon
beheading worms and scaring mourning
doves from the yard with a murderous yell,
but at bedtime he prays to Jesus, to Mary,
to the saints of the Church
with sacred vulnerability; and my faith,
Rowan, is a raft I repair night after
night as we drift, under star-scant skies,
farther and farther asea.

The Road Back

MARK FITZGERALD

Even in our packed car driving home,
we couldn't name the letdown,
though it was so familiar, a rusted
bicycle chained to a stop sign,
a gas station in disrepair—nothing to say
on the long road back, nothing ahead
except ourselves and the ordinary
world.
What urged us forth could not
return, had turned to dust, the sober
wind lashing at a drugstore awning.

We'd kept it rolling, our special
world, for as long as we could,
and for a while felt cleansed
and more alive.
Yet heading back
were no wiser for our barefoot
walks along the shore, midday
swims and lemonade, sunset dinners
on the bay—mere memories now,
foam dissolving on the sand,
indulgences we'd starve
and feed again, and again fall silent
in what would follow, a little sad
returning home
to what we knew too well.

Daydream

MARK FITZGERALD

Scent of forest, scent
of lake—languid shadows,
and the checkered
afternoon drifting
on a white yawn
of horizon. Cool mist
floats through
the birches.
Then the sound
of a small animal
darting away.
A canoe glides
by and I imagine
time paddling left
to go right, right
then left again,
the wooden
blade dipping through
clouded water,
stirring and steadying
all the failures
of my youth,
vanishings,
distant docks.

Queenie

VIRGINIA WATTS

Queenie lived in an Airstream silver bullet trailer at the edge of a precipice on Black Hawk Mountain. Far below, deep in the throat of a gorge, Beech River slithered silently by. As far as anyone in my village of Concord knew, Queenie never left that precipice during the seven years she remained among us. No need for supplies or human intimacy of any kind.

Queenie and her trailer arrived on July 25, 1961, the day a section of the Black Hawk Mine collapsed and flooded. I was eleven. Women wailed and coffins lined up in the church cemetery but the horror of the catastrophe, five men lost and multiple injuries, wasn't the same for me as it was for most of the other inhabitants of Concord. My father wasn't a miner as his father had been. He went to medical school and returned to Concord to become the town doctor.

There were only two grand houses in Concord, both owned by The Phoenix Company. Phoenix also owned and operated Black Hawk Mine. Dad and I lived in one of those houses. My friends lived in small houses, shared cramped beds with siblings. Mr. Franklin, the overseer of the mine, lived in the other grand house next to ours. He instituted longer shifts, shorter breaks, paltry pay raises and worse of all, many of the old timers blamed him for the collapse and the flood in the mine. Despite their protests, he had authorized new work on a vein dangerously close

to an abandoned shaft known to be filled with ground water.

Our house had a turret with a surround of stained-glass windows, alternating diamonds of peach and turquoise, a deep, wide plank, front porch, intricate, gingerbread trim decorating the upper eaves, and two chimneys. The inside rooms had fine furnishings, oil paintings, lace curtains imported from Belgium that rippled with elegance on windy days. Apparently, my mother cherished those curtains, but she didn't enjoy them for long. She passed during my birth.

On the morning Queenie arrived, Sheriff Lots and one of his deputies went to investigate something near the top of Black Hawk Mountain reflecting the sunrise. They discovered no tracks leading up the mountainside but they found an old woman in black garb. She explained she was just passing through. Inexplicably, her trailer appeared well rooted into the ground with tall grasses and wild vines already climbing up the sides. She seemed harmless so she was left in peace. The name "Queenie" soon attached to her, perched as she was on that mountain precipice resembling a throne.

A rumor soon began spreading that Queenie was the soul of the Black Hawk Mountain, that the mine accident had uprooted her and either she didn't know how to get back inside the mountain, or she didn't want to. Folklore wasn't unusual in Concord, but it had always been set in the past.

"Do mountains have souls?" I asked Dad.

"No," he answered right away as was his habit. He was in the parlor seated beside a brass floor lamp with two roaring lion heads for feet, reading the evening paper before dinner prepared by Mrs. Finch. It annoyed Dad when I bothered him once he had tucked himself behind

newsprint, but it was the time of day I could get his attention.

"You don't think Queenie is soul of the mountain like everyone else?"

"No, I certainly do not. I am a man of hard science, Violet. Queenie is a human being who wishes to live alone, as is her right, and that is all she is."

"But she did show up here overnight. How did that trailer of hers get all the way up the mountain? There's no road. No one heard or saw a thing."

I leaned over, placed my fingertips inside the gaping mouth of one of the lions. I had this fantasy that someday one of those parlor beasts would bite down, but I wasn't afraid. My reflexes were fast. I would escape harm. It was a taunt of sorts, a secret game I played.

"You are smarter than that. I am sure there is an explanation. Whatever that is, it is none of anyone's business."

"Sheriff Lots asked around in some nearby counties and no one has ever seen or heard of anyone like her."

"That proves nothing," Dad huffed, clucking of his tongue, lowering his paper so he could frown at me. He looked more tired than usual, eyes bloodshot. He was still treating men who had been injured in the mine collapse.

"A mountain in an inanimate object like a slab of wood." Dad waved at the logs beside the fireplace waiting to be burned.

I wanted to frown back at him, but I didn't dare. "But wood comes from trees. Trees are living things. They grow. They drink water. Maybe trees have souls too."

Dad raised his newspaper back into reading position and lowered his chin. "The subject is hereby permanently closed."

The coming of Queenie was the beginning of good fortune in Concord at a time when we needed it most. When a drought hit West Virginia and surrounding states, rain continued to fall steady on Concord and its nearby farms. When a hurricane swelled Beech River until it jumped its banks, the flood waters galloped across land, arrived at Concord's town limits, and halted. Dogs, cats, hamsters, pets of all kinds, began living longer. Apple trees doubled their harvest. We had an abundance of butterflies in our flower gardens. The fish from Beech River tasted sweeter. Most people, except Dad, thanked Queenie for these blessings.

Even though instructed by grown-ups that Queenie had a right to privacy, the desire to see her exerted a strong draw upon the youth in Concord. In the years that followed, it became a rite of passage to make the trek to Queenie's place at least once during your teenage years.

At fifteen, I finally went to see Queenie, almost physically sick, gutted after four years of nothing but secondhand stories. I couldn't get her out of my head. I admitted to my diary that I wondered if she was calling for me to visit her. Predictably, Dad wasn't happy about it.

I hiked there with two of my closest friends, Darla Pickford and Sarah Martin, on a sunny day in early May. We faced a steep climb we knew would soon have our legs burning so we got an early start. A straight row of girls in bell bottoms, flowered peasant tops and chocker necklaces. Silent for the most part save some nervous chit chat about the boys we liked and the girls we were jealous of.

Halfway up the mountainside we rested, thinking we'd have a picnic, nibble the sandwiches we'd packed, sip thermos water. No one felt able to eat or drink. We were a trio of combustible nerves. If it had been physically

possible, we would have sprinted the rest of the way up that impossibly sharp incline. Once underway, a desperation to get the whole thing over with descended heavily upon us. This was our chance to tamp down the same misgiving that prickled along every spine in Concord until they were able to put their pilgrimage to Queenie's place behind them. Days, months, seasons had passed with Queenie remaining a complete enigma.

"I kind of want to turn back," Sarah admitted, balancing her sandwich on her stomach. She was sprawled on her back, staring up at clouds puffing across the wide expanse of blue sky like a locomotive. The air was still where we were, grasses, branches, and leaves appeared glued into place. I ignored Sarah's question. A growing part of me wanted more than anything to turn around and let my feet fly down the mountain too.

"When are you going to lose the Pipi Longstocking braids." I teased Darla as a distraction. Darla was practicing handstands. "You've had those things poking out from the side of your head since fourth grade."

Darla popped to her feet. Turning towards me, she shielded her eyes.

"Never ever."

"Aren't you guys just a little afraid?" Sarah said in a shaky voice.

Darla and I exchanged worried glances. Sarah tended to be on panicky side at times. She'd lost an uncle in the mine accident.

"Nothing scary or bad has ever happened to anyone who visited Queenie." I told her.

"I know," Sarah mumbled.

"It's been so long now," I continued. "It's not like anything is going to change today. Everyone says they don't know what all the fuss is about."I was only speaking

the truth. Descriptions of Queenie had remained vague. An old, eccentric woman who liked to sing. Sometimes visitors never saw Queenie, only heard her singing from inside her trailer. Even those people would say there was no need to go back because there was so little to see.

"Violet is right," Darla backed me up. "We are going to see what everyone else sees. A lot of nothing much."

"There's a first time for everything," Sarah said. "The whole mine never collapsed before."

"Technically, the whole mine didn't collapse," I said, immediately aware of how much I sounded like Dad. "There was a pit wall collapse on one level of the mine. The investigators said it will likely never happen again."

"Really?" Sarah's tone turned sharp. "How do you they know? No one can predict the future."

"Let's just get going already," Darla said, tossing a cookie toward a squirrel who snatched and sniffed. "If we go now, we can be home in time to go see a movie tonight."

"Great idea," I said and began packing up with Darla. "They are showing *Breakfast at Tiffany's*."

That news made Sarah sit up. She'd been wild about *Breakfast at Tiffany's* when the three of us saw the film the first time. I wasn't crazy about it. New York City seemed like a fairy tale. Still, a second viewing wasn't a bad idea. Maybe I'd change my mind about New York. Maybe I'd move to there someday..

An hour later, physically spent, we hobbled up to a small grove of dense trees not far from Queenie's place. From the tree grove, we could have hurled a stone and pinged Queenie's front door. One of the wilder ideas about Queenie was that if you ventured any closer to her than the grove you'd be struck by lightning and the echo of your teeth chattering would rise up out of the hollow that was Black Hawk Gorge for all eternity.

The first thing we saw was a bunny who hopped out from under a holly bush. She eyed us, twitched her whiskers, and the three of us Nervous Nellies startled and jumped. Turning tail, the bunny bounced in the direction of Queenie's place. Next, a robin sang out clear as a bell.

"If birds and bunnies aren't afraid, then we shouldn't be either," I whispered.

Darla nodded a bit too exuberantly.

"I'm not afraid anymore," Sarah added unconvincingly.

We parted thick leaves to gain a clear view of Queenie's place. Sarah's hand flew to cover her mouth to hush a gasp. Queenie was outside. She had her back turned toward us. She was singing while polishing her front door with a crimson cloth in steady, even circles.

I couldn't imagine that the silver on her trailer could be glossier than it already was. Just a few direct glances at the trailer had already rendered me sunspot blind, but perhaps Queenie's trailer was like the Genie's magic lamp in Aladdin. If Queenie rubbed her trailer in this exact way, then the trailer would grant her wish. Maybe that's how she'd been bringing good fortune to the people of Concord.

The thing that stuck me the most was how naturally the silver trailer belonged on the side of Black Hawk Mountain, as if it had grown out of the soil.

Queenie herself had brilliant white hair lopped off unevenly, close to her scalp. At first, I thought her outfit was composed of strips of black fabric stitched together and fitted tightly to her form, which was female, tall, thin, and small-breasted, but when the wind suddenly stirred, the strips plumped up and beat against her sides like a crow drying off after a cloudburst. I realized her body was covered in massive, purplish, black feathers. My mind raced toward a rational explanation but these feathers

were much too large to be the feathers of a crow and her limb moved as a wing flapping.

The air was filled with Queenie's singing. An entrancing sound as others had reported. Part of me worried it was a spell that would render us unable to remember what we were about to witness at the top of Black Hawk Mountain, but it was impossible not to fall in love with that voice. My friends were already swaying back and forth, eyes shut. My eyes closed and I felt as though I'd been floating, sore feet dangling limp in the air.

Queenie's slow tempo, husky alto yodel reminded me of thunder's echo when it rumbles back from a distant valley seeming to say, here I am, I haven't left you. I also thought of Beech River, the low note lullaby of the current when times of high water ceased. A river song I had listened to all my life from underneath my bed covers assuring me the waterway was tucked safely between her banks once more.

Exactly how long the three of us stood mesmerized by Queenie's song I am not sure, but it did come as a great shock when suddenly, she straightened her spine and reached for the handle on her trailer door. I snapped back into reality. Was this how it was going to end? A cold rushed into my belly. I longed to see her face once now that my chance was slipping away. I was sure she'd sensed our presence in the tree grove the second we arrived there. It would be her choice whether we would have the opportunity to see more of her or not.

"Please turn around," I pleaded under my breath. "Please, please, please."

Sarah reached for my hand, grabbed it, began squeezing the life out of it. "Maybe we should just go," she whimpered.

"No," I hissed.

"But we've seen her now," Sarah whispered. "She sang and everything."

"Go ahead and leave if you want," I whispered, dropping Sarah's sweaty hand. "You can wait for me halfway down. I just want to see if maybe she'll turn around."

And then Queenie let go of the door handle. Her arm fell to her side, began swinging back and forth like a grandfather clock pendulum. As she turned around to face us, it was in movements so gradual the world slipped into slow motion along with her. My heart wound down to a clip and a clop, clip, clop. Darla remained at my side while Sarah retreated a few steps.

Queenie's eyes were larger than any human eyes I had ever seen. Glittery black as anthracite. She raised her chin, glanced at Sarah over my shoulders, gave Darla a once over, then settled her gaze upon me. I knew I was in the presence of the soul of Black Hawk Mountain and that I'd never be the same. Her trailer glowed brighter and brighter as if any minute, it would burst into a star. My heart skipped wildly. The hairs on my arms stiffened, stood straight up.

Seconds later, Queenie turned away and disappeared inside her trailer. I was gasping for air by that time. We turned and ran.

I wheezed once we slowed down, "Her eyes were huge, and shiny as glass!"

"I don't know," Sarah surprised me by jumping right in, sounding all together composed and downright cheerful. "I didn't really notice her eyes. Her hair was really short. She had a friendly smile."

"What about her outfit," I tried again. "What was that?"

"She was wearing a long black dress," Sarah answered. "The kind old ladies wear in the summertime. She looked okay to me."

"The dress hung like a sack," Darla said. "She needs a belt, but she didn't look too bad. What was the matter with her eyes?"

"She looked like any old woman." Sarah added. "Maybe we shouldn't have bothered to walk all that way."

"Agreed," Darla said.

"But she looked weird to me," I sputtered. "What about how she flapped her arm like a bird."

"Really?" Darla said. "I didn't notice that."

"Me either," Sarah said.

Had I let my imagination get away with me? I began coughing to open my throat.

"Are you alright?" Sarah asked, her cornflower blue eyes flying open.

"Are you choking?" Darla asked, stopping to swat me hard on the back.

That swat made me cough even more. When Darla swatted me again, I fell to my knees.

"Violet!" Sarah was in a true panic now. "What's the matter?"

I managed to push myself up off the ground, though my legs were trembling.

"I'm fine," I announced in a forceful tone. "It's just spring allergies. Gives me asthma. The sooner I can take my medicine the better."

"I never noticed you had allergies," Darla said, hands on her hips, head cocked.

"How about a bet," I suggested, forcing a grin. "When we get to the sign for the town limits we race to the Esso Station. Whoever wins gets to go to the movies tonight free, buttered popcorn included. Deal?"

"Throw some Sugar Babies in and it's a deal," Sarah said eagerly, though she looked worried.

"I'm in," Darla said. "But it's Good & Plenty for me."

Sarah was skipping her way toward the start of the race

with Darla and I trailing behind. Her chances of a free movie ticket were high. I struggled all the way to the end, panting like a dog.

"Hey, you don't look good," Darla said. "You wait here with Sarah. I'll go get your dad."

"No. It's just this asthma. I'll take medicine as soon as I get home."

I'd have to think of something later to explain this sudden asthmatic condition of mine, because one of them was bound to ask Dad about it.

Relief flooded over me when we finally parted. I dug deep and found enough energy to walk the rest of the way to my house.

I'd been aware of the black bird that had been tailing us all the way from Queenie's place, didn't dare look skyward for fear of tipping off my friends, but I stopped now to watch as the bird flapped upward and perched atop the turret, a beady-eyed gargoyle, her caw anguished and familiar.

The roofline and outline of my house and its identical twin as it appeared to me that evening had turned into two hideous monsters. If I had had somewhere else to go, I would have turned and run. Why hadn't I seen them this way before. Their structures against the darkening sky were all wrong for Black Hawk Mountain's gentle, moss green valley of rounded hills. Everything about them brutal, out of place. The stark, sharply cut angles, the oversized windows as alarming as gaping stab wounds. The turrets, something I had loved all my life, worst of all. Nothing but a silly, showy appendages. Grotesque tumors. And then the adjoining backyards, the stone pathway linking the two dwellings permanently together. The pathway trellis laden with wisteria. Lavender blossoms I long admired had taken on the appearance of the fingers of a cascading poison. I hurried to my room. Sank onto my bed.

That evening, before the movie, I gathered myself together and went to find Dad in the parlor. He was watching the doorway as I entered the room, ferocious lions still salivating near his feet. His newspaper sat untouched on the table beside him. There was a squat, cut crystal glass of amber liquid on top of the newspaper. Dad rarely had a drink. He nodded once and cleared his throat.

"How did it go today?" He asked. "You look pale. Did you drink enough water during the hike?"

"Yes. It was a long walk. Queenie was outside."

I padded over to the fireplace mantle to stand instead of taking my customary chair across from Dad.

"What did you think of her?"

"She was interesting looking. I don't think she's just an old woman if that's what you are asking."

Dad cocked his head at me. His lips disappeared into a thin, straight line as he folded his arms across his chest. "What was she then?"

I can't say he was mocking or teasing me. He unfolded his arms, folded them again, crossed his legs, uncrossed them, turned his head to look out the front window where there stood a massive oak in the front yard still holding up my childhood swing. The clock on the mantle ticked and ticked.

"Did you ever think that we shouldn't live in a house like this when no one else does except Mr. Franklin?"

Dad's eyebrows arched. "This house is part of my compensation for providing medical care to the miners and their families at a discounted rate. Phoenix wants them to have the best medical care possible."

"So Phoenix can have workers who can keep making truckloads of money for Phoenix," I said. "You've said many times that the miners themselves aren't paid nearly enough."

Dad stood up. “I care about the people of Concord. You know that.”

“They work underground, Dad, get injured and sick with things they would never get if they weren’t miners.”

“I can’t stop the mining industry”.

All I could do was shake my head. For the first time in my life, I was ashamed of my father.

Three years later, Mr. Franklin suffered a darkly biblical death. I was a senior in high school when a lightning bolt rained down upon his driveway one morning. The momentous crack woke me. Our house was engulfed in bright light. The mighty beams holding the house together shuddered. Roof rafters groaned. The turret windowpanes screamed a million tinkling deaths back and forth to each other. Dad ran to his aid, but it was too late.

Shortly after, Phoenix closed the Black Hawk Mine, profits from coal mining being down everywhere, and Queenie disappeared as mysteriously as she’d come. With giant boulders blocking the wound in her side, the entrance to the mine, she no longer had to watch over the mining families of Concord. That’s what everyone believed, maybe even Dad, though he never admitted it.

Man on the Moon

MICHAEL LOYD GRAY

It was the day after Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, but I just didn't give a rat's ass. What did that have to do with me? I'd just turned eighteen, sported a perpetual hardon, and cruised a canary yellow 1967 Firebird with chrome wheels. High school was in my rearview mirror and shrinking by the second. "There goes that hotspur," my grandfather would tell my mother whenever I'd peel out from our driveway. I thought I sensed a trace of admiration.

My dad called me Theodore, no matter how many times I asked for Ted. Now he was in orbit with Neil Armstrong. "This changes everything," he muttered as he gazed dumbfounded up at the sky, still buzzed about a man on the moon.

I just didn't get it. What's changed? I slid onto a bucket seat, pushed a Stones tape into the eight-track, and turned up the volume, but when I looked up, my mother was waving at me from the mailbox. She looked sick to her stomach. Turned out, Richard Fucking Nixon had sent me a letter.

I waited until I was well down our street, Tricky Dicky's letter jammed in a back pocket, before I abruptly dropped into second gear and popped the clutch for a quick squeal. I figured Nixon owed me that one. But I was mindful that my mother had heard enough for one day, what with this Army physical letter and my father all goggle-eyed over

Neil Armstrong and his freaking small step for man and tremendous flying leap for mankind.

My father didn't yet know about the letter. My mother said to wait a few days until the moon thing had lost its shine, and we laughed nervously at the pun. My father had a heart condition. It was my mother's job to protect him from excitement and French fries. Now it was up to me, a horny hotspur from Argus, Illinois, to help protect America form Vietnam, a pissant country I wasn't sure I could find on a globe, at a time when I couldn't always locate third gear in my car's transmission.

A few weeks later, it was the Army physical and not Armstrong's stroll on the moon that changed things for me. Matt Grenville, Clark Busey, and I got drunk the night before. It seemed like a great idea until morning came, and we boarded a bus to Chicago at first light. Matt got a goodbye soldier boy blowjob from his girlfriend in his Corvair before we departed. He hadn't told her we'd be back that evening. She thought we would go straight to Vietnam. I remember she cried and waved at the bus as it pulled out and Matt watched her for three blocks until we turned a corner and headed for the interstate north, and then he didn't say anything for a while.

We all quickly fell asleep for a few hours and woke when the bus pulled up at a clump of blistered old buildings on the south side of Chicago. I had no idea where we were. Clark said to look for bullet holes in buildings, from Al Capone's days, as though every building in Chicago must surely have some. Everything was a blur, with an occasional scene coming momentarily into sharp focus and then fading to fuzzy, surreal, slow motion. I thought at one point I saw Soldier Field but couldn't be sure. It

reminded me of Sundays in front of the TV, watching the Bears and eating peanut butter sandwiches and drinking Vess Cola. Those days now seemed like ancient history.

By now, our hangovers were magnified by lack of proper sleep. We stumbled off the bus and huddled, some of the boys lighting cigarettes. Pissed-off sergeants appeared as if on cue in crisp shirts and creased trousers. They stood ramrod straight, chins jutting out fiercely. With meaty hands planted firmly on hips, they looked us up and down as we gawked back, our hands stuffed in pockets, shirttails hanging out. Like sudden gusts of blustery wind, sergeants barked at us, poked us, called us ladies and pussies, and herded us like wayward sheep into a room with desks and test forms already on them.

You had to pass a written test to go to Vietnam?

A delicate-looking boy with shaggy blond hair plucked a harmonica from his back pocket as sergeants passed out pencils. The boy grinned at me with glazed blue eyes and began to blow some passable blues. Everyone stopped and listened to that boy. The two biggest sergeants, tall black men wearing Smoky the Bear hats shading penetrating eyes, lifted the boy from his seat as though he was weightless, and they hauled him toward the back of the room and out the door. The boy whimpered like a beaten dog and the harmonica fell from his mouth.

When the harmonica struck the floor, one of the sergeants kicked it into a metal waste basket by the door. We never saw that blond boy again. Matt and Clark looked at me, fear etched into their angelic faces, but nobody said anything. We weren't even in the Army yet and already we were taking casualties.

After the written exam, I picked up the harmonica and stuffed it in a back pocket as we were funneled into a room the size of a basketball court and ordered to strip. We carried our urine round in small cups, trying desperately

not to spill it. Body odors filled the room. Farts punctuated the otherwise chilling quiet like distant gunfire. There were hundreds of white and black butts and swinging penises in a silent conga line winding though the various exam stations.

Our piss was checked, armpits examined, blood pressure monitored, anal cavities inspected. We left dignity behind with our clothes. Our identities were stolen, too. One gangly farm kid tried to make a joke of it all and he pissed in someone else's cup. They took him away, too.

An erection, however accidental, was unthinkable, horrible, and I silently prayed it would not happen to me. One boy thought that might get him off the hook with the Army and so he got one up. The line opened up as if Moses was parting the Red Sea, and everyone gave that boy a lot of room. He stood right in front of me. Sergeants swooped in like bats. Another one of us was silently whisked away, the body count mounting.I wondered if there was a secret place, a dungeon, maybe, where they stashed the fuckups. Did they go to jail? Did sergeants beat them to a pulp? I worried I would break some rule unknown to me and end up in the secret dungeon, too. I felt palpable fear for the first time since my father's heat attack a few years before.

Then it was over as abruptly as it began, and we realized an entire day had been consumed in a dizzying swirl. We got something to eat and then we filed back on the bus for the trip home.

All three of us were still 1-A: perfectly available and healthy specimens that the Army had employment opportunities for in the exotic Republic of Vietnam.

Matt was the first to break the torpor, "One of those dickhead sergeants said we're definitely going to Vietnam. Guaranteed."

The three of us pondered that a moment.

"He can't know that for sure," Clark said. "He was just trying to scare you, man."

"Well, it's working, Clark. Okay?"

"Maye we'll go someplace else," Clark said, not sounding convinced. "I heard a guy say some of us might go to Germany."

"Who said that?" Matt said. "One of those fuckface sergeants?"

"No. The guy with the hardon said it."

"He's probably halfway to Vietnam by now. With his fucking hardon."

The trip home was much different than the voyage up. A few of the boys were in good spirits and slapped each other on shoulders because they'd failed their physicals and were safe. Some of the boys were proud to have passed because they believed that John Wayne bullshit and wanted to go fight. One of the boys bragged about failing for "psychological reasons." He seemed awful happy about it until I asked him what the psychological reasons were, and he just looked away, out a window.

"Oh, it's nothing I can really talk about," he said quietly.

Most of the boys took fitful naps, their faces mashed into the crooks between seats and windows. Some just stared stonily out windows at passing cornfields and soybean fields. Maybe some of them instead saw jungle, populated by black-clad Vietcong instead of farmers in their faded overhauls.

I tried to think about the Bears, and then the Cubs, but it just seemed suddenly like kid stuff. I didn't have a regular girlfriend, and so I tried to picture girlfriends I'd had, going back to junior high. I had trouble seeing all

their faces clearly. We crossed the Kankakee River, the water green and slow, and then around Gilman, I finally fell asleep and didn't wake up until we lurched into the Argus bus terminal amidst a downpour.

I became aware of the soldiers among us. The dead and survivors had been streaming back from Vietnam for several years, but I'd not noticed them until now. The war was on television all the time, regally narrated by Walter Cronkite, but my family had not been one of those routinely eating from TV trays and watching helicopters disgorge soldiers into wild elephant grass only to pick some of them up later in body bags.

I recalled during my senior year when a social studies teacher suddenly announced at the start of class that the war was over and the troops were coming home, that we had won, gloriously. He made a beautiful speech, and everyone was fascinated until he admitted he'd just made it up to get our attention to focus on current events. The war was definitely not over. Now, it beckoned me.

Jerry Ray Hawkins was the first survivor I met. We'd been on the track team together when I was a pukey sophomore and he was a senior. He never spoke to me back then because he was a senior stud and star two-twenty man, and I was just average in the eight-eighty; but he remembered me when I ran into him coming out of a bar. We went in and he bought me a beer. Jerry had joined up after he gradated and was shot in the knee in the A-Shau Valley and was home on leave. I'd never heard of the A-Shau Valley, and I vaguely thought I ought to look it up in an atlas at the library.

"My two-twenty days are over, man," Jerry Ray said, rubbing his bad knee. "Kaput, dude."

"How bad is it? I mean, Vietnam. How bad is it really?"

"It's fucked up, man. You don't want to fucking go there, man."

I nodded. "But I've been called up."

He arched his eyebrows and sipped some beer.

"Then you're fucked, dude. Keep your head down, troop."

"That's your best advice?"

"No, man. My best advice is fucking don't go there."

"I don't have a choice."

"Sure you do, Teddy Boy. Listen to me, man. You don't want to go to the fucking Nam."

"You went. You enlisted."

"Big time mistake, troop. Back then, I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground."

Jerry Ray had a deep tan, but as I looked closer into his dark, lined face, I realized he appeared older than twenty-one. I saw the weariness in his eyes. He limped too.

"Do you have to go back soon, Jerry Ray?"

"No fucking way, troop. I did my time. Now I get to ride out my hitch stateside."

"That's cool."

He chuckled. "It would be cool if you didn't have notions of running track in college, Teddy

Boy. Oh fucking well."

We got two more beers and sipped them quietly for a moment. Someone was playing pinball over in a corner, and when the balls smacked loudly against the glass cover, Jerry Ray winced.

"What's the worst part about Vietnam?"

"That it ain't fucking Illinois, man."

I nodded and waited a few seconds. "But other than that?"

"Other than that? Shit, man -- let's see," he said, pretending to have to think about it. "Oh, yeah—the worst thing is all those little people in black pajamas trying to shoot you. Yeah, that'd be my guess."

"I see."

"No, I seriously fucking doubt you see at all, Teddy Boy."

I looked over at the bar and several men on stools glanced at Jerry Ray. The bartender washing glasses stopped to look for a moment, too.

"On TV, they say we're winning hearts and minds," I said. "And turning the corner on the war."

"Light at the end of the tunnel, right?" Jerry Ray laughed, sort of maniacally, his voice too loud. The bartender shook his head and the two men on stools whispered something between them.

"If you believe that shit, Teddy Boy, then I've got a bridge in Brooklynn I'll sell you cheap, my friend."

I tried to picture him as he was back when we were on the track team, but all I got were fleeting images of him running. He really was quite fast.

"What's a punji?" I asked. "I heard that somewhere."

"You did, did you? Well, let me just tell you, man – see, Charlie sharpens up a stick so it will penetrate a boot. He dips the tip of that sharp stick in his own shit, so you get an infection. How about them apples? Shit, man, sometimes he even puts a snake down there in the pit with the punji sticks."

I sagged back in my chair.

Jerry Ray lit a cigarette.

"I never used to smoke," he said, "until I got to the Nam. My body used to be a temple, man."

He got up to go.

"Thanks for the beer, Jerry Ray."

"Least I could do. See you around – Ted."

He started for the door.

"Hey, what did you mean earlier, when you said I had a choice?"

Jerry Ray turned and pointed north. "Canada's that way," he said, and stepped out into bright sunshine.

Clark and Matt had already located Canada. They came by my house the day after I saw Jerry Ray and they had an atlas between them on the front seat of Matt's Corvair. I slid in back and we rode out to the forest preserve drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon.

"It's not really that far," Matt says as he scanned the atlas. "You just drive up to Detroit and then you're there, just across the river."

"Then what?"

"We become Canadians, Ted."

"Just like that?"

"There might be some test we'd have to take."

"What about your mom and dad?" Clark said. "And your sister?"

Matt pretended to study the atlas. I handed PBRs to them, from the cooler in the backseat.

"They'll have to go up there to see you, Matt," I said. "If you come back here, your ass gets hauled to jail. You'll be a draft dodger. A traitor."

"Don't you think I've considered all that, Ted?"

"Have you? Did you consider you might never get to come back?"

"The war won't last forever," Clark said.

"No, but the resentment might."

"It'll all work out okay," Matt said, forcing the optimism in his voice.

"I'm sure it will," I said, "as long as it involves jail time."

We sipped our beers quietly for a moment.

"Drive on up to the covered bridge," Clark said. "They've been busting people drinking and cruising. If we go down to the river, the county mounties will think we're just fisherman."

We carried the cooler down to the Sangamon River, just downstream from the bridge. It was a clear night, the sky glittering with stars. The moon was near full and bright. Crickets were in full symphony.

"You think they have PBR in Canada," Clark said. "I'd miss my Pabst."

"You'd drink Canadian beer, jerkoff," Matt said. "Molson, I think."

"They talk different up there, too," I said.

"It's still English, man," Matt said. "In Canuck land."

"I wouldn't call them that, Canucks. I don't think they like it."

"It'd be okay because we'd be Canucks, too."

"If you say so."

Clark said, "They speak French in Quebec."

"So, we don't fucking go to fucking Quebec," Matt said, irritated.

I tossed a pebble into the river.

"We should have brought rods," I said. "We could fish all night for bullheads."

Clark heaved a big rock into the river, and it made a heavy splash. "I wish we had some girls. We could fish all night for that, too."

We all giggled. Clark dug more beers from the cooler.

"They've got girls in Canada," Matt said. "Don't you worry about that."

"They'll keep you warm during those longass winters – like in that Beach Boys song," I said.

"And they speak English," Matt said. "Did I mention they speak English?"

"And they drink Molson," I said.

"That's so true," Clark said. "They do drink Molson."

"And if you ask real nice, Clark," I said, "they'll go over to Detroit and get you some Pabst. All you can carry. Ain't that right, Matt?"

"That's right. And they'll go buy your rubbers for you, too. Ain't that so, Ted?"

"Absolutely, man."

"But will they have my brand in Canada?" Clark said. "I'm a Trojan man."

"They'll get the Trojans when they get the beer," I said. "Those Canadian girls know what they're doing. But you could always try Canadian rubbers, to show patriotism."

"Nope," Clark said. "Trojans are made in the good old U.S.A. I'm sticking to them."

"Or, vice versa," I said, and Clark spat beer and laughed. A car crossed the bridge just upstream, and then a spotlight came on.

"County Mountie," Matt said.

The spotlight beam danced first along the far bank, for maybe ten seconds, and then it crossed the river and came close to us before it went off. The car sat there for a good thirty seconds or more, then moved off slowly.

"Those county boys are lazy," Matt said. "If something doesn't jump out at them, they don't get too worked up."

"Do you think they took us for fishermen?" Clark said.

"No, jerkoff," Matt said. "He figured we're having a homo orgy."

"You're real funny, Matt," Clark said. "You should be on the Smothers Brothers Show."

"That's what I'll do in Canada. I'll tell jokes about Americans and get my own TV show."

"Let's head back," I said. "I don't want to stay out here all night."

"Pussy," Matt said. "In Vietnam, you'll have to stay out all night in the jungle, with snakes and tigers and shit like that."

"Fuck-you, Matt," I said.The county Mountie had gone toward Route 150 and so we took country roads back toward Argus. Clark passed out in the front seat. I was buzzed but doing okay and talked to Matt to help keep him awake.

"You guys really going?" I said.

"Where?"

"Canada, jerkoff."

After a long moment, he said, "Yeah, I suppose so. Sure as shit beats Vietnam."

We barreled along county roads, wind whistling in through the windows. I put my arms around the passenger seat and leaned closer to Matt.

"You never said why," I said. "Why we'd go. Is it because the war's immoral, like hippies say?"

Matt twisted the radio dial, looking for WLS out of Chicago.

"I don't think about that Jane Fonda shit very much. I just don't want to get shot. And I don't think I can shoot anybody. Clark feels the same way."

"I hear you."

My stomach suddenly hurt. An awful truth bubbled up from deep inside my very core . I'd never really questioned any of it, not the draft notice, or the physical, and not even the war. I fidgeted in the backseat and felt something hard beneath me. It was the harmonica that boy dropped in Chicago, at the physicals. That boy, in his own way, had resisted. I had not. Like debris in a current, I'd allowed myself to just be carried along. I wasn't a hotspur after all.

Matt pulled us over on an overpass overlooking the interstate so he could piss. We straddled I-57. Matt turned on the emergency flashers so we wouldn't get rear-ended. But it was a lonely, dark overpass on a dark and lonely county road and there wasn't going to be much traffic. When Matt came back, he searched the radio again and found WLS. He patted his hands on the steering wheel in time while we listened to Jimi Hendrix sing "All Along the Watch Tower:"

There must be some way out of here, said the joker to the thief.
There's so much confusion, I can't get no relief.

Matt and I sang along as we watched cars speeding along the interstate, north to Chicago, or south to Memphis. Matt struck the steering wheel harder and faster with the song, like he was a rock drummer. I thumped the back of the passenger seat awkwardly.

The car lurched forward. We turned on to the interstate, headed north. It began to rain as we slipped into the slipstream of cars. I was surprised there was so much traffic on I-57 so late at night. People going everywhere. I was wide awake now, trying to remember how many Argus exits there were before we passed the point of no return.

Chevrolet Tango

KURT OLSSON

Remember when men smoked pipes
toting around tiny tools to finesse the dottle
and the hollow *chock, chock* of meerschaum against glass,

and ashtrays the color of bourbon
one could stack as high as a basketball rim, and how
anything handy could be an ashtray—bottle top, soda can,
pant cuff—

and lighters, monogrammed, glinting
in your hand like fool's gold, and Diamond matches
and using your thumbnail to flick a light for a friend's
and only then your cigarette,

and don't forget mini-skirts, heat lightning slither of nylon
and strutting like cowboys, tight jeans and tighter pockets
when pockets
did work, hands submerged, thumbs and all, like Dylan's
on the cover of *Freewheelin'*,

and Colt 45 sunrises, chicken-fried steak, highways cut clean
through cornflowers, and flooding the engine to catch up
    to the curve
of a forearm, posed from a car window, black satin polish
    flicking ash Nile queen style.

Remember all the mistakes you wanted to make.

(Im)Permanence

The Camus Conspiracy

MENAHEM HAIKE

Before I distort them beyond recognition, let me begin by stating the facts: Nobel Laureate Albert Camus celebrated 1960's New Year's Day in his house in Lourmarin with his wife, Francine Faure, and their twins, Jean and Catherine. Michel and Janine Gallimard joined their long-time friends in welcoming the decade along with their eighteen-year-old daughter, Anne. On January 2nd, the Camus family was about to leave for Paris by train when Albert had a change of heart and decided to use the trip as an excuse for a joy ride with Michel Gallimard in his luxurious '56 Facel Vega. The Gallimards leave on January third and spend a night in Thoissey, about halfway between Lourmarin and Paris. Then, shortly after passing picturesque Pont-sur-Yonne, Michel loses control of the car, skids off the road, and crashes into one tree then another, killing the two men in the front seat. Janine and Anne survive.

Now, let us try and let in, carefully, the thought that Albert Camus was the one driving the '56 Vega. Worse, that he had made a conscious decision and pulled the wheel with the aim of ending his life at whatever cost. A harrowing thought, with grave implications for those of us who have ever been reassured by Camus' absurd reasoning. But would it be purely arbitrary of us to imagine—on the outdoor platform, as the train for Paris beckons over the amicable leave-taking chatter—Camus' familiar

black and white grin turn into a thin pale line, overcast by stubble, his tall forehead creasing as an unthinkable decision is being made in his heart of hearts; or accept that more than with any other character in his *Plague*, he had sympathized with Joseph Grand, the bureaucrat laboring his life away over one line , the first or last I cannot remember, of a novel or love letter, ruminating a single thought he'd once proclaimed most important? In fact, we do not need to go in circles to propose that Albert Camus has been suicidal for a large part of his life; that ultimately, he did not—could not—find peace after having spotted the life-embracing conclusion he had found somewhere between Sisyphus' teeth.

We find Albert flat on his back in the bed at Lourmarin, spending his last nights staring at a motionless ceiling fan. Desperately, compulsively, he reaches for an empty glass on his nightstand while probing behind his ear. The owls outside mock him until the larks take their turn in the morning. Once a mélange of spring and carnal scents, the room is suffocating. If details such as this have any meaning to you, we can summon the phantom of Maria Casares to pass her hand through her old lover's curls the night before New Year's Eve, then vanish.

Otherwise, let us take his wife's, Francine's, place: humming Bach and whispering comforting words into his ears, then dozing off. When she wakes, her husband's rising chest and brown eyes have already absorbed the sun. It seems to have dawned on him ages ago. He is trapped in an old, unrelenting thought, one he himself pulled her out of when she had felt the same. Unfortunately, she can't seem to remember how he did that. Now it's her turn to excuse his absence during the day. She tells the guests that he's a little melancholic, remembering to euphemize for Anne and the twins. At night, if it comes to that, she'll be

the one writing extolling notes in the margins of Simone Weil's thoughts.

She spends the first day of the year packing. She danced the 50's away last night. Good riddance. The alcohol sat well with Albert. He sleeps late and wakes with enough vitality to fold some shirts and underwear. The next day they leave for Paris by train so as not to be driving in their weary state. But he makes one of those maddening last-minute changes and decides to leave with the Gallimards. She pulls Janine aside and asks her to keep an eye on him. On the train, she wakes up startled and speaks a silent prayer.

***

It takes some banter, but on the first day Michel doesn't find it too hard to convince his friend that he should remain in the passenger seat and take in Auvergne and the Alps through the window. Camus' snoring exquisitely accompanies Marie José's popular *La Chanson d'Orphée* on the radio, an incident which young Anne Gallimard imaginatively documents in her diary as sounding like a conversation between the green hills on the western horizon. "Francine will be happy," Janine thinks to herself as she watches Albert sleep through the side-view mirror. At night, at the inn in Thoissey, she presses her ear to Camus' closed door and, not without considering a light knock, listens to the regularity of his breath for some time before finally convincing herself that the monster lies dormant.

Next day it's Janine who nods at Michel with approval when Albert extends a hand, wearing his fool's grin, and asks for driver's privilege. Michel grabs hold of the handle above the window as he sits down in the passenger seat.

The Gallimards are humming different fragments of *La Chanson d'Orphée*, looking out of the car's open windows as Camus pulls out of the parking lot and gets back on the road. None of them notices that Albert is chewing on his cigarette filter, turning it into bitter pulp in his mouth, nor can they see his eyes squint behind his sunglasses, making sterile calculations meant to prevent collateral damage.

By noon, the day grows unusually warm, and a pile of overcoats has formed on the backseat between Anne and Janine. Though local almanacs recorded an unusually dry week, the police report includes a wet patch on the Route Nationale 5. That, we'll venture, might have been overkill. Speed, an oft-underestimated force, managed to send the large cruiser through one plane tree and into the second's wide trunk which broke the car into pieces. Nevertheless, the dead Vega was able to share ample information with us: the arm of the speedometer (held at Villeblevin's *Musée de la Sécurité Routière*) still points to the small line indicating 145km/h, or 90 mph and the clock (owned by a private collector) still flashes a faint 13h55. "Since speed was free at the time," Google translates Camus' more exhaustive French Wikipedia article, "television news report of excessive speed and a tire blowout." Anne, whom we are most concerned about, is clinging to her parents' coats on her way out the window and survives, leaving us with the angelic image of the young woman floating horizontally through Bourgogne's sky. Albert dies instantly. Fractured skull and broken neck. Janine injures her legs. Michel suffers from several fractures and dies six days later in a nearby hospital.

Presumably no crime was committed, and yet we are not surprised to see a local police officer at the scene, warming Anne's shoulders with aggressive rubbing. Another is wrapping barricade tape around the bruised tree trunk.

We can tell they are amateurs by the investigator's face as he arrives at the scene in his Citroën DS. He cuts the tape with a knife and points to the tree's clearly unnatural damage. His furious expression is enough to make the officer rush and clumsily gather the fallen tape in his arms. The investigator hurries towards the dead man in the driver's seat and freezes when he recognizes the face.

And this is where things get tricky for us: what I'm asking of you now is to concede that our backwoods investigator, who in less than a decade would lead the violent suppression of student demonstrators in the whole region, had read *The Fall*, not without some reservations, that he'd devoured *The Plague* and, most importantly, that he'd braved *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He leans down to see the lost man wearing a sad victor's smile, his fingers grotesquely still holding the bloodstained wheel. "Qu'est-ce que t'as fait?" he asks in a whisper. But before he can lay a consoling hand on the dead man's shoulder, he is struck by a vision. He sees the front pages of *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, with a picture of the bloody face he has in front of him, a caption in tiny print, and a reference to page 3 crouching beneath the title *Recherché: Le Souris de Sisyphe*, then the figure of his 20-year-old son applying excess pressure with his razor and falling to the bathroom floor. He sees contorted, hopeless Frenchmen swerving their cars into the Seine en masse, their bodies floating face up and crashing like waves against the walls of Notre-Dame and Sainte-Chapelle. Before opening his eyes, he sees the desperate souls of the future jumping out of their flying saucers after having read that the man who just quieted the suicide-sirens in their minds had ended up yielding to his own; at that point, our investigator could only hope for some crazed future historian to recolor the truth, blaming the KGB for another writer's death, if only to make it all stop.

The vein on the investigator's forehead is swollen as he finds himself back near Route Nationale 5, stepping on the bloodstained thorny fruit of the plane tree. He raises two trembling fingers to his mouth and lets out a sharp whistle that summons the two goons to help him tamper with the scene. Suppose that they pull it off impeccably; that these clowns spent more time in theaters than in training. "It took two hours to extract the man's body from the crumpled sheet metal," their report states.

***

We cannot begin to understand how the man got Anne Gallimard to hide the truth behind her innocent father's death—and this incongruence should cheer us up quite a bit—but when Janine woke up in the hospital to the news of her dying husband, our investigator was standing by her bed. At first, she thought it's because of the meds that she'd heard Monsieur l'Agent refer to her husband as the driver. She asked him, perplexed, to repeat what he had just said. He admitted to having hoped she wouldn't remember a thing. At which point she snapped back, reminding him that leg injuries rarely result in memory loss. Years later, when she would jot down her memories of the incident, she'd fail to remember any distinguishing feature in the investigator's face: "Just a cop. A head popping out of an unpressed uniform. A cop and a widow in a hospital room. Does his face even matter?" She would, however, remember that the investigator had surprisingly correct French, that he seemed shy and not yet poisoned blind by notions of justice. Not only that the man had read Camus' entire oeuvre, but he had also bought, he'd told her, the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade's collection, since he was "impatient to read Gaston Gallimard's spiritual son's

tastes, may God help him." Then he moved to tell her of his vision. He sat down by her numb feet and looked pathetic as he read from an asymmetrically folded sheet of typewritten paper. From where she was lying, the frenzied red crosses and corrections were visible on the page. When he finished, he called it "his humble gospel" and asked her to take into consideration the grave implications for the French youth "if the man who had vanquished suicide would be found vanquished by it."

In that final note found in Madame Gallimard's attic circa 2007, we read that "that facile parallel uttered by the sweaty cop who sat by me on a hospital bed almost convinced me *not* to play along." Then, after a tall white gap on the page, "One wonders how much silence this fear of contagion has engendered? How many great men, dying their heroic natural deaths in life's passengers' seats, have actually performed the cowardly snag at the car's wheel?"

Stained-Glass Jesus

RICHARD DOWNING

Papi was not dead although it would appear to most people that he was. All right, to all of them. *You're lying in an open casket inside St. Somebody-Or-Other's Cathedral and what else you going to think? Resting? Just resting?* Papi laughed to himself in a way that he didn't find particularly funny: *That's one long nap, motherfucker.* He was a little uneasy even thinking "motherfucker" in church, *but when you're face up in a casket there's not a lot to lose—or win—*he reasoned. *Especially win.*

Papi started to consider that maybe he was dead—in the traditional sense—as in dead-and-buried dead with the buried soon to come. But he wasn't *dead* dead—he knew what was going on—OK, maybe not "knew" exactly, not everything, but he could hear and smell—and see, but just straight up—the sides of the coffin blocking the views on all sides. Plus he couldn't move. Plus he was laid out face up. *Been stiffed before, but never like this.* Papi wanted to laugh at his own joke, but his being dead seemed to put a damper on the moment. *Moment? I wish.*

He was aware of the human sounds first. The voices would come next, and their sounds would become words, sentences, things he'd have to deal with. But first there were just the human sounds: the shuffling of leather soles on tile—linoleum Papi figured from the occasional squeak—probably some teenager dragging his feet, wanting to be anywhere but here, wishing Papi'd had the decency to die at a more convenient time, like either before

the teenager had impregnated a friend of his girlfriend, denied everything, signed up for community college classes he never planned to attend but figured, "What the fuck? At least I can always tell everyone I attended some college" or else after he'd disappeared himself to another state right when the court was putting real pressure on him to pay child support—yeah, either of those—those would have been better times for Papi to have cashed in his chips.

The low sounds of people talking came next. Not really somber sounds, but more like is-this-somber-enough-for-a-memorial-service? sounds. And the laughs. Intermittent, true, but there. Maybe just a single "Ha," but there. Deep. Male. Papi—dead and laid out Papi—could only look straight up and Stained-Glass Jesus wasn't talking, so Papi tried to recognize the voice, to place it in his past, to ID the source of these single, intermittent laughs. Maybe the laugher was thinking good thoughts, of good times, good times he'd had with Papi, happy memories—maybe he wasn't making light of the situation. Papi did a quick brain scan, but no specific "happy memories" with any of the people likely to have come to offer their condolences, begrudgingly or otherwise, came to mind. Mostly Papi had fucked people over.

Better them than me.

Papi's motto—tattooed on his left cheek—ass cheek—backwards so he could bend over, stick his butt in front of a mirror and read his guiding mantra to himself. Which he did. More than once. It was reassuring, just knowing it was there, always, in the mirror. Om-like. *Kind of aerobic, too, the way I'd have to twist around to read it. Wish I could twist around and read it right now. Better anybody than me—that's what it oughta say.*

It was becoming clearer that the laugh might, indeed, not have not been happy-memory induced. It was growing louder, coarser, more frequent. Then a second voice. A loud *SHHH!* and that was it for both laugh and laugher, Papi figured. He wanted to turn his head, for the coffin sides not to be there. *Better them than me.* Papi worried that in his current state—which seemed likely to be a prolonged one—he'd no longer be able to read his personal philosophy for which he'd used an elderly aunt's rent money to have permanently inked backward across his backside. *I was a kid, for God's sake—teenager, tops.* And there was also the problem of holding a mirror.

Now the sounds were becoming somewhat more distinct, especially those from the front row. "I came to see his dead ass, to make sure, just to make sure." Papi didn't recognize the voice; it sounded almost echo-like—probably the effects of lying inside a coffin's walls—so he couldn't be sure if what was being said was being said in jest or was more damning than just joking around. Papi liked joking around. Always had. He might like it, he thought, if some of these semi-somber-sounding mourners would joke around. Make fun of him as he always had of them—banter, that's it, banter like they used to. That would explain the laughing. And the other things they said.

Assholes.

*

He knew he was in church. He was looking straight up—Jesus Christ was looking straight down. At him. At the people in the pews. *Stained-Glass Jesus looking straight down—from the heavens—or heaven, singular, period—at his fucked-up congregation, the good people of St. Whatever-the-Hell-This-Place-*

Was. Don't misunderstand. This was Papi's church, had been at least, sort of, as in, "Papi, do you go to church?"

"Sure do."

"Which one?"

"Stained-Glass Jesus."

Enough said. Everyone knew the church with the stained-glass skylight, the church where sunbeams passed through a glowing, roof-top Savior and traced the direction of His eyes as His gaze fell upon His flock.

One big, fucked-up flock.

"Fair enough, Papi, fair enough." The voice emanated from the stained-glass figure above, filtering down to where the man in the casket lay. "Maybe we'll get into that. But what's of interest now is that you always told people—friends, co-workers, cousins, job interviewers, especially job interviewers, people you met making deals, and just about anybody else you came into contact with—that your church was Stained-Glass Jesus. If I'm correct—and you'll find that I am—this served you three purposes: (1) no more need be said—everyone knows Stained-Glass Jesus, (2) it gave the distinct impression that you were a member—you weren't—or at that you at least regularly—or even occasionally—attended that church—you didn't, and (3) it led people to believe that you knew the actual name—the real name—of the church—you didn't. Still don't. And now you're lying there, looking up at a colored-glass version of Me, your Lord and Savior, and you don't even know where you are. Where you really are."

"Saint Stained-Glass Jesus, Son of God, Holy Cathedral—how 'bout that? Close enough, OK?"

"Sure, why not? Close enough. And it's not like you don't have the time to learn the right name if, in fact, you've got the wrong one. Time you've got, Papi."

"Listen to the comedian. 'Time you've got'—like I don't

know that. Or like I'm not starting to. Who'd of thought Jesus—Stained-Glass Jesus—was going to turn out to be a funny guy?"

*

The twins' voices—then the twins themselves—were the first to get to the coffin. *The grandkids, Bonnie and Ronnie—what the fuck, they're too short to even look inside.*

"I'm getting on your shoulders first. Bend over, Ronnie."

"Tell me what he looks like. What's a dead person look like?"

"Hold still a minute. Good. Now stand up. Grab the side of the coffin, Ronnie—for support. Pull. Harder. Pull yourself straight up so I can see over the side. Good. Son of a bitch."

"'Son of a bitch' what, Bonnie? What do you see? Is it Pap-papi?"

"Of course it's Pap-papi, stupid. Whose funeral you think we're at anyway?"

"You could fall you know—I could make you fall."

"OK, OK—"

"So what's he like—what's he look like—dead, I mean. I want to see."

"He's just lying there. Seems like he ought to be saying something. Swearing at me or something. Teaching us more new words to tell the sitter."

"Or Mom."

"Yeah, or Mom. I can't believe you said, 'Fuck you' to Mom."

"Me neither. I didn't know. Pap-papi sure did though—thought it was the funniest thing in the world."

"Mom didn't."

"No, Mom didn't. Can you reach him? Can you touch him?"

"Lean in a bit closer. There. I think I can. From here I think I can. Don't move."

"So do it. Touch his cheek. Can you reach his cheek? What's it like touching a body, Bonnie? A dead one? Did you do it?" The light streaming through the skylight—through Jesus's eyes—was now falling full on Papi's face as if to set his cheeks, nose, and forehead on fire.

"Squat down, Ronnie. Now. I'm getting off. You can touch him if you want to. I'm through up here."

"Where you going? You got to hoist me up. It's my turn. C'mon, Bons."

"Here comes Mom. Maybe she'll lift your ass up to see Pap-papi—if you ask her nicely."

*

"'Never underestimate the power of a good vocabulary, kids.' That's what I'd tell them, Jesus. More words you know, the better you can get your point across. That's why I taught 'em the words that I taught 'em. And with a straight face, I'm proud to say. What the fuck. It's what they wanted to know anyway. They're kids, for God's sake. Poor Jeanee. I'd say, 'Try this one out next time you have a babysitter.' But they could never wait. They're kids. Jeanee always heard it first. Then I'd get an earful, like it was my fault for trying to expand her kids' vocabularies. 'What the fuck, Papi!' she'd say, and I'd just laugh—couldn't help it—and tell her she was helping to prove my point and then I wouldn't be allowed around the grandkids for a while, not 'til the next birthday or Christmas or whatever. No biggie."

*

"Don't just keep staring at me. You're starting to creep me out, Jesus."

"'No biggie,' Papi? You turned your own grandchildren into a couple of potty mouths. I'd say that classifies as a biggie."

"Forgive me, OK? That how it works? Sorry. No harm, no foul. So now we're good, right?"

"Just like that?"

"As far as I know, yes. I ask you for forgiveness—and you forgive me. That's your job, right? I'm the human being here—or was—don't know what the fuck I am now—but I was the human being, I was supposed to be the jerk, the sinner, the fallen man. Hey, I did my job—in spades. You do yours." Papi watched as a single, small cloud edged across the skylight, darkening Stained-Glass Jesus for just a moment.

"Fair is fair, Papi."

"It's not like Jeanee was going to be raising them to be two little clean-mouthed angels. You know that. You're Jesus. You know how Jeanee could be—"

"And who raised her? When he was there, that is?"

"I get it. I get it. A real Mr. Know-It-All you are."

"That's pretty much how we Gods roll, Papi."

"So where am I going to roll, Stained-Glass? After this little event is over, I mean?"

"We can discuss that later. Right now you've got company."

*

"How's it feel to be deader'n a goddamned doornail, Papi."

"Who the fuck are you?" Papi strained to turn a head that wouldn't move.

"He can't hear you, Papi. Only I can hear you now. You want to talk, you look straight up at—how did you put

it?—at 'Stained-Glass.' Your Lord and possible Savior. I'm not going anywhere."

"Look at you, Papi—all dressed up and nowhere to go. Ha!"

"'Ha?' It's the laugher. I don't even know this guy. What's he doing here? Rhetorical question, Jesus, rhetorical question. Just stay quiet for a minute and let me hear what this asshole's got to say."

"They only give us a few minutes for the viewing. So now that we're alone, so to speak, I want to explain—"

"Explain?"

"—why I whacked you—why I shot you in the bar. In the lung actually. OK, both lungs. And the liver. And the heart. Article in the *Times* was pretty detailed."

"I was shot? Son of bitch. I thought it was a heart attack or a stroke. This motherfucker shot me?"

"I know you can't hear me, Papi—or anybody else for that matter—but I still want to tell you that—while I'm not really sorry 'cause everything I've heard about you points to your being pretty much a complete asshole—I didn't mean to shoot you."

"You shot me in both lungs, the heart, and the, the—"

"Liver."

"Thanks, Stained-Guy. And the liver and you didn't mean to? Son of a bitch."

"Mistaken identity. Bar was dark. I was told the guy I wanted would be sitting on the middle stool, wearing a baseball jersey, red—a big, loud guy—remind you of anyone?—I'd know it was the right guy if everybody was listening to him. Turned out to be you instead. My bad."

"So this other guy, this other me that turned out to be not me—who was he? Sounds like he might've been a celebrity somebody or other, everybody hanging on him like that. Athlete. So what big superstar you get me mixed up with, pal?"

"Remember, Papi, he can't—"

"—hear me. Got it, Jesus. Over and out."

"So mostly I'm here to let you know there's no hard feelings. You may be an asshole—maybe not—either way, I didn't have anything against you. Didn't even know you. You just picked a bad night to sit on the middle stool. And wear the wrong team's jersey. Oh yeah, and I've been hitting on Jeanee. She's sitting next to me, front row. Pretty hot. Subtract those two little foul-mouth brats and she might be a keeper. So thanks for listening, Papi. And thanks for letting me fuck your daughter. Ha!"

*

"Next!"

*

"I was told he was a member of the church, a part of my congregation. But I swear I don't recognize this man, not at all. It's just good practice, good business, for a minister to remember each member of his flock—and I do. And I do not know this man."

"Pick up the pace, Padre—there's others in line. Who you talking to anyway? Yourself?"

"Nevertheless, I shall pray for his soul and for his passing—"

"Hey, prayers answered on the second part."

"—into God's heaven."

"So what's the deal with Mr. Robes-and-Bible, Jesus? You listening to him? About taking me up to—into—over to—wherever the hell it is—heaven?"

"There are some men of robes and Bibles who might do better to pray for their own salvations."

"Assholes, right?"

Jesus smiled.

*

"Next!"

*

"This is the quietest you've ever been, Pops. At least you won't be teaching Ronnie and Bonnie any more—" Jeanee raised her hands and waved air quotes over the coffin "—new words. I want to say I love you, Pops, but I don't want to, too. I mean, you kept leaving me, screwing around on Mom until she drank herself to death."

"She was well on her way before I met her, Sweetheart."

"You screwed over everybody who ever made a deal with you. Swear to God—" Jeanee looked quickly up at the skylight, just a glance "—or to Jesus in this case—no one was more surprised than me when they told me it was a case of mistaken identity, that it would make it that much harder to catch the guy. Tell you the truth, I don't know how hard they're really trying. Biggest surprise to me was that you didn't get whacked a long time ago. I'm no saint, Poppi. Truth is, I'm turning into a mini you—*shit*—I didn't want to cry, goddamn it—but that's what's been happening to me—I'm becoming you and I know it and I can't stop it and I swear to God or Jesus or whoever the fuck it's supposed to be up there, I hate you for it."

*

"I got the sense she's not too crazy about the old man."

"Oh, you are a bright one, Papi."

"I was being sarcastic, Jesus."

"I know—"

"Because you know every blabbity blah blah blah thing there is to know. Right?"

*

"Stained-Glass ... Jesus, while I've got you here—"

"While who's got whom where?"

"OK, so I'm not going anywhere soon—at least not anywhere of my own choosing."

"You've already chosen where you're going, Papi. You've been choosing every day of your life."

Papi paused. "Even the day I was born?"

"Fair enough, maybe not that day, but—"

"See, the kicker is that there's always a kicker—just like that: every day of your life except for certain days—I mean what the fuck, Jesus."

The sun was now straight above the stained-glass skylight and Jesus's eyes were glowing. "Including today, my foul-mouthed friend—you're still choosing."

"See, there it is again. 'Foul-mouthed' or 'friend'—which is it? And alive, dead. Which is it? Which version of me is it that's been making this choice?" Had he been able to, Papi would have shaken his head, hard, from side to side. "You make it so difficult."

"It's clear that one of us does."

"Lines like that aren't going to win you any friends. I hate passive-aggressive. Always have."

"Sometimes we hate that which we are."

"Now you're sounding old school, getting a little Old Testament-y on me."

"That book didn't involve me, Papi. Not directly. I mean it did and it didn't."

"That is exactly why I quit going to church."

"Your never went to church, not enough to speak of."

"OK, it's exactly why I never wanted to go to church. That better?"

"You didn't want to go to church simply because you didn't want to go to church. Some things aren't that hard to figure out."

"And some things are. So are you the one decides where I end up? Or is that God's job?"

"That's—"

"Or are you God? ... and the Son of God? Son of God, Son or God, Son and God. Help me here, Stained-Glass. Which is it?"

"Let's just say six of one, half dozen the other."

"Cut to the chase, Riddle Man. Who pulls the trigger on me? Besides that asshole in the bar, I mean—Mr. Ha Ha. Is it you? Who decides where Papi spends forever?"

"The decision has been made, is being made—right now, in fact—and will be made." The sun had arced ever so slightly west, tempering the glow in Jesus's eyes to an almost warm ember.

"Enough. Fuck it. I give up. I just give up."

"That's a step in the right direction, my son."

"I said, 'Enough.'"

*

"Next!"

*

"You told me you were going to take my money and pay my rent for me so I wouldn't have to leave my apartment and walk down there because I was old and it would be better and safer for me if I just stayed at home and

took it easy, that you were happy to help me out. Well you certainly were happy to help me out, weren't you? Out of my apartment. Out of my money. Three months' rent, Papi. Gone to who knows where. My nephew. Blood. I trusted you. You made it sound like I could trust you, like you cared about me, about what happened to this old lady."

"What the—what's Aunt Emma doing here? She's dead. Long dead."

"So are you, Papi. You no longer have the restraints of time and space that you used to have."

"Don't have the what? Jesus, I can't even move much less—"

"It means that the living and the dead along with those who will be the living and the dead are all one—not that they'll all end up in the same place. Aunt Emma can pay you her last respects as easily and as surely as can your grandchildren."

"That wasn't sounding a lot like respect, Stained-Glass."

"Sometimes respect comes from hearing others tell us who they think we really are."

"That would be exactly numero last-o on the things I want to hear right now. Or ever. Where'd Aunt Emma go?"

"She said what she wanted to say, Papi, what she needed to say, what you needed to hear."

"Bitch."

*

The line continued filing past Papi, some glancing briefly at the man in the casket, some taking a moment to say a few words, and some, starting to redden in the face as they spoke, having to be pulled away from the casket.

"One more to go, Papi."

"Oh, what *don't* you know, Stained-Glass Son of God? I wish I could see better. Is the next one dead or alive?"

"This one is alive, Papi, in your sense of the word. He's the last one in line who's come to pay his respects. If you don't mind, I'd like to listen in."

"Like you haven't been eavesdropping on every other asshole who's dropped by."

*

"Next!"

*

"Sir, you probably don't remember me—"

"You got that right"

"—but there's something I've wanted to say to you for a long time. You coached me in Little League. In the Regional Championships. We were down one run, last inning, seems like all our guys were getting hurt, outfield collisions, turned ankles, Freddy got beaned—"

"That I do remember. Right on the old cabeza. Hauled him out. On a stretcher as I recall. Better him than me."

"—and we've got runners on second and third, nobody out, Freddy at the plate when he got—"

"Cold cocked, bigger'n shit."

"—beaned and had to leave the game."

"HAD to—you bet your sweet ass he had to—cocky little shit as I remember."

"You put Benjy on first to run for Freddy because Benjy was fast—"

"Benjy, Benjy ... not ringing a bell."

"—and now I'm walking to the plate to bat, and I know

you're looking up and down the bench for someone to pinch hit for me because I could hear you muttering, 'Little twit can't hit worth a shit, not a shit,' but everyone who'd been on the bench had already been put in to replace all the injured guys—"

"Yeah, it's coming back to me. Shit for luck even then."

"—and I heard you say, and this is a quote or I wouldn't say it in church, "What the fuck. Nobody out. Let 'em strike out. What the fuck."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"But I didn't strike out, sir. Remember that? I didn't strike out."

"Oh, you little asshole. Now I remember—the whole fucking thing. You hit into a—"

"I hit into a triple play. Game over."

"Regionals over!"

"Regionals over. I grounded to third for a force, throw to second to force Benjy, and I was running as hard as I could—"

"Oh, God, it's you. Franklin."

"—and you remember that cleat I could never keep tied—"

"'Cause you couldn't learn to tie a double knot, you dumbass—"

"—because I could never learn to tie a double knot? Well, I was about to beat the throw to first when my—"

"Your fucking shoe fell off."

"—cleat came off and—"

"You fell on your fucking face."

"—and I fell so the throw to first was in time. Triple—"

"fucking"

"—play. Game—"

"over."

"—over.

"I remember walking back to the dugout with my head down but not so far that I couldn't see you throwing your hat down and kicking up dirt and gyrating around—"

"Gyrating?"

"—and hearing you mutter—well, scream, really, "What a useless piece of—"

"shit"

"—crap.

"So I got to the dugout and more than anything I didn't want to cry and I remember your coming straight over to me and my heart about stopped and I wanted to look for my mom in the stands and you grabbed me with your right arm up high around the shoulders—"

"Hopefully trying to strangle your ass."

"—and I was crying pretty hard and you said—"

"You suck, kid, you truly suck."

"'Franklin—' I remember that because it was the first time all year you got my name right '—quit crying for one—' and again I realize we're in church but it's a quote '—goddamned minute and look me in the eye.' Which I did. The look-you-in-the-eye part."

"So what'd I do? Spit, I hope."

"You asked in as calm a voice as I've ever heard, from anyone really, 'Franklin, did you try as hard as you could?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' And I was shaking pretty hard and you were squeezing even harder—"

"Trying to strangle your ass. You're not listening to me."

"—and you said, 'You ran hard. I'm proud of you, son.'"

"I said what?!?"

And your question became my mantra

"Mantra?"

"'Did you try as hard as you could?' Asking myself that

has gotten me through some tricky times, some pretty tricky times. I just came here to say thanks, Coach."

"I said, 'I'm proud of you, son'? I said that? Son of a bitch."

"Just so you know, I've kept in touch off and on with Freddy over the years, but he was never quite the same.

"I can't believe I said that, Jesus. I just can't believe it."

The Water Slums

KATHY TIERNEY

Dissidence and suitcases. Nothing he ever
wanted to make permanent. This agreement
between movement and monotony

 at the workshop in Guiyu
where he works
 a sixteen-hour day, every open field nailed
down in his mind. Unable to lightly drift
in the sun or wind. Every thought under
a wooden plank.

The day moves like a whale.
As he works
 seated on his box, his fingers drudge
like drowned wands as he pulls
apart circuit boards, snips
cables, grinds plastic computer cases, fills
more sacks for e-alchemy
by the river, where workers squat
metal-pickling in tubs and scrying
for valuable metal.

Later, bonfires of trash and circuit boards burn
on the riverbank. Pollutants sucked
into the soil, the river in slums
of lead, mercury, and tin. Bitten
water. Something still gasps

from his childhood—throbs
of fish in the river, shrimps, crabs, and spiral
shells—the unsolved grass.

Talking To an Idiot
Dubai

OMAR SABBAGH

I see him each night on the cusp of dream.
The noise the nighttime window permits dies away
the moment this young man comes upon the scene,
hawking his wares to me, the older one, who's dozing
on his side, finding his passage through the day
that's passed by recalling its joys, a few small things,
and—with a quick and sly and birdy movement— choosing to
forget the others that were lesser, less…

The young chap I see is ebullient, effusive: it's obvious
that he's been lashed, thrashed, a tad too much by love,
and each time he appears, like a gauntlet, a dare, a glove
flung-down for me to see, I—the older man, being like being
to the quicks of that becoming that slips before my eyes—
I think to slap him across the face, a wholesale belting, welting,
only to let him
know of the absolute disgrace, the shame he's brought me to.
But then I say that I have a daughter, and that I must stay: an
idiot too.

About Not Knowing What You're Talking About

Marbella, Spain

OMAR SABBAGH

It's late at night, the streetlamps doing their business
in wasp and pitted bee. I can hear the cars' motors rush
past with that swishing sound you come to expect
from a fast-nosed street. It's late, and I cannot predict
what words may emerge, begotten, created, followed
like a river, or like a path of stones, bold with sorrows.

In fact, it might be better to admit it now: I don't quite
know what I'm talking about. A bit of a long-borne idiot,
I make my way, trying to form something whole, but nothing
washes a stream across all bright lights, late at night,
and the mind, like a broken fruit, tastes off somehow,
and in the strength of its eating moves—only slow, lost
pleasure.

Nothing was ever said here. No thought, by no measure.
Look: how the cars rushing past are just charged red lights.

Drive North

RALPH ROBERT MOORE

Drive north on Missouri State Highway 112, and as the exits get farther and farther apart, look for exit 449.

Once you're at the end of the exit ramp, you'll come to a four-way intersection with ruins at two corners. Used to be a gas station, used to be some kind of diner, but now they're just white stones rising a few feet above weeds, and a big metal sign in front of the diner that's lost almost all of its letters. Impossible to tell what it once said. And at this point, who cares?

Turn right, don't bother with the car radio because there are no stations reaching this far into nothing. Drive past one field after another to the distant tree line. Along the way, every once in a while, on the left and the right, you'll pass what's left of different farmhouses, now just crumbling foundations and utter silence.

Once you reach the tree line and enter the forest, the road goes from concrete to dirt about five miles in. That's where you have to slow way down. Bumpity-bump, mile after mile, forearms bouncing on your steering wheel.

About an hour later, when the road ends, tall trees in front of you, park. You can lock up if you want, but there's really no need. Keep walking straight, into the woods, stay to the narrow path, and after a long while, depending on how experienced you are at making your way through a forest, you'll hear a sound up ahead. Keep walking, the

sound will grow louder, and as you come into a clearing, you'll see, at the far end of a wide, deep field, what's left of a hunting cabin. It'll probably take most of an hour to reach it on foot, especially if the sun is high in the sky.

Once you reach the cabin you can go inside it if you want, but there's really no reason to. It's empty rooms, empty interior doorways.

Around back, there's a motorcycle lying on its side, weeds growing through the spokes of the two wheels. Ignore it.

Past the burnt barn at the back of the yard, you'll see a thin path. Take it. Hope you like walking through the woods, because this part takes another hour or so. That noise you heard? It'll be getting louder and louder.

Come out on the other side of the woods, and you'll hear the sound unfiltered by trees, a river roaring past some foothills.

From where you stand, sweaty and dirty by now, probably even more confused, you'll see the river is bubbling and splashing around thousands of rocks. See that tall, broad rock in the center of the river, right in front of you, just a little to the left, mostly gray but with some red streaked across its surface? That's where you died.

When you were a little kid, you rarely thought about death.

Your family was ready to go to the drive-in, it was a Saturday late afternoon, your mom had roast beef sandwiches packed in the cooler, mayonnaise slathered across the interior sides of the face-up, face-down slices of white bread, specks of salt and black pepper decorating the slather, some Coca-Colas on ice, four beers for your parents, and after sitting impatiently in the back seat of the station wagon for about five slow minutes, a long, long time for a kid who's only ten years old, the back door of

your house not swinging outwards, the rest of the family not emerging to leave for the double feature as they always did, dependably, you blew your lips outwards, got out of the wagon, marching up to the back porch with the entitlement of the first born to see what was the delay. These were two horror movies you really wanted to see. You had been anticipating this all week, sitting through history class!

And your mom was unhappy in a chair at the metal kitchen table, where you normally sat, balled Kleenex in her left hand.

Looked up at your confusion. "Hey."

"Are we leaving?!"

"C'mere."

Of course you do. She's your mom.

"Timmy's turtle died. He drowned." Ruffles your hair, the ruffling letting you know she realizes you're smarter than your kid brother. "We bought him a pet turtle the other day. He filled a coffee can with water and some rocks, and put the turtle in the coffee can. The pile of rocks reached above the surface of the water, but the turtle wasn't able to climb up onto the top of the rock pile, out of the water. There weren't any ledges its front paws could grasp onto, to pull itself up out of the water onto the rock pile. I guess he thought turtles can breathe underwater, like fish. But they can't. His turtle drowned, paddling in the water, trying and failing to climb onto the rocks. Quite a few times. This is the first death Timmy has ever experienced. It really bothered him."

You had already experienced a death, when you and your mom went to visit your grandpa a few months ago, bringing him some groceries, your mom knocking repeatedly on the front door, then letting herself into his house with a key pulled out of her purse, calling, "Daddy?

Daddy?" as the two of you made your way underneath the ceilings of the downstairs rooms, then climbing the stairs to the second story, "Daddy? Daddy?", ending up at his bedroom at the back of the hall, him in bed on his back, white-haired head on his pillow, mouth open, eyes staring straight up.

You're going to miss seeing your two horror movies because of a turtle?

The entitlement of children. Some of us never lose that entitlement. Even when we get taller, older. But not kinder.

"So are we still going to the drive-in, or what?"

The dead never learn how they died.

Something that, now that you yourself are dead, surprises you.

You thought it'd be different.

Thought there'd be answers.

But there aren't.

You know less now, dead, than you did before, while you were still living, sitting in a restaurant, small menu in your hands, eyes switching left, right down through the meal offerings, and their cost.

Right in front of you, just a little to the left, mostly gray, but with some red streaked across its surface.

Now that you've seen it, there's really no reason for you to stay here.

Drive south.

my new necklace

RC deWinter

when my collection of memories
became too heavy to carry
i sent my tears to the sky
hoping they'd return as soft summer rain
evaporated of heartache and salt

but the setting sun swallowed them
then spit them out as it sank into the sea
now they shine in a lapis curtain
seed pearls strung on time's invisible thread
the perfect rosary for the mater dolorosa

but my prayers are faulty impossibilities
no jesus walks the earth raising the dead
and though i'm lighter i can't escape the stars
i've traded weight for unwearable jewelry
glittering with love that will never die

art in the afternoon

RC deWinter

standing in the doorway cancer stick in hand
i puff and exhale automatically as i shake my hips
to the beat of an imaginary lambada
while gazing up into the sky of a dying winter afternoon
painted in gaudy oranges and blues
tinged with the flesh pink of my wanting

somewhere in this suburban jungle
someone's chopping wood for a cozy fire

i close my eyes imagining us lying naked before it
in a life we painted on a canvas that hangs unfinished
in the museum of memory
crowded with the abandoned masterpieces we created
from the ink of our souls and turning away
open my eyes close the door and try to breathe

The Talk

NORMAN (BUZZ) MINNICK

Father walked in on me
my brain in one hand
my heart in the other

It'll do you no good
he said no good at all
once you realize that

you must learn
the difference between
need and desire, pleasure

and sacrifice and he
wept and I wept though
not for the same reasons

Murmurs

BETH WILLIAMS

A walker crosses marshland
to read the script of starlings, their flight

scratching poetry into the Friesland sky.
I know nothing of the Netherlands

yet hear the Wadden Sea doesn't swell
too high over its islands. It lets

them connect as if holding hands.
Intertidal sand makes it appear that men

can walk on water. We do this to ourselves,
make gods out of first born sons

then forgive ourselves for moving on.
Where I live, gnats swarm the shoreline,

making it hard to linger. I'd like to stay
a little longer, join friends in singing

a song. Paul on guitar, Norah
shaking a tambourine. But I duck for cover

from a seagull's dust turning our band
into a murmur of paused breath.

Just a slight tilt to one wing is enough
to disrupt the entire flock.

Lift Us Up

BETH WILLIAMS

The mall used to be a parking lot
for the main public library. The library was torn
down, replaced by one of ten stops
for the local commuter train.
Light rail. Not because of the low
ridership, but because urban planners
thought it sounded better than *fast tram*.

Down the street they built a fancy new building
called (insert donor name here) Library
where people can attend lectures
about the future of public libraries
and how we should all get on board.

I went to the mall for the first time
in a long time Friday night. For a city-sponsored
poetry reading. I invited six friends to hear me
read about tidal flooding. The city paid
me a whopping $150 to write one poem
and they painted it on sidewalks all over town.
They paid 20 of us, and my kid figured
they doled out a total of three thousand bucks.

Six friends clapped at my poetry reading
after hearing that *the outgoing tide*
leaves behind more than reeds. Shorelines
wear bottlecaps enmeshed
in the river's unbrushed hair.

And if my son's calculations are right
I was paid almost $9 a word, enough
to ride the light rail four times! Did I mention,
around here, we don't call it the light rail.
We call it The Tide. And it is always going out.

One of the poets reading Friday night
wrote a song called "The Tide" and the city
should pay her even more money
because her video has fourteen thousand
views and includes a shot of the train
passing by the mall. Even though only two
people ride The Tide and only a couple
more ever shop at the mall.

I want to tell you that I had six friends
show up to a poetry reading in a defunct
mall. Standing room only in an empty
storefront that used to be a Restoration Hardware
or Pottery Barn, even though nothing
sold there ever made anyone restored
or resembled a farm.

These friends came downtown to hear
me read, but said we should grab dinner
closer to home because just the week before,
three young people were shot and killed
just one short block away. So we ate dinner
in the suburbs, at the Coach House,
which sounds like an outbuilding
where a carriage is kept, but today
isn't even a stop on the train.

The next night there was no poetry reading
and no library open and no more
than two people on the train. The sky
was just beginning to show its evening
color and parents were sharing a California
pizza. Maybe it was the slant
of the sun or the cold-front approaching.
Maybe we will never know why two men
argued over money in the baseball-cap
store. Why three more people were shot
and one did not survive.

City leaders named the mall after a war
hero. They paid me a lot of money
to put words on the ground of a sinking
city. They had this grand idea
for folks to walk on poetry, as if that's what
it would take to lift us up.

A Fairy from London

SOHANA MANZOOR

The smell was golden brown, sweet and scrumptious, and it knocked at Toton's nostrils so hard that he sat up straight from sleep. O dear God, that smelled like luchi! And… did he smell halwa too?

But who could be making luchi? His mother was so busy with household work and knitting. Yet that did smell like the puffy luchi she prepared on special occasions. And her suji halwa was heavenly—not too greasy, but light and coated with just a touch of ghee, with the right amount of sweetness. His paternal aunt Myra Phupu often made and brought luchi-halwa especially for Toton. He was a very polite boy and wondered if there was a way to tell her without offense that he did not like her soggy luchi and syrupy halwa. But now where was this heavenly smell coming from? And then he remembered.

Of course! Their guest from London must have arrived the previous night while he was asleep.

He bolted from his bed. His elder brother Tapan's bed was empty. Tapan was a late riser and it seemed that the arrival of their guest must have disrupted his hours too. In his zealous expedition in search of luchi-halwa, Toton almost forgot the precious pouch he always slept with. He turned back and tucked it inside his pocket.

Down in the kitchen, a strange lady, petite and very fair, was seated on a stool near the kitchen door and biting into a round, crispy luchi. She dipped it into her

cup and bit into it again. Her movements were precise and fastidious. Draped in a pale pink saree, she was laughing and chattering away.

"It's so nice to be back in the country! I haven't been able to come in fifteen years. *Fifteen years!* It's hard to think how time flies." And then she noticed the sleepy-eyed nine-year-old boy in the nightshirt. One side of his pyjamas was weighed down as if he was carrying something too big for his pocket.

"Igu Thoton ni?" Although Toton had grown up in Dhaka, he recognized the woman's accent as the Sylheti dialect spoken in Keyaripur, the village home of his maternal grandparents in the northeastern district of Sylhet. He did not usually hear his mother speak Sylheti, except when talking to her people back home. The woman held out her arms and Toton approached her shyly.

His mother, was standing in the kitchen with a spatula in her hand, yelled, "Toton, have you brushed your teeth yet?"

Toton turned around to flee. The lady held him by the hand and said, "Hey, no big deal! I am his aunt. I don't mind."

Toton averted his face and mumbled, "No, no… my breath stinks!" This time both his mother and aunt laughed, and he sprinted toward the bathroom. Yet on his way he turned to take a second look at his aunt who seemed almost translucent. His mother had said that his aunt Ranu Khala was twelve years older than her. But she could even pass as his mother's younger sister. She was so tiny her feet did not even reach the floor.

When Toton returned, his mother had set the dining table. Neither his father Tauhid, nor his brother Tapan were there. His mother had sent them off to the fish market to get fresh hilsa. There were many items on the table, but

Toton tore his luchi and put it inside his mouth along with halwa with his eyes closed to relish the full taste. His aunt asked, "He looks exactly like you, Ratan."

Toton stared at his mother. He didn't know anyone except his deceased grandmother who called his mother Ratna by the diminutive Ratan.

The sisters chatted away merrily, trying to catch up.

"Is that fellow 'amdu Mia still around?" his aunt said. "You remember 'amdu Chacha, right? We called him kiton for his miserly habits. He would periodically chop off his wife's locks so that he would not have to buy her hair oil or shampoo, remember?"

"Yes, Buji, he's alive, but bed-ridden. His sons curse him day and night because he won't die. And he screeches back from his broken cot." Ratna was narrating the tale half laughing. "Not a single soul in the village feels sorry for him, you know. Such a rascal!"

Toton recognized the man they were referring to, whose name was actually Hamdu, but Sylhetis often dropped their h's. Once when Toton had visited Keyaripur with his mother, the old man offered him half of a cream sandwich biscuit, and that too without the cream.

Ratna looked askance at Toton. "My, my, Toton, surely you're not going to finish all the luchis? Leave some for your brother, at least!"

"But… I've had only five. Can I have one more?"

His mother sighed. "Okay, go ahead. I'll have to make some fresh ones anyway." She turned to her elder sister. "Keyaripur has changed a lot. You'll see when you visit. Many have left the village. The big pond has shrunk. Our nanabari is not what it used to be." Ratna winced at the thought of their grandparents' homestead being almost reduced to ruins.

"Of course, it's been over fifteen years… it seems almost

like a dream…" Ranu's voice trailed off, her eyes became misty, and she went quiet.

* * *

Toton learnt that his Ranu Khala would go off to visit the village in a few days. He wished he could go with her. But his mother surely would not agree to let him go, especially with final exams approaching. "When will you be back?" he asked his aunt. "There's nothing in the village except some broken houses with lots of people and some castles where nobody lives."

"How's that?" his aunt asked with a smile.

"Well, the big house, your nanabari, is full of people. But it's quite old and the ceiling leaks. And then there are two big castles with no people. They have shining bathrooms but no water."

His mother said, "The younger folks who are now expats in England have built huge mansions in Keyaripur. But they all live overseas, so the only people inhabiting their fancy constructions are the caretakers. Meanwhile, our grandparents' place is falling apart. Since Boro Mama's death there has not been anybody to take care of things." Boro Mama was their mother's oldest brother; after their grandfather died, he had become the de facto patriarch of the clan.

Ranu Khala laughed heartily and exclaimed, "And the bathrooms with no water?"

Ratna smiled wryly, "Children notice so much these days. Yes, there are huge bathrooms with expensive tiles and hand showers in the 'castles,' but no water supply lines. They have built tube wells in the ground floor bathrooms, but it's ridiculous, really."

A ghost of a smile played around Ranu Khala's lips. "Do you know anything about my ex-in-laws, Ratan? I know that Shihab has heard from them over the years, but he always kept me out of it." Her son Shihab was in his early teens when they left the country.

Toton's mother did not reply immediately but then said slowly, "The older people are all gone, Buji. Shihab's father suffered a lot, I heard. His liver was rotten. In his last days he vomited globs of blood and smelled like a corpse, they said."

Ranu Khala looked out of the window and her gaze seemed to touch the tree-tops far away. Toton wondered if she might have been a fairy in another life. She was so petite and pretty.

Ratna continued, "His sixth wife left him, too; she could not take the beatings anymore. None of his children were around him when he died." She paused and added, "Boro Mama's biggest mistake was to make him a groom of our house."

"Well, we are not daughters of Boro Mama's house. He was kind enough to raise us as his daughters, alongside his own daughter, after Abba died. But his wife clearly resented it. Don't you remember Boro Mami said that daughters of daughters are double burdens. And I cannot even claim that. It was generous of Mama to take both of us in after Abba's death."

Toton's mother protested, "Buji, what are you saying after all these years? Amma never thought of you as her stepdaughter. So why should Boro Mama?"

Ranu Khala smiled, "Of course, Amma never did. She was the only mother I knew too. But Boro Mami always mistreated me. It's only because of Boro Mama that she did not turn me out. She made me cry over every mouthful I took in the four years I lived in that house. And when I

heard Amma weeping silently at night…" She went quiet as if to contain herself, and then muttered, "Now I have so much, but Amma is gone." She paused and said, "I am glad, though, that Shihab's father is dead. Shihab has visited Bangladesh a few times since he got married. I wanted to come but dared not."

"Shihab would never allow him near you, Buji. You know that." Ratna fidgeted with the end of her saree. "After all these years… I don't know if it means anything, but I was angry with you then. I understood much later. You couldn't have stayed there… that man was a monster. Nor could you come back to Boro Mama's house."

Toton was playing with the toy he carried in his pouch. He called it his magic tube. He looked at his aunt and felt a rush of emotion inside him. He picked up tidbits of the conversation between his mother and aunt and wondered what kind of a monster lived in Keyaripur. He asked on an impulse, "Did that monster clip your wings, Ranu Khala?"

His mother and aunt were both startled; they had forgotten he was there. "Go play outside," his mother barked. "Haven't I told you not to eavesdrop when grownups talk?"

As Toton sheepishly tip-toed out of the room, he could feel his aunt's intent gaze following him.

* * *

Ranu Khala's visit to Sylhet was delayed as her son Shihab called from London to announce that he would be arriving soon, and he would take his mother to Keyaripur himself. It would not be right for her to go by herself after all these years. So, Toton had a few more happy days to spend with his aunt.

The only aunt he had ever known was his father's sister Myra Phupu. But Ranu Khala was not like her. She did not try to prove that she loved him more than his mother. She also did not ask the typical grownup questions and she did not attempt to take over her sister's kitchen either but she made him luchis as good as his mother's. She handed out gifts and Toton further discovered that her aunt's suitcases were like two magic boxes. She brought out something new almost every day. When she gave his mother a kitchen-timer in the shape of a daisy, and said, "I have not seen you in fifteen years, Ratan." Toton saw his mother's eyes glisten and she turned away hastily.

As Toton sat with his aunt one day after dinner, he asked, "Why do you want to go to Keyaripur? Can't you stay here?"

His aunt smiled. "I have to visit the pond where I used to bathe as a girl. I want to see the old banyan tree by our nanabari, and also the tamarind tree near the mosque. I heard from your mother that they are all still there. But she did not say anything about the spirit that made its home in the topmost branches of the tamarind tree." She said the last sentence in a conspiratorial whisper. "Don't tell your mom. It's our secret."

Toton nodded. "I won't tell a soul."

* * *

Ten days later, Shihab came like a whirlwind and whisked his mother away to visit their ancestral village but he promised he'd bring her back in a week, and she could stay with them for two more weeks after that. Toton knew that he was getting more than he could ask for, but still he felt sad at his aunt being away for a week. He asked his mother, "Can't Ranu Khala stay

with us forever? Her son is grown up and married, and he's so busy anyway. He doesn't need her in London, does he?"

"You like her so much?" Her eyes brimmed with joy. "Is it because of her gifts?"

Toton shook his head, but he could not explain. To him she was a fairy out of a book. Ranu Khala spoke to him as if he was her equal. He felt she belonged to a world that was as glorious as the one he saw in his magic tube—full of changing colors and shapes, full of light and possibility.

He counted the days. She'd given him so many gifts: a puffy blue jacket with a Superman logo, a toy drummer, a Lego set, play dough, picture books, and a set of sweet-smelling erasers in the shapes of fruits and vegetables. He, too, wanted to give her something special. But what could a small boy like him give a fairy from London? He sighed and tried to concentrate on his math homework.

* * *

When Ranu Khala returned, she found that Toton had taken ill. She scolded her sister, "Why didn't you tell me? I would have come sooner."

Ratna laughed.

Ranu placed her palm on Toton's forehead. "What did you do, little one? Got wet in the rain?" His mother said, "He had a fight with Babul, the neighborhood bully."

Ranu was dumbfounded for a few seconds. "Did he beat him so badly that he ended up with a fever? Who is that boy? You should complain to his parents."

Words tumbled from Toton's mouth. "He… he broke my magic tube." His lips trembled.

Ranu Khala pursed her lips.

Toton said hurriedly, "I fixed it, Khala, but it's not as good as it was before."

His mother said, "I didn't know he could fight like that. He bore down that boy who is twice his size. Tapan had to rescue Babul rather than the other way round. But he developed a fever that night. And he went on saying that now he had nothing to give you."

Ranu Khala sat by Toton's bed and held his hands. "O my darling boy, you wanted to give me your magic tube? I'm sure the magic tube is just as it was. You fixed it just fine," she said, and Toton's eyes went wide in pure joy. Ratna's eyes welled up. What was wrong with her these days, she wondered. She wept at every little thing her sister did and said. She had missed her elder sister so much through the years. Even before she had left for London, they were separated through marriage. She remembered Boro Mami's saying how Ranu had left her husband and run off to London with another man, taking her son with her. Shihab's father paraded his wounds throughout the village of Keyaripur and cursed his errant wife for running away with his seed. They were his property, he screamed. He threatened his old widowed mother-in-law with a lawsuit. But Boro Mama was still alive and people respected and feared him, so no harm came to Ranu and Ratna's mother.

Ratna did not know all the details of what had happened all those years ago. It was a major scandal in the village, but her sister had not uttered a single word about the episode. And Ratna would not ask, of course. But she also realized that she should not have allowed these things to come between them. It was gratifying to see that her son had also come to love her Ranu Buji just as she did.

* * *

The sisters were chatting as usual after dinner. Ratna had taken out her knitting and Ranu was softly patting Toton, who had been granted the boon to sleep with them that night. He lay on his side listening to his aunt and mother. But he kept his eyes shut as if he were sleeping.

"Are you sure that the bully won't bother Toton again?" his aunt was asking his mother.

"He does not go out much. I guess Tapan will have to keep an eye on him. It's a good thing that Tapan is eight years older than him. We'd hoped for a girl. And Myra says that's why my younger boy has turned out like a girl."

"What kind of talk is that?" Ranu Khala snapped. "There's no such thing. They used to say that I was too independent, too much like a boy, remember? Every girl needs to have something of a boy, and a boy needs to be somewhat like a girl."

"You were different." Ratna smiled.

Ranu shook her head. "All of us are different, one way or another."

"How did you find Keyaripur?" Ratna changed the topic.

"As you said, the place has shrunken. The young folks have grown up. The Hindu boys and girls I knew have mostly gone off to India. The graveyard is bigger. When people smell money, they forget past scandals. But they did ask what kind of a palace I live in. A few even wanted to see what fancy cosmetics I use to hide my wrinkles."

Her voice took a pleasant turn as she said, "And that old miser 'amdu Chacha has not changed one whit. He barked orders to his daughter-in-law: 'Don't put sugar in the sherbet—use molasses!'" Both the sisters laughed out loud.

Ratna smiled and shook her head. She said, "You stay with Toton, Buji. Let me see what Tapan and Tauhid are up to. The man of the house will surely complain that I've been neglecting him since you came."

The moment his mother went out of the room, Toton opened his eyes. "Did you find what you wanted to find in Keyaripur?"

"What makes you think I wanted to find something?"

"Didn't you?"

Ranu Khala smiled.

"I went to find my girlhood. I had buried it under the tamarind tree."

"Girlhood? How can you bury your girlhood? I thought you went back to get your wings!"

Ranu Khala just smiled mischievously.

* * *

The days seemed to fly by. They were fun-filled days of laughter and sunshine. And yet looming in the distance was the knowledge of inevitable farewell.

Finally, the day of Ranu Khala's departure arrived. They all went to the airport to see her off that evening. Toton had promised that he wouldn't cry or make a scene at the airport. When he gave her his magic tube, he was sad. Not because he had to give away his magic world, but because the wooden tube sported a wide band of scotch tape. He had tried to make it look pretty, but anybody could see what the purpose was. The only consolation was that he could see the magic world again, even if not so clearly.

The night before, his aunt had come to say good night to him for the last time. She had a small pouch in her hand. She untied it and out came a set of pale blue

pebbles. “I didn’t have a magic tube. But these are my magic pebbles. By holding them in my hand, I could fly wherever I wanted to.”

“And you buried them to save them from the monster?”

“Not exactly. They saved me from the monster. When I left Keyaripur, I was in a hurry. I’ve thought of them often over the past 15 years. I think they would have made my suffering in London a bit lesser.” She paused and smiled. “Now I want you to have them.”

“But don’t you need them?”

“I’ve learnt how to fly without them.”

Toton counted the pebbles—there were nine of them. He hesitated.

“They will keep you safe until you grow invisible wings like me.” His aunt patted his cheeks. “When I call you from London, you can tell me if they work.”

Toton looked at her and said slowly, “Will I ever visit you in London?”

“Of course.”

Toton could only say, “Oh!”

As his aunt disappeared beyond the glass doors of the airport where they could not enter, Toton clasped the magic pebbles inside his pocket.

On Eating an Orange and Seeing God

NOLO SEGUNDO

I miss the big navels when they are not in season,
but almost any orange will do when I really want to see God.

But it must be done right, this seeing, this apprehension of the Lord of the Universe, Lord of All the Worlds, both seen and Unseen.

First, I feel how firm the orange is, rolling it in my hands,
the hands of an artist, the hands of a poet, and now the stiff
and cracked hands of an old man, then I slice it in half,
look at its flesh, its brightness, its moistness, its color—
if the insides beckon, urging my mouth to bite,
I first cut each half into half and then slowly, carefully,
as all rituals demand, I put one of the cut pieces between
my longing lips and gradually, with a sort of grace, bite
into the flesh of the sacrificial fruit.

I feel the juice flow down my throat and recall the taste of
every orange I ever had, even in my childhood—or so it
seems, with this little miracle of eating an orange.

As I finish absorbing, still slowly and gracefully, its flesh,
the last bit of what had been one of the myriad wonders
of the world, I look at the ragged pieces of orange peel
and I see poetry—or God—it's really the same thing,
isn't it?

Tipping Points

RIKKI SANTER

If you like ghost punches, AR-15s, & vanishing
doomsday hitchhikers, then you will like
graveyards growling with cats
& accordion facts posing
like contortionists.

If you like conspiracy theories that sprout
chin hairs overnight, then you will like
Sunday revival meetings that sugar
flapdoodles & firewalkers armed
with floating rubber duckie fortitude.

If you are malcontent with globalists who refuse
to see what's flat, then you will like
snapdragon puppetry with fringe
fringing fringe that pitches
& rolls against the lighthouse
in the woods.

If you think moon landings have marinated
too long in subterfuge, then you will like
a frayed Abbey Road album cover
with a Paul is Dead t-shirt
gifted inside.

If tin foil is your haberdashery and tribal reasoning
your Karaoke, then you will like
sort ofs to punctuate your circles
circling circles to the rhythm
of freeze—wait—reanimate.

If you like your arguments sipped with
burnt morning decaf, then you will like
keeping your grade-school valentines
in your freezer right behind
a Spam casserole & a bag
of psilocybin mushrooms.

If you think He will be definitely coming & you're thinking
of ways to unroof your home, then you will like
the friendly brethren who park
their racing-striped
turbo saucers
behind Walmart's
loading dock.

If you think a shopping list you jotted down
in the middle of the night came through
a vibratory frequency, then you will like
moisturizing with WD-40
you'll be purchasing today
along with jumper cables
commercial grade.

If you find yourself ripping off metal zippers
from your trousers & brass eyelets
from your shoes, then you're rock-ribbed
& ready to be dipped
in stardust
by the scruff.

In Sickness and in Health

...

Getting My Head Around Migraines

ELIZABETH TEMPLEMAN

OF TWO MINDS

Since January of 2007, I've been recording my incidents of migraines. Looking for predictable patterns and maybe some sign of diminishing intensity. It surprises me to notice how many have lingered for two to three days. It surprises me even more to realize that these longer headaches were a novelty before January of that year. How quickly the beast has become familiar to me. Today it has all the familiarity of an old friend, albeit a capricious and cranky one.

AUGUST 13, 2007

Since I'm in the midst of one, this is a good day to begin an essay on migraines. The challenge is that among my symptoms is a certain dull-wittedness, a tendency to plod through things in a monotonic funk. Words, for example, aren't exactly flowing or tripping over one another to get from brain to fingers to screen. Rather, the fingers trip in getting from "g" to "t" and back to the "g" just now in the word getting. And there's no particular resistance to slowing the flow of my thinking down to the point where I am examining what keys my fingers hit, which, in essence, stops the flow of language.

For today, no coherence. No smooth bridge from that last thought to this next, which is forming around the idea of pain. Today I don't

feel much pain. Its level is low enough that I could almost forget it. But, in fact, the line between light pain and no pain seems absolute.

What I'll do now is describe the headache, from the inside of one. Funny how, even as I say that, the pain recedes as though to tease me. But if there's one thing about migraines that I can say unequivocally, it's that having one sucks the humour right out of life. Even the notion of it teasing me by scampering off, is ludicrous. Maybe it really is leaving—always nearly impossible to imagine.

Here's a try: This one began as they most always do, out of sleep. What awakens me is the sensation that my right eyeball is being pushed from inside my skull. There: I feel it as I write—affirmation. The sensation sometimes recedes just as I awaken. I think this happens a few times in the night, but the separate episodes get confused with dream and restlessness.

Once I reconcile to being awake, and with a pain that's real, I get up and make my way to the bathroom to find a prescription tablet. If, that is, I am can summon the wit and ambition to do so. After that, the goal is to fall back into bed as quietly as possible, so as not to disturb my husband (any further), and all the better to fool sleep into embracing me again.

Sometimes I feel the drug's impact, or imagine that I do, at the instant that the water accepts and then releases its chemical load at the back of my throat. The effects are to jam shut engorged blood vessels. That sounds dramatic, and yet I swear I can feel them constricting. I wonder how the body knows to direct the drug to the back of my right eyeball.

Generally, I drift back to sleep, to awaken later with the odd presence of an absence of pain. That's distracting and can produce a mild sort of euphoria. With or without its pain, the day of migraine is going to be pretty much useless.

Probably I grew up too Catholic to take a day off. The idea of retreating to a dark and quiet room to do nothing seems impossibly wasteful. And so I trudge through tasks, one after the next, in this dull-witted fashion.

Where next? Back to this headache—its progress and its lingering into today. I have dutifully circled its dates in my annual headache calendar.

I'll turn to describing the annoying book I bought myself yesterday—out of desperation (and compliance with my doctor's forlorn recommendation). It's called HEAL YOUR HEADACHE, The 1.2.3 Program For Taking Charge of Your Pain, *by Dr. David Buchholz. I am generally against books whose titles scream across the cover in caps, with trailing subtitles. But I do want help. And I would love to abandon those small flat boxes of naratriptan tablets to gather dust until the day when I can't even remember for what they were prescribed.*

I knew yesterday, from flipping through a few pages while in the midst of the faint nausea and harsh light of the first day of a migraine, that Buchholz was going to require me to give up red wine. Today's the day of decision: I will forgo red wine for two months and track how its absence affects the headaches. I have my bargains ready: no headaches, another two months; some headaches, some wine.

Okay. I will leave this now. A half hour I promised myself; it's been 45 minutes. Adherence to time: that's the difference between the commitment to plod and inspiration.

I'm tempted to begin: It's me, Elizabeth—without migraine, to introduce this other version of myself. They're conjoined twins who share the telling of their stories, along with a mutual suspicion, contrary viewpoints and distinct styles. That's not so different from how it feels to pick up the thread of this piece on migraines—a day later and without one. I will not interfere with what was written by me-with-migraine.

Just back from a morning run, I'm trying to reclaim the thoughts unfolding as I ran. That's always a challenge. Starting from there, the run, clear distinctions arise:

Yesterday I ran by the watch, varying my pace as the minutes ticked along. I remember hoping to return to no headache, and also being intensely aware of the texture of drying grasses underfoot and the smell of wild strawberries.

Today, though, I lost myself to the pace, the trails, and the words running through my mind. It was a surprise to find myself at the end of the first leg along my route. When I reached the lakeshore at the end of the second trail, I changed my plan to follow the narrow trails looping back, and turned, instead, to retrace the way I'd come.

The decision seemed instantaneous, the way nothing will seem during a migraine. A quicksilver verdict to avoid bush-flies along the back trail. The speed and ease of navigating choices feels like a blessing today. More so because the residue of grogginess and fatigue often lingers into the next day. I feel that fog lifting even as I sit here writing, salt drying along the edges of my hairline.

THRESHOLDS

The last thing I did last night, on that second day of migraine, was to put a tablet of Melatonin under my tongue to dissolve, thinking that the more quickly I could drift into sleep, the better my chance of leaving the headache behind. As the last of the mintiness flowed down my throat, I read on the bottle that those who suffer from migraines should consult their doctors before taking Melatonin. As I drifted to sleep, I fixed in mind the need to do more research.

This morning I was online, sussing out the more credible articles from the dodgy or outright commercial. It turns out that Melatonin could be helpful; that regular sleep might ward off migraines, which do seem to lurk at the edge of weariness. Maybe I should find a smaller dose than 5 mg, and take it regularly—but not daily. It's

daunting: to tune into the tempo and pattern of one's own cycles.

I'm balancing all that I read against the strident advice of Bucholz, on whose counsel I have sworn off red wine, among other things. Yesterday I got an inkling of the challenge I'm up against when—first thing on the morning of my Day of Resolution to follow his dietary restrictions—I ate a handful of oat crisps, only to realize that two forbidden foods had managed to slip through (by way of a raison and some almond slices). I hadn't lasted ten minutes.

Today I'm reassessing. I just finished a green tea milkshake, my newfound treat for home. It was lovely, and an assertion against Buchholz (Ha!), and also against Starbucks (Ha!), to which I will no longer give ridiculous sum of $4.65 to satisfy this particular craving. Well, a smaller "ha" to Buchholz, I suppose, since I've cut my normal daily coffee consumption back to a single cup. As for the staggering inventory of culprits he warns against, it's hard to take seriously the notion that bananas or figs, almonds or avocados, or plain bread bring on my headaches.

Skeptical, I've searched for other sources to corroborate my own batch of compromises: red wine, an indisputable culprit, sits at the top of most lists; chocolate comes next for many; followed by cured meats, and MSG. Aged cheeses, sadly, turns up next. But aged cheddar would, after all, only leave me longing for that glass of Cabernet.

The threshold is an interesting concept. Certainly, I was conscious that particular moods predisposed me to a headache, and I'd grown more wary of those. But that awareness only alerted me to the idea that—being more aware of the triggers and attuned to my threshold—I might navigate my way between the two, is empowering.

What's frustrating is that a lowered threshold is signalled by the kind of day I cherish: that adrenalin-driven spell of accomplishment when I seem to burn through tasks, buoyed by an intoxicating blend of stamina and confidence. It's the exact description for the day last week when I ran and read, wrote and gardened, managing to gain the upper hand against the crab grass which threatened to overrun the raspberry bed. I worked hard and was dirty, hot, tired—and proud. All good… until the end of the afternoon run, which left me more fatigued than refreshed—a signal that I'd gone too far.

Now I realize that I might have read the signals the night before: eating more discriminately, forgoing the glass of wine, and easing myself to sleep with the help of Melatonin. Smarter still, I might have known that the day's work needed to be balanced by rest, and not a run. Common sense for some, I know. But frankly, I've always found restraint to be tedious. Today, however, I give in to it.

With the notion of restraint in mind, I check my time and progress and notice that I've written approximately the same volume (two pages), in nearly the same time as I did yesterday. Yet today it seemed to flow faster. Another distinction would be that I'd never stop here on this day. Yesterday I followed the discipline of timing, attending even on my run, to the time. Probably yesterday I ran better, too, more alert to both pace and form.

But today I remain: still in running shorts, leg muscles stiffened and t-shirt damp with sweat; still working at my laptop. Soon I'll leave off, probably with frustration; the piece unfinished, tugging at my mind for resolution. At this moment, thunder rumbles in the distance, and rain threatens. Being ready to hit save and to shut down at a moment's notice is yet one more challenge—and distraction.

EYE OF THE STORM

The storm that had threatened this morning blew in with freakish speed and intensity. I logged off in rush, an instant before we lost our power. Later, during the long, hot trip to Salmon Arm for our son's soccer game, a light headache flickered across my right temple. I felt listless, had little appetite for the soccer game, for the amiable sideline chatter, or for our restaurant dinner afterwards. Had this blown into a migraine—barely a day after the last one and so soon into my modified program of precautions—I'd have been despondent. It didn't, though. The storm passed, the game was played and lost, power returned, and the headache vanished. This reminds me how my favourite aunt used to get headaches during storms.

Typically, my headaches come unbidden, in the pre-dawn hours when the jabbing pressure behind my eye arouses me. From that point on, I experience an astonishing array of related effects. And they do astonish me. Who'd expect, for example, an ache in the head would loosen the bowels? Always on the first day, there's diarrhoea—without cramping, but a nuisance nonetheless.

There's also the excess saliva and tears. As if dullness weren't enough to contend with socially, there's nothing quite like choking on an unexpected surge of spit, or noticing that my eyes are dripping tears.

Another surprising effect is a heightened sensitivity to all kinds of sensations, touch among them. It's both distracting and bizarre how my skin becomes so tender: as though quite suddenly the skin is not a membrane suited to protect me from life, but rather one which is too sensitive for the myriad commonplace assaults life hurls its way. Last month, on a headache day, I carefully cut the labels out of every pair of underwear I owned. And then

the seams bothered me. Where do I find underwear with no seams?

Occasionally, with migraine, a creepy sensation from the hair on my scalp will irritate me, keeping me from sleep. It's as though my head is allergic to the texture of my hair.

In addition to the pain behind the right eye, and sometimes in the right side of my jaw, the skin and scalp sensitivity, and a tendency to feel chilled, there is the aversion to bright light, distinct smells, and harsh noise. Plus, the combined effects of nausea and irritable intestines. That's the full spectrum of physical sensations and sensitivities. There's also a pattern of behaviour which signals its onset, and a cluster of feelings that seem follow its course.

What's difficult is to discern signal from source. Does the excess thirst and sweet tooth signal the migraine? Or do those extra glasses of water and pieces of chocolate I've consumed prompt its arrival? As I enjoy the effects of a satisfying couple hours of physical or mental exertion, am I doomed, then, to the migraine?

The after-effects, in any case, come free from all that ambiguity. At worst, I'll be groggy and worn out for a day. More often, though, I'll feel unaccountably happy in a dazed sort of way; slightly euphoric, with a sobering trace of hangover.

APPEASING THE BEAST

Relentlessly I chase down information, Googling, reading, even resorting to the dust-covered and ancient volumes of encyclopaedias on our bookshelves. It feels like a test: to ride herd on the vastness of detail.

In one dusty volume of our cumbersome OED, with the aid of its magnifying glass, I find migraine (p. 1793).

The *OED* doesn't disappoint. The first recorded usage was 1398. Of Greek origins, its ancient meaning is hemicranium; half the head. I know, too well, that it's "a form of severe headache usually confined to one side of the head." But I learn that migraine has alternative spellings including megrin, and myegrim. If it were up to me, I'd choose myegrim: mine, they unquestionably are, and grim, indeed.

Buchholz proposes that migraines have been far too narrowly defined. He argues that we all have this "headache generating mechanism" which produces not only headaches but also symptoms ranging from sinus congestion to stiff neck. Dental pain and dizziness are included, and even shoulder and back pain. For some of us, however, the pain is too slight to notice, too infrequent to recognize, or gets attributed to other causes, like hangovers and dental or sinus problems.

The rest of us may be more observant, or have lower thresholds of pain, or suffer worse or more frequent headaches. We are the unlucky, although one gets the distinct impression that Buchholz admires us more than those who remain oblivious or in denial of their migraines. For us, he prescribes controlling the migraine by becoming aware of our particular triggers, and then avoiding them.

The notion of migraine as a mechanism—if a rather unhelpful mechanism—feels right. There's a seductive logic to the idea that I can predict its onset and avoid its triggers. If only that didn't mean foregoing an astonishing variety of foods, including the humble lentil! For now, I will embrace his reasoning and persevere, avoiding my customized cluster of triggers for a few months; aiming, afterwards, to determine which I'm most prone to.

On the Mayo Clinic website I discover that the single constant symptom is a sensitivity to light and sound.

Migraine pain can be pulsating, or throbbing, and worsens with physical exertion. It brings nausea for most, and, for some, vomiting. Migraines last from four to seventy-two hours and vary in frequency from several per month to a few a year. Most suffer migraines without experiencing auras.

A few, my brother included, have the auras without the aching head. This group will every so often experience flashes of light, dazzling lines slicing across their field of vision, or blind spots—sometimes with tingling in an arm or leg. It must be alarming, but also seems like it might be extraordinary. I'll admit to a level of aura envy. The rest of us experience only some type of premonition, predrome, signalled by intense energy, unusual cravings, thirst, drowsiness, and irritability—a nebulous cluster of symptoms that could signal any of an array of conditions from pregnancy to a common cold.

I also learn that children suffer migraines as early as a year old. Heartbreaking. Just as I experienced headaches in grade-school, I know that our daughter had them, and our youngest would get them occasionally from as early as his ninth year. When I'd ask where exactly it hurt, he'd say, with some exasperation, "in my head."

TRIGGERS AND SWITCHBACKS

During a migraine, two things happen biochemically. Changes register in the major pain pathway of the nerve system, which some researchers believe to be the cause. Also, certain brain chemicals fall out of balance—including serotonin, which regulates messages of pain traveling those neural pathways. Consequently, both the neural routes and the regulatory system fall out of kilter. The combination of these two failings prompt the release of neuropeptides,

which make their way to the outer membrane of the brain where they manage to cause blood vessels to dilate and inflame. Levels of magnesium also drop, playing some part in this gloomy series of events. No one seems to understand the precise sequence of cause and effect.

The list of suspected triggers is staggering: hormonal changes, certain foods, stress, bright or flickering light, unusual scents, intense physical exertion, disruptions in sleep pattern, environmental fluctuations (even time zone changes), and some medications.

The better question is: What doesn't trigger a migraine? Let's see… Eating apples. Consistently dull weather. Slow walks in calm, dimly lit and scent-free spaces…

As an additional safeguard I've decided to increase my magnesium. But according to "The World's Healthiest Foods" website, among the foods recommended to accomplish this naturally are beans and almonds—both also on the migraine trigger hit list. Salmon and pumpkin seeds and boiled swiss chard should be fine, though. The article describes a bewildering list of factors complicating both the need for and the absorption of magnesium. No surprise, the daily recommended intake is controversial. The daily recommendation, apparently, would be a couple of cups of boiled swiss chard or spinach. I like steamed greens; ate some for dinner last night, fresh from the garden. But two cups a day? Store-bought tablets it will be.

Despite my best effort, this past Wednesday I had my first definite headache in two weeks. It came on gradually and I thought it would be another ghost of a headache, but by Thursday it was undeniably a migraine. I'd been looking forward to a trip to Whistler to join my husband and son where they'd been working for the month. I held out against the magic Naratriptan tablet, needing to

remain alert for the four-hour drive. The headache never got as intense as it might have. Only a few times, toward evening, did it make me want to cradle my head between my palms, closing out the light with my elbows. But even then, I managed to eat some dinner, and to maintain light conversation. The aching got worse in the night, while the others slept. By morning it had receded, settling into my lower right jaw. It didn't fully disappear until Saturday. Four days—hardly my worst, but my longest migraine yet.

More interesting, though, is how the migraine enhanced the trip. The colours were extraordinary. Deflected by sunglasses and lowered visor, the bright sun didn't seem to increase the steady pressure behind my eye. It produced the most amazing shifts in lighting, even as the landscape was dramatically changing from Cache Creek to Lillooet to Pemberton to Whistler.

I was curious, on the drive back home, to contrast the experience of the same landscapes, albeit in morning sunlight. That trip was lovely, but a lesser experience without a migraine. Maybe, to divert my focus from the pain, I push my focus outwards. Normally, I'm an introverted type, except, perhaps, with a migraine.

SPINNING FORWARD

Words flow as I chart the physiological landscape of my headaches. Conclusions elude me, every tack drawing me further from closure. Yet another year has slipped by. This spring I read about two new treatments, appealing in that both are non-medicinal. There's a buzz around magnetic stimulation, applied just above the neck. A simpler preventative measure gaining attention derives from an ancient yogic practice—slow and deep breathing. I'll try the breathing exercises. Why not?

These days I enjoy a glass of red wine now and then, though I'm especially careful on Friday nights after a busy week. Occasionally I indulge in too much coffee, but seldom enough to jangle the nerves. The Triptan tablets can be, every now and then, a godsend, although I no longer fear being beyond reach of a packet. I do still keep a calendar and am grateful when I note more than fifteen days stretching between circled dates. My understanding of migraines has grown; I'm on more familiar terms with them. They're like that those relatives you know all too well; the ones whose company you've never quite liked. But they're yours—and always will be.

Perhaps in part because I no longer have such fear of them, my headaches don't seem as debilitating. Every so often I'm tempted to declare that I don't have migraines anymore.

But it feels like Hubris, to utter those words. And sure enough, the day after I do so, a headache will gather in the night and thrust itself upon me.

MASTER OF MIGRAINE

One migraine captured in a journal entry struck in May of 2013. On this morning, at the summit of my Banff Centre writing retreat, I awoke at 4 A.M. with a migraine emanating from behind my right eye. I struggled with that usual dilemma: whether to turn to the prescribed remedy—the potent pale blue half-moon of Naratriptan. Not a remedy to be casual about, it's both impotent against any other malady, and laden with side-effects. As if navigating the decision weren't enough at this sleepy hour, there followed the struggle to break into a ridiculously robust foil wrapping. I would wager there are bank vaults less well protected. The racing heartbeat that I often experience after returning to bed could as

easily be from the drug as from the surge of victory for having overcome its foil barricade. The gradual release of pain can be relied upon to follow—first in fact, and then in perception. By now, I consider myself well-versed in migraine. I could have passed an oral defence—might have earned a Masters of Migraine, had anyone offered one. But the science perpetually advances, requiring a leap of faith to engage with—commit to—the most promising of today's findings. I meticulously logged each migraine, and every tension headache not meeting that one-side quality of migraine.

What do I ever learn, studying them? That the intensity has reduced (or so I believe—in so far as it is possible to grasp the particular quality or intensity of pain).

I also have a vivid memory of nagging aches that would sometimes take hold in my lower right jawbone, deep below the back molars, radiating toward the chin. Only after reading Oliver Sacks' account of this and other more bizarre manifestations of migraine did it dawn on me what these were. On the heels of that realization, they vanished. It's as though, perversely, they scuttled off once outed. As though they were only one in a series of tests of my ability to recognize this shape-shifter that is migraine.

From Sacks and other reading, I've gained a better grasp of the other complex and seemingly random symptoms, too: how my gut feels less in my control. And how quickly one is humbled by sensations of body fluid surging unpredictably (nose running, eyes running, that excess saliva, a clammy sweat, the random urge to pee). It's hazardous, mid-migraine, to wander far from a bathroom. And there's that prickliness where contact with fabric (sheets, clothing), grows intolerable—bringing the yearning for a total body wax, removing all hair (this instant, please).

RECKONING

Months later, when I least expect it, I learn something new. As if pulled by antennae, my attention is drawn to the morning radio host, who between songs, carries on about how the pain of a migraine has been discovered to be of the same quality as that a hot chili provokes when in contact with tongue or skin. He chatters on, cheerfully, about the way pain receptors in the brain behave identically to the nerve receptors signalling the sharp, fine-grained points of pain on the lips and tongue that follow the first bites of a fiery stew. Reflecting on that surprising fact, I miss the next song as I drive south on Highway Five toward work. It has the ring of truth.

I miss yet another song recalling the burn in my eyes when I left a pot of soup simmering beneath a dusting of chili flakes as I popped in my contacts for a run. I can imagine the flavours seeping into the broth, even as the pain, after a mere heartbeat of delay, issues from eyes and eyelids, causing tears to leak and spill. Yes, this does resemble the pain of migraine. Closer than cousins, they're more like siblings.

While I follow the studies avidly, there are limits to my credulity—and desperation. I'll hear again about those zappers that send a mild jolt into the base of the skull. And sure, if someone gave me one, I would be tempted to test a jolt or two. But it seems dubious: a miracle cure for more desperate and less discriminating student of migraine.

Every so often I still do stop and take account. The changes are modest: a boost in self-awareness and some adjustments of habit (often to do with the much-loved red wine, a few culpable foods, sleep).

My gains: fewer migraine experiences and pain that's less intense, as far as I can reliably remember. The daily cost: goldenrod discs of Vitamin B2, glistening

rust red capsules of CoQ-10, and tablets of chalky white magnesium citrate. I disperse my arsenal of pills throughout the day—a distracting chore, imposing a measure of mindfulness to the rhythm of my day. There's a discipline and a science, or alchemy, to this selecting, lining up, and dispensing of capsules. I have to admit to a kind of pride in the competence to keep all of this all straight. It's not unlike, I think, the skills honed over years of getting three kids to their appropriate soccer fields/music lessons/birthday party, for example, and with the relevant gear/instruments/gift. This plastic brain has new challenges against which to contort itself (or to snap).

AT ONE WITH MIGRAINE

Two more years of progress with migraines and I have added to my daily regime two substances hitherto unknown to me. First was Butterbur; Feverfew comes later. I love that both derive from flowers—one a relative to the commonplace daisy, and the other, closer to a sunflower. These both, the research assures me, reduce either the frequency or the intensity of migraines.

And indeed, the six-to-seven-day cycles of migraine I endured in my early fifties—prompting all of this inquiry and fixation—has given way to headache-free spans of two weeks, sometimes even more. The odd one will last for three days, so mathematically, I'm not sure I've come out ahead. But I do love these stretches between.

There is one admission that makes me squirm: Too long an absence of migraine can make me uneasy. When the expanse of days stretches toward three weeks, I grow anxious.

I can't turn away from the fact that I am defined, in part, by migraine. Their predictability itself offers comfort. It's as if migraine has become an obligatory recurrence; the biweekly atonement for my failings.

My headaches. With me since childhood, morphing with the passing decades, transforming at the hormonal benchmarks. These recent years, sometimes, usually deep in the night, I will feel a momentary surge along the outline of the usual area of pain—as though the neural pathway is so well defined that it lights up now and then of its own accord, perhaps awaken by a restless turn, or set off by the distant barking of a dog.

Whatever the vacillations in my affliction, I continue to embrace my fascination and to chase the facts. If I'm stuck with the migraine, I may as well be on intimate terms.

Chemotrail

JESSICA BALDANZI

Elixirs rush through miniaturized chutes,
siphoned from sacks that weigh you down
like sandbags. Ditch these tethers and I'm sure

you could fly, tubes waving in your wake,
like tentacles severed from a beast of the deep,
the kind that lived on the edges of the sea

in our flat-earth days. Aqueducts
delivered lead to the doorsteps of Rome,
contrails now score the sky, birds

and dragons coughing in their wake.
Chemtrails or crystallized ice? Truth
and conspiracy rain down hospital bills,

folded in vigil to paper cranes
by the rest of us, stuck flightless while you rise.

On Viewing the Corpse of my Mother-in-law

NOLO SEGUNDO

How could this – thing, have been her?
Lying shriveled and small on the bed
As those who loved (and feared) her
Gathered in the bereft hospital room
To let their shock and grief melt and
Mold itself into its own atmosphere.
Her body seemed never to have been
Real, never to have been a woman,
Never to have been young once, and
Surely never to have been a mother.

And if it had been a body once, housing
A small dragon who could lash out fire
Solely with her harsh and brutal tongue,
Keeping those who loved her at bay and
The rest of us wary, aware of her power,
Her terrible gift for shrinking one's soul,
Then where did she go when her mouth
Froze open as the last breath of a long,
Life left quietly, without fuss or rancor?

Still, though imperfect as you or I, she
Was loved and mourned and honored.
If God only housed saints, think how
Terribly lonely He would be.

Late Blooming

MICHAEL WATERSON

Your chipper voice, three hours away,
cuts through my fog of sleep:
Today is the last day of my life,
you say, *at least I'm acting like it is*.

Sleepless in the wake of chemo,
a tiny shadow spotted
on your lung, you teach me
what you've learned:

The gene was in your body
when it was still your mother's,
a coin toss coming up
tails. So now you've gone

all in on this moment,
all there is by every measure,
life's immeasurable mystery;
you've become a lily of the field.

After weighing in on weighing
what you did in high school,
you rhapsodize this late-
summer day, how you're living it.

The Cut

SETH WALLIN

The cut, simply put, spoke volumes. True, it was still a cut, on the outside of his right ring finger. It bled persistently, refusing to stop by the time he fell into bed, staining the sheets and the shirt as he slept, concrete evidence of its existence.

It was youthful folly, a product of mixing biking and drinking. He did this often because nothing truly bad had happened yet from the combination, which served as evidence that it never could, even though the math said exactly the opposite.

He always biked. It reminded him of childhood rides with his father, which meant more now that he had passed. And summer nights in middle school, and then high school, riding with friends to various wooded spots around their suburban neighborhood. The ecstatic freedom of racing down a hill, wind whipping his face, feeling fast enough to speed away from any problem. A sliver of that came to him each time he rode now, which was enough.

He was struck by how similar the night air felt, between one memory in particular and now. The summer breeze that only blew more heat and humidity in your face. The acrid smell of something burning. Not wood, something that was not meant to burn. The assembled neighborhood kids called him 'pussy' because he didn't want to watch the stray they had found be doused in gasoline, or ignited.

"Hey!" they shouted as he pedaled away, tears coming from the wind and smoke and shame. "Hey!" He turned back to look, to make sure they weren't following, because the heavy sobs were coming soon. "HEY!"

But he was in Brooklyn, not the suburbs, the yell of a woman for a bus that wasn't waiting. The smell of a stalled car, hood open, smoke billowing. He wasn't sure why the tears were flowing, but that didn't stop them from blurring his vision. Then the bike stopped, and he didn't.

The cut was also the moment in which it occurred.

Moments are violent things. They are brief yet break infinity into before and after. We replay them in our heads, revisiting the scenes as if to verify they actually happened. But that's truly the word for it, they happen, of their own accord. We only react; we have no control, yet moments like these shape and refine us.

Before, the skin on the outside of his right ring finger was smooth and unbroken. It felt good to ride, the slight breeze, stretching his legs after four hours of sitting on a friend's couch and drink-ing. Later, he would say that the night had conspired against him. It was too early, and he wasn't working the following day, and there was the summer night heat, stewing everything together. He glided down the street, weightless, the evening full of potential.

After, the skin on the outside of his right ring finger burst, like overripe fruit. Immediately after, flat on the dirty street, there was pain, all over and all at once, which quickly led to shame and more pain as he sprung up in an effort to rebuff any help or attention from passersby. Further pain swinging a leg over the frame and hopping back in the saddle. The aches that pinged with every movement made home seem to be the only viable destination, the potential of the evening leaking out through his finger.

For him, it was a moment of body smashing into pavement, the turmoil expanding outwards. A moment of 'renewal' in Brooklyn, which seemed to only mean 'more expensive.' From sea to shining sea, a moment of breaking, like a bone, no longer united and barely standing. The entire planet seemed to be experiencing a death rattle at this moment as we do our best to use it up, our existence but a blip in its vast story. Everything burning and tearing and no longer whole, like his finger.

The cut was something to ignore, because despite all his progressiveness, he hadn't fully escaped the appeal and hope of being a tough man, the kind a woman might want. Wounds had long been one of the most mythologized and ingrained metrics society had for the measure of a man's toughness. Why would he go to a doctor? It was only a cut. Nothing broken, no need for stitches.

He wasn't what you would call tough, by looking, and he was aware of this. The shorter side of average height, white, devoid of tattoos or any notable style to match the high standard of New York City. He was ordinary, and because of that, he liked the cut, liked its story, which he embellished, and its associated pain, which he downplayed. He even liked the way the blood would seep through the gauze every few hours.

The following evening happened to be a friend's summer cookout, a few dozen people drifting back and forth between the too-hot apartment and the too-buggy backyard. He feigned reluctance when someone asked to see his injury, yet relished the reactions it produced, the sympathy of some, the squeamishness of others. Most of all, he loved his own nonchalance, which at this point was still genuine.

The following morning, he awoke to a steady throb of pain and at first took it for the pressure of the tightly-wound gauze, self-congratulatory at the sight of the clean white bandage. But then he unwrapped the gauze, and with it tore away the encrusted pus that was the real reason the bleeding had stopped. Now that it was gone, the wound flowed freely, milky yellow and scarlet swirling together like an after-dinner mint.

The gasp that escaped was more from horror than pain. He had had cuts and scrapes before, but this was different. The blood he could handle, it was of himself. But the pus felt alien, a foreign thing outside of his control. It made him afraid, which clashed with the cavalier attitude he had been so enjoying. He might have to admit it was serious, which, after so much inaction, would mean he'd been a fool. Ironically, his worst-case imagination at this point was losing the finger. But that was ridiculous, he told himself. He was young and healthy and merely in possession of an overactive paranoia. Surely this could be reined in.

He didn't have health insurance. He had lost coverage several months prior, aging out from under his parents, and feared what it might cost, how it could disrupt his life. He hadn't even inquired since such recklessness also played into his measured nonchalance. He ultimately reasoned that it probably wouldn't matter: there were stories aplenty online about innocuous hospital visits and spiraling bills, even with insurance. Applying would be to tempt unluckiness. But now he had to do something.

A friend of his loved reading the Craigslist "Wanted" section, combing through the bizarre things New Yorkers might desire. A while back she had forwarded him one about a collector seeking Disney VHS tapes, knowing the size of his library. It was time to cash in, but that

didn't make it easy. The tapes, like biking, reminded him of childhood, of the cool basement couch and afternoons spent with his mother, watching all the way through the end of the credits. Despite the later knowledge that she'd usually been on pills, and used the dimness as a cloak, he still couldn't sell, which is why he was so angry as he pedaled away from his apartment on the third day after getting the cut, backpack loaded with the past for sale. This was part of the reason why he didn't see the squad car until halfway through the intersection, the stoplight blood red. He wasn't thinking straight, so he braked for the flashing lights using both his good and bad hand, pain so strong from the bad one that immediately his eyes welled up.

Seeing his pained face, the officer asked what was wrong, and he could have spoken the truth, but the truth was shameful, so he lied about a nonexistent daughter, implied grave illness followed by death, and said, through the now continuous tears, that he couldn't bear the sight of her tapes any longer. He fell into it like a slinky, no spine and at gravity's whim, opening his backpack and showing the cassette on top. Fortuitously, it was The Little Mermaid, which gave credence to his lies. He left without a ticket.

The cut was also the city, a gash in the eastern seaboard. It throbbed with life, became infected at times, and at others flowed with vitality, evidence of a heart somewhere, beating.

The city oozed in the heat. There was sweat everywhere: the people, the pipes, the sidewalks, everything shedding a bit of itself. As it evaporated, the distinctions between things blurred, the humid air bleeding it together. You could feel yourself walking through it, gluing a bit to any surface touched.

So, the infection might have been from that stretch of pavement where he fell, the layer of grime living upon it, a perfect incubator. People spat on it and garbage trucks idled over it, dripping steady streams of brown liquid from teeming holds. The cut, as it was being created, might have even acted like a cup, scooping up a heady microscopic mix.

Or it might have been the stoop in front of his building. He laid the bloodied hand on it to slowly lower himself, gripping the railing with the other. Having made it home without further incident that night, he wanted to sit and have a cigarette and finally take a deep breath.

Though the doctors couldn't be certain, they assumed the city had given him the pus and the pain and the later complications; it moved too swiftly through his body to have been otherwise. It was, like his cut, apathetic. Despite generously sharing bacteria that would herald his end, the city shrugged it off the way we shed skin cells. It's no place for an honest-to-God cut, one that's oozing into a bandage, wrapped around a hand, resting on a park bench, or pushing a turnstile, or shaking another hand.

It was ... the woman from the sidewalk?

Hers was the first face he saw, looking up from the pavement. Are you ok? she asked, only the last word coming through clearly. She didn't even step off the curb but was the only person who stopped. The way he wildly sprang up, it was good she hadn't gotten closer. He didn't respond so much as grunt; she kept walking. And now here she was, at his front door, returning the wallet he had dropped for her to find later.

What if he gratefully offered to buy her a drink and she said Yes? That sounded like the start of happily ever after. She had an angelic glow that, in the moment, made it seem possible, the 'ever after' bit. He had seen several

friends recently move out of the city and was starting to find an exhaustion in bartending that went beyond physical. Meeting someone new offered a colorful splash in an otherwise graying life. She would get him out of the house, dust him off for another go at it. It wasn't that he had completely given up on partnering off with someone, but was no longer actively looking either. With her though, he saw all the good that it could be, which suddenly seemed worth the effort. He would do more and be better, all the fluff of cute moments and good sex, but also a best friend, because the world seemed to crumble more each day, and it was good for survival, someone having your back. They would survive the wasteland, once it had all gone to shit, fighting their way out of the city and north, to the hills and silence. But no, that wasn't right. He had used his wallet last night.

It was also a fever dream, brought on by the septicemia.

It was regret.

There were fifteen minutes of lucidity, before he dropped into the coma. They stretched, the way time can, in contrast to our desire for it. Wanting it to be over soon, somehow knowing what was happening, the minutes passed slowly. At first, he was annoyed, angry even, but then touched; he could think of Time as spiting him, drawing out his end, or he could think of it as mournful at his passing, not ready to let go of an old friend. At age seven, he had done the same with Ollie, a twelve-year-old golden retriever suffering from poor hips and failing kidneys. The image of Time as a child was comforting, that it might always keep a youthful hope alive for the reliably disappointing human race.

His first pang of regret was over the cut and its preventability. God, what a dumb way to go. Not inventive enough for the Darwin Awards, not grave or shocking

enough to be properly mourned. All from a cut, on the outside of his right ring finger. He hated that finger, imagined biting it off in a fit of rage. But it wouldn't change anything, and he knew it. He had done many stupid things over the course of his short life and this would be the last.

But that was ok; he'd had a pretty good run of it. He'd made it to Europe, and South America. Seen the Pacific and done drugs. He had skydived, eaten at a three-Michelin-star restaurant, and swam in an infinity pool overlooking Los Angeles, all in the same day. He surfed the Internet and always had access to a clean water supply. He lived a ten-minute walk from a hospital that would have prevented his death even as late as yesterday.

His second pang of regret was over how much he'd had and how little he would leave. He had some friends, but none close enough to be devastated except for maybe one, but he married and moved away two years ago, and they hadn't kept up. He partied with the other bartenders and there were regulars that liked him, but they were regulars of the bar, not him; they would just drink his honor into a fog. Turned out, he was the cut on the city's finger. Except it won, healing so quickly there would be no trace of him by this time next week.

But maybe that was ok too. He wasn't a bad person but wasn't notably good either. He didn't volunteer in his community or give blood. Really, he'd be one less mouth. The state the world was in, it felt as if he was sneaking out during the encore before the house comes down on everyone left inside.

His third pang of regret was for everyone left inside. There was that recent report, forecasting famine and rising waters, millions dying off. Suddenly he was no longer escaping it so much as abandoning everyone else, and he was shameful for it. His only solace was that no one would think he was to blame.

carrying, for weeks

TANYA TUZEO

i eat lemon custard
until citrus chars the roof of my mouth,
bathe bread in pickle juice,
shortcakes line the counter.

still, i crave these things.
sometimes fizz water
or hot dough
becoming a bandage
around fat little bodies of cheese.

family who are not family
use my body as a worry doll,
rubbing garments
looking for signs of the baby.

she's there and not there,
leans against walls of flesh
that separate mother and daughter—
her bedroom door already shut.

still, i go to work at the library,
call my mother, we argue.
paint candy cane red nails for the holidays,
carrying the baby until the day is done.

awake after deep-sea sleep
together we bow-ride another day—
the killer whale and her calf
for fourteen days we both keep swimming.

daughterless

TANYA TUZEO

when little girls are near, caught unaware
in outbreath of panting, i hunger for hearts

holographic against black leggings
hands swiping sequin shirts, silver blushes to pink

what did these mothers do differently? said no more often
until follicles gobbled all the male cells right up?

i want to see grandma again, resurrected,
waiting for pancakes busy with her coloring pages

eyes blackened cast iron bottoms,
she looks at me, *venetian lashes* grandma would call them

dense ferns growing in the shade of her peasant face
i am sure they would look alike, spinning

purple georgette dress
wearing my great-grandmother's hair

cut before she died
given to all the women in the family, kin keepers

who call daily with updates, grieve over bad men,
hold onto dishes, the shawl with gold tassels.

who will wear my hair when i am gone?
who will look for me in a face?

Fallopian Tubes

VALK FISHER

Image: Fallopian tube, or oviduct, and the scientific methods of light passing

The doctor's concluding report would find *well-visualized tubes of normal morphology w/ bilateral permeability.*

What, exactly, had been deemed to be so enterable?

This has been the scientific question.

How permeable?

This is how scientific study often begins: with a question of endurance. Take, for instance, the nature of light. What are its methods of passage? Researchers unpack such questions by empirical observation known as the scientific method. In one of its earliest known implementations, in a lantern-lit room in what is now Iraq, a mathematician came to understand the nature of light passing: eyes did not give off light.

From this scientific conclusion unfolded others.

The understanding of light's passage birthed the first camera, the mechanics of which I once replicated with the core of a paper towel roll that, when held up to light, reflected the world upside down. It staged the invention of the light bulb, which went on to alter circadian rhythms that no longer rose and set with the sun. It revolutionized sleep: researchers were no longer reliant on daylight or lanterns. In a darkened room, one such scientist discovered x-ray beams, without which I would not find myself here, now, in the hospital for a gynecological x-ray, waiting to be examined in the methods of light's passing.

Procedural overview

The hysterosalpingogram is a radiographic diagnostic study. The HSG plays an important role in evaluating abnormalities related to the uterus and fallopian tubes. It is usually completed in 3-5 minutes.

I enter the examination room. There are immediate orders to *not be afraid* as I am ushered and corralled, *come in, come in!* The medical advice is that I should *not be shy!* And undress from the waist down.

The commands magnify my misgivings. It seems the doctor is addressing a cow? Or other such farm animal?

The room is lowly lit. I sense I have stepped into a trap. I remind myself I am here voluntarily.

Using radioactive contrast and beams of light, the HSG evaluates the permeability of fallopian tubes, the reproductive organs that act as throughway for fertile eggs to reach uterus.

The fallopian tubes are referred to as a unit, but there is a left and a right. Like the beings they belong to, tubes are never identical. Their track is not direct, as the most interesting pathways rarely are, with a narrow beginning that widens into the uterine basin.

Tubes, like the beings they belong to, have minds of their own.

The organs are made of muscle that's anatomically known as smooth, meaning, it operates reflexively and at its own will.

Tubes might choose to bridge, becoming the only link between ovary and uterus.

In the case of mine, the choice is unclear. Today's x-ray is here to speak of my possibilities of passage.

Thoroughfares exist to get us through, from beginning to outcome, failing at which, the passage is no longer path, but rather, impasse.

Are my tubes a dead end?

A friend calls from Madrid saying she's pregnant. In April, she will *alumbrar*, or give birth, in what translates from Spanish as a giving of light. The synonymous expression *dar a luz* speaks to a lighting up, as if a birthing mother were making a flame. What is the glow of this deliverance?

What are the contours of the enduring question?

I seem to be long-entangled in matters of light. As a child I once designed a science project that would investigate

the ideal environment for growing mold using jarred samples of bread in environments of gradated shade: in full frontal sun at our doorstep, on the kitchen counter next to my mother's potted mint, and in the damp recesses beneath the kitchen sink, where I discovered mold grew in abundance.

Scientific inquiry, my teacher at the time said, can *change our understanding of the universe. And, of ourselves.*

Periprocedural considerations

A woman's mental and sexual health are intricately interwoven with physical health. For many women, issues involving reproductive health often have long-lasting effects on feminine and sexual identity. This is especially true if it affects a woman's ability to conceive or involves loss of reproductive organs.

Matters of light were particularly relevant as a child growing up in Puerto Rico, where almost half the year was hurricane season that left the island without power, or *sin luz*: 'without light.' There was respite in the candle-lit house. Dinner might have been cheese and crackers, and these might have tasted better than the stove-made meal served warm on an island that was already hot. Before bed, I might have played with a flashlight beneath a draped sheet. I might have looked at stars. Being without light gave new ways of seeing and being.

San Juan was hot in the way of the Caribbean, where rashes behind the knees were a fixture, where articles of clothing were breathable and whenever possible, discarded. Air steamed from the sea each morning, falling by sunrise on jacarandas, tree frogs and the pores of our skin. Hot was just how things were.

I played tennis after school. Once, I sat cross-legged on resin that warmed the skin through my clothes. Sunblock dripped into my eyes.

My coach spoke from above, Butt off the floor!

I gathered that I had done something very wrong.

Those cheeks on the ground could make me infertile!

The implications of infertility escaped me, but I could perceive they were an existential threat that, if materialized, would be my fault. I was informed I *would want to be a mother one day.*

There appeared to be forces greater than me that governed my body and its desires, and they had something to do with the contents of my pelvis. While my friend sat spread-legged in his place of will, I was up against a charge, and this burden called motherhood loomed in the gloomy days of my future. The weight was anatomically female, a load embedded in my gender like the air I breathed.

I could not then identify what I now know to be heartache for a dear thing lost. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reflects on the physicality of grief, recalling the body that took hold after her father's death: "My heart – my actual physical heart, nothing figurative here – is running away from me, has become its own separate thing." My body drifted in its own slow-moving shadow, the source of which was nowhere to be found.

Why would I want to be a mother? How did my coach come to possess this information? What, exactly, would mother require? Mothering seemed like code, and I would find out what it was for. And so began my research, my body becoming its own subject of investigation in the scientific method.

"No physical position is comfortable," Adichie writes of the grieving body. I spent the next twenty years in a background malaise I could neither see nor name,

"grasping for language" that illuminated what had that day been obscured.

In 1561, Gabriele Falloppio described what came to be known as the fallopian tubes. To him, they were nerve-like, with "the utmost end being very ragged and crushed, like the fringe of worn out clothes."

His description gives me pause.

What is the anatomy of a rag?

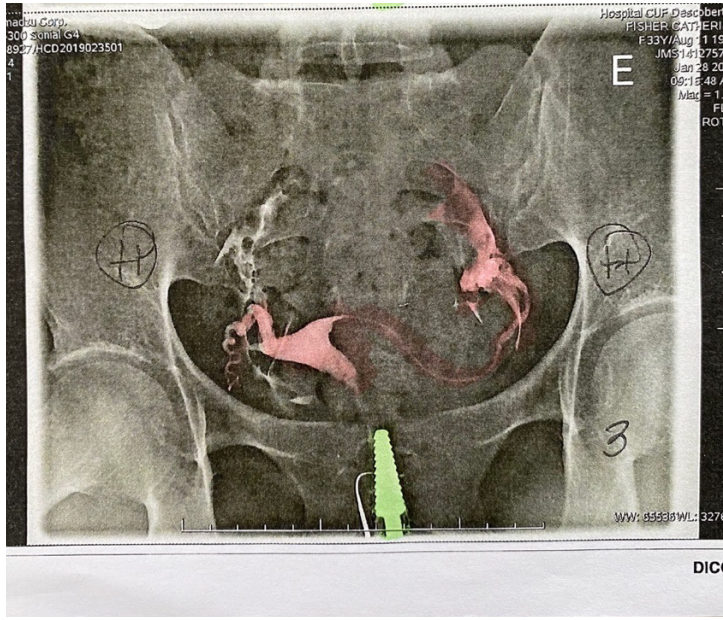
Forgive what is perhaps a linguistic over-sensitivity. But I tire of the charge, which is to have me believe female genitalia is inherently inappropriate, but also functional and decorative. I am worn: am I really to believe that vulva, labia, vagina, for instance, are best understood in diminutive metaphors like sexy bits and lady garden? I bore with the vajay-jay jokes that are apparently hilarious. Because really, I think, as I watch men routinely search for their own crotch, as if checking their best self is still there: what could possibly render female anatomy so profoundly deficient? My sense of humor has given way to a load.

What is the weight of female passage?

The Dutch scientist who first proposed tubes as organs of passage saw it like this:

Falloppio named the coils tuba after the musical instrument he believed them to resemble, but it was not until 1672 that De Graaf further articulated their evolutionary function: "the said Fallopian tubes in women and every kind of female animal are the real 'delivering vessels,'" he wrote. De Graaf extrapolated this information from the study of copulating rabbits, the female species of which have non-equivalent reproductive processes; and yet these differences did not stop him from analogizing women to "cows, ewes, rabbits and other [female] animals." To De Graaf, tubes needed a purpose, and if they were not designed for humanity's deliverance "we do not see what useful service they could do the human body."

Tubes, like the beings they belong to, can be underestimated.



In my family backyard in Puerto Rico, we had a pet rabbit in a pen, near the free-roaming lizards and tree frogs. The rabbit belonged mostly to my sister. I say mostly because she loved it and I didn't. Whereas my sister found a certain purpose in preparing its carrot sticks, I no more identified with the rabbit, or with caring for it, than I did with *becoming a mother one day*. One afternoon I fed the rabbit and left the pen door open. I cannot say if this was by mistake.

Experiments can morph over time, leading a researcher to revisit a subject anew. During the course of my experiment in womanhood, I became less interested in functional passage than in the hidden one. The rabbit's burrow.

For a stint in my childhood, I developed a passion for shoveling dirt. The plan was to dig a tunnel that would carry me through obscurity to the other side of the world.

Periprocedural considerations, ctd
Before turning to the technical aspects of the process, we wish to emphasize the psychological components. Assuming a calm, caring and empathetic persona can minimize patient apprehension.

We had just moved to Lisbon. My Portuguese partner had been invited to a dinner party, so I'd been too, for this was a gathering for locals, if not by birth, then by a certain cultural fit. I was there by marital extension, and I had been worried. I'd bought a new outfit that was expensive but possibly slimming. At the party, I was bored and also outcast, for I could not speak to cigarette-smoked conversation on hallucinogenics and Scandinavian raves, nor did I care to, nor did I pretend that I did. I found myself towards night-end yawning by an open window before the party really started.

I thanked the host before leaving. He marveled, as if at a specimen. "You don't seem American, at all," he remarked. "Actually, you pass as one of us."

Is that pride and why?

There are tunnels and tubes that we might traverse, but there is also the way we pass through the rest of our lived life. Negotiated postures, while temporary stances we might take, can reach outsized magnitudes, such that life can feel like an exercise in passing as, while we're just passing through.

Is there difference between passage and blockage?

The act of passage is a presumed success. But while passing can grant a certain admission, it also closes doors. If the structural passage, such as a tube or tunnel, is a means of transfer, passage within an identity can also be an act of displacement. A passage taken foregoes others.

The art of passing, as Eula Biss frames it, is perhaps "the hardest part." She likens it to the Islamic concept of ketman, an act of religious dissimulation. In ketman, there are two sets of beliefs, those projected to the world to get by and those that are true to self, which are held privately. The purpose is to avoid hostility from non-believers: outward religious assimilation makes space for private religious freedom. The result of such compromise is a lifestyle of contradiction.

I am most interested in the aftermath of this duality. Whereas volitional compromise can be an act of empowerment or gain, concessions made under duress are a dulling of the self. How long does a light dim before it goes?

Procedural preparation:
The patient will be lying in the lithotomy position, her thighs flexed and abducted, her feet resting in stirrups, and her buttocks extending slightly beyond the edge of the examining table. However, in many radiologic fluoroscopic suites where HSGs are performed, the tables do not have stirrups and the patient must be in the frogleg position. Empathetically explaining this awkward position goes a long way toward maximizing patient comfort.

Dressed in a disposable hospital gown, I'm instructed to *have a wee* before the procedure, then find my place on the examining table, spreading my legs over stirrups. *Scootch your bum down, to the edge, more, more, you want it just about hanging off the table.*

A female nurse stands at its foot. She is poised and very pretty. I scan her face. I am looking for disapproval, in her jaw, or lips, or brow. Does she long for the medical terminology? Her forehead is unlined and her expression compliant. It occurs to me for the first time that I'm young, but not that young.

The nurse adjusts a spotlight, aiming it between the stirrups. For a moment, it shines at my face. I can't see the room, only floating speckles of black. They erase the room, then disappear as quickly as they came, and I see the room anew.

In view of the nurse's silent face, I begin to sense new faculties of sight.

I want to speak of these things I hadn't always seen.

I once wore her pleasing face. The blank forehead and the quick smile, I'd believed, had been for me. Had my womanhood actually required ketman, or had it been self-imposed? Was this for lack of passage or for lack of seeing the less visible routes?

Either way there had been a dispersion of self, what Deborah Levy identifies as a subjective fragmentation. Edouard Glissant identifies a similar fracturing in diaspora, which he sees as a condition of passage from unity to multiplicity. In my passage as girl to woman, what paths had fractured, what prospects had been shadowed?

Levy's voice was in my head and I wanted to speak it for the nurse, to tell her, "Your mind is valuable and you need a place to think and I value your thoughts," that this whole thing "is about property," that her bodily and energetic real estate, what I would call her Light, are sacred stomping ground, Hers. In eviction from it, Levy suggests, one is left "endlessly searching for home."

Pre-pubescence began to give way to the onset of womanhood, and my family moved north. Atlanta was sprawling, with seasons and no rainforests. Days were colder and shorter than I'd known, and at other times, drier and longer. I felt wrong in a sweater. I felt wrong in myself.

I longed, I suspected, to belong, but to what?

My nostalgia was for an invisible place, but I can't say it was for San Juan. For I no more belonged in Atlanta than I did in Puerto Rico. In each case I was a transplant with an accent and no roots. I longed for a place that existed before being rootless.

All these years, on the tennis court and in the San Juan bake and in Atlanta's seasons, in all these years of ketman, what, exactly, had been displaced?

"There are things," writes Valeria Luiselli, "that produce nostalgia in advance – spaces we know to be lost as soon as we find them."

I can now see this place, I think of telling the nurse, a place I could only name long after its absence. It was the place before having to pass as someone else's definition of

woman. Or of knowing I had a choice, and I was happier than I will ever be.

The Portuguese call it saudade, a wordless longing, a homesickness of being. It is physical, like grief, evoking body; it is temporal, nodding to nostalgia for something passed; it is cartographic, implying a displacement, like being lost inside a map. Rather than feeling saudade, the Portuguese would say one has it. In my case, saudade had me.

On the examining table, I wonder if the nurse, too, was had by a similar longing. What translation could speak to the unmooring? What language could reverse it?

Notes on a miscarriage.

Ectopic pregnancy
Where a fertilized embryo implants outside the womb. This can be a life-threatening emergency.

The hysterosalpingogram is now two years behind me. I am in the halogen glare of the obstetric emergency room, legs spread wide across stirrups. Something isn't right. Something's out of place.

I am seven weeks pregnant.

Yes, but pregnant how, is the scientific question of the moment.

The doctor observes the contents of my womb with an ultrasound wand.

I am out of place pregnant, he fears. This is serious, he says.

Ectopic Pregnancy, Treatment:
Fetal growth in an abnormal place can be a medical emergency. A fertilized egg can't develop normally

in any structure outside the uterus. Structural abnormalities of the fallopian tube can be risk-factors for ectopic pregnancy. To prevent life-threatening complications, the ectopic tissue needs to be removed.

The doctor suggests the faulty implantation could be structural.

This has me thinking of the architecture of it all. What had been the relevant structures and infrastructures in my passage? Which ones had been biological, and which a device of cultural construction? To what extent had I perceived them, and in what light?

Returning to the Hysterosalpingogram, Procedural considerations:
Gentle, slow placement of the tenaculum, grasping only enough tissue for adequate stabilization of the cannula, is recommended. The operator should explain and forewarn of the insertion of the foreign agent.

The HSG was meant to last three to five minutes, and yet, as matters of scientific discovery can go, we are still here.

My thighs are perpendicular to the floor and my pelvis at the doctor's eye-level. I am thinking of the nurse and how I will talk to her about matters of vision.

A metal speculum pushes through the labia then flexes to draw insides wide. The nurse unwraps a sterile catheter and hands it to the doctor. *What is her name?* He pushes it through the speculum in search of the cervix, that dilating passage where life might push through, head-first.

The cervical dilation that permits passage through the birth canal is known as effacement. Lia Purpura reflects on the word's linguistic resonance, noting we "do not say a clarifying of the membrane; it is not a translucence, nor does it shadow or sheer or unveil;" effacement is notable for its "diminishment," our language already "locat[ing]" the female "body as a site of loss." From virginities to pregnancies to even minds lost – for hysterical derives from the Greek word for womb – the female body is the epicenter of linguistic diminution that translates into physical abatement.

"Lose something every day," Elizabeth Bishop writes, "so many things seem filled / with the intent to be lost." Bishop's invitation is to a loss that's benign, one that, if chosen, sets free. But the loss of a perpetual overlooking should perhaps be called something else: a confiscation, a renunciation, a casting away.

In all the uterine exams she'd assisted with, had the nurse ever noticed the diminishment?

Don't feel bad if you haven't, I tell her, as my mind continues in conversation with her. That's not my point. The air we breathe is invisible, remember? I think, just now, I see the extent of the forfeiture. It existed for so long without a name, coming as a sense of unidentifiable displacement, a longing for place and space. It was the ache of an uprooting and the search for a home I could no longer remember.

In my head, the nurse and I discuss my experiment over coffee.

Having a probing mind, she wants to know more than what I've shared on the examining table.

Break your research down for me like a science, she says.

If the female body *gives light*, I explain, I wanted to understand the interaction between lighting and giving. If the female body is so luminous, why its notions of shame? If it held possibilities in giving, what were the bounds? Who were the beneficiaries?

I invite the nurse to explore the variables.

Variable (a). The giving.

I start with an analogy. As a newly transplanted Londoner, my flat search informed me that renting is in no way to be confused with the widely-understood synonym leasing, the latter being, according to the Mayor of London's leasehold guide for Londoners, usually called buying.

Just as it is possible to own land that's actually someone else's, a woman's body, too, appears to be similarly conveyed. The stakeholders are multiple.

They are even codified into law. 'Heartbeat bills' in American states, for instance, ban abortions from the moment embryonic heartbeat is detected, which can reasonably coincide with when a woman might first identify a pregnancy, curtailing her space of bodily and medical choice in what is, it would seem, legislative design. Or take, for example, Chilean law, which presumes male disposition of all marital property, including solely-owned assets in a woman's name.

This latter stipulation is one my mother understands, for she was recently required to provide proof of spousal consent to sell a small plot of land in rural Chile left in her sole name by her late father. My father isn't Chilean, yet by virtue of his gender is privileged under the laws of a country in which my mother, as its national, is not. "I was young and in love with my head in the clouds," my mother says of her situation, and it's unclear to me what this means.

Figurative ownership over a woman's body, of course, does not require legislation (see Variable (b)).

Variable (b). The light.

On matters of light and shadow, the nurse has opinions. She tells me of her patients' hesitance towards matters *down there*, as if female reproductive anatomy were a descent into a nameless Hades. Many women, she says, cannot and do not wish to know, or touch, or implicate themselves in matters involving, say, their own pelvic floor. The socialized aversion to one's own *lady parts* results in a generalized cultural and personal obscurity to it, the female body remaining "less known than the bottom of the ocean," Rachel Gross writes in *Vagina Obscura*.

Contrived notions of the undignified female body exist beyond genitalia, for a woman's frame is the subject of objectification and ridicule for simply being itself.

"I want to know why," Helen Plumb explores in *A Prickly Subject*, "I'm so reluctant to be in my natural state. I think it started when he pointed at my legs in disgust, when I was only eight."

Rachel Gross provides a linguistic sampling of this tradition of humiliation: the Latin for vulva translates as part for which you should be ashamed; the German for clitoris translates as shame lips, which in French was first similarly named shameful part, or *membre honteaux*.

A girl will learn the subtext of vagina, absorbing the anatomy of female shame (genitalia is not the point: take *fat*, or *flat*). She will one day laugh at her body's expense, wanting to meet expectations; she may feel shame without knowing why. Unaware, she will enact someone else's script, disenfranchising herself from a body she is learning to increasingly hate, thereby becoming an illusory tenant in it, her body a space possessed in fact by notions peddled

by someone else; "I never really felt I had a choice," Plumb reflects on her history of hair removal, "never really knew that these legs had a voice."

Hysterosalpingogram technique:
The radioactive contrast agent should be injected slowly. You should explain this in advance, as with every step of the examination, and avoid any sudden or unexpected movements.

Cough, the doctor instructs me, the speculum still in position.

Before I can inquire as to the relevance there is a pain that is urgent, as if a nerve exposed.

I gather: the doctor had injected my cervix with contrast, deeming it medically preferable to distract me with a cough than to provide full, or any, disclosure.

What we keep silent, and from whom, is itself a well-established and gendered mechanism of control, I tell the nurse with my eyes, sharp.

If I had only *coughed correctly*, the doctor informs me, this would not have been painful. In my utter incompetence, I am to understand, I brought the pain onto myself.

Like billions of women, I am somehow not a reliable witnesses in my own life. A search for truth, I tell the nurse in my mind, is the very reason for my experiment in womanhood. Except the gynecologist had seen it like this: if a woman's body can be a taking of the dignity, say, of procedural disclosure, it must be because women don't truly experience their bodies, meaning a woman's word on matters pertaining to herself can never really be trusted or true.

Enough. This was not the conversation in my mind. I address the doctor, loud enough for the nurse to hear.

How, I ask the doctor, could he claim visceral knowledge of an unannounced transvaginal injection?

I know all about the Vagina, he informs me, his tone referencing the organ as if a contagious disease.

Medically, perhaps.

Listen, I know more about vaginas than all the women in this country combined. He actually says this.

Kamila Shamsie identifies this as the intellectual problem not with bodily appropriation, but with cultural appropriation, although the error translates. The transgression is not the act of writing another culture, she contends, but the disposition "that fails to understand that there are very powerful reasons for people to dispute your right to tell a story." Bodily appropriation, like its cultural counterpart, can displace story teller as primary instrument of violence, silencing not voices and in doing so, invalidating experience.

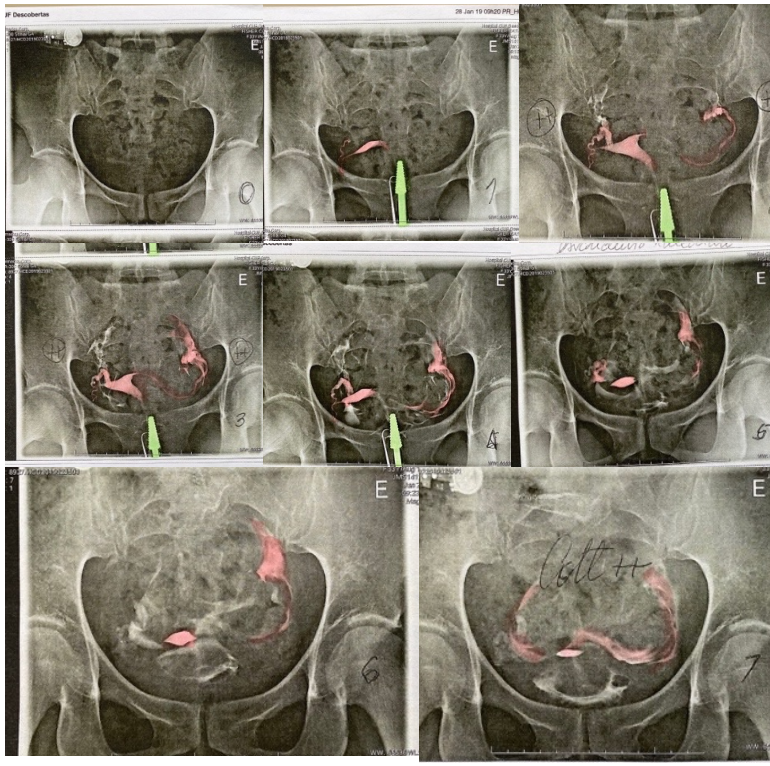
I raise my voice in the direction of my pelvis.

Hysterosalpingogram, technique:
A radiograph is taken prior to the instillation of contrast. Then a series of at least 4 more images should be captured as the contrast spreads through the genital tract.

I now have eight x-rays of my uterine cavity, each one of which helps piece together my fallopian function. These x-rays tell me my tubes are permeable. They also tell me my uterus is retroverted, or abnormal, and somehow I'm not surprised.

None of these x-rays speak to the fragmentation of passage to womanhood that I had finally, really, seen.

bell hooks wrote that women "raised to hate their bodies can change their minds" and so, too, I conclude, can women who've learned disempowerment in them.



I sit up on the tilted examination table, which is still shooting x-rays. I slide down it, fling my legs over its side and get off. I flash my bare behind as I walk across the examination room, leaking contrast agent across the floor. The doctor says something about my mental faculties, but I have lost interest in listening.

Meaningful experiments require disseminating results. Conclusions must be shared with the scientific community, fostering progress.

On my way out the door, I look at the nurse. Our eyes meet and the sharing is done.

Before I close the door behind me, I say farewell to the nurse. *I honor the light in you.*

I see the doctor, graying and hunched over spectacles and seven decades in a world that runs on patriarchy. It occurs to me that this, too, might have taken the light that is his. *I honor the light in you.*

Procedural Complications:
Complications from HSG are rare. Most cases resolve with simple maneuvers including termination of the procedure.

Years later, I give birth to a daughter. Her first and favorite book is Aaron Becker's *You Are Light*. I read it at bedtime to my daughter, night after nap after night, its words like stones turned smooth in my mouth:

> This is the light that brings the dawn
> to warm the sky and hug the land
> it sips the sea to make the rain
> and waters wheat to grow the grain
> it feeds the leaves that shade the earth
> and brings to life each blossom's birth
> it lights the moon to kiss the night
> this light is you and you are light.

I whisper of her infinite possibilities, in all her facets of darkness and light, undiminishable. Each night the words take me to a place of saudade, the place of remembrance, the place into which we are each born, and I bow to her light.

Review of

Websongs
by Onoruoiza Mark Onuchi

AJIOLA FELIX OLUDARE

Websongs is an anthology of engaging, compelling and profound creative poetry work. The corpus of poems reflects the author's great philosophical ideals and poetic narratives of contemporary existential realities of humanity in the contemporary world. The creative work demonstrates the significance of poetry to modern social, economic, and political reality in Nigeria, Africa, and the world. It amplifies a horde of subaltern voices trod down by the horns of belligerent forces and comprador bourgeoisie. The masterpiece encapsulates the writer's romance with books and empirical life's occurrences. The themes of the anthology revolve around quotidian experiences and joy, hope, ecstasy, values, faith and persuasions, creed, travail, pain; the quotidian struggles and resilience, of homo sapience in Nigeria, Africa and then the world. The anthology is structured into seven parts: (1) Flakes of Pain (2) Desolate Drums (3) Vestiges of Hope (4) Threshold of Triumph (5) Plumes & Garlands (6) Echoes of Love (7) Doxology.

Flakes of Pain is a critique of a country ruled by imbeciles masquerading as patriots, the entrenchment of looters' solidified by a horde of instant gratification-seeking indolent youths, homes ravaged by fierce torrents of moral decay, and a cynical, pseudo-democracy where the thieving bourgeoisie exploits the masses. It is a nation governed through ethnic and primordial parochialism, that has legitimized extreme poverty, crumbled political economy, ruined institutions, and calamitous social existence. Flakes of Pain reflects a country consumed by an obsession with a whimsical god of money. A perverse political system that thrives in the midst of a faith fanaticism that pays too much allegiance to religiosity, to the irreversible detriment of genuine spirituality and morality. An economic recession causing gorges of confusion, collapsing castles, crumbling skyscrapers in high profile business districts of financial implosion and poverty explosion – from Australia to Venezuela the rhythm rings clipping off wings of wealth, crippling corporations with glee, crashing domes from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

Desolate Drums depicts of the frailties, vulnerability and inevitable succumb of every homo sapience to a cruel monster, callous foe, and illusive tyrant gobbled by the pangs of hades –death, allowed by the Great Grand Architect of the Cosmos, but worsened by the brazen uprising, rising inferno, mayhem unleashed on Jos – a tin city of the radiant sun by myopic militants, aided by chieftains in the tower of power.

Vestiges of Hope is applicable to Africa's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious characteristics. It shows the virtues of diversity and portray the vibes, bustles, and mesmerizing energy of a cosmopolitan city.

Threshold of Triumph is a prophetic attestation to a new horizon, an imminent transcendental change, as humanity is on the crest of redemption and threshold of re-invention to experience an invigorating rebirth. A guaranteed all day of bliss and no night of pain with ease, perfect governance upon a domain was once ruined by pain and delusion as all enjoyed the paradise of unending merriment.

In Plumes & Garlands, the author eulogizes his former teachers whose profundity of thought and sound pedagogy shaped the curve of his intellectual and furnished him with his gateaux of philosophical paraphernalia. Iconic literary pundits and prolific scholars, like Professor Charles Bodunde and Dr Akintoye Akindele, are woven into the poems. Onuchi also venerates the legendary literary ancestor, Christopher Okigbo, a fearless and proficient bard that churned out pellets and missiles on erring political pantheons. Onuchi also magnifies his fellow poets of diverse creeds and tongues and several unsung heroes, tireless women, devoted mothers, dedicated fathers war veterans, community leaders, unknown inventors. This section brings to light E.W Kenyon's idea that "The art of writing is the art of immortality."

Echoes of Love is a corpus of exotic romantic poems and love songs. It's a new genre emblematic of the Biblical Songs of Solomon. Doxology poetically defines the indescribability of the Great Grand Architect of the cosmos. The anthology reflects both the conventional world view – Though fashioned from the prism of the Christianity faith, it is all-encompassing, all-embracing, and all-involving creative work of deep inspiration, profound thought, and sound intellectualism.

Contributors

M.A. Schaffner's work appears in *The MacGuffin*, *Illuminations*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Written in Arlington*, *Poetry Wales*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *The Tulane Review*, the novel *War Boys* and the collection *The Good Opinion of Squirrels*. M.A. wades through the archival records of the Second United States Colored Infantry (1863-66) with a view toward compiling a regimental history.

David Romanda's work has appeared in *Ambit Magazine*, *The Moth*, *The North, Poetry Ireland Review*, and *Popshot Quarterly*. His book is *Why Does She Always Talk About Her Husband?* (Blue Cedar Press, 2022). Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan.

Beth Oast Williams's poetry appears in *Leon Literary Review, SWWIM Everyday, Wisconsin Review, Glass Mountain, GASHER, Fjords Review*, and *Rattle's Poets Respond*, among others. Her poems have been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Her first chapbook is *Riding Horses* (2020).

Kurt Olsson's work appears in *Poetry, The Threepenny Review, The New Republic, and Southern Review*. He has published two collections of poetry, *Burning Down Disneyland* and *What Kills What Kills Us*, which was awarded the Towson University Prize for Literature, as well as named Best Poetry Book by Peace Corps Writers.

Paul Brownsey lives in Scotland and is a former philosophy lecturer at Glasgow University. He has published around 100 short stories in Europe and North America. His first book, *His Steadfast Love and Other Stories*, was published by Lethe Press, New Jersey, USA.

Elizabeth Bruce's novel, *And Silent Left the Place*, won WWPH's Fiction Prize. Her collection is *Universally Adored and Other One Dollar Stories* (Vine Leaves Press). She's published fiction in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Israel, Sweden, Yemen, Malawi, and The Philippines. Her podcast, "Creativists in Dialogue: A Podcast Embracing the Creative Life," is at creativists.substack.com. (elizabethbrucedc.com.)

Kathy Tierney is an award winning poet. Her poetry, short stories and CNF has been published in various literary journals and anthologies. She has an Associate Degree of Creative Writing from Southern Cross University and a Bachelor of Creative Writing with Distinction from Deakin University, Australia.

Elizabeth Templeman's publications include individual essays appearing in various journals and anthologies, and two books of essays, *Notes from the Interior*, and *Out & Back, Family in Motion*. Visit her website https://elizabethtempleman.trubox.ca/

Michael Loyd Gray has published six novels: *The Armageddon Two-Step* (winner of a Book Excellence Award, 2019), *Well Deserved* (won the 2008 Sol Books Prose Series Prize), *Not Famous Anymore*, *Exile on Kalamazoo Street* (including the stage version), *The Canary*, *King Biscuit*. He is the winner of the 2005 Alligator Juniper Fiction Prize and 2005 The Writers Place Award for Fiction. His stories appear in many international journals.

Omar Sabbagh is widely published poet, writer and critic. His latest poetry collection is *Morning Lit: Portals After Alia* (Cinnamon Press, 2022). Forthcoming books are *The Cedar Never Dies* (Northside Press 2023) and *Y Knots* (Liquorice Fish Books 2023). Currently, he teaches at the American University in Dubai (AUD), where he is Associate Professor of English.

Richard Downing (Ph.D.) has received recognition from the *Nuclear Age Peace Foundation* (1stplace), *New Delta Review* (1st place), *New Woman* (Grand Prize), *Boston Review, Writecorner Press* (Editor's Award), *Press 53, Colorado Review*, and *Solstice* (Editor's Award). Work appears in *Arts & Letters, Juked*, and *The Malahat Review*. He is an environmental activist.

Jerry Wemple has published three poetry collections. Pulitzer Prize-winner Yusef Komunyakaa selected *You Can See It from Here* for the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award. His poems and nonfiction work appear in numerous journal and anthologies. He teaches in the Creative Writing program at Bloomsburg University.

Michael Waterson is a retired journalist. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and won several awards. His one act plays have been produced in Massachusetts and California and published in literary journals. He is Napa Valley Poet Laureate Emeritus. His first collection is *Cosmology of Heaven and Hell* (2022). Visit michaelwatersonpoetry.com

Douglas Cole published six poetry collections and the novel *The White Field* (winner of the American Fiction Award). His work has been anthologized in *Best New Writing*, *Bully Anthology*, and *Coming Off The Line*. He is a regular contributor to *Mythaxis* (essays and interviews with notable writers, artists and musicians). He was awarded the Leslie Hunt Memorial prize in poetry, the Editors' Choice Award for fiction by RiverSedge, and nominated three times for a Pushcart and seven times for Best of the Net. (douglastcole.com).

Sean Madden works for the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. His poem, "Note for Inspector," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2022. Other poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *Copper Nickel, Slant, Glassworks, Sport Literate, Small Print, The Nonconformist, The Los Angeles Review, The John Updike Review*, and *Hawaii Pacific Review*.

Virginia Watts' poetry and stories appear in *CRAFT, The Florida Review, Reed Magazine, Pithead Chapel, Permafrost Magazine, Broadkill Review.* Her poetry chapbooks are available from Moonstone Press. She has four nominations for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. A short story collection is upcoming from The Devil's Party Press. Visit virginiawatts.com.

Ralph Robert Moore's fiction has appeared in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies all around the world. He's been nominated twice for Best Story of the Year by The British Fantasy Society. His novels are *Father Figure, As Dead As Me, Ghosters*, and *The Angry Red Planet*. The story collections are *Remove the Eyes, I Smell Blood, You Can Never Spit It All Out, Behind You, Breathing Through My Nose, The Sex Act, Our Elaborate Plans*, and *You Know My Name*. Visit ralphrobertmoore.com.

Norman (Buzz) Minnick is the author of three collections of poetry and is the editor of *The Lost Etheridge: Uncollected Poems of Etheridge Knight* and *Between Water and Song: New Poets for the Twenty-First Century*. Visit buzzminnick.com.

Chris Shorne was previously an international human rights accompanier in Guatemala, an administrative assistant for the U.S.'s largest DeafBlind retreat, and a teacher at a queer writing institute. Shorne holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles and has published with *Utne, Bennington Review, Portland Review*, and *Duende*.

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.J. Carber, became a widely published late-blooming poet in his mid-70's in over 130 literary journals/anthologies in all over the world. His collections are: *The Enormity of Existence* (2020), *Of Ether and Earth* (2021), and *Soul Songs* (2022). He's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Sohana Manzoor (Ph.D.) teaches English and creative writing at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. She is the editor of *Our Many Longings: Contemporary Short Fiction from Bangladesh*. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies in South and Southeast Asia, and received a special mention in the *Best Asian Short Stories 2020*.

Tanya Tuzeo has two collections of unpublished poetry, *We Live in Paradise* and *Miserable People*. Her work appears in various literary publications, is a finalist in the *Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest* 2022 and longlisted in *Frontier Poetry's Nature & Place Prize*.

Rikki Santer's poetry has received many honors including Pushcart, Ohioana and Ohio Poet book award nominations, as well as a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her tenth poetry collection is *How to Board a Moving Ship*. Visit rikkisanter.com

Stephen Page wants only to write, spend time with his family, read, walk along a beach or in the woods, eat a balanced diet, and drink an occasional cold beer, and to learn to play well his electric bass, a Fender Precision he would like to exchange some day for a Rickenbacker.

Veronika Kot is a graduate of the University of Chicago (English) and the University of California Berkeley (Law). She works in Rhode Island for a nonprofit providing free legal assistance to low-income residents of the state. She has published in *Subnivean* and *Euphony*.

Jessica Baldanzi's poetry, memoir, and critical essays have appeared in publications from *Booth* to *Genders* to *The Shore*. She blogs at commonscomics.com and most recently published *Bodies and Boundaries in Graphic Fiction* (2022). She teaches writing, comics, literature, and theory at Goshen College in Indiana. "Chemotrail" is from an epistolary manuscript she wrote with her aunt, Linda Baldanzi, who died of pancreatic cancer.

Amanda Stopa Goldstein is a poet and short fiction writer. Her work appears in *Philadelphia Stories, Cherry Tree,* and the *Arlington Literary Journal*.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). Recent/upcoming appearances in MockingOwl Roost, South Broadway Ghost Society, and Commo, among others.

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Honus Combs lives and writes in South Carolina. He works as an underwater welder and writes poems on his off days.

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