



B BRYANT
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Since our first issue in 2000, we have actively sought to expand our audience. We expect readers of the *Bryant Literary Review* to be sophisticated, educated, and familiar with the conventions of contemporary literature. We see our purpose to be the cultivation of an active and growing connection between our community and the larger culture. The *BLR* provides a respected venue for creative writing of every kind around the world. Our only standard is quality.

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Editors' Note

Thank you for picking up the *Bryant Literary Review*. This edition of the *BLR* features short stories and poetry from around the world: India, Israel, and the United States. Each story and poem was selected by an editorial team consisting of Bryant University students and professors. We, the student fiction editors, chose stories that seemed relevant to contemporary life at the end of the 21st century's second decade. From interpersonal relationship struggles to solitary struggles with addiction, from international political strife to intra-psychic ethical dilemmas, the stories' themes speak to some of the challenges and problems we see in the world today. We hope that this collection leaves you yearning to delve deeper into the complexity of the human psyche and the world around you. We hope that it rekindles your passion for slowing down and taking in a good piece of literature in a very busy, fast paced world.

This issue holds a special place in our hearts because it is the last one we will work on as student editors. We want to give a big thank you to Professor Thomas Roach, the editor with whom we worked most closely; drea brown, the new poetry editor (congrats on your first issue!); Nichole Page, student poetry editor; Ron Pitt, the managing editor who kept us on track; as well as the many Bryant University staff members, especially Lucie Koretsky, who helped us along the way. Most of all, we want to thank the authors and readers who contribute to and support the *Bryant Literary Review*. Without you, this edition would not be possible.

Christina DiStefano (Bryant University Class of 2020)

Cherlene Erauda (Bryant University Class of 2020)

Jaffa Coffee

TEHILA WENGER

The waitress placed the cappuccino down carefully on my left, next to the open computer. I glanced into the mug and noted that there was no design in the foam. My anticipation for the caffeinating process dropped immediately by several degrees, along with my belief in the basic goodness of mankind.

“Anything else?” She was pleasant, but cold. She knew that I was going to sit there for four hours on the merit of one cup, and she resented it. I reached for a brown sugar packet. What had happened to solidarity among young people?

In Gaza City, Zeinab ran into her sister’s room. It wasn’t really her sister’s room. It was their cousin’s Hadija’s room. Their own home was now a pile of gray sand, courtesy of a D9 IDF bulldozer.

Six-year-old Alya wailed, emptying herself of bad dreams through a sewer line running from mind to mouth. She was spitting out old night ghosts: soldiers and bodies. Hadija’s head was hidden beneath a pillow, her hands clamped down on either side to try to block out the noise. Zeinab checked the mattress to make sure that the sheets didn’t need to be cleaned, then wrapped her arms around her sister’s shoulders and sang the song she had learned in class on Monday. She liked it because of the verse in the middle. For the children without houses. Listen, Alya habibti, Fairuz made a song about us. Actually the song was about Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was Gaza was Palestine was Zeinab. Alya’s shrieks subsided into sobs. For those who resisted and were martyred at

the gates. Alya began to breathe again. Her cheeks sparkled beneath a shiny saltwater glaze. Zeinab flicked one large, perambulatory tear away from Alya's nose and sighed silently when it landed on her own arm. And the peace was martyred in the home of peace, she sang. Alya buried her head in her sister's chest and closed her eyes. "I want tea," she whispered.

Zeinab kissed the top of the small head burrowing into her shirt. "Tea. *Tayib*. What else?"

"That's all for now," I said, and smiled pleasantly at the waitress. Her lips twitched to the right and she moved away to more profitable tables.

A pair of stocky hipsters strolled in, arguing. The one with the cowbell nose piercing spoke English with a New York accent. The Village, I guessed. The other, a balding specimen with an unlocked birdcage tattooed onto his upper bicep, lisped his r's and gesticulated violently as he searched for words. I decided that he was a new Jaffaite, an emigre from Haifa or the prodigal son of an ultra-Orthodox family in Bnei Brak who had traded tousled side curls for an elegantly landscaped beard.

The New Yorker's voice was a high-pitched mixture of self-righteousness and irritation.

"You can laugh, but all of these little things actually make up the sum total of human interactions. Like interrupting a woman at a meeting, you'll definitely be like, hey, it wasn't because she was a woman, it's because she didn't have anything good to say."

"Yes, maybe she didn't," said his friend, spreading his hands wide to convey the meaning he was not sure he could express in his second language.

“Oh my God.” The American rolled his eyes. “Okay, when you consider that the vast majority of people who are cut off in work meetings are female, you start to see a holistic picture. That’s what a microaggression is. The evil of the unintentional.”

“No, no, no,” responded his friend. They took seats facing one another at the square table in front of me and pulled the laminated menus towards themselves like shields. “It is the thing that makes the left look so fucking stupid today.”

“It’s not...”

“Listen to me, listen. There are women who have, how you call it, ehmm... You know, a *brit mila* for girls.”

“FGM?”

“What?”

“You’re talking about female genital mutilation.”

“Yes. I think... Yes. Listen, listen. In Africa, this surgery happens. Even here. In the Negev, with the Bedouin, you know? It’s disgusting. So then you say, ah no, she is not allowed to talk in a fucking work meeting? Who fucking cares?” He slapped his open palm on the table for emphasis. “It’s distraction from real things, okay? Real problems.”

In Qaryut, Ibtisam lowered the water bucket carefully from her head to the ground and leaned over to inspect the tree. Her face was a little pale. She was angry. Once, she would have run back to the house in hysterics. Burnt, dead, she would have cried. Aiiiiie. Our trees. Our children. They murdered our children. Allah have mercy.

She had seen too many uprooted trees. It was only one this time, unburnt, lying on its side. The soldiers would say that it was an accident. Maybe a big storm had blown it over. They would say, why

would the settlers attack one tree? It's not even picking season. And her husband's face would turn red and he would tell them in the shards of Hebrew that he had picked up working on Tel Aviv construction sites in his youth, do not ask me why a settler this or that. There is no why. There is no why for kill tree. And the soldiers would look over her husband's shoulder, at the sky, at the ground, cradling their guns and shifting impatiently from foot to foot. We'll look into it, they would say. Go home. Standing in her husband's family's grove, looking at the dead tree that his great grandfather had planted, the soldiers would say, go back home.

I was so caught up in the conversation opposite that I didn't notice when Lena walked in. The American hipster was trying to explain, his vocal pitch and eyebrows radiating exasperation, that FGM had been almost completely eliminated in the Bedouin community down south. It was racist to imply otherwise. The Israeli shook his head vigorously. "No, no, no," he said. "Now you are changing the subject."

Lena lay a slim, tan hand on my shoulder. She had a new layer of paint on her nails: something between red and pink, a color that shouted. "How are you, *habibti*?"

I rose to my feet and embraced her. "*Marhaban*, hello, peace, good morning, how are you? Is everything good? Is anything new?" The litany of Arabic greetings rolled smoothly off of my tongue. I could pass as a near-fluent speaker if I stuck to blessings and the weather.

"How are you, my darling?" she asked again, checking her phone one last time (although she would come back to it throughout the meeting, I knew, compulsively scrolling through new notifications and apologizing with the embarrassed laughter of an addict).

“Good,” I said. “My boss promised me...ah...more money last week.”

She told me the Arabic word for a raise. I pulled my computer to me and typed it in, painstakingly tapping out each unfamiliar curly letter with my index finger. Lena clapped her hands and told me how happy she was for me.

“You deserve it,” she told me. “When you are a millionaire, you’re going to buy me a ticket to Paris and we will spend the week there together.”

She had never been to France. Sometimes I asked her to come to my neighborhood on Bograshov Street for our language lesson. Little Paris, I called it. All the immigrants milling around, setting up kosher patisseries and complaining bitterly that Israelis didn’t speak French. But it made her uncomfortable to sit in the center of the city. When she spoke Arabic outside of Jaffa, she told me, people looked at her like she was wearing a suicide vest.

“How do you say suicide vest in Arabic?” I asked her, trying to change the subject.

She ended the lesson early that day.

In Jabalia, two girls walked home from school. Nusreen, her ponytail gathered into a pink scrunchie and her cheek a matching mauve where her father had slapped her a week earlier, skipped manically as she told Marwa about the party that their teacher was planning for the end of the year. Her knapsack levitated every time she launched herself into the air. The wall to their right was covered with the mural of a masked fighter, a rocket resting on his left shoulder and the opposite foot perched atop a human skull. Marwa did not ask about

the mark on Nusreen's face. That was good. Almost, she had forgotten. It wasn't so important.

She had asked her father why he stayed home all day (not like Marwa's father, who worked), and his hand had flown at her face. Fast, very fast. She ran to her room, tears in her eyes and fear in her mouth. Her mother walked into the bedroom. She covered the welt on Nusreen's cheek with a wet cloth and explained in a soft voice that Baba was not angry with her. All of his anger was for the Jews. God would punish them. Even for this, her stinging cheek, God would punish them deeply. Baba loved her, of course. But she must not ask such things.

When Lena's coffee came, she ordered me to switch languages. "Enough Hebrew," she said. In Arabic, I blurred and stumbled over verbs, although we had been meeting for almost a year. We discussed her husband, my boyfriends, the quality of the coffee, and the upcoming elections in the United States. I tried to explain the intricate workings of the electoral college, and soon slipped into Hebrew, then English. But her English was weak. Finally, I shrugged.

"It's very complicated," I said in Arabic. She smiled forgivingly.

"Like all politics," she agreed. "Complicated and bad."

In Bil'in, Maryam told her son that she didn't want him to attend the Friday protest. Not this one. Not this time. Her nephew in Balata had just been arrested. It was not the first time. But she was frightened. She had a feeling. She had bad dreams. "I don't want you to go," she said.

He drank the coffee that she had prepared for him, stood, and kissed her cheek. "It is good coffee, Mama," he told her. "I tell everyone that you make the best coffee in Palestine."

This means that he will go.

The hipsters stood, their quinoa salads and arguments finished. As they headed toward the door of the cafe, one of them – the Israeli – stopped by our table. “Excuse me,” he said. “You were speaking Arabic?”

Lena looked at him. I immediately sensed that she didn’t like him, although I didn’t know how I knew it. I hadn’t watched her with other people enough. Our friendship was a strangely decontextualized collage of coffee shops, grammar rules, and occasional inspirational Arabic stickers exchanged on WhatsApp. Some of her facial expressions were familiar: there was a particular eye roll that she reserved monogamously for stories about her husband, and the faint smile when she spoke of the next generation of Jaffaites meant worried pride (“they’re not afraid of *anything*,” she told me fiercely, as if I had been trying to frighten them), but all of these relationships and reactions were just words to me. I had never seen her with her own people.

Not that the bearded hipster with the birdcage tattoo was one of hers.

“Yes,” Lena told the beard. She looked squarely into his face, her eyes slitted, and then looked away.

“But... Sorry if this is rude, but are you Arabs?” He glanced at me, at my sunburnt neck and freckles.

“Why would that be rude?” asked Lena. Her voice was even. Her skinny leg shook up and down, up and down on the floor.

“I’m American,” I said, leaning forward protectively. I wasn’t sure whether I was protecting Lena or the hipster. “We do a language exchange together. Thirty minutes of Arabic for thirty minutes of English. Or sometimes French.”

“But you, you’re Jewish?”

“Yes.”

“Great,” he said enthusiastically. “That’s so great. This is what makes a difference, you know? Not the politicians, but real people and real connections.”

I blinked at him. Lena played with the salt shaker, her eyes on the table, the corners of her lips stretching downwards like gravity had come to collect payment for all of her past smiles.

The American called impatiently from the doorway and the birdcage bicep left. I grimaced in a vague, embarrassed way at Lena, a nonverbal apology for my people.

“He’s right,” she said.

My eyebrows jumped. “Right about what?”

“That what we’re doing is important. That you learning Arabic makes a difference.”

“To whom?”

“To you. To me. To your community, maybe. Who knows?”

“To that guy who asked if we were Jewish or Arab.”

Her eyes rolled all the way around her face, a full 360. “He’s a donkey. But okay, yes, *habibiti*, to him too. To all of the donkeys here. If it were up to the women, there would already be peace.”

In Bet El, Ya’arah adjusted the microphone and thanked the women for coming to the memorial ceremony. “This is the fourth year since he was killed,” she said. Ya’arah was tall. She had a silver nose piercing and she wanted to dye her hair purple, but her parents would not let her. The words tumbled out too quickly when she spoke, creamed together like someone had taken a blender to them.

Her mother smiled encouragingly from the front row. Ya'arah looked away. They had fought that morning, and fiercely, because Ya'arah wanted to join the army. Her father laughed. Then he grew angry. Army service was bad for all girls, and unthinkable for religious ones. He knew, he had served. The way soldiers talked about girls. The way they talked to girls. And there were the cigarettes, the drugs. Her mother added, did she want to end up like Dena Azoulin, who was living with (God protect us) a German boy in Tel Aviv? Did Judaism mean so little to her?

"Every girl in my class learned a chapter in his memory," Ya'arah explained to her audience of high school girls and married women in bright headscarves. "We chose the Book of Judges because that's where his name comes from." Shimshon died in Gaza. Sniper's bullet. In the picture that his cousin lifted up to show the women, he smiled with his mouth closed. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his neck was covered in a carpet of stubble that made him look a little less like a nineteen-year-old. Ya'arah held the edges of the frame tightly to steady her fingers.

"This picture was taken right after he started training," she said. "We almost didn't recognize him, because he always had long hair. Since he was three. He had longer hair than his sisters, even. And he had to cut it for the army. And he said that it was his sacrifice for the State." Her eyes filled. "But it wasn't."

Several of the senior girls hid their faces in their hands. Ya'arah looked at her mother. The older woman was also crying; she pressed her fingers to her lips and flicked a kiss to the front of the room.

"It makes a difference," repeated Lena. "When you see the other side, when you speak their language, you know that they are human."

I looked at Lena and opened my mouth to say, it is more complicated than that. Because even if we met for coffee over another fifty years, and even though next week I will learn to say “power imbalance” and “cultural appropriation” in Arabic and I will also eat half of your chocolate soufflé when you insist, and even though we agree that you are human and I am human and Maryam and Miriam and Alya and Ayelet and Yara and Ya’arah are human, still it cannot be denied that Ya’arah’s house is on Yara’s father’s land, Alya’s uncle stabbed Ayelet’s sister, and Miriam arrested Maryam’s son last Thursday. These things would still be true even though Elana and Lena should drink a thousand and one coffees together in Jaffa.

Instead I told her, “Yes, of course. It’s very important.”

In Jaffa, two women paid for their drinks and stood up to leave. They hugged each other tightly. One headed south into Ajami, while the other returned to Tel Aviv. And in the burgeoning darkness the city of Jaffa, ancient story-strewn golden-walled bleeding Jaffa, winked into lights that cast long shadows in small alleys. If one stood on the bridge at the city limits and looked back, one could forget for a moment all of Jaffa’s unhappy sisters calling her name, clawing at her veiny legs, begging her to fly their banners – blue stars or red triangles – over the muezzin towers. In the briny twilight, Jaffa shook off her family chains and froze into the seeming of a lonely lovely city on the sea. □

Fantasy

JOSEPH MURPHY

When I hear the mountain's voice,
words rise from a burnt page
and a door in my heart swings open.

As it opens, I unclench my fist
and begin to preen the wings I had cast aside.

I fit them into a falcon's dream: within it and aloft,
I hear the melody the loam is humming
beneath the green leaves
of your breath.

Words that rise from a burnt page
no longer need be imagined. You've written them
on the case you carry; on the note
to a lover; on the door that's swung open
in my heart.

Words as real as the world's brow; as the wings
I cast aside. Imagine it!

Bedside Vigil

CATHERINE JAGOE

Because each night when I was pregnant
my husband rubbed my aching feet
and still does, when I'm grieving or in such pain
the feet are the one place I can tolerate touch,

because my dad is slipping, lost, afraid,
connected to a catheter, IV, heart monitor,
blood pressure cuff, and leg pump
that inflates and deflates automatically,

because he believes we're in Siberia,
because he keeps on yelling for my mum,
because he cannot sleep,
because I don't know how to comfort him,

because we've never comforted each other,
because my mother and his Irish mother
are the only ones who've ever rubbed
his skin, his limbs, to soothe and settle,

because I think maybe this most distant
part of the body might be the least alarming,
not so defended, clenched in fear,
all I can think to do is rub his feet.

I should be less awkward, more at ease,
more skilled. He says he's never had
his feet massaged before, in eighty years.
They're cold, dry, bony, gaunt as old war horses,
the toenails thickened, yellowed, ridged,
the toes bent out of shape, the heels
like hide, hard and insensible, ivory-colored,
as I suddenly imagine he'll be in his coffin.

I rub lotion on them, knead the instep,
thumb the ball of the foot where all the muscles
crunch, circle the vulnerable hollows
round the ankle bone, squeeze and release
each foot from heel to toe, rotate and flex them.
He lies there stiffly, silent.
I ask him how it feels, and he says, carefully,
"It feels nice." He doesn't sound too certain.

I can't get his feet to soften, though, neither
the muscles nor the skin. They remain
inflexible, obstinately unyielding.
Only a little warmer, is all.

The Music Box

CLIFF SAUNDERS

Sing the gap between food and electricity
into a spirit unlike any other.

You might not have a choice.
Sing chaos into every message

in a bottle. For once in your life,
sing oceans into a tizzy,

sing weather buoys into hearing aids
in a pinch. Sing pages into the lost years

of civilization and they'll light up!
Sing poplar trees into mourners

of the earth while you still can.
Somewhere in your neighborhood,

sing the roof of the corner store
into the kind of music box that you

can sit inside, that lets your glory
run free. You must remember this:

the street dies there where you live,
where you park your past mistakes.

Red Fox on Zaleski Trail

DEBORAH FLEMING

Vinton County, Ohio

On the trail through hillsides
twice shorn of woodlands
and regrown, I sat down on the earth
to listen to the wood thrush
at the solstice when the sun was high
and the shade deep, and saw
from the corner of my eye
an orange back slipping along
a clearing at a trot,
and thinking it a cat I called out "Here,"
and it turned and I gazed full in the face
at a red fox with expression so perplexed,
bewildered, as if I had been a talking stone.

It leaped into the underbrush,
as all visions vanish into shadow,
I a scourge upon his sun-filled day,
he a precious ornament to mine,
appearing unbidden before my eyes
within a resurrected wood.

Going for Wood

MOLLY VAUX

I.

I would never have chosen a window seat, but there I was, staring at great banks of clouds while the plane, rocked by invisible currents, sailed upward.

“Have your babies now,” I’d wanted to say to Leila. Apricots and plums were strewn across the wooden table. Drying, she told me, so there’d be fruit for the winter. All well and good, I thought. But what was she doing? She was drawing them. Drawing withering fruit, for days, alone inside the casita.

Casita—a little house where a child could play. But the little house, which I have paid for, has betrayed me. Somewhere inside, a pipe has burst and the life has drained out of it.

I wanted to ask, “What is paper? What can those surfaces give you to equal a cord binding you to a child?” I imagine her turning away as though she couldn’t hear me, as though she believes that her life belongs simply to her, when so clearly we all belong to each other.

“How can an artist spend an entire day drawing?” I asked Daniel when he came home from teaching. He was lighting kindling in the corner fireplace. Leila had gone for a walk though the sun had already set and the fire was flickering weakly. I pulled my jacket close to me.

“That’s just what they do,” Daniel said.

“Life needs to have a structure,” I said, and just then Leila came in, half her face covered by a dark woolen hat.

“Well, you two confound me,” I said, although I was feeling more thwarted than confounded. “I need a glass of wine.” Daniel opened the pinot noir that I’d brought and poured it into three glasses. He sat down and began scraping a small piece of metal with a pen. He seemed oblivious of Leila. She was cutting vegetables at the counter and, indeed, she seemed not to need anything from him.

She had given me her sly smile when she came in. She thinks that she’s keeping a secret, but I know what it is. The whole day I was striving to encourage her to be a mother. I thought, she’ll be grateful to me in the end. I didn’t see until the evening that there’s a coldness to her. I was standing with them in the kitchen when I realized it. I must have staggered because Daniel reached for me. “It’s just the altitude—and the wine,” I said. “I’m still adjusting.”

After Leila went to bed, I said something terrible to Daniel. “You have no heart,” I said to him. Out loud, to my own son.

By morning, I needed to give Leila’s coldness back to her. We were looking together at her drawings and I said nothing. What can be said, after all, about scuffed sheets of paper taped to a wall, half-made and half-realized? What can she possibly find in those drawings to pin such hope to? Is it presumption or desperation? Either way, she is stealing my hope.

“You have no heart,” I said to Daniel. I wish I could take it back. It was meant for Leila.

On the plane I thought, I’m afraid of the time to come. I know too much and I don’t want to live with it.

Then we were coming down. I imagined the plane catching fire, just before the tires hit the runway. I almost wanted it. But then the

abrasion of the landing coursed through my body and I put my arms up, as if I could hold back the future single-handedly.

Inside the terminal I pressed against the tide of travelers coming down the passageway, the children clutching their bears and pillows. I dozed off in the taxi, and when it stopped and I opened my eyes, I saw a gray stone building. This is not where I live, I said to myself. But of course it was.

There were signs of something different, though. The elevator door struggled to barricade me as I pushed my suitcase in. Between Seventeen and Eighteen, the car stopped quietly. All I could see through the porthole was a painted steel beam flush against the window. I have always avoided my reflection in the polished metal door. But there I was, inescapable, a stranger to myself, fluid and shimmering in a pewter light, as though a stream of water was passing over me with a cold, relentless current.

Then, as quietly as it had stopped, the car began moving and arrived smoothly at Eighteen. When the door slid open, there was Sherman, my neighbor, minus his partner, who's usually talking vivaciously as they pass in.

"You're back, Ingrid," Sherman said gaily. He stood aside for my suitcase. "How lively you look. Your trip must have done you good."

"Has it?" I asked. There was flirtation in my voice. I turned around quickly, but the elevator was already descending.

I keep seeing myself from the outside now, a woman I do not know. She is old, but still lithe, and she's bending over her one plant—a white orchid given her by a friend. The petals are luminous. She can almost feel their breath, though the soil at the base is parched,

and the papery roots are exposed and reach around the pot as though they're trying to embrace it.

The petals are breathing in spite of my neglect. She draws water at the kitchen sink and feeds it drop by drop into the soil. She sees now. She sees, as the water disappears, that there is no need beyond this necessity.

II.

I like it when life happens to me. I like watching the unexpected unfold. You could say that I'm caught between two women—or perhaps three, counting my mother, and she'd want to be counted.

After three or four glasses of pinot noir, after Leila has gone to bed, my mother gets to the crux of things: "You have no heart," she tells me. "You won't have any heart until you have children."

I checked that out with Chloe, the quote/unquote other woman in my life. She argued with it. "Of course you have a heart," she said. But she hasn't known me for very long.

In the beginning, my mother thought Leila was perfect. She saw that Leila could make anything—a garden, a sweater, a quilt for our bed.

What I like about Leila is she can draw for an entire day. I like to work, too.

But the house is too crowded. "Our life is too comfortable," I tell Leila, and she gets angry. "This isn't comfort," she says, "this is survival." I want to say, "Yours or mine?"

I've been trying not to think. Last week Chloe told me she might be pregnant. Holy shit, I thought, what would my mother say? There

is Leila, walled up inside the casita in Santa Fe, which my mother—thinking “baby”—helped us to buy, and there is Chloe, pregnant in Taos and nowhere to live at the end of the month. I’ve messed up. At this stage that isn’t the point, though.

I was trying to look at things practically, without regard to feelings. Chloe loves living in Taos. That means Leila could have the casita in Santa Fe. I was arranging things in my head and then Chloe called from Taos saying she isn’t pregnant after all but is missing her folks and moving to Laramie for the winter. All of this while my mother is in town.

That’s when I thought I would go for wood. After I dropped off my mother at the airport, I headed across the mountains to cut wood for the winter.

There’s a guy in Gascon who lets me come out to his place every autumn and cut trees. I always leave it too late. By the time I was stacking logs in the truck it was afternoon and snowing. I couldn’t see beyond a couple of feet. That’s usual in November, which is why you should go for your wood in September, or even August, between the monsoon and the frost.

After I’d loaded the truck—perfectly, I might add, without an inch of wasted space—the truck wouldn’t start. I checked the connections. I couldn’t figure it out. My hands ached from trying to get at everything and I was thinking, “Idiot rodents—they’ve chewed up a cable somewhere.” I got into the cab and jammed my hands up under my armpits. I stared at the snow coming down.

Often when people survive a disaster, they’ll talk about feeling blessed. I don’t believe they’ve been singled out, though, or—quote/

unquote—chosen. I think they've only been brought into closer connection with things. After I'd watched the snow for a while, I decided to try the engine and it started with a surprising jolt and I held my foot firmly on the gas and the weight of the logs kept the wheels going along the track.

That wasn't everything, though. Halfway down the slope to the road, a doe was standing in the middle of the track and I had to stop. I could just make out her scruffy coat and then she came toward me and stood absolutely still in front of the truck. I swear, her heart couldn't have been beating. But her eyes looked straight into mine and during those moments—I don't know how long it was—she kidnapped me. I couldn't look away. I shut off the engine—not considering whether it would start again—and sat with my eyes locked with hers. I don't know how to describe the silence and the stillness of it. I couldn't have moved—not so long as she wanted to hold me there.

I don't have any idea how long we stayed that way. In a sense, we're still standing there, facing each other in the snow, because she is with me now as the truck creeps along the I 25. She is in the snow swarming around the headlights and in my tangled thoughts. I can feel her breath mingling with mine. Her musk and woody scent are clouding the air inside the cab and I don't know, really, where I live now. I'll go wherever the truck takes me. After all, she's the one driving. I'm a mere passenger.

Maybe Leila and I will stay together. Maybe we'll move out to the coast or further into the mountains. Who knows if Leila would like to do any of that. All I know is, I have this animal inside me now. I'm going wherever she goes.

III.

I'm afraid of myself, and so I keep moving the crayon around the paper. As long as I can put lines down on paper, I know I will be all right. I don't need to be afraid.

When I was a child, things were not all right. Her shoes would go furiously down the hallway and she'd be gone. Then she'd be back again, as though never missing, her laughter striving to cancel everything. I became two people: victim and rescuer.

On the street there was a price for not keeping up: the bus home ran only once in the afternoon, and there would be harsh words, no matter what. Eventually I'd find her in the line at the bank or choosing vegetables in the market. Perhaps she needed to be found more than I did. Even today I don't like seeing children stray. What if their mother doesn't want to search for them?

Daniel found me in the Plaza. He said he'd been watching me for days while I drew. I was sketching people then—skateboarders, burrito vendors, artists selling their turquoise and silver along the Portal.

Daniel is patient and curious, when he isn't feeling caught by someone. He's feeling caught now. Our house is too comfortable, he says. "This isn't comfort," I told him, "it's survival."

When I came back to the casita, the first thing I heard was, "Well, you two confound me." What was confounding? Now I think I have the answer. The table was covered with apricots and plums. I'd seen Ingrid's ferocious gaze try to sweep them away, as though they were defying her. For Ingrid nature's the only force and it will give her what she's been waiting for—the chance to be a mother again. She entered our casita and looked around, as though the space that we've carefully

tended is utterly inhospitable. For a child perhaps it would be. But there is no child here, which is precisely her point.

Before Daniel took Ingrid to the plane, we were alone together. We were looking at my drawings and she said nothing. I was tempted to say, “Ingrid, why don’t you try painting?” I think that she’d say, “I have made my life. It isn’t complete, but I know the measure of it. I know the things that give my life meaning.”

Will I ever be sure enough of myself to say something like that?

Perhaps I am more like my mother than I realize. I think mostly about where I want to be and the work I want to do. I don’t pay much attention to the future.

But a child can be a danger to a mother—reminding her of something she wants to forget. By that I mean her own suffering. I kept myself safe from neglect and verbal lashings. Now I must keep people safe from me. But that’s impossible; I have hurt Daniel’s mother.

After Daniel and Ingrid left for the plane, a clear winter light came slowly through the window and it warmed my back. I picked up a stick of pastel, a lilac color, and held it in my hand. I rubbed it with my thumb and fingers and my palm became powdered lilac. I pulled up my sleeve, and I spread the color the length of my arm across a large sheet of white paper.

Then I sat up and looked through the window and saw a dormant landscape. I looked at my drawings on the wall and they seemed worthless. What could I offer this woman instead? What gift or what comfort?

Daniel and I have climbed together above tree line. We’ve slept out. We’ve searched for water together and hammered our pots to

ward off the bears. I have believed that the myriad stars visible above these mountains mirror everything that is possible. I wonder if Daniel believes this. I thought he did, but now I wonder.

He's gone across the mountains for wood. He's left it late. He'll be coming home in a snow-laden truck with perhaps a heart as confused as mine is.

Loneliness is my friend but it isn't everything. There is the twilight now, and there is Daniel. I slide the door softly home in its frame. As I go along the road, the stones shift under my feet, muttering, I think, about the heartlessness of choosing. I listen for the patchy idle of an engine and I watch for a waver of headlights and Daniel's truck lurching home along the gravel. □

Rattlesnake Religion

SARAH MORGAN

We tried to trap rabbits
lit ants on fire with matchsticks
gathered pebbles to scatter in front of us,
a warning to snakes hiding under the sea
of dead, dry grass

My mother—she taught me
the art of sensing danger
That rattlesnake Voodoo
the Survivor's Religion

So, I was left to wonder with
a pocket full of pebbles
Why didn't she run when my father
came up out of the desert
a snake and a charmer

In my lucid nightmares, I'm
running through the desert
scattering pebbles in terror
every time I try to sleep

Borders

MARY MAKOFSKE

Drawn in ink or blood,
they unspool from history
to split mountains and valleys,
meander in rivers that twist
and turn, dragging their banks
to new configurations, adding to,
subtracting from, this dominion
or that. Invisible, except
when a fence or wall defines
them, ramparts that open
only through drawbridge or gate
guarded by sirens and guns.
Those you can step across
are silent. The same weeds grow
on either side. Perhaps a sign
announces some new territory,
but the soil does not change
its allegiance: clay or silt,
loam or dust. The name
of the tree that straddles
a border may change from one
language to another, but its roots
are anchored in the same earth

and draw up water that travels
without passport or visa.
Still, coastal nations cast their nets
three miles into the ocean's
tides and storms, and even the sky
is bound with invisible lines
dividing yours from mine.

After Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience

WILLIAM DERGE

(on a work of art by Lisa Sheirer entitled *Water Stories – Lilypons 2*)

I.

Things were pretty clear then,
the pencil thin lines of reeds,
curved like the hairs on a stevedore's arm,
the sculptured reflections of clouds,
scabbing bark of sycamores or
rust scars on seasoned machinery,
the *koi*, streaks of welder's sparks
against the pond bottom, black
flaked with sunken leaves, all which,
cross-eyed, I could double and overlap, or
flatten with one eye denied, or
smear with a squint, but not
split the infinite, confine to time or border,
but jump to the call to a disciplined Labrador
on a falling kill.

How some scenes stick
like blue-ambered grease augmenting
the whirr of engine and axle,
stirring the oil slick to
an industrial sublime

II.

Ankle deep in Parris Island muck,
black leather reddened
to South Carolina clay, from which
no Canada escape
or faked heart
condition can extricate, but
with each sucking step sink deeper in.
Every black reed is the gnomon
of a steady sundial.
It is never cool here.
It is never night.
The door to the season's passing
is rapidly closing, and
the fish that circle your naked flesh
are piranhas in goldfish clothing.

Ode to a Lobster

JOSHUA GAGE

Here, between thick-cut filets
and a sheet of crushed ice
bearing slabs of cod and salmon,
a tank of frothing water
and a lone lobster.

You are the last thing alive here.
Only you scuttled over the sea floor,
survived the cold, the primordial shadows;
only you: pocked, blue-brown witness
to that ebon sermon.

Somewhere, lemons and melted butter
await. Somewhere, a pot of boiling water.
But now, you are a stone with spider legs,
great claws, and two black jewels for eyes,
ever open, patiently navigating
the tides of my all too human trembling.

Weeds in Her Curly Hair

HAREENDRAN KALLINKEEL

“I need a dagger,” Shiva says, “double-edged...and razor-sharp.”

The blacksmith turns from his furnace and stares at him in surprise. *What the hell is a renowned writer doing here?* he thinks as he stands up and walks towards Shiva.

Shiva smiles at him, an awkward effort, as if to justify his presence there, running an errand that any of his servants could have done.

“Please do come in, sir.” The blacksmith dusts the single chair in his workshop.

“It’s okay.” Shiva shifts his stance. “I just...”

The blacksmith pauses. He shouldn’t have asked the man in. Dignified men who live in cooled homes can’t bear the heat inside, or the stench of sweat emanating from the skin of a toiling man.

“Why’d you need such a dagger?” The blacksmith regrets his question as soon as he asks it.

“What do I pay for it?” Shiva asks, sweeping a lock of his curly hair back from an already perspiring forehead. The heat, even outside the shack, feels unbearable to him.

“That’s usually a couple grand, for the best quality.” The blacksmith beams at him. “But for you, fifteen hundred.”

“I don’t need the discount.” Shiva takes out his wallet from the pocket of his jeans, pulls out two two-thousand rupee notes.

The blacksmith’s eyes gleam.

“The additional money should quell your curiosity,” Shiva says.

The blacksmith accepts the cash. “Sure, sir, it’s more than enough to guarantee my silence.”

“Have it ready by four in the evening.”

“Whatever you say...Mr. Shiva.”

“Good.” Shiva leaves, gets into his car parked on the opposite side, and drives away.

The blacksmith gazes after him wondering, *Aren’t pens anymore the weapons of writers? What do they need a dagger for?*

Shiva sits by a pond’s side, watching the weeds. The morning sun casts golden rays across the crystalline water. As a cold breeze sweeps, ripples form on the surface, the pond becomes alive. “Do you ever listen, to the music playing in me?”

Shiva stares in response. Weeds, with stems like dancing tentacles, jut from the bottom, raise their head in a floating carpet of green algae. He listens to birds hum in the nearby bushes, and laughs aloud.

The breeze carries his laughter to the bamboo-grove on the opposite side. Bamboos’ reflection gyrates on the ripples in a chaotic fashion as the wind gathers speed. Bamboo stalks strain against one another, producing noises like lingering sounds of a wail. He hears the rustling of dry leaves as a serpent slithers out of its hole.

“All I can perceive,” he says, “is the bamboos’ lament, the hiss of serpents. And, I see too...the trap you lay beneath the allure of your calmness.”

“Train your ears, focus, you’ll hear my hum. Look beyond the veneer, you’ll see my beauty in the depths.”

“I hear the cries echo in the bamboo grove.”

“Concentrate deeper, look farther beyond...”

Shiva places his hand on his forehead, presses his temples with his thumb and middle finger. “The pain thudding in my skull, words that keep nudging its walls, the images dancing in my mind’s eye... I just want everything to fade.”

“You are a writer, right? The things you complain about, those are your blessings, can’t you see?”

Shiva moves his hand, sweeping his long hair back. “I don’t need that blessing, just want my head clear.”

“Try to see through, everything will be clear.”

He takes a deep breath. “All I see is the raised hood of a serpent... and the weeds. Weeds entwined in her curly tresses. Beyond, it’s foggy, I see nothing.”

Ripples move faster, lap against the stone steps, the cacophony of the pond’s laughter keeps reverberating in his ears as Shiva falls back and curls on the ground.

“Your son is a damn fool,” Kannan says.

Strange, Madhavi wonders, that her husband ignores the aroma of garlic-marinated lobster, his favorite seafood that roasts in the fry-pan. The accusations, well, all husbands blame their wives for anything bad the children do, and they take the credit when a child does something good.

“The lobster is about ready,” she says. “Wash your hands, I’ll lay the plates.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Well, it’s the same thing.” She looks at the stove, takes a deep breath. Flames lick their way along the coffee-pot’s side. Coffee

swooshes up to the brim. She turns off the stove and pours the coffee into a gold-rimmed cup. "What are you so agitated about?"

"He's announcing his decision to decline the Literature Academy Award in a press conference tomorrow," Kannan says. He loosens his tie.

Madhavi stares at her husband for a moment. "How can he do that? It's something he always wanted." She places the cup on the dining table.

Kannan sits on a chair, picks up the cup, and takes a sip. "Serve me the lobster," he says.

"I'll heat up the rice pancake."

"No, just the lobster," Kannan says. He inhales deeply, relishing the scent wafting into the dining hall. Perspiration has broken on his bald head, shining in the overhead lamp's light.

Madhavi places a plate in front of him and serves him a big lobster.

Kannan bends down, takes a whiff from the plate. "Smells great," he says. "But he's a hopeless case, your son."

"Did you ask him why?" She stretches to take out a fork from the nearby shelf.

"No need," he says, scissoring his fingers. "You know, you need to feel it, the hard shell and the soft flesh, relish the contrast." He breaks a pincer and bites into it.

She hears the shell crack, watches the paprika-red oil seep onto his fingers. "He appears restless these days. I'm sure something is wrong." She pulls her sari tight around her bosom.

"The way you pamper him, that's his problem." Kannan lays the cracked pincer on the plate, hooks his finger and digs out a portion

of the flesh. "I wanted him to pursue an MBA, but he preferred literature," he says before having it.

Madhavi watches, with satisfaction, the way her husband relishes the lobster. It's always a joy to see him eat, slow and systematic. He'll first finish the flesh, then crack the bones, chew on them for a while. "Why don't you talk to him," she asks.

"What's there to talk?" Kannan spits out a lump of the chewed shells into the waste-plate. "I pay thousands to the managers when my educated son whiles away his time, writing fiction. And, when he receives an award, he chooses to reject it. Do you think a scribe's career will get him enough to live the life he wants?"

"Have you ever read what he writes?" Madhavi asks her husband. "It's very emotive, he's quite talented. One day he will become famous, I'm sure."

"It's not that, Madhavi," Kannan says, cleaning his fingers with a napkin. "I don't doubt his abilities. But we must be practical. He's the only one who's there to take care of the family business. I can't bear the pressure alone. You must realize I'm getting old." He leans back against the chair and stretches his arms.

"I understand, dear." Madhavi places her hands on his shoulders and presses. "But, what's the point in pushing him into something he doesn't want to do? If it's writing that he chooses as a career, he must accept the award." She pulls out a chair and sits by his side. "In any case, you talk to him."

"You know how he evades me. It's been a while since we spoke to each other." Kannan holds her hands.

"He came home early today, maybe around five, and went to the pond. I don't know, he carried a knife or something... and a net. His

behavior worries me.” Madhavi looks at her husband. A thin veil of moisture blurs her view of him.

“It’s that girl.” Kannan takes a deep breath. “I don’t know why he can’t get over his guilt? Nobody can blame him for what happened.”

Madhavi’s fingers grip his wrist.

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry,” Kannan says.

The twin ponds, Shiva’s paternal grandmother’s legacy, are the family’s pride. The first one, seven meters wide and ten meters long, holds memories as large as its size. Grandma supports Shiva splaying both his limbs, her forearms under his belly, as he is learning to swim; sweet, savory recollections of olden times. After grandma’s death, the pond receives less of the kick of energetic limbs and more of the slippery-slope of encroaching algae.

It decides to pay back.

The second pond, smaller in size, holds memories less significant; watching the male servants bathing the cattle, maids washing clothes...

Now, everyone likes to take a bath in the Jacuzzi, the pond remains unused. Algae grow thicker, weeds proliferate.

Shiva inspects a small stream that flows from the first to the second pond, then another from the second to the paddy field. He throws a magazine into the water; current carries it to the second pond, from there, to the other stream, and into the paddy fields.

Good, he can trust the streams to carry the waste.

He examines the weeds. The algae carpet sways in slow motion as ripples dance on the pond’s surface. Bamboo stalks shake in the wind. Dry leaves rustle as serpents slither on the ground.

Serpents never change. Their hiss sounds the same as it did twenty years ago.

He had stared then, open-mouthed, surrounded by water, when a serpent's body glided out from between bamboo stalks, like a nightmare coiling around the thread of his dreams.

The dark skin of its spread hood reflected sunrays in tiny sparkles. The sound of its hiss traversed into Shiva's ears through the calmness in the air as he struggled to stay on the water's surface.

Then he felt the pull from the bottom. Algae turned into vicious masses of membranes, engulfed his body.

Weeds became fetters that coiled around his ankles, and a vice-like grip dragged him down.

As his feet landed at the pond's bottom, the slush, choking in its own stench, heaved breaths of relief, causing bubbles to escape towards the surface.

Pressing his feet further down, Shiva flung his body upwards. Feet kicking, arms flailing, he rose. The water broke around his chest in furious waves and bubbles burst, spilling the scent of mud.

Shiva gasped, lungs craving for fresh air.

Frantic ripples escaped in circles around him and he struggled in the water, hoping his grandma's forearms were beneath him.

Shiva's reverie breaks as a chilly breeze laps up his face. Has he ever written a word, whose promptings are those scribbling? Do emotions flow from a pen he holds, or the keyboard he madly taps his fingers on?

He hates the award, not his to accept.

A reward for a death, a curse of a lifetime, a sin one takes to the grave. Can he ever bear the burden?

The weeds need to be cut. The blacksmith has done a fine job. The blade, on either side, can slice smoothly through any type of underwater growth. Gratitude for the additional money reflects in his craftsmanship, not merely a promised silence.

He'll shred the weeds to pieces, trap them in the net, and spread them on the shore. A day, maybe two, they'll dry up and be ready, to be licked clean by the tongue of a flame from his lighter.

Shiva takes a swig from the bottle of scotch he carried. The tangy bite of single malt assuages the chill he feels. He lights a cigarette, takes a few deep drags, and stubs it out.

He prepares for the kill.

Shiva drives a wooden stake into a corner of the pond, and it glides smoothly as the muddy bottom gives way. He tries to push it farther, but feels resistance. He picks up a large stone and hits the stake down. He secures one end of the net to the stake, pulls it across the pond's breadth, and ties the other end to a bamboo stalk.

Shiva wades through the water, begins to chop the weeds with his dagger. Its blade swish through, forth and back as if the rage in his guts flows through the veins in his forearms, and has transmitted to its body.

Bubbles, carrying shreds of weeds, rise to the surface and pop. Shiva feels a perverse joy as he watches broken algae clusters float in the water like amputated frogs.

These were the monsters that lurked in the pond's bottom, held his feet down as he yelled for help. Anu, at twelve, five years older than him, had taken the responsibility. He clasped the rope she threw towards him. Her tugs extricated him from the pond's treacherous tentacles.

She pulled him, standing near the bamboo grove. Then he noticed

the cobra, hood spread, and its body raised, ready to strike. Sunrays reflected on the tip of its fangs.

How could a seven-year-old be so mean?

He knew if he warned her she'd drop the rope and flee. He'd drown. He forgot the mythological legends, stories that grandma told about the sacrifices of great men and women. He chose to hide behind the shadows of barbarian princes, closing his eyes.

He'd crafted the first story, of survival, by means of treachery and betrayal, consigned an only friend to the mercy of a serpent.

The cobra bit her before she could pull him ashore. She fell on the ground.

He felt horror seizing him, as he began to sink. He saw her rise, a winged-fairy. The serpent's venom seemed to have pumped energy into her hands. She began pulling him back to the shore, her hands working frenetically.

Legends bowed before her might.

As he clambered to the steps, he saw her face light up in a smile. Then, abruptly, she slumped.

For a moment, he held her image in his eyes, and the next, her body slid to the pond from the bamboo grove's slope. Her still eyes stared at him from beneath a watery film.

He watched her lie there at the shallow end of the pond, on a carpet of algae, weeds entwined in her curly hair lapping up as the tiny ripples crashed against the shore.

Nobody knew she died saving him, nobody would ever know the story of deceit.

A shudder wakes him to the present. He sees bits and pieces of weeds float toward the opening of the pond and get entangled in the

net. He collects and throws them onto the shore. Within an hour the pond becomes clean.

A burst of light, at the pond's bottom, catches his eyes. He plunges into the deep towards its splendor.

Brightness at the bottom dazzles him, leaves him agape. Rainbows of vibrant colors explode before his eyes. He lies on the pond's bosom.

She rests there too, in a fluffy white bed, her luscious tresses spread around her head. Her eyelids flutter, like the wings of a butterfly.

She opens her arms in invitation. Shiva glides into them. He snuggles close, listens to the thuds inside her chest.

Whirlpools swirl around, the churning water swooshes.

"Anu, I belong here, not you."

"No, Shiva, you have a call; live up to it."

"The call...the lie I live?"

"You have a gift from God, Shiva, not all mortals are that blessed."

"It's a curse, Anu, payback for my treachery."

"It doesn't matter, Shiva. We're all like that. If I saw the cobra, I'd have thrown away the rope and fled."

"No, Anu...you'd never. You held on even after you were bitten."

"I did nothing, Shiva. I felt the pain shoot through my body, the fear grip me. I clasped at the rope. Then the angels came...and I was drawn to light."

"Whatever you say, I betrayed you."

"Any seven-year-old would do the same."

"The legends, Anu, what about them...we all grew up listening to their stories, their sacrifice... But I cheated you, let you die."

“No, Shiva. The tentacles held you down, and you had to grapple with them.”

“Yes, Anu, the weeds... Their serpentine coils curled around my ankles, the cold, slithery creepers held onto me, like fetters clasp. But, you know, Anu...I’ve finally severed the tentacles, shred the weeds... The pond is clean now, rid of the monsters.”

“Good, Shiva. They won’t any longer be anyone’s reason for remorse. I’m happy.”

Anu embraces him. “Pursue your call.” She moves up in slow motions. The light wraps around her.

Shiva struggles in the darkness, flailing his arms and kicking his legs.

Weeds entwine in his hair, pulls. It hurts. Where do they come from? Haven’t I rid the pond of weeds, he thinks.

The tentacles crawl beneath his arms, clasp around his shoulders. Shiva feels the tug...

Kannan sees the bubbles break on the surface as he approaches the pond. In the waning sunlight, he sees a heap of weeds on the shore. Large bubbles keep bursting in the water.

Kannan panics; the weeds on the shore, the bubbles in the pond, narrate the story.

He jumps into the water and swims in the direction of breaking bubbles, and dives deeper, groping in the water, his hands splayed.

He perceives someone struggling, flailing arms, and moves towards the site. His groping fingers clasp hair.

He feels an unusual chill in the water; the pond appears to have deepened, and without any weeds, it is easy to swim.

He pulls Shiva out of the water, lays him on the stone steps, and presses down his palms on his son's belly.

Water seeps out, and a few shreds of weed stick to his mouth. He regains consciousness.

"Father, where's Anu?"

Kannan stares at his son and touches his forehead. The skin burns against his palm. He scoops Shiva in a tight hug. "My child..."

"She's here, father. That's why...the pond hums..." Shiva's voice breaks as he coughs.

"Your mom," Kannan says. "She's concerned."

"The ripples, father...those tiny ripples..." Shiva says, "You know, they're desires. Anu's unfulfilled longing...Weeds, algae, held me... crafted her death"

Kannan feels tears sting his eyes. Maybe, his son knows the deeper meaning of life he's never been able to see. Maybe, he needs to honor his call.

"Do whatever you want, Shiva, just be with us."

"The pond, father..." A thin trickle flows from the corner of his son's mouth. Pieces of weed crawl down his chin, clots of algae drop on his chest, as he sits up. "Grandma's pond had a purpose, it was not death. But, I failed to keep flailing my limbs."

"It's okay, son. Now the pond's clean. Try to keep it that way."

"I will, father." Shiva hugs him. "I'll have my penance too."

Kannan's arms tighten around his son's body.

"I know father, you all wanted me to accept the award," Shiva says. "I realize now, you're right." □

The Ventriloquist Toasts Her Teddies

RIKKI SANTER

Here's to my set-up like so many before me—
To the vice grip of acne maps & stammering

From the snap crackle pop in bowls that talked back
From every classroom that was bloodthirsty & cagey

From impotent teeter totters & empty swings
From fabrication & my teddies in moonlight

To mail order & marionette strings
To patient mirrors & *gottles of geer*

To pillows of pot smoke putting stage fright to bed
To classic parlor tricks with Brechtian sidetracks

To my cackling at jokes vaulting in out of nowhere
To the wood that decides what I say/when I say it

To the *I do all the carrying and you get all the laughs*
To sanity that leaks subterranean while Freud's in my lap.

Chemo

CAROLYN ADAMS

As you turn to the oncoming magic,
what subsumes?

Because everything can't stay
at the surface, what is forgotten?

Your overlying shadow?

The aspect of sensation,
immediate, compelling?

Or the primitive drive
of instinctual flight?

Is there a heaviness
of limbs in your surrender?

Do you remain alert
to what creeps in, to cool or heat
as it progresses, moving
under your skin
like a spreading realization?

Does it urge
or discourage a resolve
as it performs its
inner work?

And you, there, alone,
in whatever position you've assumed,
do you poise an idea
toward what happens next?
Do you allow yourself
to think that far?
Do you ask,
"When is this over?"
then
"What is 'when'?"
and
"What is 'this'?"
and
"What is 'over'?"

Silent Elegy

ANNA LEIGH MORROW

What I want to say is
 there are no words.
The Missing You settles beneath my ribs like
 suffocation
and no sound can escape from my heart—
 only a silent moan.

Some people pray to their ancestors,
burn incense and breathe words into the smoke,
 into the wizened ear of Heaven.
But what can I say
to the small white
 skull
sealed within a too-large white
 casket?
There is no one listening—
 only Death and the year-old sod.

Your absence is like a black hole,
 nothingness
so intense that it consumes
 everything.
Missing You is solid gravity—
 too heavy for light waves.

When I sit at your gravestone,
my words bleed out into the soil and
 your Death seeps
like a chill into my bones.
There is no comfort in the ground above your body—
 only emptiness.

Mourning is like running in circles.
I always come back to this—
 the silence.
The muzzle on my soul.
 There are no words.

How can I sing an elegy for you when
 Missing You hollows me out, leaves me barren?
How can I immortalize you when
 my memories are too fragile
to remove them from my padlocked
 chest?

I cannot recount your life—
 it is too much, it churns like an ocean
when I stretch out my hands towards it.
I cannot speak you back into Living—
 not even as a translucent ghost
that shimmers in the moonlight.
I can only watch, helpless and voiceless—
 watch you fade
as days pile themselves into months and my
 memory betrays me.
I can only feel you slipping
further, always further
 away from me
While my thirty-seven trillion cells scream
silently after you—
 “WAIT!”

Dreams of Flight

BETH PAULSON

A man with wings large enough and duly attached might learn to overcome the resistance of air. Leonardo da Vinci

No Icarus, you knew pulleys and winches would keep a man tethered to earth though he rise high above a stage for a duke's entertainment. In your *fabrico* you built mechanical birds of wood and bright-dyed linen, then raised men up on ropes to fly and float, angels with dark curls, gilt-edged wings.

A boy, you walked the path between the houses of your father and your mother through fields, vineyards outside Florence where you marked how a dove moves its wings swiftly when it lowers them, raises them to fly higher. How birds steer through the wind's motion. How they lower their tails, lift them. Did you picture in your mind how you might ascend into the blue like *un uccello* you held in your hand, so light, such soft feathers?

And do we all as children not dream of flying? Try jumping down a flight of stairs or off a roof or branch of a tree we climbed? Head bump or skinned knee. A young boy, doing flips in the backyard, goes airborne for seconds, defies gravity.

Your whole life you sketched swirls of water, fluid air like a lover's hair, elegance of bone and feather, drew hundreds of studies, pages that filled your notebooks. Inside you lived the artist who imagined, the inventor who obsessed. Even in old age, when you visited the duke at Sforza, you stood at your window marveling at the four-winged dragonflies above the moat, treading summer air.

Mud and Truth

HANNAH KASS

Tsofi knew the story since her mother began telling it to her and her brother almost every night. Other villagers would notice how her people did not eat the same meat or observe the same day of rest. In her mind those differences were as arbitrary as preferring to eat lamb or chicken. Yet such arbitrary reasons had sparked the most violent of reactions.

As Tsofi listened to her mother's voice, she could almost see the fires illuminating the night sky, blood splatter painting the cobblestone roads, and the rainstorms of shattered glass. Cries of distress mixed with cries of the people who relished the destruction, as if the small towns and neighborhoods were primal civilizations and they were their conquerors. Emperor Rudolf dismissed her people's appeals for action as less trivial than a dispute between farmers over cows and goats. It's not as if they could do anything for him, a small group of people sequestered away from the rest of Prague, restricted to their own world. Then one night, a man known simply as the Maharal decided: enough. With the help of two students he gathered mud clay from the river to meld into a human-like shape that stood over six feet. As the clay began to dry, he said a little prayer and inscribed אמת or "truth" on the clay figure's forehead, awakening the first golem. That golem guarded the Jews of Prague and frightened away anyone who tried to hurt them. Finally, Emperor Rudolf had no choice but to address their concerns. After that, her mother said, the Maharal lost control of the golem, and

upon finding him, removed a letter from his forehead, turning “truth” into **ממ** or “death.”

Since that fateful day, the summoning of a golem became a new ritual in the coming-of-age ceremony for boys of thirteen, in addition to recitation and presentation of the holy texts. Many girls in her town were kept busy with cleaning, cooking, shopping, and making sure the house still stood while men and boys studied from dusk till dawn. Tsofi had little complaints about it. She loved to go into town, see the quiet chaos of the market. She found it hard to envy her brother Avram, who spent his days in that small room in the synagogue, head slouched down, at their father’s siddur, the crisp smell of a well-used book permeating the air.

Tsofi had read that siddur herself. Her father spent some time teaching her to read when her brother began Hebrew school, and she was still too small to be of assistance to her mother. She knew she was luckier than most girls in the village. It filled her chest with pride, making her want to stand tall compared to the rest. Mother made a point to remind her to keep that pride to herself, it was not worth making the other girls feel bad.

“If it weren’t for us, your father and brother would be lost. We are the ones who keep them grounded, who remind them to come home.” Tsofi knew it was true. Imagining Avram trying to barter with the butcher put a small smile on her face and filled her with that same air of pride. When she did bring this up to her brother he smirked and said, “You still don’t get to awaken your first golem.” At that, the air left her body, causing her to sink and slouch.

Her brother’s coming of age ceremony would be in a few months,

to demonstrate his understanding of the traditions and values of their people and bring life to a force of divine protection he could awaken and put to sleep if he wished.

Tsofi would come of age with a visit from the matchmaker and a walk down an aisle to chuppah, dressed in white. Without a chance to show that she was not unlike her brother. Just another future caretaker and carrier of children. No different from her mother, her grandmother, or any other girl in this village. No different from the matriarchs, whose greatest honor was having their sons.

With a long-drawn sigh, eyes unable to move from the sight of her feet in the dirt, she turned from the market to make her way home. In her periphery, the yellow sunlight was turning orange, and the shade was getting darker. She had much to do before sunset when her family and the rest of the village would welcome the Sabbath bride.

As Sabbath ended, Tsofi took the basket of clothes and made her way to the river at the other side of the hedge by her house to take care of laundry while her mother was at home entertaining guests. When her mother wouldn't say who the guests were, Tsofi took that to mean her mother was speaking with the matchmaker about Tsofi's marriage prospects in a few years.

As she settled into her spot by the river, basket at her side, she took in the calm bright sun, and let her fingers linger in the cool murky waters as she traced the muddy bank. The mud was cool from the waters, yet warm from the contact with her own fingers. Tsofi liked to imagine letting the mud drag her into the river by the hands, pulling her in.

“What do you mean they’re coming to this village?”

The sound of her father’s voice disturbed her reverie, prompting her to continue washing the clothes, attempting to ignore any instinct to find out who “they” could be.

“Listen, Moishe, there was a pogrom two towns over earlier this month, and I just heard from my brother in law in the next town that a mob had come in during the Sabbath. That means we must be next!”

Although she couldn’t see it, she could tell from the heavy sigh of her father that he must have been rolling his eyes. It was a mystery to the whole village how her father could keep himself together with “Lazar the Paranoid.”

“Lazar, the gentiles here never have a problem with us. We don’t bother them, and they never bother us. I don’t see why they would—”

“You know I’m not talking about our neighbors Moishe.”

The long pause that followed created little knots in Tsofi’s stomach. She froze in the middle of soaking old sheets. A voice in her head was pleading with her father to say something, anything. Maybe her father would somehow receive that message from a distance. But he did not know his daughter was at the other side of the hedge dividing the house from the river bank. She held her breath, not letting any bit of air leave her mouth or nose until she heard something. Anything.

“I...I...” Her father stopped talking. The tightness in Tsofi’s stomach began to loosen a little, causing her to let go of the air she was holding in, stopping short of a sigh of relief, sensing the trepidation in her father’s voice.

“I...I don’t want to believe that it could happen here...to us...I don’t want to think outsiders would put so much trouble into going

so far just to start a pogrom. For all I know, our ancestors thought the same before the Romans took the second temple...and again in Chmelnitski... It's why I left Krakow in the first place. Maybe mobs wouldn't bother villages like ours."

In an attempt to adjust her position, Tsofi slipped against the rock, catching herself with her hands as she fell into the shallow bank. The splash yielded a sudden silence from the other side of the hedge. After a few moments of uneasy silence, she carried on washing clothes. From what she could tell her father and Lazar had left to continue their conversation elsewhere. She wondered if maybe her slip had given her away, if her father somehow knew she was close by, or if he had assumed she was any one of the village girls doing laundry. Whoever he thought was on the other side of the hedge, he probably left thinking it would turn into gossip, then from gossip to panic.

Tsofi continued washing the clothes and sheets, hoping that doing so would wash away the fearful seed planted in her brain. As she was finishing the last sheet, Tsofi put the cloth aside, sat on the smooth rock by the bank, and carefully removed her shoes, letting her feet slide into the water. Feeling the cool mud seep into the spaces between her toes, she allowed herself take in the space around her, letting her hands flatly touch the drying mud by the stream.

Drying mud.

Scrunching the mud together, not caring if it got under her nails, Tsofi waded her legs in and out of the water. Pointing her toe toward the mud above the water, she lightly traced the letters alef, mem, and taf.

אמת

Seeing those three letters.

In the mud.

Tsofi stopped herself for a moment, surveying the area when she saw a bundle of branches and leaves within walking distance.

A perfect cover.

“I hope mama doesn’t find it strange if I ask to take on laundry more often...” she considered. She rinsed her hands and feet in the river before putting back on her shoes. As she took the laundry to dry, she saw Avram with his knapsack of books, heading down the path from the synagogue back to their home. The sight of her brother with his book bag made Tsofi’s heart drop from her chest to her stomach.

“He’d probably laugh if I asked him to help...” she thought with her head hunched downward, looking onto the ground. Then, as a small breeze enveloped her exposed ears, Tsofi laughed softly to herself as she began to put the clothes on the line.

She never needed her brother to go to into town.

He never needed her to read for Hebrew school.

This would be no different than any other task she had been faced with in her life.

After helping her mother clean the dishes and the kitchen, Tsofi told her she needed some air. “Don’t go too far!” her mother said as she retired to the downstairs bedroom. Tsofi was not going far at all. Just a short walk away, barely even a stroll away from her home. Yet a small voice in her head said she was going far from something.

Once she was at the other side of the hedge, the river and its muddy bank welcomed her back. Removing her shoes, she let the dirt fill the spaces between her toes. The mud felt cool, but a soft kind of

coolness like the surface of a frozen lake, not harsh like snow flying through aggressive winds.

She was tempted to just sit by the river, study each part surrounding it as always, but had not come here to idle. Though there was no danger present, she could still see the windows of shops being shattered into a million pieces, fire consuming a synagogue that did not look unlike the one in her village. She knew the stories. She didn't have to actually be there to know what happened. No one did. She shook her head. As she began to gather in the mud and dirt to make out a sphere for the head, she thought back to the tale of Prague.

*Is this what the Maharal thought of when bringing the first one to life?
This urgency...an urgency over maybe...nothing?*

At the same time, Tsofi could not find it in herself to call the apprehension nothing, as she put the "head" to the side and gathered enough mud from the bank to mold into a large body, or at least an outline of a body. While unsure of the size, she knew it had to be much bigger than herself. She made the arms and legs twice as long as her own, and the body twice as large. She lifted the head onto the shoulders with her hands.

"Are you sure this is the right place?"

"I am certain."

Tsofi froze, her skeleton might as well have jumped from her skin and run off, leaving her behind.

They're speaking Polish... Unsure of where the voices were in relation to the river, she immediately crouched down in the water. Her heartbeat reached her ears, so loud she swore it couldn't possibly be in her ribcage. It was not loud enough to overpower what the men's

voices said next “Shall we bother with the houses here or meet the others in town?”

Tsofi did not listen for the other man’s response.

She slowly waded herself out of the water, hoping not to make any sudden movement. She didn’t have to look behind or turn around to know that clouds of smoke would emerge from all around. Blazes would lighten the sky, enough to overwhelm the eternal flame itself. Blood splatter against the cobblestone road would dry into the stone by dawn. Gravestones no different than crushed boulders. Because even when dead, the fact that her people lived at all was deemed insulting. Screams at the sight of bloodshed and ruin; screams for more of it.

With her finger Tsofi traced those three letters onto the sleeping golem’s forehead with precision and care, not letting herself linger on the feeling of the cooling mud. She tried to ignore the tremor in her finger as she lifted it from the mud to draw the next line. Her success depended on אמת. Such a simple three letter word. Once the full word was done, she slowly moved her finger out of the mud, wiped it against the leaves of the hedge, stepped back and waited.

Nothing happened.

She was torn between wanting to destroy the useless pile of mud and running home. However, she was stuck in place to feel her stomach sink and arms shake. She was finally ready to run, when she felt the ground shake, she latched onto the rock beside her. It was as though the ground yawned, causing a small rumble in her immediate area.

“Hmmm...” The ground shook a little again, but this time Tsofi found herself letting go of the rock all too aware of how her legs were shaking, standing straight as the upper body of the mud golem

slowly propped itself upright with his arms, then held himself steady by the ground as he pushed himself upward and stood upright before her. There were two faint beams of light, signifying his eyes, not staring down upon her, but to her. Waiting patiently for Tsofi's instruction.

The air re-entered her body as Tsofi let out a small laugh, wiping a tear from her cheek she didn't realize she shed.

The golem woke her from her brief reverie. He was gazing at her the way the village looks to the rabbi during high holidays or gentiles to their king. She was not used to having someone, let alone a giant of earth, regard her in such a manner. She gave a small smile, collecting herself, knowing exactly what had to happen next.

"Go." She told him. "Help." □

Mud Minor Mass

KEVIN WALKER

Even Johann Sebastian Bach
had to fake it through the mirk
on merciless days,

clavier keys arthritic and
sick of his touch,
the gleaming machine of his mind

stuck in neutral.
No God in the mud.
The angels of his process

skulked like street orphans
and threw rocks at dogs
too damaged or old

to outrun
one dull man's
failure and lost time.

Grief, Be My Coverlet

MOHJA KAHF

Grief, be white daisies

Grief, be blue lace

Come, grief, embroider

My sorrowing face

*an open letter to the white feminists
holding a literary panel on Toni
Morrison*

MATTHEW E. HENRY

look to your left, your right—where
are her sisters? why are they missing?
while there's a shared violence only
your bodies can know, they were never
your breasts from which milk was stolen
or freely given to sons with their own
white teeth. your daughters will never
destroy dolls, scraping skin to find the beauty
beneath. will never see their fathers shot
off fences, or shucking with shirley temples
while they watch from behind grim windows.
you will never slit throats as a slave-act
of salvation, or place a God-tanned pap
between gums with uncertain futures. your backs
are forever clear of chokecherry trees. you—
whose faces adorn the cups, the magazines,
the movies—are married to the master
narratives she subverts. are intrusive
as rusty nails breaking an arch. move
her stilled lips without consulting her face,
her family. forget she still has a voice.

The Clearest Night Sky

CARLA MCGILL

*The ending was glass breaking
stones falling from cliffs
The ending was a cat's purr
the vanishing foam of waves
on all the shores he loved*

Pebbled fields beside the tracks,
his hands hitting a jar
a sparkling beer in the sun
and some part of me, like Athena
already formed, understood
the dark veins, afflictions
of generations, our troubles.

Look at that big old crow,
my grandmother said,
as she strung bleached bones
on the laundry line.
It was October,
a fierce wind full of nettles.
Bare sky over mountains.

*The beginning was thunder
flash flood*

*The beginning was light
amber of dawn shimmering
on his infant grimace*

Shortcake still served
beside steak, the sad opening
door, the fighting, later crying
those heaving child sobs
until waking for school
where I wandered like I
running from the flies.

There are too many instances,
they crowd like sirens and twigs,
like voices in a broken choir,
and at times I just see jackrabbits
under the pepper tree, at ease
in cooling afternoons, or
the cake bowl while granny slept.

*The ending was a singing bird
hot lava sinking back
The ending was a whisper
merciful ceasing of machines
a star shooting across the clearest night sky*

A Sweet Kid

WILLIAM TORPHY

Editors' note: "A Sweet Kid" is a follow-up to Mr. Torphy's "The Good Son," which appears in the 2019 edition of the Bryant Literary Review (Vol. 20). Although "A Sweet Kid" is a fully realized story in itself, we recommend seeking out "The Good Son" if you like Mr. Torphy's writing as much as we do.

I wait anxiously in the United terminal sipping a cup of coffee and feeling ungrounded. My nephew's flight from Baltimore is late because of a severe weather system over the Midwest. My sister Kat tells me that Justin has become very selfish, even for a teenager, and that he lies and constantly tries to manipulate. "Brian and I are at our wits end," she confesses. "Justin tries to hide it, but we know he's smoking pot all the time. Who knows what else he's doing? We've threatened to send him to rehab this summer, but he's told us that he'll run away if we do."

"Rehab seems pretty draconian, Kat. He's only seventeen." I think of myself leaving home when I was Justin's age. I had just been outed and was convinced that our parents would send me to conversion therapy camp that summer.

"Justin was so easy. He was such a good student, mostly A's," she says. "Now he cuts classes and takes a bus somewhere downtown."

I'm tempted to remind her that not only did she smoke pot in high school but was also truant. Is it age or parenting, or both, that's made my sister so tense and anxious? I miss her old wit. Her defiance and fearlessness.

“Brian searched his room a couple of weeks ago. He found a bong, a pipe and a baggie of weed, but no other paraphernalia. Justin blew up when he found out and taped a rock poster with a skull-and-crossbones on his door. They’re arguing all the time now.”

Unlike Kat, I never fought with our parents. I was good at pretense. I did have terrible knockdown, drag-outs with my two alcoholic ex-partners though.

“Justin says he wants to visit you, Edward. What do you think?”
There’s desperation in my sister’s voice. I’m tempted to tell her no.

“He loves you, Edward. He was so excited when he visited you last time.”

I enjoyed Justin’s visit myself. I took time off from the gallery. We drove up to the Gold Country and spent two days at Yosemite. He was such a bright, sweet kid.

“You would be doing us a big, big favor. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

What do I know about teenagers, much less about my special needs, handle-with-extreme-care nephew?

“There’s something you should know,” she says. “Justin has just come out to us. Brian’s having some difficulties with that, but he’s trying.”

“You mean I’ve been elected for a rescue operation?”

“We just need a break, some time to re-group.”

“Okay. I just hope you’re not expecting too much to come from this visit.”

“You’re a real lifesaver.”

Justin lopes up the terminal’s walkway and stands before me. He unslings his backpack and pulls back his hoodie, neither smiling nor

frowning. His dark hair, tips frosted blond in the front, flops over to one side of his forehead and partially covers his right eye.

I smile and conceal my apprehension. "Hello, Justin. It's great to see you." I automatically move to hug him, but hesitate. I put my hand out instead, which he shakes with a surprisingly strong clasp. "Let's get down to baggage claim," I suggest.

He slings his backpack onto his shoulder. "This is all I brought."

A biting wind assaults us on the pedestrian bridge to the parking structure.

"I thought this was supposed to be California," says Justin.

"It's San Francisco. You've been here before."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. Freezing my ass off on the cable car."

The 101 is mercifully free of traffic. The lights of a plane taking off are reflected in the rearview mirror. Even after thirty-five years, I'm still thrilled when I see the city's skyline suddenly appear, skyscrapers glowing, the fingers of fog tumbling over the hills. I'm even beginning to appreciate the looming phallus of the Salesforce tower, with its LED display like some lightshow beaming from Mount Olympus. It's featuring an anti-drug message tonight. Maybe there is a god. But Justin doesn't notice. His eyes are glued to his iPhone's screen.

"Have you called your mother to let her know you're here? She'll be worried."

"She's always worried."

"Why not put her out of her misery?"

He sighs and dials. "Hi Mom, it's me. I'm in the car with Uncle Edward. Talk to you later." Are adolescents really that curt? He must have gotten her voicemail.

I maneuver through jammed city streets and head up Market Street. Justin stares silently out the window. Despite a gale-force wind howling down from Twin Peaks, guys in shorts and T-shirts crowd the sidewalks. At home, Tigre greets us warily, peeking from behind the Chinese chest in the hallway. He's terribly territorial and not fond of visitors. At least he's not hissing, prelude to a hunger strike and a pissing match.

Justin bends down to pet Tigre, who retreats deeper under the chest. "Isn't that the same cat you had when I visited you last time. He must be a million years old now."

"He's only ten."

"That makes him fifty-three in cat years," he informs. My age.

"I'll show you your room." We tread up the spiral staircase, metal ringing with two sets of shoes. My home office doubles as the guestroom. Justin scampers to the windows and stares down at the city. "This is so cool. Baltimore isn't anything like this. I'm so fucking glad to be out of that shithole."

The next morning, I take Justin to the gallery, a straight-shot from Ashbury Heights down 17th Street to Dogpatch. The area was once filled with light-manufacturing, greasy-spoon cafes and working-class bars. It's now chockablock with new condos, vegan-locavore restaurants, hip boutiques and art galleries like mine. I point out a few of the more interesting shops. Justin dutifully glances up from his phone and nods.

I had a gallery downtown on Geary Street until high-tech rents scattered us dealers across San Francisco's forty-nine square miles. I was

lucky to win the leasing lottery to relocate in a former machine shop rehabbed into a kind of art multiplex. I park in my dedicated space—forget finding parking on the streets anymore—and switch on the gallery lights. “These graffiti paintings are so cool!” exclaims Justin. I’m cheered by this unexpected enthusiasm.

“They’re by Nick Stone. He used to be homeless but started painting after he stopped taking drugs.” I’ve decided to be instructive right out of the gate. “You can sit in my office with your friend the phone while I change some of the art work. We can go out for lunch after my assistant Patrick gets here.”

“I can help you,” he volunteers.

“I want to replace these drawings with one of Nick’s big paintings.” From storage, I pull out a six-by-four-foot canvas bursting with brilliant color and crawling with a multitude of overlapping images, among which are two anatomically-identifiable men fucking. I’m caught off-guard and feel embarrassed for a moment, but quickly collect myself. After all, my sister has sent her boy to spend quality time with his very identifiably gay uncle.

Justin helps me carry the painting and we set it against the empty wall. I show him a trick for installing at the ideal height and have him pencil in the spots for two hooks. We hoist together, attach the wire, and step back. It’s our first bonding experience of the trip.

Justin studies it critically. “It’s crooked.” And adjusts it.

My assistant, Patrick, arrives early. He’s only a few years older than Justin and they seem to hit it off, trading comments in arcane phrases I’m not hip to. After leaving instructions, Justin and I leave for lunch. Mexi-Cali is always busy but the food is terrific. Justin wolfs down his

carnitas along with three glasses of Coke, which would undoubtedly make my health-conscious sister apoplectic.

“I’d like to wander around for a while,” he announces. “If that’s okay with you.”

I wonder if I should let him go out on his own so soon. I remember wandering around town when I first came to the city. Looking for trouble.

“I close the gallery at six, so please come back by then, earlier if you get bored.”

“Sure thing.” He smiles and heads out the door while I pay the bill.

A minivan of visitors arrives at the complex. Perfectly-coifed middle-aged women from Walnut Creek set upon the gallery. I delegate Patrick to entertain them and hole-up in the office to send a few emails before making an appearance. They ask the usual questions. “Where does the artist get his inspiration from? How long did it take him to paint it? Are there posters available?” The ladies are window-shopping, but their interest is sincere. There’s always the off-chance that one or two of them might return to the gallery someday and buy something.

Six o’clock comes. No sign of my nephew. I tell Patrick that I’ll close up shop and call Justin’s cell phone. No answer. I call again. He doesn’t pick up. He finally appears at 6:20, carrying a shopping bag and wearing a Duran Duran sweatshirt that could have been mine back in the day.

“Where were you? I called several times.”

“My phone went dead and I lost track of time.”

I’m about to scold, but he cuts me off. “There’s a dope Goodwill down the street with some really sweet stuff.” I stiffen hearing the word, dope.

“Look what I got.” He pulls out a pair of jeans from the bag. They’re ripped to shreds, like the ones in the store down the street that sell for \$180. Justin unfurls several washed-out T-shirts printed with catchy phrases—*Good Year for Tires*, *I Don’t Play Games*, and, emblazoned in black gothic font, *Queen*.

“This is my favorite,” he declares., holding up a pair of bright magenta cargo shorts. “I’m saving these for the Castro.”

My face must have registered horror. “Just joking,” he laughs.

The kid has a sense of humor, which is more than I can say for his uncle at the moment.

I toss a frozen cheese pizza in the oven for Justin and make a salad for myself. I’ve vowed to limit my intake of alcohol during his stay.

Justin gallops down the stairs, barefoot and wearing a Goodwill T-shirt and the magenta shorts. He looks very cute. Was I ever that young, my skin ever that smooth?

“Very cool crib, Unc!” he enthuses.

“Nothing’s changed much since you were last here.” The house was a royal mess when I bought it. It had the same owner since the 1950s. Cat shit everywhere, filthy carpet, leaking plumbing. But the house was dirt cheap, the last bargain to be had in San Francisco.

Justin takes a soda from the fridge. “The view is totally rad. The hills are so cool, like a roller-coaster. Baltimore is so fucking flat.”

“Damn!” I burn my fingers lifting the pizza from the oven and nearly drop it. “I remember how much you liked roller-coasters.”

He pulls the pop-top of his soda can. “I don’t go to theme parks anymore. They’re for kids.”

“What do you like now?” I asked my sister the same question. “Smoking pot and sleeping late,” she said. I wasn’t sure if she was informing me or being sarcastic.

Justin shrugs. “Whatever.” He helps himself to a slice of pizza, rolling the crust until it resembles an oozing, oversized joint.

At seventeen, I had an after-school job at a pizzeria and worked full-time in the summer cutting grass (on lawns). On Saturday mornings, I took a bus into Minneapolis to attend a studio class at the Institute of Art in Morrison Park. I had my first sexual experience with a classmate in the museum basement’s men’s room.

“Whatever you’d like to do is fine with me, Uncle Edward.” He burps and covers his mouth. The boy has good table manners.

Liz calls after dinner. “Justin texted me. He said you had an awesome day together. You’re a good influence on him, Ed.”

“Give me time, sis. I have two weeks to fuck up.”

I’m having a dinner party. Ben and Leon are eager to meet Justin, perhaps too eager. I’ve told them that he’s come out to his parents. I also mentioned drugs. They’re good friends, but they can be over-the-top silver flammers, riffing off one another like a double-act at Gay Comedy Night. As buffers, I’ve invited Karen and Max.

Ben and Leon arrive unfashionably early and volunteer to help, which means hanging out in the kitchen and drinking wine while I braise the chicken and prepare the polenta. Leon is strikingly handsome, with cocoa skin and the longest eyelashes I’ve ever seen on a man. Ben is a white-bread Midwesterner who likes sharing hair-raising tales of their sexual antics, together and separately, like real-life evocations of a Francis Bacon painting.

I ask them to tone things down for the night. Ben affects an innocent expression. “Don’t worry, dear. Justin grew up with the web and social media. I’m sure he’s been exposed to everything.”

Speaking of, where is the drug addict?” asks Leon.

I wave a wooden spoon at him. “Neither drugs nor sex are to be mentioned tonight.”

Ben refills their glasses with Pinot Grigio. “What else is there to talk about?”

“I mean it. Justin has problems, but he’s my nephew, not some boy toy.”

The doorbell rings. Karen gives me a hug. Max smiles and hands over a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Karen and I met at the Stud twenty years ago. She had given up on finding a partner. I was already on my second, but the relationship was at end times. Karen met Max at a work-related event. It was love at first collation. Max is tall and handsome in a Scandinavian, blonde-god sort of way. Which isn’t my thing. But he’s the most open, gay-friendly straight man I’ve ever known. He tends to encourage Ben and Leon’s outrageousness, and I’ve asked Karen to tell him to not encourage them.

Justin appears on the landing, wearing the magenta shorts and the *Don’t Play Games* T-shirt. He descends, flip-flops flapping.

“I want you to meet my friends, Justin. This is Karen and Max.” He waves to Karen and manfully shakes hands with Max. “I’ll get Ben and Leon.” Who, I discover, are standing behind me and leering.

“It’s good to meet you,” chirps Ben. “We’ve heard so much about you,” trills Leon. Which is the very worst thing to say to someone who has issues.

At dinner, Max and Karen dutifully ask safe questions. Where do you live? Where do you go to school? What's there to do that's fun in Baltimore? Justin, scraping capers off his chicken piccata, answers politely.

During dessert, Ben brings up John Waters. "He's from Baltimore too, you know. I just lo-o-o-ve his films. He was in town recently. We went to see him at Norse Auditorium. He's so wonderfully dirty, isn't he, dear?"

I shoot Leon a cautionary glance. He takes the hint, but Ben continues: "He's so funny and hyper. He must be on drugs all the time."

"Excuse me," says Justin, pushing back his chair. "I have to make a phone call." He retreats up to his room.

"Maybe it's his drug dealer," whispers Leon.

Ben arches his eyebrows. "Love those shorts."

"It's good of you to have him here," declares Max, saving me from swatting them.

"My sister and brother-in-law needed a break. It's been a rough year for them."

Karen takes my hand. "If there's anything we can do, let us know."

"Us too," volunteers Ben. "We'd love to help," echoes Leon.

I bite my tongue.

Kat tells me that Justin spends half the night on Facebook and texting his friend, and sleeps in whenever he gets a chance. I slept late too, in my twenties, after closing down the clubs.

I leave the house, carrying a list of Justin's favorite foods: chips and jerky, baby carrots, an expensive brand of organic soup, along with the

kale and cranberry salad from Whole Foods that Liz told me he craves. The boy is spoiled. In my day, we ate whatever our mother served, whether we liked it or not.

Wandering the aisles, I make plans for the day. It's been ages since I've driven to the ocean. I'll take Justin through Golden Gate Park to Ocean Beach. Lunch at Chalet on the Beach with those WPA-era murals. We'll grab a window table upstairs and stare at the Pacific over crab cakes or a burger—or whatever. Maybe walk the trail at Land's End and check out Rodin's hunky sculptures at the Legion of Honor.

Back home, I call upstairs. No response. I clamber up to find his bed empty, sheet and comforter thrown to the side, pillows still indented from his sleepy head. The bathroom door is open, the shorts and T-shirt from last night wadded on the floor. I'm tempted to check for drug paraphernalia, but tromp back downstairs, annoyance trumping concern.

On the dining table, amid napkins and crumbs from last night's party, I find a scrawled note: *Taking a walk. Back later. J.*

He's getting some exercise at least. When I first came to the city, I walked everywhere from my grubby little studio apartment off Polk Street, exploring Chinatown and North Beach, hiking to Potrero Hill and the Haight. It was a fucking urban "Sound of Music" in Technicolor for the first few years. I found plenty of opportunities to get into trouble, too, mostly sexual.

A long-haired dealer occupied every other corner then and Justin is out there now.

I'm not going to fret. I clean up the remains of the last night's dinner. I heat up a little of Justin's expensive soup. Ben calls to ask,

more a provocation than a question, if he and Leon had sufficiently behaved themselves last night. “What are you and Justin doing today?” he asks.

“I don’t know. He’s disappeared.”

“Should we organize a search party?”

I don’t take his bait and call Justin as soon as we hang up. I’ve been told that kids don’t actually talk on their phones, so I follow up with a text. I put on a meditation tape, attend to my breath and repeat a mantra, “The peace of God is shining in me now,” which I only use when I’m not at peace.

The front door opens and slams shut. Justin is wearing the Magentas again and looks pretty pie-eyed. I know the signs.

“Where have you been? I was worried.”

“You read my note?” He plops down on my Danish lounge chair and pulls at the frosted forelock of his hair nervously. “I’m wiped.” Even though his lids are half shut, I can see that his pupils are dilated. “You’re not going to interrogate me like Mom and Dad, are you?”

I take a deep breath and modulate my voice. “You have to understand, Justin. I’m responsible for you. If something bad happened, I couldn’t face your mother and father.”

“Then I guess you’re actually worried more about yourself.”

How do Kat and Brian deal with his adolescent conceit?

He stares at me accusingly. “I heard what your friends said last night,” he snarls. “Why is everyone on my case?” He springs from the chair and stomps upstairs.

I knock on his door later and ask if he’d like something to eat. No answer. Let him sleep it off.

Kat calls. "How are things going?"

"We decided to have a quiet day. Justin took a walk earlier." I don't tell her more than that.

As if nothing happened yesterday, Justin asks, "What do you want to do today?" Clever boy.

I treat him to a "way cool" thirty-dollar haircut in the Castro and we head toward Golden Gate Park. A car vacates a parking spot (there is a God after all!) right in front of the Conservatory of Flowers. Throngs of tourists are milling around taking selfies. "I'll take a picture of you for your mom and dad." I pull out my phone and stage Justin in front of a flowerbed planted with bright orange and yellow daffodils. He makes a funny face.

"What's that?" He points to the pedestrian tunnel under the road, a urinous underpass that I've avoided ever since seeing 'A Clockwork Orange.' Justin runs inside, hoots and hollers, his echoes bouncing off the walls. He goes down on one knee to snap a few photos. I ask if I can see and he hands me his phone.

I accidentally scroll to a photo of Justin sitting on a couch with a young man who has his arm draped around my nephew's shoulder. "Who is this?"

Justin grabs his phone and slips it in his pocket. "Just a friend." I wonder if that's his downtown friend.

We walk through the tunnel to the fern grove where colossal primeval ferns cohabit with elephantine fronds of mystery plants. "It looks like dinosaurs live here!" yells Justin, snapping a photo of two frogs humping on a lily pad. He has a good eye. We wander past dense

shrubbery where I once enjoyed sex with other flagrant flaneurs. I don't mention this to Justin.

There's a David Hockney show at the deYoung I want to see, but instead I lead Justin over to the Rose Garden. He looks bored. We head back to the car and pass a clearing where several deeply-tanned men in speedos lounge at picnic tables. Justin eyes them casually. Whenever I came across scenes like this as a young man, I wavered between feelings of apprehension and exhilaration.

We pass the bison paddock where no bison are to be seen and take the last curve on Kennedy Drive, suddenly face-to-face with the Pacific Ocean.

"Awesome!" exclaims Justin.

I cross Pacific Coast Highway and find a parking spot in front of the concrete seawall at Ocean Beach. Justin nearly rips open the passenger door. "Meet you down there!" He flips off his sneakers and tears toward the water, spraying sand behind him. "Careful. There's an undertow!" I caution. Justin ignores me and wades into the water, waves breaking over the hem of his shorts. He throws his arms up and yells like a banshee, prancing around in a circle.

The first time I laid my eyes on the Pacific, it was in December. I'd been in town only a couple weeks. A guy I met took me there. It was at night, the beach deserted. We stripped off our clothes and ran naked into the water. The frigid cold was shocking. My friend laughed as I let out hoarse cries. We were in the water for maybe a minute, swiftly pulled on our clothes and found a place for coffee. Afterwards, he drove me to his place.

I take off my shoes and pad along the hard sand near the water. Justin joins me and we head toward the rocks at the northern end.

I mention lunch and we dodge traffic to cross the highway to The Chalet at the Beach. I stop to point out a few details on WPA-era murals in the lobby but Justin grows antsy. He excuses himself to use the restroom.

I immerse myself in the mural until I see Justin standing outside the restroom. A young man in a denim jacket and torn jeans skirts behind him and dashes out the front door.

“Did anything happen in there?”

My nephew looks nonplussed.

“The man who followed you out of the bathroom. Did he try anything with you in there?”

Justin looks at me as if I’m crazy.

It’s Friday. We catch the ferry to Sausalito and eat lunch at a sidewalk café on Bridgeway. Justin is effusive and talkative, telling me about sail-boating with his dad on Chesapeake Bay. At Surf’s-Up, he tries on a pair of boardshorts he calls “crazy sick” and chooses two bright t-shirts. I nix the *Cannabis Wave-Rider* number, imagining Liz and Brian’s reaction. We head up Bridgeway and stop in at the Rogers Gallery. I had a brief fling with Ron Rogers years ago. We hug and I introduce Justin, whom he eyes just a bit too eagerly. We don’t stay long.

Outside, Justin lobs me a sly look. “How do you know him?”

“We’re in the same business.” I can be crafty too.

“How many lovers have you had in your life, Uncle Edward?” A middle-aged couple in matching baby blue jogging suits turn around, looking slightly alarmed at us.

“Mom must have told you that I came out to them, right? Mom

and Dad aren't making a big deal about it. Not like they are about smoking grass."

"I'm sure drugs concern them more than your sexual orientation. Coming-out is easier now than when I was your age."

"I know about you leaving home in high school. That must have been kind of scary."

"It was scarier to stay. I didn't know anyone here, but it was easy to make friends."

"I bet it was easy to get drugs then too."

"I'm not sure I should answer that."

We walk from the center of town to a small park on the hilly side of Bridgeway and settle on a bench, staring out at the bright water and the city shimmering across the bay. I clear my throat. "When I was twenty-five, I smoked pot with a friend in this park and almost got arrested."

"Really?" Justin looks impressed.

"My friend and I took the ferry here and decided to get high. We figured no one would notice. Big mistake."

Justin's eyes brighten. "What happened?"

"Someone must have seen us, or smelled us, and reported it to the foot patrol."

"No way! That would totally weird me out."

"Fortunately, we had just finished a joint. My friend dropped it on the ground and covered it with his shoe. The cops demanded to see our IDs and frisked us. My friend didn't move his foot the whole time."

Justin snickers. "What happened then?"

"After they made a big show of writing up a report, they ordered us to move along and followed us all the way back to the ferry."

“But pot is legal in California now. It’s not a problem anymore, right?”

“It’s still a problem if you’re under twenty-one.”

“I bet the cops don’t hassle you unless you’re being really obvious.”

“Not true. Now that recreational marijuana is legal for adults, they’re cracking down on under-age use even more.”

“What’s the big deal? Practically everyone at school smokes. Mom and Dad act like it’s the end of the world. They guzzle down at least one bottle of wine every night.”

Not to mention my own alcohol consumption. “Drugs have the biggest impact when you’re young. Pot affects brain development well into your twenties and it’s definitely addictive.” I hear myself sounding like an after-school special. “And what about you skipping out of school and taking a bus downtown?”

“I just chill out with friends.”

“You should be in class. You may be sacrificing your future in ways you can’t imagine.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Why *do* you smoke pot, Justin?”

“It makes me feel normal. It helps me get through things.”

“Listen to me. You say that pot helps you relax. But your brain compensates for this eventually. So when you’re not high, your stress level increases and you need more and more THC to feel good.”

Justin looks defensive. “You smoked pot when you were my age. You even left home.”

“I left because I was caught having sex with another boy. Your grandparents were fundamentalists. The town was full of people who hated fags. I would have been bullied and persecuted if I’d stayed.”

“I’m being persecuted too! Mom and Dad carry so much shit in their heads. There’s so much pressure. They ground me for no good reason and—”

“They worry about you. That’s what parents do.”

“I hate them. They’re always colluding against me.”

“Most seventeen-year-olds hate their parents. It’s compulsory. Your parents are still entitled to have a say in your life. You don’t realize how fortunate you are. You’ve come out to them and they’re totally supporting you. They’ve sent you to spend time with your gay uncle, for god’s sakes.”

“An uncle who freaks out when I go out for a walk.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble on my watch.”

“What if I bought some pot to share with you?”

“That’s not going to happen, Justin. I don’t smoke anymore. Even if I did, I wouldn’t smoke with you until you turn twenty-one, at least.”

“Have you ever tried opiates or meth?” I don’t like where this conversation is going.

“Never. Meth and opiates, cocaine—they’re killers. Promise me you won’t do any of that stuff.”

He holds his hand to his heart and affects the jaded expression of a Caravaggio saint.

I’m not particularly interested in pursuing the role of anti-drug crusader. “We should leave. I want to get back to the city before rush hour.”

We head back toward the ferry. A group of gay men are waiting with us at the dock, joking and laughing. They all have soft Southern accents. Justin observes them sullenly. We board the ferry two at a time, like unicorns entering Noah’s Ark.

Things have come up for me at work and so I ask Kathy and Max if they would meet Justin for lunch near their place in Noe Valley. They're both teachers and good with kids. They're also hikers and there's a terrific park with rocks to climb nearby, which I'm hoping will satisfy Justin's penchant for wandering for at least one day.

At the gallery, Patrick hands me a list of clients I should contact. There's been a major uptick of interest in Nick Stone's work since his show opened. I'm alerting collectors about getting in at the current level before his prices are raised.

I close two sales before Patrick fetches lunch.

"How are things going with your nephew?" he asks, opening cartons from Hi-Thai.

"Adolescence is a pretty awful time. Old enough to get into trouble, too young to realize the consequences."

"Have you had the talk about drugs?"

"He admits to using pot. Hinted at other things."

"Being gay and drugs pretty much go hand-in-hand at a certain age, especially club drugs."

"Like ecstasy, you mean?"

"Mostly crystal meth. It makes for the most amazing sex."

"You aren't using, are you?"

"Not anymore. Daniel would drop me super-immediately."

"You have a great future, Patrick. I'm sure you won't fuck up."

My cell rings. It's Kathy. "Justin didn't show up at the restaurant. We called his cell phone but he didn't pick up. Did his plans change?"

I pretend not to be alarmed. "He must have decided to do

something else at the last minute. Sorry about the mix-up. Thank Max again for volunteering.”

I try to reach Justin several times without success. I’m not sure what else to do.

I distract myself with calls to clients. My cell phone rings again just before closing time.

“Is this Edward Burton? This is Sarah Wheeler, admissions assistant at Zuckerberg SF General. A Justin Rohnert was admitted to emergency services thirty-five minutes ago. We found your card in his wallet. We’re seeking a family contact.”

A red-haired receptionist takes my name and asks me to take a seat. I search out the admissions clerk, who can’t tell me anything specific but assures me that someone from the medical staff will be out to talk with me. I give her my cell number as well as Liz and Brian’s phone numbers.

A thousand scenarios go through my head—Justin hit by a car, accosted by a crazy street person, struck by falling debris at a construction site. Or more likely, he’s OD’d on some designer drug. I hope it’s anything but that, so, and this is terrible, it won’t be my fault for trusting him to be on his own.

I take a seat and wait. A patient, bleeding through his pants leg, limps in and shouts for help. A gurney shoots through the open glass doors carrying someone covered in a sheet. My worst fears inflate.

The first time I went to County General, as it was called then, I’d torn the palm of my hand on a rusty gate and required ten stitches. I returned too many times since, visiting dozens of friends dying in the AIDS ward.

Finally, a young man in a tie and rolled-up sleeves arrives and sits on the edge of a chair next to me. He introduces himself as Doctor Fennerman.

“Mr. Burton, since you’re not Justin’s legal guardian, I can only tell you that we received a 9-1-1 call reporting that your nephew was acting very erratically, running in and out of traffic.”

“Jesus Christ! How is he? Can I see him?”

“I’m afraid it’ll be a while before you can see him. I can tell you that his condition is stable. We’ve run a few tests for drugs. We’re trying to get him to talk.” He puts his hand on my shoulder, which does nothing to reassure me. “Why don’t you get something in the cafeteria.”

I forget to ask him if the hospital has called Liz and Brian. I take a few deep breaths and dial. “Liz, I’m at the hospital. I’m afraid it’s Justin. He’s in the ER.”

“Oh my god. What happened?” Her voice rises an octave. “Is he okay?”

“They haven’t told me much, except that he was on the street acting strangely. The doctor seemed to think that it was drugs.”

“Christ! We should never have sent him out there. From her stifled sobs, I can tell Liz is trying to keep it together. “I have a call coming in,” she croaks. “I think it’s the hospital.” She hangs up.

I let Patrick know that I won’t be coming back to the gallery.

“I figured. How’s Justin?”

“They haven’t told me much.”

Dr. Fennerman appears again. “I’ve just spoken with Justin’s parents. They said that I could fill you in. Your nephew arrived in ER sweating profusely, breathing rapidly and with dilated pupils.

There's a methamphetamine epidemic on the streets. It's cheap and easily available. Your nephew used crystal meth, and judging from his behavior it may have been cut with something else. People are dying from these combinations, but Justin should pull out of this okay. He's young and his heart valves are resilient. You can see him now."

I follow a nurse to the ward room. Someone behind closed curtains is coughing and coughing. Justin lays in a hospital bed, as pale as the sheet that covers him. He's slack-jawed, his mouth agape, a UV line attached to his arm.

"We've sedated him," the nurse informs. "You can sit with him if you like."

I stare at the boy, registering his heavy breathing. It's heart-breaking to see him like this and maddening that he did this to himself. I stare at my hands. They look old. I think of all my friends who have died here.

I caress Justin's forehead and return to the waiting room to call Liz.

"I've left two messages for you," she complains, her voice grabbing me by the sleeve. "Brian's been absolutely frantic. The doctor said that Justin overdosed on methamphetamine."

"They intend to keep him under observation overnight."

"I can get a flight out this evening."

"There's nothing you can do here, Liz. Why don't you hold off?"

"I'm his mother. I should be with him."

"I promise to keep you posted. If Justin is well enough to return home in a couple days, I can fly back with him."

"It was too much to expect that you could handle him."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

“How could you let this happen, Edward?”

“I’m not his fucking father, Liz. You asked me to relieve you and Brian of your son for two weeks, remember?”

“I should have known better. Irresponsibility runs with the men in our family. You were Justin’s age when you took off from home. You left me alone to deal with the repercussions.”

“What repercussions?”

“Like my classmates treating me like a pariah. Our parents’ hysteria and being humiliated every Sunday by the congregation praying for my sinful prodigal brother’s contrite return.”

“Why are you bringing this up now?”

“We shouldn’t have put you in this position. That’s all I’m saying.”

She’s saying more than that. This is crazy. My sister harping on something that happened thirty-five years ago, when, meanwhile her son is in ER?

“What can I say, Liz? I’m sorry.”

“Too little, too late,” she bleats and hangs up.

Kat and I were raised in an atmosphere imbued with guilt, saturated in shame. I rejected that upbringing, but the awareness of sin still clings to me, like dirt on a gardener’s hands. I never once regretted my decision to leave Aurora. But, years later, I realized how much I must have hurt my parents. I tried to talk about it one Thanksgiving visit. It never occurred to me that my sudden departure may have been traumatic for my sister too, leaving her alone to fend for herself in that bigoted atmosphere. A rush of shame overwhelms me. I’ve no idea if this is justified, but there it is.

Maybe it would be better if Justin stays here with me. Now who’s being crazy?

I look for a more comfortable chair for my back, an overstuffed number made for some E.R. victim's grandmother. I feel exhausted and lay my head back.

My friend Adam, or someone like Adam, raises his bony arm, and whispers, "You need to survive so you can bury us." He grabs me with his gnarled hand. I protest that he isn't going to die, that he'll beat this virus.

A nurse rouses me out of sleep. "Your nephew is awake. He's asking for you." It's nine o'clock. I follow her through several hallways to the main hospital. A UV line is still in Justin's arm, but I'm relieved to see that a little color has returned to his face.

He stares up at me. "I guess I screwed up." His voice is weak.

"It looks like it." I don't push things.

"They told me I was dodging cars on the street. I don't remember that."

"Apparently, you were acting like a drunken toreador. You could have been killed."

"Do Mom and Dad know yet?"

"Your mother wants to fly out here."

"Please don't let her, Uncle Edward. I don't want to go back to Baltimore. Can't I just stay with you?" he pleads. "Everyone in Baltimore hates fags. They bully me."

Liz would have told me if he was being bullied. "You're still a minor and your parents make the decisions."

"My summer will be totally fucked. They'll probably make me go to rehab."

"You've sent yourself to rehab, Justin."

"Whatever."

“No. *Whatever* were you thinking?”

“I don’t want to talk,” he moans, and turns away. “I’m tired.”

I grab my jacket, bristling at this adolescent selfishness. “I’ll leave you alone in that case.” See you in the morning, okay?”

Any idea I may have had about having Justin stay with me are mercifully resolved.

At the airport, we hug, and then he is out of my arms. He looks me straight in the eye. “I met a guy on the street,” he confesses. “He took me to his apartment and gave me something so we could have more fun. Then he kicked me out.”

Justin slowly moves through the TSA line past the checkpoint, recovers his backpack and flips his hoodie over his head. Intent on his phone’s screen, he doesn’t turn to wave and disappears into the crowd of summer travelers. My heart lurches. I suddenly feel astonishingly empty.

I reach Liz. “Justin’s at the gate. His flight is scheduled to arrive in Baltimore on time.”

She lets out a sigh. “Thank you, Ed, for taking him.” Her voice is meek. “I know it wasn’t easy.”

My sister has apparently come down from crazy-ville. I don’t tell her what Justin has just confided. He’ll continue to make bad choices as well as good ones, just like his uncle does.

At home, Tigre emerges from under his hiding place, a bit bedraggled, and purrs at my feet. The disarray Justin brought makes me miss him for a moment. I fall into bed and sleep until I’m wakened by my cell phone ringing.

“Justin’s plane just landed,” Liz says. “We’re taking him to rehab in two days.”

“Let me know how you’re all doing, won’t you?” I’m concerned of course, but I suddenly feel abstracted from them, distanced from their lives. Maybe I don’t want to admit failure.

Throwing cold water on my face, I see creases I never noticed before. I shuffle into the kitchen and open the cabinet where I’d stashed all the liquor. I pour myself a scotch and stare out at the city through a rare summer drizzle, watching the lights from traffic snaking on freeway. The LED display at the top of the Salesforce tower emits abstract images of what seems to be a modern dance performance replicating strobe-light syndrome. The wail of sirens pulses somewhere in the Mission and paws at the windows.

The scotch is taking the edge off. I’m relieved that Justin is gone, but sadder too than when he first arrived, when anything was possible between us. □

Charcoal Nude

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

Roughed-up: edges indistinct: body
softly black & blending with all this white
space. The paper:

less a canvas than a mirror. That she is displayed here at all
is a minor miracle, the kind the old folks call
assimilation.

Not pictured:

the artist: his intent: that half-moon smile
when the legs are complete & the infinite
opening between.

Weaponized beauty, that we are meant to touch
ourselves with suspicion. Or is it guilt? A sordid history erased
or on full display, depending on

the context. The framed notecard doesn't give us

her name.

If the stars had voices

BUFF WHITMAN-BRADLEY

If the stars had voices
They would surely sound
Like cricket song
Throbbing with passion and yearning
And tinged with melancholy
As summer's blue canoe
Drifts toward autumn.

If the stars had voices
We would sit every evening
Out on the front porch
To hear their fervent, achey airs
Just as we do now
In these tail-end days of August
Talking quietly about today's heat
And tomorrow's
And enjoying the hubbub and spectacle
Of whole galaxies of crickets
Twinkling in the grasses.

Brutality

LAURIE LESSEN REICHE

I.

There is something I want to say about brutality.

It comes out the lips of the hateful
mother, the beautiful mother.

It is a delicacy served under a silver
dish, under a shiny dome.

It is the sustenance of the old home,
the genetic nest. In my blood there is only darkness,
river of cruelty flowing in one set direction, the anthem of terror,
the pledge of desolation sealed with the kiss, the scary
caress.

It is her love that I love, the promise of eventual goodness, the hope
that brutality will be short-lived even though I am awful
and do not deserve her forgiveness. Let her rage against me and I'll join in
the crusade! I am brutality's baby: bad, dirty, lazy. I'll get the kerosene, burn
myself alive, prove to the brutal monster that she was wronged by every twist
and birth-turn of fate: a misfortune the day
I was born.

I have nothing more to say about brutality.
It comes and goes on and on
like a song.

II.

Am I really so many sheath-thin flakes of ash?

Am I really a burst bubble of spurt pieces

lighting up the air? Or am I resurrected?

I think I am—I see out two human eyes, breathe air

into a human lung, long arms are curved on this desk in front of me

like Escher's print of two arms resting on paper, a pencil in the right hand

drawing a picture at the very moment we are gazing at it.

I gaze at my own hand writing these words.

I have fingers! And the brutal woman is far away

weaving vivid stories of betrayal to any stranger who will listen.

She is Jewish in that way—a verbal necromancer.

I am Jewish in my own way—full of catastrophes I hide away like a secret diary

buried in an underpants drawer. Still, now I am I

and that's nothing to pooh-pooh.

A miracle! I hear people cheering! I've reached the finish line

at the other end of heaven's burning desert! I am thin, bones brittle, skin

sheer as water. If I drank a fluid that I crave

it would go right through me like a snake slithering in one end and out

the transparent other. It is something to be thirsty.

It is something to recognize a flower in the hands of a child in the crowd of happy

people who have come to meet me. O' memories! O' Mnemosyne,

leave me for a while so I can mingle in this crowd!

Do not remind me of my tattered sandals.

Do not remind me of the needle that burst the bubble of my small self.

Let me float among all the happy angels who are dressed as civilians.

Let me fall bodily into their outstretched arms.

My Father's Loaves and Fishes

LENNIE HAY

In his soft throaty voice he speaks of rice—
washing and rinsing hard kernels,
how hands knock them on the side of a pot
until water runs clear. How it will rise

with rest. Two fingers placed parallel
above the country of white, mark enough
cooking water. He tells of the importance
of a firm lid to contain steam's slow ritual.

Airy morsels are the beginning of a meal's success.
After we finish the mounds of rice,
when only crusty skin remains in the pot,
he pours a river of water on its dryness.

The pot simmers bounty and economy.
He drains the precious pot. We drink his rice tea.

That Thing

SUSAN TAYLOR CHEHAK

My pap's eyes are bad. It's not the books or the computer, not the peering at small letters on a page or on a screen. And it isn't just a consequence of age either. His peepers went bad a long time ago, when he was young. Not a child, but a teenager. Sixteen years old, to be precise. The world began to blur then, and now it's just getting worse, fading from him even though he's really not so very old. Says he still needs his eyes. Still needs to see what's what. He can't be counting on me all the time, he says, though I'd drive him, and happily so, if he asked. Wherever he wants to go. He's a good man, my pap. I'll take care of him, just like he took care of me.

But there it is anyway. He flunked his eye test down at the DMV, even though he was prepared to cheat. I'd warned him and then piped up again and warned the DMV lady at the counter, too, that he'd try to cheat, which brought forth a stern warning from the DMV lady herself—a heavy girl in a big denim dress, or maybe she was pregnant. Hormones run amok. Pimples on her chin and a scowl on her face that deepened when my pap played it straight and had to admit he couldn't make out the letters, even with his glasses on, and he smiled and asked, "Could I please try again?" because of course he had them memorized. But the DMV lady was on to him and she changed them or...I don't know. Only that he failed and lost his license.

Or maybe it had more to do with the drinking. Damned patrolman who tracked him at fifteen miles over the speed limit and .01 points

over the lowest bar for intoxication, but he insisted he wasn't going to hurt anyone. Said he knew what he was doing. Explained that he's driven that stretch of road so many times in his life, he knows it by heart. Besides, whatever the numbers said, he was not impaired. But, "Tell that to the judge," the patrolman said. And, "I know who you are, sir." Pap couldn't see the smirk, though most likely he could feel it.

You can find accounts of what first made my pap famous around here in some of the old newspapers that they've got archived online. In those stories he's a sixteen-year-old boy with 20/20 vision, minding his own business on his father's farm. He goes outside after supper to check on the horses. It's twilight time in the early fall. He shivers, pulls up his collar, stuffs his hands into his pockets. But of course the horses are just fine. That's only an excuse for him to be with his own thoughts, as it were. Because Pap is in love, not with a girl, but with his teacher, who's too old to be anything serious for him, but young enough to set off a spark in his heart that's burning hot enough to make him want to do something about it.

He's leaning on the fence, feeling the chill and watching the sharpness of the stars coming out in the black sky. He hears the horses stamping and snuffling like they do. He's smoking a cigarette and looking over his shoulder at his mam's figure at the sink, where she's washing up after supper. A light blooms on in the window of his sis's room upstairs.

He moves away from the fence and into the shadows behind the barn. Taking a leak there, probably. Innocent enough, but when he looks up, he sees a glowing in the trees. Like sunrise it is, almost. He's thinking there should be some kind of sound to go with that light,

and just when he thinks this, he hears it too. Humming, or some such as that. And he realizes he's been hearing it for a while, after all. He squints through the smoke from his cigarette, clenched in his bared teeth the way he's seen the TV cowboys do. The light spreads until he can make out a shape with a definite curve to it, twenty feet maybe, from one end to the other and a dazzle of blue, red, and orange lights flickering there along the sides. It's hovering above the ground about the same height as his sis is from head to toe, he thinks. He looks back to the house to see if she's there at the window maybe. Or if anybody else inside can see what he sees, but now the kitchen lights are off and the curtains upstairs are drawn. When he turns back for another look, the thing has begun to shine at its base, and then it lifts up and spins away with a whirring sound. The glow is so intense now that poor dumb Pap is temporarily blinded by it and will never get his eyesight back the way it was before; in fact it will only worsen over the years that pass for him between then and now.

In the newspaper story about all this, he says his eyes were on fire, and his mind was swirling, and his heart was hammering in his chest. He stumbled back to the house, running, falling, slamming his shoulder on the corner of the barn as he came around too quickly into the innocent yellow glow of the yard light. There was a truck passing on the highway at the long end of the drive, and the dog was at the back door barking at him, and his mam's birds were flapping in their cages when he barreled inside, hollering for help. When he saw his own pap's look of alarm and heard his mam's frightened cry, he turned right back around again, knowing they were going to follow him. His mam says she and his pap found him on the porch, pointing at something up

high, above the tallest trees. Pretty soon his sis tumbled out the door and then there was the whole family and the dog too, gaping at the glowing in the sky.

Pap's pap says he went back into the house for a flashlight, which he gave to Pap to hold, and Pap then led the way around back of the barn, where his cigarette butts were piled up and scattered along the path, the evidence of his guilty pleasures, but never mind that. He went on into the trees where he'd stood before, where he'd seen the mystery for himself.

"That Thing" was what they all came to call it, never daring to say the words: saucer, spaceship, UFO. My pap's delusion, his sis insisted. Her brother's cracked skull. And pretty soon she was denying all of it. Shaking her head. Telling the reporter that she didn't see anything. It never happened. Her brother is crazy and so are you if you believe anything he says.

His own pap took another stance though. Champing on a toothpick, head tilted, hands on his hips, considering the situation. Pap's pap was a canny one, and he was already calculating how he might be able to make some money on That Thing. A swagger of greed was already glinting in his grin as he hoisted up his pants, crossed his arms over his chest, and rolled that toothpick this way and that with his tongue.

Only my pap's mam was drawn past her own calculations and expectations into an honest belief in what she'd seen. She separated from her family—the boy with his burning eyes, the girl with her cynical sneer, the man with his whiskey squint—and crept all on her own toward the white circle in the grass. When she got there she

stepped right into it, just like that. Ashes dusted up at her feet as ever so slowly she bent her knees and squatted there, her skirt flowering out around her, and put her palm to the ground, pressed her fingers to it, felt the heat and came away with a small mound of what looked like sugar crystals in the pocket of her palm.

Her fingers were numb for days afterward, and she never did get the feeling back into them completely. Eventually, over the years until she died, that hand would gnarl up and knot into a painful arthritic fist that she held clenched against her belly, as if cradling something precious there, a secret she held tightly to herself, kept close, for no one else to know or see.

Not long afterward, my pap was suffering too. His head was plagued by pain, headaches that were like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Eventually a doctor told him they were migraines, as they were always preceded by a kind of effervescence behind his eyes that, to his mind, were like the sparkle of the lights on That Thing, whatever it was. And his eyesight was weakening too, as if sand had been kicked in them. Itching and watering so that at school it was assumed he'd been crying, though no one knew or bothered to ask why. Just, a bigger boy stepped forward, breaking away from a clot of those halfwit kids from town, and gave my pap a shove while the others called him baby and pussy and girlie and all like that. His head wasn't just throbbing, it felt stabbed, as if someone had plunged a knife into his brain, straight through the eyebrow just above his left eye. And not long after that, he took to stammering and couldn't say what he meant to, couldn't find the words. Embarrassed and ashamed, he hid out in his room, taking some comfort from the shadows there, as light of day and school and the world only made everything all that much worse.

When he slept he dreamed of bloody hands and broken bones. Blindfolds and handcuffs. Long hallways, dimly lit. Red doors and broken teeth. Wild horses. Snakes and flapping bats. He woke thrashing. Sometimes screaming. Sometimes out loud but mostly in silence, inside his head. The house around him creaked the way old houses do. His pap's snores rose and fell from the bedroom down the hall. Soon his mam was there to cool him down with a healing poultice pressed against his brow.

My pap knew who was calling before his pap picked up the phone, sometimes before he'd even heard it ring. He understood that his grandmam was ailing even before that phone call came. He looked at his sis and could tell her the name of the boy she'd kissed last night. He knew about the money his pap had taken from the cash register at work. It wasn't much, not enough for anybody else to notice, and they didn't. He spent it on drink. He took a woman outside to his truck and laid her down on her back. Her name was Genie. Her husband was from Michigan.

All this information popped into my pap's head and left him knowing everything about everybody, excluding whatever it was he was supposed to be learning from that attractive young teacher at the school. It was like there wasn't any room left in him for all that anymore. And so the pink slips and the phone calls started coming. And his pap gave him a slap on the face, told him to straighten up, or else.

For a while my pap got to thinking maybe he could just leave. Run away and join the circus. Open a tent and tell people their own secrets. Earn a real living that way. It was a talent, after all. A gift that he could use. He'd been given this and it was his. So as his pap

hollered and slapped and shoved him around, my pap stood strong and firm and heard the cries of that Genie woman in the truck and his pap whimpering in her arms.

While my pap suffered thus, his pap was scheming up a way to make some money of his own off what had happened to them. That Thing, he called it. He looked at the wild woods that had grown up near the creek and the little clearing that had come from cutting for firewood one year, a parcel that had been of no use to anyone for as long as Pap's pap could remember, and now suddenly he could see the value in it all right. He envisioned a sign in the yard, a listing in the local tourist books—such as they were—close enough to the interstate that he'd be able to bring in the curious folks, he was sure of it, and charge a fee for his trouble too, if only a donation. Not greedy, just practical, he told his wife, my pap's mam, with her clenched fist.

Pap's pap sat there at the kitchen table long into the night, thinking it all through. Then in the morning he made the phone calls, starting with the town paper. He also stopped for breakfast at the coffee shop and mentioned there the fact that he and his family had been paid a visit the other night and asking around, "Did you folks see that light in the sky?" He knew the tall waitress—that Genie with the big tits—liked a little mystery, and that this story was right up her alley. And sure enough she took the bait and ran with it. Jaw dropped: "Is that what that was? Well, my oh my, I did wonder, I did. I thought it was a fire somewhere in those woods, glowing. Or my own imagination." She looked at him. They shared a secret after all.

And he said, "Sure was something and not just any woods, but my woods."

And so the story came out, and everybody in town heard of it, and it spread far enough to catch the attention of a doctor by the name of Martin Goode, whose profession was the study of such phenomena as flying saucers and aliens and whatever else might be out there in galaxies other than our own. He was a certified ufologist, Pap's pap explained to his family: his wincing son, his wide-eyed daughter, his weeping wife. And this Dr. Goode, he was coming to have a look at that clearing for himself, which Pap's pap was sure was all it was going to take to convince him this was the real thing. Once he'd seen the withered trees and sampled the glassy soil and written up his report, then the rest of the plan would fall right into place and the looky-loos would come flocking.

"You can bet on that," Pap's pap exclaimed. There was money in it, he insisted. Good money and plenty of it. He pounded his fist firm on the table, while his family cringed away.

And sure enough, this Dr. Martin Goode pulled up into the driveway in a long black car. He was with another man, younger, wearing glasses with thick lenses and his hair in a crew cut. Together they took their equipment out of the trunk and trudged along after Pap's pap to that patch of woods behind the barn, which Pap's pap had made Pap clean up—the cigarette butts and the beer bottles, a pair of blue panties, soiled, and other whatnot left out there by the boy being a boy. Dr. Goode and this assistant of his stood together at the edge of the clearing with their hands on their hips. They looked around at the trees and the damaged branches. They eyed my pap and his pap, assessing their sincerity, before they set to work.

It was clear they'd done this before. They knew what they were doing and they knew what they wanted. They wouldn't let on what

they were thinking, just kept on thinking it as they poked around the dirt, scooping samples of it up into little plastic vials with rubber tops. This and that they gathered up and carried off.

“We’ll be in touch,” the younger man said, and then they both nodded at Pap’s pap and slapped my pap on the shoulder before they climbed back into their black car, which then disappeared in a cloud of dust, up the gravel drive to the highway and on out to the interstate and gone.

My pap shook his head. He knew what they were going to say, but he didn’t want to say it to his pap himself. And sure enough, three weeks later there was a letter in the mailbox. Folded over twice and slipped into a yellow envelope. It said the soil had been tested by seven different laboratories, and these tests revealed the presence of an unidentified fungus, but no proof of having been altered by the landing of an alien craft.

Pap’s pap shook his fist at that and exclaimed: “Unidentified! See! I knew it!” And from there he took the high road and insisted it didn’t matter what they thought anyway. Clearly they were lying. It was a conspiracy. Obviously they had something they were desperate to hide.

But Pap’s pap and my pap both knew the truth, and so did his sis and his mam. They’d all seen what they saw with their own eight eyes, and that ought to be proof enough for anybody with any imagination. Pap’s pap went right back to work setting up his tourist attraction, including a sign in the yard that he hoped would be temptation enough for the local folks who passed it every day, at least. Red on yellow: UFO LANDING SITE. And, more practically, another, smaller sign close by, advertising in plain old black and white the eggs and jelly and fresh produce from Pap’s mam’s garden on the far other side of the yard.

There were some looky-loos who stopped by, all right. But all in all the customers were scarce at first and scarcer still as time went on. The believers wouldn't buy the garden goods, fearing they might be contaminated or radioactive or somehow dangerous on account of their association with aliens from outer space, and the nonbelievers wouldn't stop in at all.

Pretty soon the whole thing was forgotten, and Pap's pap's signs were left to go to ruin in the yard. Pap's mam's fingers still tingled, and she got used to that until the tremors came, but that was something else altogether and no connection to an alien sighting that any doctor would take seriously. The one she consulted only raised his eyebrows when she explained it and smiled patiently, indulging her, shook his head, and gave her the proper bad news.

Meanwhile Pap's pap wasn't getting any younger either, and he'd started sinking into himself, spending more and more of his time alone out there in the barn with the horses and an office he'd set up for himself in the hayloft. No time for any Genies anymore, he had work to do. He had a desk made out of a cedarwood door that spanned the space between a pair of metal filing cabinets and an old manual typewriter, along with reams of paper and all kinds of notes and diagrams and suchlike on the walls. He was going to tell the story, he said. He planned to write it all down, but the truth was that mostly he just sat in his chair, throwing back his pints and then fifths and then half gallons of whiskey, or stood at the open loft door and stared out at those ruined woods and the tainted creek and the promise of the starry sky, unmoving and unmoved overhead.

And that should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. Not for my pap anyway, and not for me either. He kept on knowing things

he had no business knowing and hearing things and seeing things no one else could hear or see. The headaches came and went, but he was well enough to take a job with a construction crew in the summers while he was finishing school. They were widening the highway that ran past the farm and on through town, in one end and out the other side, and my pap was the kid flipping the stop/slow sign, smiling at the irritated drivers who had to wait and waving at them as they went on by. His mam was failing, and his pap was losing his mind, and his sis had married a boyfriend and left town altogether, so my pap moved out of the house and into the trailer he had set up on blocks in those same old woods behind the barn, which is where I grew up into who I've become too. He felt safe there, he said. His mind was blank and he wasn't bothered by the headaches or the visions or the endless cacophony of other people's thoughts.

And so that was how his first sighting of me came about.

My pap's original impression was that what he was looking at was a stray dog. Or maybe a coyote. Or a fox. His eyesight was bad, after all. So he didn't pay me much mind, not until I showed up a second time and then again a third. I was crouched there at the edge of the clearing, making a study of him. He was tall and thin by then, full grown, almost, and handsome in his way. I was short and stooped. My hair was all wild and matted on my ovaloid skull. My bare skin gleamed in the moonlight, shiny wet like I'd just been birthed out of some gelatinous womb. I watched him watching me, then turned, quickly, to scutter off into the brush on all fours, as I was wont to do.

Later there would be some folks who said my pap had somehow heard about all the other little goblins who were being spotted here

and there at that time and that this was what was behind what he was seeing, whether because of suggestion or telepathy or dishonesty or what have you. It didn't matter though, because any way you looked at it, my arrival in his world was calling into question his whole being. Either he was deluded or he was psychic or he was a crook, but my pap was none of that. He was a solitary young man on his own in the woods, lonely, aloof, plagued by headaches, going blind, hearing voices, and okay, then maybe that was crazy, but he could accept it for whatever it was before he would admit to any fraud or such like that. He was at the mercy of his own pap, people said. He was his mam's son, losing his own mind as she was doing just then with hers too.

But none of what was behind what they were guessing was true. My pap only found out later that there were others. Goblins, that is. This wasn't That Thing—the spaceship, alien craft, UFO, or whatever you want to call it. Many people had seen, and would continue to see, those all over the world at that time, and there are plenty of explanations for them too, some reasonable and some not, to this very day.

But me, I was something else altogether. And the puzzle was: how was this sighting related to the other or were they connected at all? Was it simply a random coincidence and nothing with any meaning in it? Just two different strangenesses right there on that particular little farm, in those particular dark woods. Three, if you wanted to include my clairvoyant pap himself as one of them, I guess. Four, if you wanted to throw in his mam for good measure too.

And so it all escalated from there. That is, my pap wasn't alone anymore. For all that everyone was thinking—and some were saying

he was crazy—still there were others, too, who had seen the lights that one night and now were seeing me out there as well. That July at least four people in and around town reported sightings of a bare-naked child of about preschool age, with matted blond hair and filthy feet, hiding in the woods or running through the brush beyond the fences of their backyards. One woman said she found me on her back porch in the early morning, crouched on all fours and eating out of the dog bowl, while the dog just stood back and watched, curling his lip, to which I curled mine right back and growled, so the dog backed away, and the woman, fearful, called the police.

By the time they showed up though, I was gone. They took a report but couldn't be sure whether to believe what they were hearing. Talk around the taverns in town was that this was Pap's pap scheming again, working up a fuss to get some interest back into his UFO LANDING SITE. Some were even thinking maybe it was my pap himself who was behind it. Maybe his clairvoyance was working the other way, creating hallucinations in the minds of others, including himself. And it was true, although his eyesight had been permanently damaged, the headaches had pretty much left him by then, and he felt such a relief, as if his mind was suddenly freed, emptied out, like the plug removed in a sink and all the water goes swirling down the drain.

And then this lady—her name was Miss Lange, and she taught the first graders at the elementary school, children close to the same age as I appeared to be myself—she called in to the police to say she'd had a face-to-face encounter with a poor little child sitting on a picnic table inside the shed at the back of the vacant lot across the street from her house. There by the alleyway where she took her evening walks. She

couldn't say whether it was male or female, just that it was naked and its private parts were hidden from her view. It was definitely human, though, she was pretty sure of that. She said it had big black eyes and an oddly shaped head and overly large ears and that it made a gurgling sound. Not a growl, exactly. More like a big cat's purr. And when it saw her in the doorway, it jumped from the table to the floor and slipped off by way of a broken board in the wall of the shed.

Miss Lange and her neighbor—who had come to meet her at that spot for what turned out to be a regular rendezvous, mentioned only later and a subsequent embarrassment to them both—searched the area and said they'd seen it again and approached it with all good intentions, getting close enough, in fact, for me to scratch them both. Miss Lange on the chest and her neighbor on the face in such a way that she was left with a scar that crawled up her cheek from the corner of her mouth to the lobe of her ear, forever after that.

Someone called in later and reported they had me trapped in a garage, but before the police could get there, a crowd had gathered, and when they broke down the door and tore the place apart, there was nothing to see and not even any trace that maybe there ever had been anyone there.

A lot of folks cried hoax, though they never could find a way to pin it on anyone specific, not even Pap's pap. Wild imagination was all it was. A story flowing through them, passed from one to another like a case of the flu or a bad winter cold. Flaring up now and then, only to die away again after a while.

You can look this all up, if you don't believe me. And if you do, if you dig in deep enough, then along with the whole story I'm telling

you here, you're going to find a snapshot of my pap's pap and my pap standing there by the fence out back behind the barn, next to the clearing that was a landing site for a saucer from outer space before it became the graveyard where my pap's pap lies now and where my pap's mam is buried too, along with his sis, who lost her life to drugs somewhere along the way, and where my pap will be buried one day, at the edge of his good-for-nothing family's sorry patch of otherwise worthless woods. Pap's pap is in the overalls he always wore, with a dirty white T-shirt underneath, and he's got a shovel over his shoulder, and he's wearing a floppy hat on his head that shadows his face like he's got some kind of a secret he's doing his best to hide.

No matter how close you look though, you won't see the little old trailer there on its blocks in the thickest shadows of the trees, where I grew up. And you won't see me inside it either, holding on for dear life to my pap's saving grace. □

When Death Comes

CAROL TYX

after Mary Oliver

When death comes
like the dentist,
sticking her hand
into your mouth, wielding
sharp instruments
as she searches out
all the dark places,
the shadows of decay,
the weak spots
in the worn enamel,
I hope she will be like
my dentist, making sure
I'm sufficiently numb
before drilling in
so it's pressure I feel,
not pain, her skilled hands
steady and swift
as she replaces
my old filling,
trying her best
to make it smooth
as she hums in my ear.

Gunn Hill

PAT DANEMAN

Given time, a place becomes a thing
small enough to hold in memory's grip,
strong enough to struggle free. Frightened

and beautiful, it looks over its shoulder
as it bolts away. Years ago, I walked uphill
in snow here, counting the days

until Christmas with each footstep. I hid
with boys, stained my clothes
in the wet grass, ran home with leaves

in my hair. I left my children
asleep on quilts as I wandered deep
along purple-orange swales

to pick berries. I have tasted the onion sting
of weeds here, worn a crown of clover.
Many times, I've slipped a hand into my pocket

expecting to find a dry petal or a stone, forgetting
that nothing rises from cindered kisses
or crystallizes out of snowmelt.

The Flood

ELIZABETH UNDERWOOD

I wake
and I am alive
but the wine in my glass
from the night before
is dead.

Lots of things are dying in the morning.
Fragile things, like my marginal grasp on reality,
the lace structure of a seasoned leaf,
the color of your eyes.
All are swept away and lost.
Drowned, in this high season of storm.

News Guy last night said
maybe the prophets lied about the Flood,
maybe the world will be destroyed a second time
by water, and not hellfire after all.
It's been nine weeks of water now,
and a year without you.
Loss saturates the hours.

My mind will not move from death
and rebirth, death and rebirth.
The Phoenix is taken down by water this time,
then rises from the deep, drenched.
This time, he begins just like we do—
wearing a thin film of liquid
at the beginning of life.

I can't stop thinking of twigs broken,
 leaves torn from their bodies,
 insects swimming to their fate—
 and of dormant seeds bursting,
 incorrigible flowers budding,
 forgotten redwoods,
 drunk with a flash of vibrant green,
 and cavalier blades of grass,
 swashbuckling, with certain life
 from all this water.

News Guy today says
 there's a man on the edge
 of a very high bridge.
 He's going to jump.
 Wants to meet his end at the waterline,
 but wants a priest before he goes.
 I say: hey, just jump.

Out in the galaxy of my morning,
 there is nothing but death and renewal.
 Both are rampant and everywhere.
 Drowning and new life stitched together
 with the thread of wet weeds—
 a brilliant reversible tapestry.

I wake
 and find myself wet
 with the memory of a walk
 on the beach
 in this much rain.

*When I think about the funeral,
I find I can taste the mints*

NICHOLE PAGE

I can hear the crinkle of the wrapper, the sniffing and speeches
My fingers push it from the plastic casing giving me something to do
Stares from family and friends who think I'm being too loud
Fingers, mine, bring it to my mouth
My tongue grazes against a twisted kind of braille
Held between my teeth, I poke the tip of my tongue through the center
The mint cracks under the pressure from my jaw
Drowns out the stories people are telling at the podium
The powder becomes pressed into the dips of my molars
Swallow
And another and another and another and another
So many they make cuts on the roof of my mouth

I'm afraid to find what else I might remember
If I'm left to think for much longer.

Raul

PAUL LAMAR

On the twelfth day of his new job as a security guard outside of S–, one of M–’s finest men’s shops, Raul B– stumbled upon a unique answer to the question of store security, though he was never to be aware of his particular gift or its profound impact on crime in M–.

It was, of course, already his responsibility to be alert to customers leaving the shop with their purchases; at his previous job in his hometown of J–, he had famously (at least in the owner’s eyes) developed a sixth sense about who might be departing without having paid for the shirt or the tie or the pair of colorful socks that were becoming all the rage, thus requiring him to ask—but always politely, even deferentially—to examine the bag’s contents, which occasionally saved everyone embarrassment or even criminal prosecution because he had a way of making the patron feel at ease enough to offer a plausible (but obviously fabricated) explanation. Needless to say, when Raul had to move to M– because of his widowed mother’s declining health, the owner of J–’s men’s shop was certainly sorry to see him go.

But here in the city, he could be observed, as I say, to be looking critically not only at the customers leaving S– but also at the bags of people strolling by S–, customers who had not come from his store but who were merely carrying their bags from shops down the block or around the corner or across the park.

Looking critically in what way? The first time he manifested—completely by accident—this piercing look was to a woman with a

red scarf, walking briskly down the street in the direction of the post office. It was around 1:00, and Raul's attention had been wandering slightly (his mother had had a restless night), and perhaps because of the red scarf, he had watched this woman fixedly from about 50 yards away, never taking his eyes off her until she was about 10 feet away, when he suddenly realized that he was staring, and, in a flash of self-consciousness and professional pride, stared—purposefully—at the white shopping bag, hanging from her wrist.

He furrowed his eyebrows severely and tightly pursed his lips, almost as if he were, with X-ray vision, identifying every object, including the sales receipt, in her bag, though he was, in fact, merely trying to wake himself up. And when the woman was just below him (he was stationed at the top of four steps that led invitingly to the front door of S–), he gave the faintest of professional, dismissive nods, prompting the woman to draw the bag closer to her and walk a bit faster.

In fact, this woman, one Mariana del Thiem, had just shoplifted a silver lavalier from X– on Calle 66, a piece of jewelry at that moment sitting at the bottom of the bag, underneath a modestly priced sweater that she had bought at the same store. Mariana del Thiem was so completely rattled, however, by the judging eyes of Raul B– that, at the next corner, she ducked into the church of San D– de la Cruz and, in an attitude of prayer, secretly and hurriedly dropped the lavalier into the slot of the collection box used to help the poor. Then she undid the red scarf from around her neck and put it over her head, made the sign of the cross, and vowed never to steal again.

And so, over the next 17 years, the shoplifting rate in the central shopping district of M–decreased by an extraordinary 11% because

that was how long Raul B– continued to work at the store in M–. And every weekday, at about 1:00, he found himself fighting fatigue (though his mother had passed away during his 13th year in M–, he was himself getting older) and nearly lapsing into unconsciousness by fixing his gaze on some approaching passerby (always someone wearing red clothing or carrying a red bag or even possessing red hair), and then, out of self-consciousness, staring at that person with a look of such knowingness and judgment that those who were not guilty of stealing nevertheless felt chastened to do better in whatever area of life they had slackened in, and those who had indeed stolen were prompted to return the item or—like Mariana, now a doting grandmother of twin boys, about to make their first communion under her tutelage—to stuff it into the same collection box at the same nearby church.

By coincidence, in the very month and year that Raul began his job, a young priest, Father C–, from Raul’s hometown, became the priest at San D– de la Cruz, and as the pieces of jewelry or beautiful ties or fur accessories began to appear in the collection box or on the steps below it, so, too, did the reputation of Father C– increase. The faithful noticed the regular appearance of the gifts and associated them with the arrival of the good-looking young priest. By the 15th year, in fact, Father C– had developed such renown for Christian charisma and charity that he was sent—slightly baffled but certainly agreeable—to Mexico City to serve in the cathedral.

Of course, after Raul retired, the rate of shoplifting began to creep up again, albeit slowly, and no measures the police or the government took could ever cause it to go down as low as it had once been. □

Fragments of Mother

SHEREE LA PUMA

daughter, i rock your empty
cradle & ask myself,
how long will we
make war?
dig for salvation
with a hand
grenade. watch it
explode, decimate

three generations of family.
i sing, lullabies.
you call them weapons.
i write love

poems you lead me
to the edge
with a lantern. my wings
taste of honey.

no hope for resurrection.
you leave me
as a sacrifice & i have yet
to understand *

fire.

Could we be coyotes

GEORGE LONGENECKER

who howl all night behind the house,
whose ancestors mated with wolves?
What if we run with our pack,
hunt voles, rabbits, and neighbors' chickens?
What if we romp through the backyard,
yowl at the moon, run right under
that ladder leaning against the garage,
circle the Subaru and grin in its cracked side mirror,
moon high over our snouts?
What if we leap across the yard,
share voles, munch bones,
smile with fresh blood and hair on our teeth?
What if we kill the family cat,
howl high on the hill before dawn,
then sleep all day in our burrow,
waking only to lick each other's ears?

Let Go

JANE FLINT

Ten minutes
to pack up all my things
like a pocket
turning inside out
I leave
across the threshold
of belonging
into the new rush hour
of three p.m.
time strangles
to a jangling stasis
just ahead a winter wind
scuffs horizon
chokes the throat
of this rain-lost valley
not to get someplace
to be somebody else
a desperate wish
may all the ungreen
sage and sand
of gasping farms
buff the edges off
make everything unrough again

past racing turbines
barbed wire fences
treeless rest stops
rocked by wind
miles of stench
nauseous
weeping
from foul feedlots
radio signal
weakens
static cryptic code
scratchy hiccups
a rhythm
of cheers
anticipation
disappointment
some sport
without the details
until the pocket of light
that is the car
pleads its way
with token friction
inside out
into the jelly
of the night.

Our Tiny Somewhere

MARTINA NICHOLSON

a description of Earth from Maria Popova

The speck in the last
Voyager photograph
was Earth,

400 million miles away
at the edge of the solar system
it turned to look one last time
our way.

Everything we have loved and learned,
all we know and breathe
and hope is here, our
little speck.

the brief span of my breath
the dose of oxygen which lasts 3 seconds,
and then again, another dose,
my 72 heartbeats pulsing in this minute
in all this vast cosmos
with the rhythm the heart makes
and does not stop 'til death

the racing mind can expand
toward that infinity
wanting to see the edge
but only flying further—
like desire,
moving toward fullness
of being.

and then it is time
to do the dishes,
and then
to fall asleep
and dream

Amends

RENAY COSTA

Quinn searched the chalkboard menu of the café deliberating what the appropriate beverage would be. What does a soon-to-be-divorcée drink while composing a letter to the man she separated from about a month ago? Wine would be the obvious option, but she was now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the letter was part of the ninth step, which required her to “make direct amends” to those she had harmed, and tonight she was attempting her amends to Gil, her soon-to-be ex-husband. A pumpkin spice latte, her regular order, seemed too saccharine and sentimental. Quinn decided that a macchiato, slightly bitter and sophisticated, was suitable for a woman waiting for her divorce to be finalized. With her drink in hand, Quinn found a corner booth and took out the notebook that had served as her journal since she started AA about three months ago, and put pen to paper.

Dear Gil:

I am sorry that you were so insecure and threatened by my success when you were unemployed. I am sorry that I shut you out when I came home from a long day of work and saw that you had done literally nothing all day. I am sorry that I started to enjoy drinking because catering to your fragile male ego frayed my nerves.

Sincerely, Quinn

Quinn reviewed her writing and imagined her AA sponsor Marla's raised eyebrows and wry smile if she shared this with her. Marla was great, but the woman did not possess a sense of humor. If she asked Quinn about her progress on making amends to Gil, Quinn would just say that she was "not in the right place" to do that now.

Having attempted her amends to Gil with what she believed was a good faith effort, Quinn deliberated what to do next. She wasn't quite ready to go home. She found her small loft apartment, which she'd moved into about a month earlier after filing for divorce, too quiet and cramped, and being there too long inevitably led to comparisons of the spacious condo she used to share with Gil. During their engagement, about four years ago, Gil suggested that she move into his apartment in Brookline, so they could avoid the obligations of home ownership. Quinn, who wanted to be near the water, proposed buying a house on the North Shore so they could start building equity. They ultimately compromised with a two-story condo in the suburbs. It was the first of many compromises. The word "compromise" came up so often during the engagement it had become an inside joke. *Darling, let's compromise and use red and silver as our wedding colors. Sweetie, let's compromise and have Italian for dinner. Honey, let's compromise and start trying for a baby in six months.* At some point it had stopped being funny.

Quinn could hear Marla's soft voice as she turned the key in the ignition. *"You never have to be alone. You can call me anytime. And there is always a meeting you can go to."* Quinn sighed and took the AA pamphlet out of her glove box and saw that there was a meeting that began in twenty minutes at her regular spot.

Quinn began attending AA meetings about three months earlier as a requirement of her plea agreement for her first-offense OUI. At her first meeting, it had actually been three days since her arraignment and plea hearing, and four days since the Night of the Lemon Drop Martinis with Ben, but she accepted a 24-hour chip because the next one available was a one-week chip, and she wanted to start the program honestly.

Quinn attended meetings at a church downtown once or twice a week. Members gathered in a room with white-washed walls, occupied with a rack storing black choir robes and decorated with pictures of Mary, Jesus, and the disciples observing from above. Quinn was reminded of a bar at closing time with the lights coming on, with everyone's flaws suddenly shown in sharp relief. She didn't want to imagine that she belonged in this group of beer bellies, greasy hair, and ruddy complexions, and was unable to relate to the stories the other members shared. She never drank mouthwash for the alcohol, stored nips in her desk at work, or caused a scene at a wedding. However, anxious to complete each step of the program as quickly as possible, she readily admitted when she started the program, as required by the first step, "that she was powerless over alcohol and that her life had become unmanageable."

Looking for Marla and not seeing her, Quinn took a seat in the back. She suppressed an eye roll as she saw Charlie's large frame lumber towards the front of the room. Charlie was a regular speaker, and she could recite the facts of his personal history as if they were her own. Formerly an accountant at a large firm. Married ten years with two children. Hit rock bottom when he was fired for hitting on a colleague

when he was drunk. Praying for a reconciliation with his wife, but accepting that it may not happen. *This is your penance*, she thought, bracing herself for the litany of the slights and grievances Charlie had suffered the past week. *This is where you deserve to be*.

Quinn and Gil met when they were students at Boston College Law School. A year ahead of her, he was infamous on campus for wearing a suit and tie to every class. Though they were members of the same Commercial Law study group, they never really spoke to each other until a student happy hour one evening, when Quinn gained the courage from several martinis to ask him why he wore a suit every day. “The clothes make the man,” he replied with a wink. Quinn giggled at his reply, and Gil found himself laughing along with her. Quinn admired his complete disregard for what others thought of him, unbothered by whispers that he sucked up to professors and spoke too much in class. Their relationship evolved from being the last two to leave the study group, to him sitting next to her in class, to him walking her home to her apartment. By the time he grabbed her hand one evening, it was both expected and exhilarating.

Quinn was proud when he made law review and when he obtained a position with Davis and Yates, one of the most prestigious firms in Boston. When she graduated a year later, she got an offer from Volk and Lodge, a small boutique business litigation firm. Their wedding soon followed. Listening to her girlfriends criticize their significant others, she would merely nod her head, with little to complain about with Gil. She tried to suppress the smile on her face when they attended functions together, sandwiched between singles who were tired of the chase and couples with children barely speaking to each other.

In their second year of marriage, Davis and Yates went through a “restructuring” that involved closing the Boston office and laying off junior associates like Gil. The legal job market was evolving quickly, with non-litigation duties being done by legal software or assigned to paralegals. Finding a comparable position was proving to be a challenge for Gil. His motivation and optimism, which were so high when he first received the news, declined steeply with each passing month.

Quinn spent a great deal of time showering Gil with affirmations and acceptance. “*Stop worrying—you are more than your job and we have enough to get by for a bit.*” “*It’s okay if you didn’t send out any resumes today—you must be burnt out.*” “*Of course, go to the Patriots game with Ted—you deserve to have some fun.*” Gil would always offer not to go, but she never objected. Sometimes it was easier to be by herself than to constantly reaffirm him.

One night, during that eggshell period before her OUI, Quinn entered the house struggling with a heavy bag of groceries. The shutting of the door woke Gil up from a nap on the couch.

“Hello,” he said drowsily, dressed in his new uniform of a t-shirt and jeans. Quinn winced, recalling how tall and svelte he used to look in his suits.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Fine.”

Quinn waited a beat. “My day was pretty good. The court granted the motion for summary judgment in that employment case today. And James was so impressed he said that he was going to assign me to a contempt complaint for Ben Jacques, that restaurant owner from Texas. Have you heard of him?”

Not waiting for a response, Quinn entered the kitchen, and saw the sink filled with dishes. The same dishes that she had used to serve the pot roast that she cooked the night before. With an aggressive clattering of her heels, she strode towards the overflowing trash can, topped with a Styrofoam container, and smelled the Chinese food that Gil must have ordered for lunch. “Cooking, dishes, trash. Cooking, dishes, trash. That’s all I fucking do. Cooking, dishes, trash,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” Gil called.

“Nothing,” she chirped.

“So I got a rejection letter from that firm I interviewed with last week,” Gil said, entering the kitchen. “They probably hired some recent graduate they can underpay.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Just keep applying. You know it’s a numbers game.”

“So I’ve been thinking,” he said, leaning against the fridge as Quinn put groceries in the cabinet. “Maybe this is the perfect time to start a family. We would save a fortune in daycare if I stay home and watch the baby.”

“Maybe,” Quinn replied, her voice breaking as she swallowed the bile that rose to her mouth. She grabbed a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the counter and filled a wine glass about three-quarters. The household chores had not really bothered her before, but now Gil didn’t have an excuse to not help. She never mentioned it, knowing that any comment on assisting with the chores would be seen as indirect criticism of his unemployment. And now he was ready to give up for some grand ambitions of staying home to raise children. She

inhaled the oak scent of the wine as it flooded her mouth, cleansing her palate of the stomach acid that she had swallowed. She welcomed the warmth spreading through her body and exhaled. *That's better*, she thought, swirling the glass in her hands, caring a bit less and forgetting a bit more with each sip.

Ben Jacques, a Texas transplant to Boston who spoke with an exaggerated drawl, wore cowboy boots and a bolo tie, and enjoyed the attention they attracted. Quinn wasn't sure if the Texas good-ol'-boy presentation was genuine or an act, but he amused her all the same. She had represented him that morning in a contempt trial for unpaid child support filed by Ben's ex-wife, and they were celebrating having the complaint dismissed. Ben suggested the Four Seasons, and Quinn readily agreed, thinking that she and Gil had not gone to a nice restaurant since his layoff several months earlier. James, her supervising partner, had already sent a text congratulating her and told her to take the rest of the day off. Flanked with James' approval and Ben's praise, Quinn couldn't stop smiling. The other associate attorneys at the firm often compared a good day in court to sex, and Quinn was beginning to believe there was something to that.

"I tell you what, I get a great deal of satisfaction seeing how fat she's gotten since this whole thing started. Did you see her bursting out of that button down shirt? It was like watching the filling of a sausage ooze out of its skin!" Ben puffed his chest out, attempting an imitation of his ex-wife, and its surprising likeness almost made Quinn spit out her lemon drop martini.

"And the look on her face when you pulled out those Facebook posts with her and George!" Ben continued. "Bitch didn't think we had it in us."

“I thought you’d enjoy that. I didn’t want to but she forced our hand.”

They had been there an hour and she was on her second drink, trying to keep up with Ben, who was drinking whiskey. Her mind, which had moments before been racing, slowed down and she found herself laughing easily at Ben’s stories about employees sleeping together and managers trying to cheat him. Compact with a shaved head, Ben was not a man she would have described as her type when she was single, but she could see that there was something attractive about him. Her face flushed with guilt at the thought, and she began looking around at the other tables.

Seated to their left was a couple about her and Gil’s age. She observed the ease of the couple’s conversation, with soft laughter and occasional touching. The woman’s hand gestures emphasized her large engagement ring. They were too familiar with each other to be mere colleagues or friends. An aura of impenetrability surrounded them, triggering something like a memory. That was not a woman who had spent a half hour last night researching moisturizers on Amazon because she had scraped the bottom of her jar of La Mer cream. Nor did that woman ever have to cancel her appointment for highlights on Newbury Street because her husband had a newfound desire to be a stay-at-home dad to children they hadn’t even agreed to have yet.

“Do you know them?” asked Ben, breaking her thoughts.

“No, no, I thought so but I was wrong.”

“I suppose she’s attractive enough, but I’m partial to brunettes myself,” Ben said with a wide grin, inching closer to her in the booth. “So tell me, Counselor. Does watching all of us poor bastards going through divorces ever make you think about your own marriage?”

How easy it would be, she thought, loosened by two or three martinis, to tell Ben things she couldn't tell her own husband. That she no was no longer attracted to Gil, and that she resented him for not being able to enjoy her success. Ben was neither a stranger nor a friend, and with his case concluded, she wasn't sure she would ever see him again. Blood rushed between Quinn's legs, reminding her that she and Gil hadn't had sex in ages. Ben's failure to break eye contact suddenly felt threatening and her sympathetic nervous system begin firing.

Quinn looked at the time on her cell phone. "I should head home. I have dinner plans with my husband." It wasn't true, but Ben wouldn't know that. He quickly leaned back, and she knew her message had been received. If she left now, they both had plausible deniability, with no offense being given or taken. She gulped the remainder of her third martini, and her throat burned.

"You tell your husband he's married to one hell of an attorney. Now don't you go being a stranger."

"Of course not. Good night, Ben." She offered him a handshake and exited the restaurant, smiling at the waiters and the valet who retrieved her car. As she drove her Audi out of the garage, her phone beeped with a text from Gil: *Going to meet Ted to shoot some pool. See you later.*

Quinn continued to drive as she texted back: *Ok. Have fun. XOXO.*

Quinn decided that she wasn't ready to go home. She picked up her phone and texted her sister Kim: *Guess what amazing sister just had a big win in court?* Kim responded quickly: *Congrats! Come over and*

tell me all about it! I'll have sangria ready by the time you get here! Quinn responded with a wine glass emoji and a smiley face and put her phone down. She saw that she had taken a wrong turn and was driving down an unfamiliar street. From the corner of her eye she saw blue and red lights flashing from behind her and she instinctively slammed her right foot down on the brakes to slow down. *Not me, not me, not me...please, please, PLEASE let it not be me...*

She glanced in her rearview window, and confirmed that she was the only one on the road. *Act sober, act sober, act sober*, she repeated to herself. She pulled over, put the car into park, and gripped her hands on the steering wheel as if it were a life preserver.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I’m stopping you because you’ve been swerving on the road and you turned at a red light when the sign said no turn on red. Have you had anything to drink tonight?”

Everything that happened after being stopped was a blur. Refusing the breathalyzer, advice that she had always given to her clients but never thought that she would need. Calling her sister. Driving to the station in the back of the police cruiser. Kim and Doug retrieved her car, delivering it to her house, and met her at the station. The booking lasted half an hour, and the lights of the station were garish and sobering. Her license was automatically revoked for six months for refusing the breathalyzer, and she had to appear in court the following day. As Kim and Doug drove her home, Quinn was grateful that her sister didn’t lecture her. If Kim wondered why Quinn had called her instead Gil, she didn’t ask.

Quinn was surprised and relieved that she made it home before Gil. She buried herself under her comforter, regularly pinching herself

to see if she was dreaming. Around 10:00 p.m. Gil returned and watched television for an hour before coming upstairs. She waited until he was in the bathroom brushing his teeth.

Quinn closed her eyes, and clenched her toes and fingers. “I have to tell you something,” she said, after she heard Gil spit out his toothpaste. “I got an OUI tonight.”

“Are you kidding me? Jesus, Quinn! What the hell happened?”

“It was only two drinks. I guess I didn’t realize how strong they were and some asshole cop stopped me.”

“I was beginning to think it was a problem but I didn’t see this happening.”

The limbic part of Quinn’s brain took over, shattering the thin veneer of patience and understanding that had contained her resentment. “Of course you didn’t see this happening! You don’t see anything! You’re never here!”

“Don’t lash out at me just because you did something stupid! Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because you were busy! Like you always are! Doing what, God only knows!”

He sighed heavily, seating on the bed. “What happens next?”

“I have to appear in court tomorrow. I’ll probably plea out. You’ll need to drive me. My license has been suspended.”

“So now I have to be your chauffeur?”

“It’s not like you have a job, anyway!”

“Go fuck yourself, Quinn,” Gil said, leaping up to stand.

“I might as well! You haven’t in two months!”

Gil grabbed the nearest shirt and stormed out of the room before he even had time to put it on. Quinn heard the door slam downstairs

and saw his car drive away. He returned two hours later, slipping under the covers without saying a word. He spooned her, something he hadn't done in months, and Quinn fell asleep thinking that maybe the distance between them wasn't insurmountable after all.

The next morning, they woke up and apologized to each other, but Quinn still felt unsteady in his presence, realizing they have achieved more a *détente* than a breakthrough in their marriage. Quinn could barely look him in the eyes, afraid of what she would see. She had violated a trust, reflecting her worst thoughts about him back at him. As she cooked and cleaned without complaint, she wasn't sure that she would ever be able to make it up to him.

After several weeks of Gil driving her to AA meetings, Quinn noticed a gleam in Gil's eyes that unsettled her. *See, I'm not the only fuck-up in this marriage now*, his tight smile seemed to say. She realized maybe their marriage was a fragile fiction in which they had both lost faith. She repeated the newly learned Serenity Prayer to herself, asking God to grant her "*the serenity to accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*" As she collected chips commemorating a week, one month, and then two months in AA, Quinn attempted to summon the wisdom to know which category her marriage fell under.

When Quinn received a memo that she had received a raise about two months after her OUI, she thought maybe there was something to all this talk of a Higher Power in AA. Maybe Marla was right, and the program worked if you worked it. She had not had a drink in two months, and she was being rewarded with a higher salary. Suddenly, her living circumstances and her marriage were things that she could

change, if she had the courage. Quinn immediately calculated her monthly take-home pay and began perusing real estate listings in Marblehead, researching what thirty percent of her new take home pay would get her. She focused on apartments near the train station, and estimated how long her commute from Marblehead to Boston would be. Within forty-five minutes of receiving her memo, she had an appointment with a real estate agent to view some apartments that evening. Several hours later, under a pink sky that was bleeding into purple above the harbor, she fell in love with a bright renovated loft with a balcony that was a fifteen minute walk from the train station and a ten minute walk from the shopping district. La Mer cream was still not in the budget, but at least she would finally get the North Shore apartment she always wanted, even if it was on her own.

“I’ve signed a lease on an apartment in Marblehead, and I’m going to start staying there tonight,” Quinn announced to Gil two days later. “And I’ve drafted a Separation Agreement,” she said, handing him a manila envelope. “It’s standard and any court would find it reasonable. You can either buy me out of my share of the condo or we can sell it and split the proceeds. I’m not fighting over dishes and furniture—just give me a list of what you want to keep. Alimony is obviously not an issue. You’re welcome to have an attorney review it, but I think we can do this cheaply and quickly on our own.”

Gil merely nodded his head, as if this had been expected. “Bitch,” she thought she heard him say as she as she exited the condo, or maybe it was her imagination. But it didn’t matter anymore. She would soon be watching the sunset over the harbor and she no longer owed him anything.

Quinn entered her office a half-hour late. She was still adjusting to the longer commute from Marblehead and had missed the train that would allow her to arrive at work at her usual time. “Shit,” Quinn muttered when she saw the petition from the Board of Bar Overseers on her desk. A complaint had been filed because she failed to report her plea agreement as required by the Rules of Professional Conduct. The envelope had been opened by her assistant Grace, as all her mail was, so news of her pending suspension was probably spreading through texts and hushed phone conversations throughout the firm. “*This challenge is an opportunity*,” Quinn could hear Marla saying. “*This is a chance to practice the 10th Step, and promptly admit when you are wrong.*” If nothing else, Quinn thought, she should disclose the complaint to her supervising partner James before he found out from someone else.

“James?” she said, standing outside his door, momentarily distracted by the growing bald patch on the crown of his head, which was bent over reading a brief.

“Is this important?” he asked, not looking up. “I have a hearing this afternoon.”

“I’m afraid it is.” She knew if she asked to meet later she might lose her courage.

James sighed and looked up. “Shoot.”

“I was arrested for an OUI about three months ago. My first. I pled out. Unfortunately I wasn’t aware that you were supposed to file a Notice of Conviction with the Board of Bar Overseers and they’ve filed a petition for an administrative suspension pending a hearing.”

“Jesus, Quinn. Why didn’t you file a Notice? Didn’t the court tell you to?”

"I'm sorry. I don't remember, it was a bit of a blur."

"And you didn't think to ask anybody here for help?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it was that big a deal."

"A first offense OUI is not a big deal, but a failure to report is a serious violation of the Rules."

"It wasn't intentional. It's just a misunderstanding, I'm sure it'll get cleared up. I'll attend the hearing and it won't affect my bar license."

"But you don't know that for sure," he said, crossing his arms and rolling his head back. "And now when clients research you on the BBO database, it will show that you have a pending disciplinary proceeding."

"I...believe so."

"Well, until you get this cleared up, you're going to have to withdraw from your cases. We can't have you as the attorney of record. Perhaps we can use you as a paralegal on some matters."

"I understand. I'm sorry."

"And if you can't bill clients, we're going to have to reconsider your compensation."

"I understand. I won't disappoint you again, I promise."

James returned to his work dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

Quinn walked down the hallway quickly, not wanting to run into anybody on her way out. Her face flushed at the thought of returning the next day and asking Grace to file Notices of Withdrawal for her cases. And the thought of other associates going to court to argue her briefs and get all the credit from the clients and partners made her clench her fists. *Be grateful*, she reminded herself. *You're still employed, you have a great apartment, and you're no longer responsible for your*

dead weight of an ex. But instead of gratitude, she was overtaken by a tsunami of anger. *Fuck all of you,* she thought. *I deserve better. I'm one of the best attorneys here.*

Quinn stopped at the liquor store by her apartment. She felt ridiculous for having thought that she had some disease that meant it was forbidden to her. Her name was Quinn, she was NOT an alcoholic, and she was going to drink. What was the point of having a balcony with harbor view if she couldn't enjoy it with a martini? It wasn't like she was going to have to appear in court the following day. Hell, she wasn't even sure she was going to go to the office the next day. She strolled through the aisles, enchanted by the hues of the liquor which reminded her of precious stones: amber brown, sapphire blue, ruby red, emerald green. Her mouth watered, triggered by the taste memories of salty margaritas and sweet amaretto sours. She grabbed a bottle of Smirnoff vodka before reconsidering. *What the fuck, it's a special occasion,* she thought, replacing the Smirnoff with a bottle of Grey Goose. She grabbed a bottle of triple sec and a lemon by the register, and began to feel giddy.

She had made a promise and had been given a promise in return. The program had told her that her life would improve if she followed certain rules. No drinking. Do the work that is offered to you. Make amends to those you've harmed. But it had all amounted to nothing. She entered her apartment and put her phone on silent before tossing it the couch, thinking that Marla would probably call if she did not see her at the meeting tonight. The Brenda Lee song came to her mind: "I'm sorry, so sorry..." she sang. The thought of apologizing to yet another person struck her as hysterical.

Quinn poured the vodka into a silver shaker and shook it vigorously. She searched her cabinet for the right glass, and her hand gravitated towards the hand-painted martini glass that she had received at her bachelorette party years ago. She held it to the light, appreciating how the silver paint and decorative crystals sparkled. She had been a different person when she last drank from this glass. A bride-to-be with a rocketing career who only felt the need to apologize for how happy she was.

How long had it been since the Night of the Lemon Drop Martinis with Ben? Three months and four days. And what did she have to show for it? She had her journal, which included her fourth step “moral inventory” of her “defects of character” and “shortcomings.” She had a 24-hour chip, a week chip, a one-month chip, a two-month chip, and the three-month chip, which she had received only a few days ago. As Marla stood beside her with her beatific smile, Quinn had spoken about how wonderful AA was, how she had been humbled, how life wasn’t perfect but was getting better. But she realized now it was just words, lip service to a program that she didn’t really need and that didn’t work anyway. Those silly chips had been, she admitted, great motivation, and the thought of starting over again with the 24-hour chip had been enough to keep her from a glass of wine on many nights. But not tonight, she thought, as she poured the vodka into her martini glass. She walked out to her balcony and lifted the glass to her lips, knowing that she would feel better very soon. □

Contributors

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CARLA MCGILL's work has been published in *Shark Reef*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Cloudbank*, *Paragon Journal*, *The Hungry Chimera*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *The Alembic*, and others. Her story, "Thirteen Memories," received Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train's* 2016 Very Short Fiction Contest. She lives in Southern California and writes poetry and fiction.

A screenwriter and songwriter living in Austin, Texas, **SARAH MORGAN** has written and performed sketch comedy at the Fallout Theater. Her poems are published or forthcoming in *Steam Ticket: A Third Coast Review*, *The Round Journal*, and *The Hungry Chimera*. See more of her work at sarahmorganstory.com.

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CLIFF SAUNDERS grew up in the Rehoboth/Seekonk area of Massachusetts and was a Creative Writing major at Roger Williams College in the 1970's. His poems have appeared recently in *Atlanta Review*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *The Aurorean*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Pinyon*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *Phantom Drift*. He lives in Myrtle Beach, where he serves as co-coordinator of The Litchfield Tea & Poetry Series.

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