

THIN
AIR
MAGAZINE

vol 20



thinair

flagstaff, arizona

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Thin Air Magazine is published once yearly by Northern Arizona University.
See website for submission guidelines.

Printed by Arizona Lithographers
azlitho.com

cover art by Johnny Laliech Salas III
butcantheyfight.tumblr.com

ISSN # 1099-0380

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Dear Readers,

High up on our mountaintop, 7,000 feet above sea level, shrouded
within forests of Ponderosa Pines, the English graduate students
of Northern Arizona University have been soliciting, selecting, and
publishing creative works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for 20
years.

This, our 20th volume of *Thin Air Magazine*, would not have been
possible without these lovely people:

Dr. Nicole Walker, our faculty adviser and deep-hearted professor for her
assistance and encouragement in producing this magazine (and for being a
wonderful person in general)

James Jay, the patron saint of *Thin Air*, for his generosity and support. James is a
great friend of *Thin Air*, creating and hosting the Narrow Chimney Reading Series
so that the local writers and graduate MFA students have a venue to read their
work. Thanks to James for allowing *Thin Air* to share the poetry of Jim
Simmerman

Karma Sushi in Flagstaff for selecting *Thin Air* as the recipient of Good Karma
Tuesday

Sean Carswell for generously contributing his original work to our magazine

Diana Gabaldon for her assistance in printing this magazine

Flagstaff Cultural Partners for their support

The faculty and staff of NAU's English Department

The 2013 editorial staff for setting such an impressive standard, and a special thank
you to Jeff Huizinga for his patience and kindness at the head of the 2013 edition.

And, of course, our deepest of thanks to you, our reader. Here's to
20 more years.

Sincerely on behalf of the editorial staff,

Chelsea Burk
Editor-in-Chief
Thin Air Magazine

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Featured Author

Sean Carswell is the author of the novels *Drinks for the Little Guy* (1999), *Train Wreck Girl* (2008), and *Madhouse Fog* (2013). He wrote the short story collections *Barney's Crew* (2005) and *Glue and Ink Rebellion* (2002). He co-founded the independent book publisher Gorsky Press and the music magazine *Razorcake*. He has been a regular contributor to *Flipside*, *Ink 19*, and *Clamor*. His writing has also appeared in such diverse places as the skateboarding magazine *Thrasher*, tiny 'zines like *Zisk*, and prestigious literary journals like *The Southeastern Review* and *The Rattling Wall*. He is an assistant professor of writing and literature at California State University Channel Islands. "The Wide Empty Sky" is one in a series of short stories he is writing about his favorite authors and their metaphysical ukuleles.

The Wide Empty Sky

The orange moon hangs over the eastbound 40 like an antidepressant trapped in a spider web underneath the bed, the kind you discover when you're searching for sandal on a day when the spider web around the pill isn't necessarily a deterrent. At least that's what I imagine. I have no firsthand experience with antidepressants. All of my life's pills have been recreational; all of my life's psychiatric medications have been self-prescribed.

The moon and the metaphoric antidepressants seem to match my mood as I hurtle into East Flag toward the country club. I'm going to an authors' dinner where the presence of me as an author will elicit a wall of apathy. The most important thing about me at this moment is the woman riding shotgun in my wife's Honda Civic: Pam Houston. We met less than an hour ago. I can't get over the feeling that can she see right through me. A moment of silence smatters between us in the front seat. Her silence says, *I know your kind. If we had met in our twenties, you would've been my next big regret.*

My silence shrugs.

I miss my exit and backtrack through a frontage road just far enough off the freeway to feel right.

Pam uses her voice the next time she speaks. She says, "It feels so good to be see the right kind of trees the right distance apart."

My wife and I share a glance in the rearview mirror. We're ocean people, not mountain people. It's no great divide. My wife says, "Flagstaff really is beautiful."

Somehow, a ukulele emerges from Pam's oversized purse. She slides into a song so naturally it feels like the song was always there. Pam has been on a Wilco kick lately. She plays "Ashes of American Flags." The ukulele is so cheery

against such a sad song that when she sings, “All my lies are only wishes,” it sounds like an inside joke I’m on the outside of.

If Pam were to make a list of her five greatest weaknesses, it might include (1) soft promises from new age healers, (3) specters that haunt her femur, and (5) ukuleles.

Eighteen percent of every Pam Houston short story is a ukulele.

Ukulele memories surface like sunglasses and bucket hats in the calm pools that follow whitewater. There was the plastic Maccaferri Islander she carried with her as a river guide. A rugged little instrument that could get soaked on a class five in the afternoon and hum through a Wanda Jackson tune that same night. It was forever adaptable. She could replace broken strings with fluorocarbon line bartered off riverside fisherman.

When *Cowboys* struck, well maybe not gold, but silver and turquoise certainly, Pam began experimenting with the higher end, solid-wood ukuleles. She went first for the Martin tenor—the legend among legends in the ukulele world. The Martin was a dubious lover. Sure, he’d sound beautiful in her arms. He could make her feel like a world-class ukulelist, like a Chopin nocturne might not be beyond her skill level.

The Martin sounded even better in the arms of another woman. Therein lay the rub. She tried to tell herself that a ukulele need not be faithful. As long as the Martin made her feel whole, who could complain when another woman strummed him?

Pam could. She finally allowed herself that.

She returned to the river and the Maccaferri until it was swept away on the Tatshenshini River in Alaska. More than mourn its loss, Pam had to forgive herself for bringing plastic to such a pure place and leaving it at the bottom of the river. Her crime was no Valdez or pipeline running through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but it was something.

From there, she experimented with a handmade

Colorado ukulele from Beansprout, decked out in rope binding.

Her fingers grazed the dark grains of mahogany reclaimed from the front door of an old Denver Victorian. It matched her barn in Creede perfectly. In her mind, its songs sung all the way to the mountains that cuddled her ranch in three of the four possible directions. Outside of Creede, it was a fickle instrument. On a foggy day in coastal Northern California, it played with too much twang. It’s country-western roots sounded almost hateful in Tunisia. A dark spirit emerged from it in Lubbock. She wasn’t at all sure she should bring it home.

When she met Vivian and me, learned that we’d been married for more than ten years, together for more than eighteen and Vivian not yet even forty, she shot me another knowing look. *Of course you’d be a Kamaka man.* And I am. I know Kamaka ukuleles seem hopelessly traditional. I don’t want to emphasize that. Tradition or not, when I find the sound that speaks to me, I keep singing along.

On the morning before the book fest, Pam sips her Late for the Train coffee alone in her motel room. She saw the guests in the room to her right loading up at dawn. The guests to her left leave loudly on the way to breakfast. She feels free, thinks to herself, *So free*, and plays her ukulele rendition of the Dixie Chicks song “There’s Your Trouble” twelve consecutive times.

With each repetition, the song comes to mean more and less simultaneously.

Horse carts and turn-of-the-century plows rust under the springtime sun outside the Coconino Center for the Arts. Needles from the ponderosa pines settle into the old wooden carriage sets, seeping moisture, reclaiming the elements. I’m inside, answering a litany of questions that follow the reading from my newest novel. The questions I’m answering could be described a number of ways. *Well-informed and thoughtful* would not always be among that number of ways.

Afterward, Pam details the questions she found least compelling and the answers she wishes I had given:

Real Question: I noticed that you used very active verbs in your narrative. You said your characters "moseyed" out of the hall. Did you do that on purpose?

Pam's Imagined Answer: No. I'm a writer who doesn't put any conscious thought into the words I use.

Real Question: When you write a story, how difficult is it for you to cut stuff out in the revision process? For me, cutting out lines that I have written is a bloody affair.

Pam's Imagined Answer: Lady, your stories could use more blood.

Real Question: I came in late. Who are you and what are you doing here?

Pam's Imagined Answer: Get the fuck out.

I'm a writer who has written almost exclusively for punk rockers and working class males. This has resulted in tremendous numbers of books shoplifted, but relatively few books sold. This has upset my publishers as much as I should expect it to. I'm therefore trying to transition into writing for people who will actually pay for books, who will not erupt in barroom brawls during my readings, who will not call me a poseur because I won't go to strip club with them. I enjoy every question I'm asked during the Q&A session because the question I hear is, "Will you be nice enough to give me a reason to purchase and read your book?"

All I want to say is, "Yes. Yes I will."

Only one question genuinely upsets me. It's this: "Do you think the short story is a dead format?"

Good Christ! I think. Pam Houston is in the room. Show some respect.

Three people during Pam's Q&A later that night ask her what the message is behind her writing. The messages I get from her books are varied and complex. They tend to change with every reading, just as mountains viewed from the north may look very different

when approached from the west.

The simple message I can get is the one written on Pam's face. It says, *If life were that simple, I wouldn't write books. I would write bumper stickers.*

Pam's least favorite tonewood is sapele. It's a cousin to mahogany, harvested off the coast of west Africa with all the abandon embraced by multinational corporations bathed in lax environmental regulations. The fact that most sapele is sent to sweatshops in China for mass produced, trinket ukuleles bothers Pam all the more.

Koa is too traditional, too rooted in Hawaii for Pam.

Mahogany is good if it's on an antique. She could get down with a mahogany Favilla or Regal from the '30s or '40s. Pam doesn't like it on new instruments. She tries to stay away from anything made of an endangered species.

Spruce is okay. She enjoys the bright sound. She'd go with spruce if she hadn't stumbled across Western Red Cedar. It's flawed just enough to keep her interested. It sounds like home wherever she is.

The same moon that began as an antidepressant now nestles Lake Mary Road in its reflective glow. Stars hang above our heads like glowworms in an underground cave, tiny globes of light dangling on invisible strings. Pam and Vivian talk away. The Civic is vibrating in a shared validation of the choice to remain childless. "Childfree," as Vivian is quick to correct.

I've spent most of the past thirty-six hours with Pam. I've been at that perfect balance of proximity and distance to notice a recurring theme. It is this: everyone wants something from Pam Houston. Dealing with this cavalcade of desires seems to be her primary activity while at book junkets.

She has already satisfied my lone desire, which is that people at book events treat my wife as the full, complex, accomplished human she is rather than as my plus-one. Pam and Vivian fill the night with their jokes about childfreedom.

Vivian plots out her own not-a-mommy blog. Pam says, "I hate it when environmentalists get on my case about not printing double-sided drafts. Give me a break. I haven't contributed one diaper to a landfill. Not one fucking diaper."

If Vivian and Pam laugh much harder, they'll have one of those laugh-till-we-peed moments Pam writes about. I don't want to know where she draws the line between fact and metaphor.

I pull the car over at the parking lot on the western edge of Upper Lake Mary. A couple of cars are already parked there, windows steaming from the inside. I find a spot far away from the lovers.

Pam's acupuncturist, Janine, found a Native American ghost hitching a ride in Pam. "He only wants a lift to the Grand Canyon," Janine had said. Pam intended to drop off the hitchhiker at Mormon Lake and point him north to the Canyon, but when we got to the Mormon Lake Lodge, some kind of event was occurring that included large numbers of white men with big trucks and American flags. The crowd was not completely absent of guns hanging off hip holsters. "Way too much camouflage around here," Vivian said. Pam and I shared a nod.

It's an American West we all know well enough from experience. We also know it's not a hospitable place to leave a Native American ghost.

The gravel parking lot at Upper Lake Mary is hospitable. I know of it because of a nearby trailhead. I point out north and the direction of the Canyon for Pam. She climbs out of the car, holding only her ukulele with its Western Red Cedar top. Vivian and I give her a moment alone.

Pam heads over toward the tiny dam that holds Upper Lake Mary in place. Damp marshland prevents her making it all the way to the dam for a seat. The cold, mid-May Flagstaff night means that the ceremony will have to be short. One song, at most, before her fingers will lose their dexterity on the fretboard. She drifts her thumb across the strings, just to

make sure the song she sings for her Native American friend will be in tune. It's still solid from her morning's strumming.

More than once, Pam has entertained the thought of penning a country song called, "Cowboys Are My Weakness." The chorus alone, which could be nothing more than a repetition of the title, would make her enough money to finally retire, to leave universities behind, to just write her short stories.

Short stories which are alive and well, thank you very much.

The simplicity of pop songs is elusive, though. It uses language in ways Pam may be beyond, or may be too distant to access. Language, for Pam, always fails to mean. The exact opposite is the prerequisite for a pop song. So Pam borrows one. She serenades her hitchhiking ghost with a tender rendition of "Into the Mystic."

Faint traces of the song drift up to Vivian and me, who stay warm in the car.

When Pam climbs back into the Civic, she smiles like a woman who has never seen a bad day in her life.

jim simmerman

Featured Author

In 1983 Raymond Carver chose Jim Simmerman's poetry for a Pushcart Prize. With this award Carver proclaimed: "These are evocative and beautifully rendered poems. Time and again I found myself stopping to draw breath, moved and sometimes startled at the aching rightness of the image, the felicity of the line. Simmerman is clearly among the best poets of his generation."

Indeed, Carver was right. While living in Flagstaff, Arizona and teaching at Northern Arizona University, Simmerman would garner a national reputation as a significant American poet in the latter half of the twentieth century. His awards and accomplishments were numerous, including fellowships from the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the Port Townsend Writer's Conference, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

While accolades piled up, he still kept his mind firmly pressed to the matter of writing poetry, publishing five books in his life time and co-editing a third, *Dog Music*. And while his national reputation inflated, his emphasis on teaching poetry and being an integral part of the local Flagstaff community never wavered. He remained anchored to his mountain town, volunteering at the local high schools and reading at businesses and bookstores right down the street from his home. It is with this sense of national ambitions and local grounding, we feature Jim Simmerman in this issue of *Thin Air*. Jim Simmerman died in 2006. These poems were unpublished during his lifetime and are provided by James Jay through the Estate of Jim Simmerman.

*jim simmerman*Wings of Desire
In memory of Bryan Short

First, I tried a fable
about an angel
that lived in the belly
of a whale.
But the problem was,
I couldn't get the angel
out of the whale.
And then, of course, the whale
turned into literature.
Next, I tried a lyric
about the mossy
undersides of stones,
but it was pretty gloomy
and sounded, anyway, like Roethke.
And who could sound like Roethke—
I mean, not even Roethke—
and still remain sane?
At no time, you'll be glad to hear,
did Emily Dickinson appear—
though some may have recognized
the famous white dress
with its dozen awkward buttons.
Others, I fear, may have taken it
as metaphor for the cumbersome
garment elegy is—
in which no one dances.
At one point, I had the libraries
of America in flames.
At another, I couldn't decide
between an ellipsis and an owl.
And, as it was entirely impossible
to get Jimi Hendrix into the opera

Mozart wrote about his father,
 I left the whole thing out.
 Ditto the bottle of good Bordeaux.
 Forget about it. Drunk
 without regret at the get-go.
 I'm sorry, though,
 I couldn't get it right
 about the angel,
 which would have worn a topcoat
 like the angel that fell
 in love with the lovely
 trapeze artist
 in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire*—
 where Peter Falk,
 whose job it was to explain
 to an angel the sublime
 details of mortality,
 was played by Peter Falk.
 In reality, of course—
 where there are no angels,
 and the details of mortality
 can break your heart—
 Bryan Short was played
 with flair and wit
 and, let's admit it,
 considerable improvisation,
 by Bryan Short.
 For who else
 would accept the part?
 I wish I could have auditioned
 the poem with Bryan.
 I think he might have liked me
 getting Mozart into the sentence
 with Hendrix, but advised
 against the line about the heart.
 The heart, in a poem, is bogus.
 Instead, he might have said

to go with the owl,
 see if I could get it—
 not just the tremulant vowels
 of its cry, but the consonant
 hush in the shadow beneath it.

jim simmerman

Blue

At the border of what is and is not true
there is a light the blue of certain late

Impressionist paintings or all-night cafés.

Say there is, in the former or the latter,
a man or a woman waiting for the other.

What matter if she or he does not or does
arrive? What matters is the light—that blue
illuminating dolor wherein time stops,

completely, at the border of what is

and is not true, and where, now, you are
waiting, as in a late Impressionist painting

hanging from the wall of an all-night café

in a painting, and so on, and blue
unto the end of Eternity.

jim simmerman

Karate

After fifteen years of retirement, during which time I had had two elbow surgeries, two hip replacements, three vertebra fused in my neck and two in my lower spine, assorted live-in and move-out girlfriends, etc., I had determined to begin, again, teaching karate. I would need a room, which we called a dojo. I would need students, which we called students. I would not need, but already had, a right-hand man who was, in fact, left-handed—a ham-fisted, knuckle-dragging, shambling hulk named Meat, who wore a shaved head tattooed with bees and a nose ring in the nostril of the person beside him.

In three weeks, I would turn fifty, though I didn't look a day over sixty. To celebrate, Meat had planned a beating, though he hadn't told me whom. But tonight was Valentine's, and it was clear from the seething drone of the bees that Meat was getting restless. We had stationed ourselves at the bar in a place called The Bar. We were throwing back shots of Bull Run—Beefeater and prune juice laced with tobacco. Things were turning ugly, and the night was still young.

diana pinckney

Wolf to Dog

I passed you, cousin, chained
 by your dry bowl when I trotted my starved
 body to the edge of town. Down
 on the banks of the river, nothing leapt
 from shallow rocks,
 no fat heads with soft eyes, not one

flapping silver tail to move mine. Nothing
 but light and shale shimmering
 in September's heat. Not one cloud
 pulled the red fish here. Not one drop
 for the creek bed. No salmon
 and only berries for the bear. You, dog,
 never rolled in the dark

snows of tundra, never knew
 the secrets of cedars. You, who whined
 for scraps and dodged their sticks,
 are free. And when they come home
 with the crimson sun,
 their pockets and pails empty,

they will find strings of fur, curls
 of white tinged with pink at the end
 of a chain. Because of you, I live
 another day to follow the wood's
 scented trails, to run
 under the shadow of the owl.

george searles

Taking Narcissism to the Next Level

Were I to wake one day to find
 my dick had vanished while I slept
 and I'd become a woman overnight,

this would bring about some changes
 in my life. But not right away.
 For the first two weeks, at least,

I'd simply sit around,
 bent fully over at the waist,
 the better to admire myself.

samuel piccone

Removal

You called and said, “the dog food has grease ants—I called my mother,” so I went and bought the traps and spray and a new dog bowl. I put one trap under the sink, one behind the washer—walked around the house spraying the corners while you closed the windows and waved and we felt relieved, safe from intruders, and decided to cook on the barbecue. I lit up the grill and in the heavy dusk, the shadows of earwigs began to scurry about the pit, dancing around the flame. At first, they panicked; trying to climb the greasy walls, but eventually gave in and allowed their bodies to huddle and flip, exposing tan bellies, legs crinkling. You said you didn’t care if we still ate, but then we saw the last living earwig attempt to walk across the hot grates to safety, feet giving way, body melting, falling into the pit of fire, bouncing & writhing, not wanting to burn, ashamed of his failure as the messenger, the lone survivor, the storyteller of a great village now deceased, and it was then that we decided there would be no eating—the ashes of dead took precedent.

william vernon

In the Presence

I’m not even fishing, just standing on the bank of the Little Miami River, and the flowing seems to pour through me. It’s as if the future lies downstream and all I have to do is look there to see it. My eyes are like spools from which the lines of my being arc out, unwinding to catch on the surface, then slowly sink, gleaming like lasers cutting through the murk, spreading a light net over the deep. I’m so close the smell of the water seems to rise up from inside the earth.

Without thinking I reel in to see if I’ve caught anything. Often it’s nothing, my hooks return empty. Often they snag on something so heavy I have to cut them loose. Sometimes the lines snap when whatever it is pulls away. But sometimes my hooks return something that never breaks free.

So I think of that catching as if fishing’s the purpose we all have. If we can hook the large mouth, we are connecting our soft hands to the teeth of animal instinct, something so deep in our selves we can sense but not understand it. To jerk the pole and set the hook means to resist the muscled, invisible currents. When I sweep my rod tip overhead, the curving pole makes a black C against the blue and white sky.

Thus, I start directing that distant, hard impulse without snapping my line. It’s a struggle of course to succeed. My wrist trembles, trying to tire the blind panic I fight, my left hand gripping the rod handle tightly, my right reeling in. A fight to the finish I want can take a long time, but when that deep dweller flops to the surface, I’ll drag it ashore backing up, lift it in triumph, claim it forever as mine.

So my dream ends facing the current I’m caught in, kneeling in the river’s presence, silently holding a catch I often embrace and always release. I have no other choice. Keeping it is impossible. I have time on my hands but not in them.

shirley kuo

Rusting Bones

when i touch your ribs, ink stains my fingers like
 a stinging reminder that i can never really wash
 you out of my life for good. they say you can
 change your life any minute any second now but your
 fingers are skeletal wires i don't know how to hold in
 fear of bleeding or rust. maybe the scar tattooed
 down my mother's spine isn't really a scar, but the
 result of their singing while rome burned straight

to the ground. honey, i've read the inside of your palms,
 and there is nothing the ocean hasn't
 seen before and that includes the insides of your body,
 glittering and violent, drenched in the breath of the moon.

george searles

Political Action

He's always on the corner
 of 14th
 Street and 7th Avenue
 holding a beat-up cardboard sign:

"Eat the Rich."
 Not such a bad idea.
 I think I'll start
 with Jennifer Lopez
 and move right along from there.

Way Out

On the way, you sat in the passenger seat of Tom's coupe. You felt Tom's glances, but kept your eyes on the road. He traced his fingertips above your knee. Tom acted like he didn't notice you squirm, until you pushed his hand away.

"What?" Tom asked.

A waft of Tom's cologne smacked your nose. You remembered watching your father, before his dates, take a small bottle, flip it over on two fingers, and dab at his wrists and throat. Tom must have poured it into his hands and lathered up like lotion.

You were there because you had thought you wanted to be with Tom. Before walking out the door and catching the bus, you had told your mom that you were going out after school. She told you that you better be home by midnight, because your father was flying in the next morning to pick you up for his weekend.

* * *

At the executive airport, your mom hugs you. She always squeezes the tightest just before she lets go.

Inside your father's Cessna, you keep your hands to yourself as you know he doesn't want you to do anything other than look at all the buttons, knobs, gauges, and dials on the console. Your father checks that the wing flaps are up. The tower clears the plane for take off and your father pushes forward on the yoke—full throttle. The propellers whirl in a counterclockwise rotation that hypnotizes you. You stare at the nose as it rises and the rest of the plane lifts off the runway; climbing until your father levels off, and then points to the horizon.

* * *

Last night, your mom had asked what you had done. You said you didn't do anything, really. Okay, your mom said,

she wouldn't ask any questions. She said she trusted you since you made it back before curfew, but she wanted to let you know that she was there if you wanted to talk. You didn't say anything. Well, your mom said, she was going to bed and that she was just glad that you were home safe.

Then you went upstairs to the bathroom and you stripped out of your clothes and took a shower until the hot water ran out. You looked at the mirror, but it had fogged up. You didn't want to look at yourself anyway.

You brushed your teeth with your towel wrapped around you. After, you used your toothbrush to lift your crumpled underwear off the floor. You threw them in the bathroom's trash bin. Then the toothbrush. You could smell Tom. You double-knotted the plastic liner. You turned on the bathroom fan and left it whirring as you walked downstairs.

In the garage, you threw the bathroom trash into the garbage bin. You went inside. At the kitchen sink, you filled a cup of water from the tap. You swirled the water around the cup, until it came to the rim, almost spilling out. You took a sip, but spat it out, and poured the rest of the water down the drain. You went back to the garage, opened the garbage bin's lid, lifted up a bag already in the bin, and buried the bathroom's trash bag at the bottom, underneath the others.

"I'd like you to try flying once we level off," your father says through the headset.

You shake your head, but your father faces forward, looking at the plane's ascent into the sky's graying ceiling. You used to seriously salute your father and even call him Captain, because he had flown in a war. Back then, it seemed he flew everywhere and that he knew everything.

Your father takes his right hand off the yoke and reaches for your shoulder. You withdraw to your window, focusing on the wing slashing through the air.

"Let your hair down," your father says. He pats your arm; you try not to jerk away. Your father gives you a one-cheeked, closed-mouth smile, and steers again with both

hands.

Your father used to read you Rapunzel. He would sit on the edge of your bed and read the story from a book of fairy tales. A soft glow from the sidetable's lamp would cast shadows on your bedroom door of your father's outstretched arm reaching upward as he would make up a scratchy voice for the witch and do a deep voice for the prince, both calling out to Rapunzel. Rapunzel was safe up there in her tower. No one could reach her.

* * *

Flames mirrored off Tom's coupe parked away from a billboard. He had driven to a lookout over town. When the evening had cooled after sunset Tom had made a fire. You tried to transfer the heat of your baked outstretched hands over the fire to your bare arms. You couldn't create anything other than friction from rubbing on your goosebumped skin. As soon as you stopped, your skin lost the warmth, prickled back up, and the night's dark chill settled back down.

Beer cans—cinched in the middle—littered the perimeter of the well-used fire pit. Your father told you how in war you could spot a bomb's impact from a plane by looking down at the shrapnel spiraling on the land, marking it as the target. Around the fire, shards of glass sprinkled brown and green flashes of light. You watched the flickering.

"What do you want to do?" Tom asked, standing up.

You glanced at the coupe, wanting to leave.

"Alright," Tom said. He got up and threaded his hands under your arms, brushing your breasts. He smirked. The fire was left smoldering.

* * *

The Cessna's windshield frames the gray cement highways and black tar roads splitting up the gridded landscape below. Your eyes bounce from chlorine blue kidney-shaped, swimming pools to brown dirt baseball diamonds. Your perspective withdraws and focuses on the droplets of rain beginning to ping on the aluminum roof. The plane rises above suburbia and levels off in a curtaining of clouds.

"I'm just asking you to try," your father's voice comes on over the intercom. "For me."

And so you take the yoke to steer the plane, but torrents of wind have begun to shake the hull. You glance over at your father. He just stares ahead like there's nothing to do now but ride through it.

You grip the yoke with both hands. The plane lofts up until your stomach becomes weightless. You hold on for the inevitable plummet.

You had tried to kick Tom away. Tom grabbed you. He held both your wrists with one of his hands. His other hand released the button on your jeans.

Tears boil under your eyelids, blurring your vision. You accidentally step heavy on a rudder pedal. The plane banks and you jerk the yoke back to center.

"Whoa, whoa," your father says. "You have to let it correct itself."

He takes hold of his connected steering column and overrides your controls.

* * *

You had given up. Tom unzipped your jeans, pulling them along your thighs down to your ankles. Tom was quick. After, he wiped his hand on your underwear, their elastic stretched out.

Pinpricks of static hum over the intercom. Your father has straightened out the plane. The propeller spins, pulling you forward.

* * *

In the backseat, Tom kissed you. At first, you had kissed him back. Tom squeezed your thighs through your jeans and his thumb crawled up toward your crotch. You touched your tongue to his tongue. The button on your jeans came unclasped.

You thought it was too much. You pulled away. You buttoned up your jeans.

Tom's hand was behind your neck, pulling you to him.

"Now—"

"—Get off," you said.

You slammed your elbow into Tom. Connecting with his ribs you pushed deep and up. Tom sputtered.

You scrambled for the lever to angle the seat forward. Tom regained his breath. You opened the door just as Tom lunged.

You fell backward out of the coupe and onto the ground. The billboard peaked above some pine trees by the road. You thought you could make it.

You got up and ran. Behind you, there was a grunt. You didn't look. You climbed up the billboard's ladder, grasping the rusty, but cool, metal.

Only from the top did you turn around. Then you scrambled away from the edge as Tom grappled up the ladder.

* * *

Your father aligns the plane perpendicular with the runway, swooping through the turn to set it on course for landing.

"I don't know how to tell you this—"

"—If you don't want to fly," your father says. "You don't have to."

The plane's nose slants toward the ground. You slide to the edge of your seat, but your harness holds you. You are suspended in the descent.

On the way home, Tom held his finger up to your lips and said, "Hush."

You nodded.

Your father reduces the plane's power. The runway comes closer as if the land is moving toward the stuck-in-the-sky plane. You want to explain.

"No need to say anything," your father says. He tells you that he didn't force your mom to keep trying. You say you

understand.

You feel the plane glide on an updraft. The airspeed increases as the plane sinks to the runway with your father pushing the yoke forward. You know the plane will land safely and after this weekend when you won't tell your father anything, you will go back to your mom's house, and at high school you will still see Tom, but will act like nothing happened. This is the first time of every time after that you wish the asphalt strip would swallow you up as the landing gear's tires skid against the tailwind.

alexa doran

Some Call it Dada, Some Call it Divorce
-or- *Dorothea* a painting by Chuck Close

The end of the affair always opens
like a fan, paper-fisted, the offered

image forever folded. I know that
dapper crisscross, that dent-sour span too

well and trust me the collapse is easy
compared to the cleave from end to end.

I know I am better for the fractures,
the left eye swollen, the right a bitter pill.

Divorce is woman's greatest errand.
You say your face is a night that breaks and

breaks, every inch etched in constellation.
And I say I am a grave, I have felt

the sweet stoned rest of fake flowers on my chest,
but love itself has only been buried

here. Still you paint, pock after pimpled pock,
the worm-warm skin of your hands torches my breath

to slag. As if all women can be stripped
down to sequins of skin smattered across

some canvas, some secret licked scroll.
As if your brush could cause your fingers to find

me like a fawn, creep their snow stunned hooves
inside me, to splinter and burst like

the velvet sponge of sea without her sun

terry barr

Morris

My grandmother found an orange Tabby in the back-
yard of the complex where the elderly Jewish people lived.
She named him "Morris" after his 9-Lives namesake. His for-
aging days over, Morris lived quite regally, often reclining on
the chair my grandmother designated for her boyfriend only.

Dad reported on the growing bond between whining
old woman and fawning beast. I could have told Morris not
to trust the love of a woman who rejected the present I gave
her the year before: Neil Diamond's "Song Sung Blue," which
she said didn't "play right" on the beaten-down phonograph in
her living room closet.

I could have told Morris that my grandmother's love
was entirely random and fleeting. But before I could arrive
home from college, Morris bit my grandmother. And for his
trouble, she sent him, still licking his lips, to his new bedroom
at the pound without any dinner.

carolyn adams

Dose

Her pills
 multiply each day.
 She jokes
 they're breeding.
 At breakfast,
 she gathers
 the pastel ovals and disks,
 shiny, matte,
 clicking like a rosary.
 She calls it
 her daily devotional.

As a child,
 she mouthed a necklace
 to taste each curve,
 each specific contour.
 Warming the cool shapes.
 Knowing she could
 swallow them,
 if she chose.
 Holding onto that power
 for a moment.

Her eyes sparkling,
 jewel-like, girlish,
 she slips the pills
 between her lips,
 moving them
 one side to the other,
 before
 their hard sugars dissolve.

*joshua rathkamp*In Response to the Denied Appeal of the Court
Order

It takes two years to tread gray paths
 up the stairs and into the room
 that was once my daughter's
 seven nights a week. Now, it is three
 if I'm lucky, and when I'm not,
 it's a long walk to the bottom
 of whatever bottle or bottle
 of pills is left from whatever bone
 I broke, from whatever doctor I begged
 until they cut the well dry, until they see
 straight through the skin of me
 and find missing whatever one must miss
 to miss so much. I'm as terrified
 as my daughter when the lights go out
 and the hallway shadows grow
 teeth and claws and whatever else
 we can't look at so we cover ourselves
 with blankets and stuffed bears
 to keep us safe and standing
 at the edge of a bed
 that's empty.

The Ghost in My Shower

I never believed in ghosts until I started showering with one. Sometimes she would wait for me in the shower or jump in once the water was warm. It became a habit of ours, one that I welcomed at first because it gave me a way to feel less alone. I'd smile back at the ghost when she'd wipe water from her eyes and laugh. But after a few weeks of showering with this ghost, I found myself lying in bed after the alarm and dreading getting inside of that shower and seeing her again. What was a comforting experience slowly transformed into a haunting. The ghost started going beyond the shower. We'd get dressed together and I'd sit down at the breakfast table, and she would be sitting next to me with a bowl of oatmeal, cross-legged and humming.

As I'm writing this, I realize that she sounds like a friendly ghost. Children might consider her to be more of an imaginary friend, but it wasn't the ghost that made me uneasy and kept me up at night as she slept next to me, it was my relationship with the ghost. She resembled my ex-girlfriend that I had lived with. Our daily routines were shared and my brain replaced her in my present life with the accumulation of memories. Ghostbusters would never come to visit my apartment with their magnetic field reading kits, but "ghost" is the only way I can describe the active existence of the woman who sits next to me on my sofa and laughs at the television.

When I stopped showering to avoid the ghost, she started waking up with me. I'd open my eyes, and she would face me with a smile that showed off her mouth guard. The appearance of the ghost was not the only experience of being haunted that was followed by our breakup. I had inherited her night-time jaw clenching that has put me in the dentist's office with cracked fillings. When my dentist asked me if I had been undergoing any additional stress than normal, I couldn't

tell him that I had a ghost who seemed incessant on spending more time with me every day. Then he asked me where my partner was. She used to accompany me to our dentist appointments. I could bring myself to tell him that she was right there, in the corner, reading a magazine.

She was controlling my life. I cried in the shower twice in a row and couldn't finish washing myself before the hot water ran out. I continued to shop for clothes that she would approve. Then there seemed to be a more direct control, a control that made me listen to music I hated and watch television shows I normally avoided, and even make dinners that were flavored towards her tastes (cheese and fat). These behaviors were carried over from the relationship as a way to compromise, although in the remaining months of our relationship, I found that her wants and needs trumped mine more often.

So I decided that I needed an exorcism. There was no priest, but there was fire. Photos, postcards, notes and letters; all set ablaze in a gasoline soaked box. Getting rid of the items that I had used to summon her ghost were difficult to compile with their end in mind, but I had the drive one night when I couldn't sleep, again, and needed some way to gain control. After I torched the box, the ghost slept with her back towards me. Then I grew my beard out (something she always disapproved of), found new cooking *vegetation* recipes, started backpacking and watching my kind of movies. I showered at night, I slept backwards, and I never ate a meal at the table. When I moved into a new apartment across town, I was nearly ghost-free.

At the end of a horror movie, there is sometimes a cliff-hanger meant to make way for either a sequel or to keep the audience a bit frightened when they leave the theater. My sequel with the ghost has been the haunting I still get from places that we loved together. Should I decide to return to Newport, Oregon or Honolulu, I'm sure to see her just as I had in Seattle dancing around the musical fountain outside of the Space Needle. I'm afraid of going to certain coffee shops and bars because I might bump into the real her. When I

finally bumped into her, we talked, and I realized that my ghost was no longer based on a person who exists now, but on a person who only exists in my memory. This realization doesn't stop the ghost from appearing to occasionally lather and shave her legs in my shower.

rees nielsen

If Only

If only we could
 be as kind as
 we are dangerous
 if only we could
 confront our doubts
 as persistently as we cling to blind belief
 If only our gods
 weren't as petty
 as we are
 If only someone would run for president
 that didn't want to be president
 If only you and I had one more day
 we could learn
 the same songs
 we could harmonize
 if only
 we could throw back our heads
 we could dance
 till the moon went down

howard winn

Boulder

There is one thing
 you can say for
 the labors of Sisyphus.
 They gave him employment,
 a steady job
 even if there was
 no health plan.

william doreski

Condolences Offer Themselves

Though some have been dead for years,
 old friends munching hot dogs and chips
 look sturdy as woven starlight.

The kitchen hums with unearthly tunes.
 Stanzas clash in grandeur. I doze
 as my computer spews messages

from disintegrated moments spent
 making love in the roar of insects
 on bulbous summer nights. I wake

and pour glasses of Shipyard Ale
 for my friends, who nod and munch
 in silence. Back to sleep, I dream

that condolences offer themselves
 to earthquake victims in Paris,
 Madrid, and Singapore. Pages

flap and certain words escape:
carrion, rumble, detour, feint.
 Often I've attempted to tie

these very words to a railroad track
 so that a long passing freight train
 might properly discipline them.

But they've always wriggled free.
 My friends would understand but
 they're focused on hot dogs smeared

with that grainy deli-style mustard
and the sweet relish I recall
from family picnics sixty years past.

A violet light smuts the kitchen
and casts shadows dense as porcelain.
I'm awake again and eager

to share my heartbreak with friends,
but they've moved on, leaving crumbs,
and the chairs they filled are cold.

j. david stevens

Good Intentions

The morning of the fifth-grade party, I see this little black boy crying in the bus loop. He's holding a bag of grapes in each hand, and when I ask about him, my wife turns from her clipboard just long enough to say his name. *Jean Phillipe*.

I know how it sounds—"little black boy"—but there are only seven black kids in my daughter's entire class, and most are girls I know already. Jean Phillipe surprises me. "No permission slip," my wife explains. "He's the only one." She's called his house twenty times. His mother seems nice enough. But rules are rules, every kid needs a slip.

What my wife really means is, "Not my screw-up." The party is the last hurrah before fifth-grade graduation, and she was the volunteer who suggested holding it at the health club a few blocks away. Two nights ago, when I said it seemed like a lot of effort for fifth-graders, she shot me a look that said, "Go to hell."

In the bus loop, a ring of girls gathers around Jean Phillipe, cooing and rubbing his shoulders, and even though he can't stop crying, he manages to push the grapes toward them. Real gentleman, I think. *I'll be all right, just take the fruit*. Further up the line of buses, a teacher yells something about the small corral of watermelons soon to be greased and tossed into the swimming pool, so my wife heads to investigate.

That's when I notice a few blank slips in the box at my feet. Jean Phillipe barely sees me coming before I spin him around and unzip his backpack, talking loudly to no one in particular about how things get mashed down in backpacks sometimes and you have to look extra hard to make sure you don't miss them. Then I yank my hand out, waving the slip I'd hidden in my palm.

The girls cheer, and as we march back to my wife, Jean

Phillipe looks like I just rescued his puppy from a storm-sewer. I may not have spelled his name right, and the parent's signature looks like Helen Keller had a seizure, but my wife won't upend my kindness now. She motions toward a bus.

The party's not so bad after that. The kids spend a half-hour at each station: basketball, swimming pool, food tables. I'm chaperoning the obstacle course with another dad who'd rather be somewhere else, so for fun we tie each kid to a partner. They trip over hay bales, get stuck in a cargo net, and basically go ass-over-eyeballs. We hand out gag prizes before they move to the next event.

Months from now, when the accident pops into my head, I know I'll imagine the lifeguard kneeling on the pool-deck, another lifeguard struggling in the water. But at this moment it's hard to believe there's a problem. Fifth-graders still laugh from all directions: the playground, the tennis courts. Things snap into focus only when a chaperone breaks from the pool, yelling for the principal.

Fear jolts me, but I find my daughter quickly, still trying to make a layup on the basketball court, her chunky limbs yanking her down every time she jumps. I shouldn't feel relief, but I do. It's someone else's kid on the deck.

That's when I remember Jean Phillipe. I don't see him anywhere: not at the stations, not in the crowd gathered around the pool. Later tonight, my wife will complain that I'm going to get my ass sued off one day, but it's not money I'm worried about now. Moving toward the pool, I still feel my hand yanking that permission slip from the backpack.

Only it's not him. It's a girl half my daughter's size, blond and pale. I've never seen her before, either, at least not that I recall. A faint red cloud dissolves in the diving well, but a darker trail curves over the pool edge onto the stone, stopping beneath the girl's head. A lifeguard breathes into her mouth. Far away, I hear sirens.

Taking a step back, I finally spot Jean Phillipe at the food tables under the pavilion. He samples some pineapple then tosses dessert onto his plate: a couple of cookies, a

brownie the size of his fist. It feels like a full minute before he notices me and waves. Behind him, the empty swings on the playground still drift back to front. Jean Phillipe's hand lowers into the popcorn bowl like a crane, and I can't believe what a difference a few hours makes. From this distance, his smile looks painted on. From here, he could be the happiest kid on Earth.

The Dangers of Instant Space/Time Travel

Imagine I dismantle you to atoms, fling you
 through the black drapes of space and time.
 Could you come back from that? Wait, better.
 Picture yourself as a bowl of rice I drop.
 Now you see why we can never teleport.
 Notwithstanding how *The Fly* launched fears
 of cross-dimensional head-swaps, the danger
 is in the rice, between the wrinkles
 built into your brain like mountain ranges
 we hiked in Tennessee, valleys overrun
 with purple phlox, between the folds
 of your plaid shirt crumpled on my floor.

In your head, electric memory resides,
 but when you're down to nuclei
 scattering, all of you will go.
 You'd still look right, even smell like that
 perfect hour of the morning—coffee,
 a wisp of milk, toothpaste, the last
 shavings of a dream of you and me.
 Which is to say, if Scotty beamed
 us up, the sea of memory
 would be flat-ironed to a dull,
 cold mirror. Here you've got me
 mixing metaphors. Because alone,
 with only threads of you in the sheets,
 I would love to slip through space,
 shed you like a comet until I had just
 your hand down my hip, your voice
 purple in the evening, the threat of rain
 swelling the clouds in the hills over Nashville.

The Reveal

You are the waif, the wastrel,
 the soot-faced urchin of some ancient Dickens tale,
 hands outstretched in subtle supplication,
 seeking assistance with the practiced innocence
 of a seasoned charmer, short skirt and long legs
 working a discrete incantation, luring in
 and mesmerizing, distracting from the descending
 and pervasive cloud of leaden sadness.
 The day is heavy with possibility,
 hot with humid expectation, palpable and hyper-real.
 Without sound and from a great distance,
 this could be someone's paradise.
 Up close, though, beads of sweat attack cosmetic touch-ups,
 the pathos and desperation suck the sweet vitality
 from this dog day and the music of your little voice
 turns acidic, astringent, atonal.
 Appalling long shadows
 (and what they reveal)
 ultimately claim
 another summer's pyrrhic victory.

Listening Town

After midnight the town nobody's heard of on the other side of fame listens to a paint-speckled radio playing a slow blues in a ramshackle house teetering on the edge of a polluted river strung up with fishing line along with other undesirables, and you wonder how you came to live here and how you came to hear it and how your life has been distilled to listening to the town even as the town listens for you in ever gaining vectors of attention with ears the size of grain elevators, both of you hearing the train wailing in the dark for lost traces of asbestos and coal and the flaking rust of crumbling love, listening because your life has come to depend so much on small town frequencies and clef notes of the heart's aching core according to some mysterious fiat laid down from a water tower above as imperious as breathing. And listening to town you try to crack the code of a troubling enigma having to do with so much feckless yearning tracking out across miles of farmland with no human face and nothing to attach itself to, no slip knot or guard rail, no fence post or street lamp, no nada, unfettered longing as deep as the night and cover of darkness so black the town hears it as beetles work their way through the intestines of the dead in blind gut work though the town does not slam a screen door shut even against these grim proceedings, your destiny tied up in listening to the town where you were not born as the town listens back at you stone-faced and noncommittal, both of you hearing late night drivers cruising down empty streets coming to a stop sign with their break lights glowing like soft embers of hell fire, a drunk out on the sidewalk calling out his loosed demons for how they've betrayed and abandoned him, whore demons, whore phantoms, town hearing this also and accepting it in fey benediction along with every other sound the town is heir to this summer night or any other on into morning, cat fights

in the alleys screaming like hysterics and crashing of heavy metal in the junkyard lit up by klieg lights, fire works exploding like small bombs in the name of freedom known as Blow That Shit Up, and all the town dogs near or far away barking their chained-up lives away as the tower clock downtown tolls The hour is near, The hour is near—and town is listening for you even in these and town is listening in you so deep down no plumb bob can fathom it, listening because it too is broken, it too is tattooed and abused and worked over by self and others knocked down yet again for the umpteenth time before it rises once more to take another righteous beating and you tell the town, you say to it with all the eloquence, pleading and accusation you can summon in desperate, last chance oraculum, Thou movest me town and thou killest me, thou rockest me and socketh me, thou filleth me with pity and thou draineth me of hope, thou fucketh me over and thou savest me from myself, chipped tooth, chipped rocks glass, empty bottle of vodka and pileated woodpecker bashing its rooster head against a tree, you my rock of Gibraltar and millstone around my neck as I slide further down the food chain, and town hears the raw grittiness of your voice and the hope that dares not hope, the love that's determined not to love but goes ahead and loves anyway, and if town could speak the town would say *Failure is on sale down at the dollar store*, and town would tell you things you could not refute or gainsay, deny, put off, ignore, *Did you think you would get off so easy and I'm the only place that would have you, bro, sister, Jethro or Janice*, and other brutal judgments you could not live with, but town does not speak, does not utter because it is bound to listening by holy writ and oh, how town does listen and oh, how it hears us even as we are somehow made aware by spooky transference just how quickly town listening can turn into burning town, into raging town, and town the original broken god of raw deals who doles out dire information only on a need to breathe basis, the old folks home teeming with memories of fucking and laughter and dancing the two-step, the funeral homes overrun with carnations and the rife smell of

furniture polish and the barefoot little girl (you'll never forget her as long as you both shall live) standing in the dirt apron of a supposed front yard no bigger than a throw rug, her skinny knees scraped raw and dirty, her yellow dress the only hopeful light in the whole neighborhood along with her long, strawberry-colored hair, spilling down over her sunburned shoulders like so much blown away fire.

falconhead

The Rape of Chrysippus, or From The Bed of One Who Sleeps

O Laius, Father of Heirs, Puppet of Fates, that your son shall bury

you, shall follow you, turns this bed a softer hue. You and your

hands, your tongues, your legs all agrasp at the sinewy frame. And I,

a fruit bruised under you, the colt in your thighs, the saddle made of

my spine. But not even death puts a stop to you. And you, Gemini, two-

headed serpentine, King of Carrions your brother be, for you two are

mouths upon mouths, creeds upon creeds, but not one prayer shall erase

your deeds. And, dear Mother, I blame you, not the rope awaiting, too.

drew pisarra

Love Is Colder Than Death

(a recipe for early Fassbinder)

Ingredients:

2 cans of b&w film stock
1 Hanna Schygulla™
2 petty criminals, shaved
1 fedora
1 bag of popcorn (salted)

4 white corpses (male)
1 white corpse (female)
1 Turkish corpse (male)
A dash of nouvelle vague

Directions:

Shoplift ingredients.

Beat petty criminals until tender. Sprinkle faces with water.
 Shoot. Cut. Have a smoke.
 Repeat.

Place Hanna Schygulla™ against stark white background.
 Strip. Grope. Slap. Share.

Use black market gun to off an archrival, a random waitress,
 an arms dealer, and two undercover cops. See your best friend
 go down while wearing a fedora.

Be dazzling.

Escape.

Time:
 88 Minutes

Serve cold.

chris haven

The Black Hole Uploads a Match.com Profile

Tall, dark, and massive. Introverted. Could stand to lose some weight. Been burned by relationships in the past. Bent, but not broken. I am a survivor. Afraid of getting too close. Very observant. Nothing escapes me. Not in to parties. Prefer a quiet atmosphere. Some say I seem inscrutable. I do have feelings. Never let them show. Tired of keeping it all in. I just want someone like me. Who gets me. It's been a very long time. But I suppose it's all relative. Be my event. Let me be your future. Your singularity. Show me what can't be seen. Show me that I exist. That I matter. Light me. Unbend me. Let me show you my mouth. My horizon. Come. Let's get lost in each other.

Presently in the Past

I stand by your coffin. I don't shake anyone's hand and nod when they come by to pay their respects to you and whisper how sorry they are for me. Seventeen is too young to be standing in my mother's receiving line.

We were the broken family in the receiving line by my dad's coffin. At nine years old, I wasn't able to understand the pomp and circumstance going on around me. I saw my mother was upset; I didn't like it. I kept making piggy faces and dancing; it worked. She cradled my face in her warm hands and said, *Mickey, I can't be laughing. This is sad.* She held onto my face searching for my father in me.

Because I'm late to your funeral, everyone sees your hands. I want a closed casket but I couldn't bring myself to slam the lid down in a room full of people. Everyone sees the frosted pink lipstick on your lips. Everyone sees I didn't put you in a dress. I failed Funeral 101. Everyone sees your grey and pink hands.

My mother drove me to and from school during my last year at Pennsauken High. One day, she arrived wearing her sweat shirt inside out mimicking my style. She had on big gold hoop earrings and pink frosted lipstick. I told her she shouldn't wear that color because it clashed with her black hair and pale complexion. She asked if she should wear my red lipstick. I told her yes. She grinned and said, *Mickey, I feel like my life is really about to change.* I smiled. She held up her hand and waited for me to be the other half of her high five. I couldn't let my mother down.

I let you down. The world is walking by your coffin, viewing your black jump suit, your ratty sneakers, and your discolored hands. The funeral makeup artist prepared for a closed coffin; he wasn't careful applying the beige cake-like

putty on your hands; they're streaked. I see the grey tone of your hands in the places the foundation sponge missed. I'm embarrassed.

At least your nails are polished to a shine.

It was Spa night. Instead of Debbie Gibson's *Out of the Blue* blaring through the tape recorder, I was blasting Lita Ford's, *Kiss Me Deadly*. I pulled out my electric nail dryer and my box of nail polishes. I picked the black *Wet n Wild* color. My mother came into the kitchen and asked what I was doing. I pointed. She sat down and asked, *got any pinks?* I nodded to the box. She moved the bottles around finding the bubble gum shade I used last year. I ogled her nails. I told her they were beautiful. She said, *Never compliment a woman on her nails; that's when they break.*

I should've given your father's ring to the funeral director, but I didn't think of it at the time. I wanted you to look like you; not some crazy dolled up version with a flowing dress and curled hair. I focused on picking clothes and not your jewelry. I never counted on your body bloating to the point the funeral director couldn't manipulate your hands preventing me from giving you the one thing that made you feel safe—your father's ring.

My mother was halfway down Route 130. She called to me from the front seat, *did you get my father's ring?* I didn't. She whipped the car around heading home. I started complaining how dumb it was for her to think she needed her father's ring before she left the house. She pulled into the driveway, spun around to me. *I don't leave the house without it.* She took her keys out of the ignition, handing them to me. I got his ring.

This room is filled with people whispering and gawking at your body. They don't understand I need silence to atone for giving up on you and not stopping the blood clot in your brain.

The alarm screamed. I investigated why my mother didn't shut it off. In the kitchen, I saw her "medicine" for a headache— a half empty glass of Pepsi and a packet of Salem 100's. On the living room floor, my mother laid in the fetal

position, hands positioned for praying. A halo of brown, chunky liquid formed under her head. While she sounded like she was struggling for breath, there was no hope. She was dead.

amanda schoen

Elsinore

You live with ghosts. They've seeped into the floorboards, warped where three generations slouched from the couch to the kitchen to grab a beer. There's a rut in the cushions your father cleaved—a couple inches every year after his back went out. Each time you collapse atop it, the leather wheezes, trying to swallow you whole.

Pits and pockmarks mar the walls. Blood too, where your grandfather bashed his thumb with a hammer trying to hang a family portrait. I'm not sure why he bothered when I can hear his son's sigh in the whine of the hinges. The air's dense with the whole brood, a cloud of dust the ceiling fan can't churn away.

I remember sneaking out as kids, teenagers, waiting in the drive, staring up at the windows in the eaves, a pair of bulbous eyes peering back at me while you clung to the clapboard on your way down the wall. A fly on some beast's wide flank. We'd cut through the woods behind your house and find the spot where the river suckled at the grass. There in dark waters, nothing we shed could take root. Little pieces of us found their way to the Atlantic.

I followed.

You didn't.

Now you etch yourself on the walls of this place, add your footprints to the floorboards, walking miles over the same scant inches.

You Ask Me the Names of the Flowers

Showy dogwoods, mostly white
but some of them stained
like bloody tissues.

Windblown daffodils, madly
yellow, vulgar forsythias yelling,
waving, lavender crocuses

stolid as Buddhas, courageous
in grit. You know scars
ride me, crepey, puckering,

turning purple like rotting grapes.
I'm like wisteria's weedy
intransigence, pendulous blooms

the color of scars, vine ascending
in either direction, clockwise
and countering. It scatters petals

out onto asphalt, lifts pain
from my arms and breasts,
climbs on anything, wild to rise.

You Can Deny

all day long
that your legs
aren't the apocalypse.
But I know
without heraldry
that hipbone
to ankle
defies gravity
and the devil
and announces
unto the world
the longitude
and latitude
of lands unseen
of Coronado
of hell on earth.

Holes

Loretta, the cleaning woman, went at the picture window in the living room with a bottle of Windex, wiping in hard slashes. She always makes faces while she cleans, as if we live like animals on the days she doesn't come. When she was finished, she dusted her hands off and said, "I don't think I can get this house no cleaner, Mrs. T.," like that's my fault.

I asked her once how she liked her work. She looked at me like I was asking how many men she'd been with. All I wanted to know was how she got into the cleaning business, whether she chose it or life chose for her, because I think Sherry could do work like that when she gets out.

My mother told me Sherry has a new roommate or whatever you call it, a woman named Wanda Talmadge from Wilmington. Vehicular manslaughter. They must group the similar types together, like in a zoo.

We shared a room as children, which means I probably know how Wanda feels. If I ever meet her, I'll tell her how Sherry was always working under that gooseneck lamp, cramming facts in her head, which has my face on it and people say is like Ava Gardner's. No surprise she went into science. She said education equaled a future and if I was smart I'd study too. I said I didn't need to because I was planning on marrying a doctor. Donald is an orthodontist, which is almost as good.

After Loretta left, I went outside and walked over the dunes. The beach was clear, so I started working on my hole, which Donald or the ocean or Loretta had filled in since yesterday. If I can ever get it deep enough, I'll watch the whole beach slide into it, along with that big old house Donald bought to silence me. It will take the rest of my life because every day I have to start over.

While I was digging, the little boy next door, who's named after a city in Texas I can never remember, trotted over to see what I was doing.

"You digging to China, Mrs. Tucker?" he asked.

"Not exactly, Abilene, but if you want to think of it that way, that's fine with me," I said.

He peeped over the edge of the hole, looking disappointed to see the bottom. "It ain't very deep," he said.

"That's your opinion."

He sat down and started working on his own hole, digging at the sand like a dog, kicking it all over the place. His hole was starting to show some potential when his mother came out and made him go back in. She doesn't care much for him visiting me.

"Let me know when you get it all dug, Mrs. T.," he said, waving goodbye.

"You'll know, Lubbock," I said.

I dug until the hole was up to my knees and the sun cracked like an egg and bled across the sky. Just as the egg dropped into the ocean, I heard the phone ring back at the house.

"Shoot," I said to the water. "Look at me."

My pants were wet. Sand was working itself into funny places that I'd need to get at with a washcloth. I knew my mother was on the phone because it just rang all day, as slow as I moved toward the house. We don't have one of those machines people get to take messages. Well, we did, but I smashed it with a hammer, and Donald had to throw it and the hammer out.

I stood under the house rinsing myself with the hose, watching the sand skootch off into the drain like a coward. "Hold your horses, you crazy old thing," I yelled up. The kid next door's mother peeked at me out her kitchen window.

Mama was calling to see if I wanted to go to our old piano teacher's funeral on Saturday. The Drill Sargeant, always jabbing at my hands when I messed up my scales.

"Why would I want to come all the way to Winston-

Salem just for that?" I asked. "I even think about a piano, I want to mutilate myself."

Mutilate is a word I have been trying out lately. They say it on Maury when those depressed kids who cut themselves come on and the audience yells it's the mother's fault.

"You got a piano in your house, Eva," she said.

"Nobody's making me play it."

She didn't say anything to that, so I knew she was looking over at my daddy, like she does. They've been married so long they don't communicate with their mouths much anymore, or if they do, it's with mouths you can't see. I don't know if it's because they're old or some kind of strategy.

"Why do you have to be so dramatic all the time?" she asked. "I honestly don't know how you get through life."

Donald says the same thing. I let the little things get under my skin like redbugs, start scritch and scratching, never thinking it might be my life I'm clawing at. He'll talk your ear off about it. When I complain about Mama and Daddy's house, how everything is vacuum-packed in there so you can't take a step without falling and breaking your neck, and those jars full of moss she brings in from outside, attracting bugs—*terraria*, she calls them—he says no one has ever twisted my arm to go there. My house is the opposite, white light, clean plants and space to move between things.

It was to be our weekend home, I say, when people comment on how nice it is. *We liked it so much Donald moved his practice out here*. The truth is he thought living at the beach would settle me. Like in English novels where a girl is having conniptions, ruining everybody's life, and they send her to the seaside to rest. Looking at sand and water will fix anybody up.

"I think Donald hired a cleaning woman to watch me," I said.

There was another long pause, and then she hung up.

The story about the funeral was made up, of course. Saturday would be her and Daddy's day to visit Sherry. A couple days before they go, she'll always make up an excuse to call in case I have a message to send. It's why I said the thing

about the cleaning woman, though I don't know what Sherry's supposed to do about that.

I sent Sherry a letter a few weeks ago telling her that the Piggly Wiggly where I mixed up the pedals is going to become a hardware store. Donald said I shouldn't have done that, probably because of the whole time thing. It's her line of work. I looked it up at the library once, the white coat, the machines taking pictures of invisible things, prophesying about the end of the world. I think she's even got a scrawny assistant like in the magazine, filling up notebooks of math problems like she used to do under that gooseneck lamp. She doesn't have any of that where she is, not even the lamp, so she can't punch a hole and skip to where the store isn't a Piggly Wiggly anymore. I guess that's what Donald meant.

I told her not to worry about me driving to the hardware store or anywhere because Donald gave my car to the rescue mission. We see it sometimes when we go into town. It's usually got a couple of hopeless-looking people in the back, going wherever people like that go. I don't think she'll write back, even with that information.

robby nadler

there was no saving taxi

we all tried
but taxi didn't want to be saved and i say this
as the one who stayed long after everyone else gave up on him
but they were right

it was a thursday in september
and i was getting ready to go back to college
taxi worked nights at the cookie factory and came home
in the late morning smelling like apricot jam because i told
him
to take a night shift so it meant he couldn't hit the bars after
work

for a while we stopped fighting
he started to accept his sexuality
that i was his boyfriend and not just the guy he fucked
a few times a week when he couldn't pick up pussy
life was cotton in his sober arms

i don't remember why they fired taxi
but it was early enough that bars were still serving
i don't know why he didn't wake me up coming in
i imagine he must have made a lot of noise
but i slept until i woke up with my face in a pillow
his knees drove into my back and with one arm
he pinned my neck down while with the other
he unlatched his belt
it's not like we wouldn't have fucked if he asked
so i knew he was trying to teach me some lesson about life

i don't know why i started crying
i didn't think he'd kill me even though
he probably was considering it
i trusted taxi i guess and i think
i was crying because i still trusted him as he pushed into me
there was no fighting taxi

he was two hundred fifty pounds
and he felt heavier than he ever did
as if all the other times we fucked
he was holding back his body in politeness

but it was the crying that stopped him
there was no screaming and no struggling on my part
i kept crying and repeating *i love you*
until he finally flipped me off my stomach
so his fist could split the infinitive of my lip
fight back you faggot was all he could muster
and then another punch landed and another and another
hit me you fucking faggot and another
until he realized i'd let him kill me
before i turned on him and another then he stopped

he tried to explain something
the firing the bar the difficulty of words for the word of life
then threw me a dirty washcloth he used as a cum rag to dry
the blood
but even that gesture was unclear and no matter what he said
it didn't resolve the futility of speaking without hands
and i knew i'd be a writer since i was a kid
because i believed writing was the ultimate way to debate
to change someone without them knowing you did
taxi was right though

lost in his ineffableness of sorrow
there was so much he tried to say and i to say back
to show i heard him and there will never be words for that
moment
just like how taxi crawled into bed as if he'd just walked in
from work

and asked me to hold him while he slept
which i did but can't tell you why

and it was in that moment that i understood
where the curve of my arms matched his torso
i wanted to tell him about semicolons
how they link the past and not yet to come
but you can't point to semicolons in darkness

so while he slept in my arms
 i bent his back into the comma shape
 his head the period point and broke his spine
 the one body into two pieces
 the white space the neck the goodbye

Labor

She is having sex with two of her doormen
 on separate shifts, inspected each
 like fruit when she moved in, wants
 to be a woman in control, not a victim-wife.
 A defensive position, she calls it—her reason:
 husbands always cheat. *A full-service building,*
 another friend laughs. Except,
 these two men seem a little muted at
 the edges: new jobs, new country,
 startled by the clatter of residents' spiked
 heels on the marble lobby floor.

When one of
 her lovers rings her today to let her know
 I'm there, I notice paint residue around
 his nails; she shows me where he's freshened
 up her baseboards—soft ochre—and she
 winks, lets me know she didn't need to tip.

The Uncertainty Principle¹

Energy² is not continuous³ but comes in small discrete units⁴. These units of energy⁵ behave as both particles⁶ and waves⁷. The movement⁸ of these units is inherently and always random⁹. It is impossible¹⁰ to know¹¹ both the position¹² and the momentum¹³ of these units¹⁴. The more precisely one measurement is known¹⁵, the less precise the other becomes.¹⁶

1 Complete title: The Uncertainty Principle of Physics: Our Love.

2 Energy = Love.

3 We've dated these five months and broke up three times. We're on the nearest verge of a fourth.

4 Units = Hard kisses at night, slower kisses with a morning sun.

5 Energy = Love.

6 Particles = You saying, *I love you, Monster*. Me whispering, *I love you, Spoon*.

7 Waves = You yelling, *I have no fucking clue about what we'll do once you leave*. Me screaming, *I can't just love you for tonight. I need more*.

8 Movement = You struggling to decide to stay in Crested Butte or move to Albuquerque or follow me to Michigan or return home to Boston.

9 Random like trying to figure out if we're going to make love tonight or fight about if we're going to break up once I move to Michigan.

10 *I need a fucking answer*, I yell.

11 *I don't know, Sean. I have no fucking idea*, you spit back.

12 Position = Crested Butte, Albuquerque, Michigan, or Boston?

13 Momentum = If you are staying, if you are moving, if you are moving with me.

14 Units = Love.

15 The known = *Come with me*, I whisper and plead.

16 The unknown = *I don't know. I don't know. I don't know*, you scream.

Blessings

May the parallel lives of your alternative universe meet in a bar over yeasty beer and tell the old joke about the two bums walking a railroad, the train only a puff and a bend from their commingled imaginations.

May the nocturnal grunts of your over-wrought ghosts accentuate your more feasible nightmares in syrupy renditions of old English folk ballads with endless verses concerning rolling heads bumping down long stairwells.

May the disjointed figments of your half-baked dreams slip in the tub of your valiant quest to organize and re-examine your life up to this point, or that spent on beauty parlors, chicken coops, and delectable bake goods.

May the range of your emotions strangle your perverted meditations allowing the child-imps of your illicit affairs with ogres and free-range babysitters, to scatter across your favorite predetermined landscapes, confused but witty.

May these blessings turn you into a more passionate observer of gravity, an acute listener to the radical susurrus of whispers, and a true believer in life's intrinsic value, that you once thought sucked, but that beckons now, like a lost dog down at the landfill.

shannon quinn

Bear Polite

Bear saw the open air astronomers on the corner
 doing better business than him.
 Bear knew how the slurry and the crunch of that work
 wears on the body
 --shows up in the face, in the fur.
 Bear left town,
 gone like Easter Jesus after the stone rolled.

Bear was fair
 always let us see him coming.
 That was Bear polite, Bear forethought.
 With Bear gone, Wolf dreams got in Dog's head,
 which was bad for the elderly.
 Then, before long Dog was having Coyote thoughts
 (all tip toe and yip)
 and there went the babies and then the Cats.

Bear's got knowledge.
 Angels and Bison move in herds, (both disrupt travel).
 Bear's on a mission.
 He's done unpretty things with his paws
 but there's love in all his rumble and shed.
 Bear ends misery;
 Patron Saint of Stragglers.
 Bear's got a belly full of Salmon song
 in want of watering.
 Bear cracks through a crust of ice (a river rises in heaven)
 Bear unloads all those Salmon souls with their Salmon dreams
 (empty bellied but fulsome in aspiration)
 makes him think of his brothers at the dump with mouths full
 of ruin.

Bear knows what can nest and breed in the winter.

Bear's seen the garden but can't stand the smell of man
 (half made, naked, meanness on a leash).

Bear wants to join other Bear hearts in a kingdom come away
 from city blunder and blight--
 a place full of all kinds of Bear polite.
 Outlaw Paradise;
 Bears drinking buckets after buckets
 of spiny finned fished swimming in stout ale.

Robert Mulholland's Recovery Journal

August 1st

1. The *Recovery Handbook* states that facing up to your Life Mistakes constitutes the First Critical Step to Recovery, but I don't know if my Life Mistakes started occurring in one recent, unfortunate sequence, or if I've always charged through life blind, unaware I was committing all kinds of Mistakes, and only now have the consequences hit me. It's a question that can plague any reclamation project: Where do you start?
2. Right now I'm sitting against my twin bed's headboard, holding the dislocated connection lines to my CPAP machine, a breathing aide that resembles an air compressor. The CPAP clears my airways and wards off sleep apnea. I'm not obese or anything. My sleep man, Dr. OJ, says I'm just one of those lucky folks who possess a dangerously narrow esophageal construction. That's Dr. OJ's word, 'lucky,' and when I started quizzing him about the odds and probabilities of my condition he pursed his pale lips and shrugged, a black and silver stethoscope bristling uselessly around his broad shoulders.
3. My sleep machine is not my primary concern (and the *Recovery Handbook* recommends starting the day listing your primary and secondary concerns; if you find you have neither the *Handbook* itself functions as a stand-in for both), although whenever I have a restless night, the breathing lines invariably tangle and detach and I'll wake up with a breath-strangled jolt. So I am not overweight, but poorly structured, and, since I'm in possession of the *Recovery Handbook*, I have made some serious Life Mistakes, including a few that were close to fatal.
4. It's five a.m. and I have to be at my wife's house in one hour. The *Recovery Handbook* lies open on the bedside nightstand, its Post-Its protruding distortedly and blackening at

the edges. 5. My wife Allison and I have separated, but this is not the primary concern of the day either. The separation can be traced back to one major Near-Fatal Mistake, although previous Non-Lethal Mistakes certainly added to an accumulation of hurt feelings and, eventually, the kind of unspoken bitterness that can hang over a relationship like a shitty, leaking camping tent. 6. The *Recovery Handbook* recommends that I narrate the events in my life I might find upsetting, as this will create emotional distance from their potentially debilitating effects. The exercise can also aid in perspective, as in gaining it, which forms an essential component to Recovery. I should say that I received the *Handbook* from my sponsor, Dr. Groz. He bought the worn book for a reasonable price on *Amazon*. Dr. Groz runs about six-five and his eyes are sheathed like an alligator's (or is it a crocodile's?) and during our second one-on-one I called him a bad ma'ama jamma as a joke and he released a brief chuckle but looked like he wanted to stab me through the heart with a plastic coffee stirrer. Dr. Groz does not have a medical degree like Dr. OJ. I call him Dr. Groz because he has a doctorate of pain, as he likes to put it. It's not a coincidence that Groz's ancient Life Mistakes sometimes involved sledgehammers. Dr. Groz walks with a slight limp and does not joke about recovery. 7. 'He walked past the front entryway's white columns and let himself inside the house.' 8. My wife has requested that I escort our daughter, Emma, to her new school's open house. The People-First! handout the school sent offers some helpful advice to parents like Allison and myself - for example, the handout recommends that I shouldn't refer to my daughter as being disabled, but as having a disability. I am not entirely sure why one phrasing is right and one is wrong (the *Recovery Handbook* does not make much of a distinction between being a drug addict and having a drug addiction, as both are major Life Mistakes, any way you want to phrase it) but I am going to try and respect the school's wisdom on matters like these. 9. 'He writes himself a note on the handout to remember to refer to his daughter not as disabled, but as having a disability.'

10. My daughter's skin is dangerously sensitive (fatally sensitive, you could say, but that would be an exaggeration) and so she is limited in the kinds of clothes she can wear and, above all else, she does not like to be touched by anyone, ever. She occasionally tolerates Allison, and, even rarer, me. **12.** Emma is my primary concern. The *Handbook* lines up as my secondary one. Allison has made it clear I shouldn't be concerned with 'us' yet, whatever that means. **13.** 'He climbed the stairs to Emma's room. He found his wife's bedroom door still closed. He noticed a tiny sliver of distance between his daughter's door and the frame.' **14.** Emma's awake and sits cross-legged on her sheetless mattress, her blankets balled up in the corner of the bed. She isn't wearing any clothes. Her frizzy hair lies loose along her pale bare shoulders. **15.** I think she's inherited this nighttime oddness, although Allison, from what I can remember, has no bedtime peculiarities. **16.** The routine of getting Emma down to the car to go to her new school should be boring and uninteresting, but instead I feel like I'm one of those cage fighters, cautiously circling his opponent, not knowing if she's going for a strike to the temple or a lunge at my knees. It is strange to think of little Emma in this way, as a fearsome, well-trained martial artist, and probably not conducive to following the Critical Steps. **17.** Before I say anything, or even put on the making-a-request smiling face that is different than natural, unforced one I made when I first saw her but before she saw me, she's frowning. I'm well aware why, and so, while I let her process the fact that her father has turned up in her bedroom instead of her mother, I think of another kind of smile, the one that you'd might use if you know that someone has insulted you to your face using a word you didn't quite hear, and so are unsure if you've in fact been insulted (although, judging from the tone and the bemused grin, you probably have been at least condescended to) or how, exactly, you've been insulted. So you find yourself in a Social Situation where you feel like jamming a plastic coffee stirrer into this tweed coat-wearing, pretentiously mustachioed asshole (and this scenario originates from a very public

Life Mistake that happened in graduate school, and often bubbles up as a particularly nasty thought whenever I visit the house where I once lived, but the *Handbook* recommends staying in the present when not engaged in a one-on-one with a trusted sober sponsor). **18.** So after she is done frowning she says, no, and I shift into basic tactics, and this involves me repeating myself, and then, like two strangers waiting for the bus, commenting on the weather, on how cold it is in the room, and wouldn't she feel much warmer with clothes on, isn't she cold? Emma gives me a half-lidded, sidelong look, which I have learned means she will do it, but only because it is cold, that cold is an undeniable reality, and not because I told her to do it. **19.** Emma does not like eating breakfast, so I grab an Ensure bottle for her and we are on our way. Allison doesn't let her drink the Ensure in her car, and I do, but this is not a primary reason for the separation, although it does reflect a difference in parenting philosophies that I probably need to work on before the subject of 'us' comes up for discussion. **20.** 'Outside the overcast Missouri sky added a dull, unflattering leadenness to his reflection in the late model Camry's window.' **21.** Emma says, your car is smelly. Mom says it's a garbage can. Why do you drive a garbage can? I say, Sorry, I forgot to clean it up. She says, you always forget to clean it up. **22.** 'Emma chugged her Ensure while making loud gulping noises and these sounds reminded him of the white-chalked sidelines of grade-school soccer games and Igloo thermoses.' **23.** It's not that she dislikes me. It's just that she feels a constant, low-lying rage at being incessantly assaulted by external stimuli and sensory data. Anyone with this condition would be put in a foul mood, eventually. So my daughter has the body of a five-year-old girl and the eyes of a 40-year-old woman. I usually tell Emma, Just close your eyes, but Allison feels that this is just a way of disengaging with the world, instead of trying to find 'successful strategies' to exist in it. This is another difference - Allison, rightly, always thinks long-term. **24.** I have to drop Emma off in Room 124, and then wait in the faculty office for my turn with Principal

Sotheby. I've never met him. This is because the *Recovery Handbook* recommends staying away from situations that involve Symbolically Significant Persons who inspire Negative Feelings, and, in my personal case, this would be Authority Figures and Anger, respectively. **25.** A teacher, Ms. Crow by her name tag, looks at us and says, well, we're so glad you could make it out today! This is Room 124. **26.** 'He looked at the scattered multitude of early childhood recreational accessories, the mats and the tricycles and the tire swing hanging from the ceiling and he thought of cattle pens, dolphin tanks, three ring circus bears, *Planet of the Apes*.' **27.** Ms. Crow wears a long plaid skirt with black tights and a pair of those flimsy ballerina flats that I've seen around coffee houses and bookstores. Even in that footwear she looks to have an inch or two on me, putting her well over six-feet. She also has a Big Personality, which the *Recovery Handbook* advises to watch out for in some situations, but this is not one of those situations at all. Emma stares, silent and kind of amazed, as her new teacher takes her through the various parts of the room while bombarding her with all kinds of information: the rules, the toys, where I'm going to be while she's there. **28.** 'He took a seat in the faculty office next to a man with a camouflage hat and an orange hunting jacket.' **29.** And then it's time for inclusion strategies and techniques, the everyone is equal and everything is okay and hopefully no one is offended spiel I've heard out of different mouths and said in different ways, but in the end the message was always the same – something misfired somewhere, cellular error, a missed t or g in that impossibly long strand of DNA, and accommodations have to be made, agreed upon and put in writing, and now, really getting down to it, Southby starts going by a different Handbook, and the irony is not totally lost on me, as one Handbook is pretty much interchangeable with another, only the terms and definitions differ. **30.** 'Principal Southby gels his hair, even though most of it is now gray. We shake hands and I leave.' **31.** I walk back to Room 124 in time to see Emma yell, NO, and raise a detached computer keyboard over the head of a Down

Syndrome boy, the auburn hair on each side of his head looking like competing windmills, and whose arms are outstretched towards Emma as he demands, HUG! **32.** 'He ran across the room.' **33.** I don't make it in time – Emma swings the keyboard letter-side down onto Karl's head. The keyboard lands with an awful *thwack* and the black keys spill to the floor in quiet clinks. **34.** The boy screams, a heavy-tongued *bwwaaa*, but then Ms. Crow descends, soothing Karl first, and then taking the keyboard out of Emma's hands. I stand around like a screwdriver without a handle, watching as Ms. Crow resolves the situation. **35.** 'With many apologies, we walked out of the school and headed towards the playground.' **36.** Emma asks, What's a retard? What? I say, stalling. I didn't care that Karl is a retard but then he tried to smoosh me and I hate being smooshed, she says. I don't think we're supposed to call Karl a retard, I say. I think we're supposed to say mentally disabled. She says, mentaowly what? Just don't call him a retard, I say. It's not nice. Call him Karl, that's his name. And don't whack kids on the head if they're smooshing you. Tell Ms. Crow. Okay, she says. **37.** She hops onto the swing and asks for an underdog, that move where you hold onto the seat and then run underneath the swing, leaving your offspring suspended, for a moment, at the swing's apex. **38.** While Emma swings, I dial Allison's number. There is a lump in my throat forming while I listen to the rings. It goes to voicemail. The *Recovery Handbook* doesn't recommend trying to resolve issues remotely, and so I hang up and wait for her to call back. She texts back instead, writing: **is it an emergency?** I text back: **no.** **39.** I put the phone back into my jacket pocket. I take a seat on the unoccupied swing next to Emma. She has never told me this, but I think swinging allows Emma to go someplace outside of her body, the physics of flight and the mechanics of motion casting a temporary spell on her hyperactive brain, sedating its overloaded warning system and allowing her some freedom. She can swing for as long as she wants if there's no place to be – I think her record is two hours. **40.** And now, while Emma swings and thinks whatever

thoughts a blue-eyed, frizz-haired girl with disabilities (or who has disabilities, like the chicken pox, only forever, or so her school would want you to think) thinks, I try to do some Soul-Searching and Reflecting, an integral part of the Critical Steps where I reflect on the housewarming party my dissertation chair held, the one I showed up to high on cocaine, the one where I misheard something he said, and, after a very regrettable exchange that I'll save for another time, this left me out of the program and in rehab, eventually driving a UPS truck during the day while teaching statistics at the local community college at night, instructing an eclectic mix of single pregnant moms and Iraq war vets and ex-cons and young overnight shifters. **41.** I want another one, Emma says. The decelerating black rubber seat carries Emma north to south, and the red light capsules on the heel of her velcroed sneakers blink through the dirt and dust. I rise from my perch and launch her again. **42.** The logic and order of the UPS job suits me. The codes, inventory and addresses create a blanket of safety and I can lose myself in the surety of routine, the comforting four-way stops and dented mailboxes and trimmed lawns. I think more about the teaching job. In two weeks a new class of amateur night-school statisticians will fill my room. I'll teach them about data, probabilities, and the intricacies of the discrete random variable. Towards the end of the semester, I'll spend most of one class meeting teaching them about Bayes Theorem, even though it's not in their Introductory Stats textbook. The Theorem is the one leftover from my shameful dismissal from rarefied academia (my discarded dissertation examined the many Computation Implications of Bayesian Analysis). Its implications now veer towards the personal. **43.** If we make an initial estimate of the prior probability of Emma being born with her condition at 2% (x), and the probability of her disability manifesting itself because of my flawed genetic material at 60% (y), and, finally, the probability of the defective traits coming from Allison's DNA at 40%(z) (the twenty-point gap in our respective percentages due to my death trap esophagus, my predisposition to acute social

anxiety, and, of course, my susceptibility to addiction) we arrive at a revised estimate. The posterior probability of both Emma being born with her condition and it being my fault $((xy/xy+z(1-x)))$ comes to 3%, and so I go to sleep at night wondering, if Bayes is to be believed, if I in fact raised my child's chances of being born with a debilitating condition by a full percentage point. Dr. Groz would frown on such calculations, he's a man of the earth, of what can be seen and experienced, but Dr. Groz did not make it past the tenth grade. **44.** 'When his daughter has finished swinging, they walk towards the Camry.' **45.** Why are you always writing in that little thingy, she asks. Just trying to keep things straight I say. What does that mean? I'm not sure, I say. **46.** I crouch down and look at Emma until she sees that I am looking at her, and for a few seconds we're staring into each other's eyes. We both have the same color, blue, but mine seem to have paled in recent years, while Emma's almost seem fluorescent. **47.** What? she says. Nothing, I say. I open the door for her and she buckles herself into her car seat. **48.** 'He realized that they were both cursed, in their own ways, and for now that bond would have to be enough.'

sara hughes

Jill Explains the Fall

The first time was an accident.
 Jack and I stripped to our shorts,
 hiked the hill to fill the pail
 for Mother. On top he dipped
 his hand in the pail, splashed
 me. Cool water feathered
 my body like braids of silk.

I slung dirt at his legs, tackled
 him. Under a white sun
 my brother's eyes burned
 like coins. Our bodies folded
 together, we rolled like sand
 over dunes. Afterward I smeared
 my blood across his chest.

For weeks we made and unmade
 this chore, me walking in front,
 tin pail clinking my knees,
 Jack trailing behind, white skin shining.
 No one would blame you for doing
 the same. Have you ever felt a man's finger
 unlock you like a skeleton key?

One day Jack said no. I pushed him.
 His heel caught a hole; his skull cracked
 like glass struck with stones. I threw
 my body after his, tumbled down
 the dry hill, bumped my cheek against a stump.
 Look at this bruise under my eye, purple
 as an old lemon. Tell me it wasn't love.

reem abu-baker

Over and over, I look at them,

The letters of your name: snakes, waves, yard strawberry vines
 into which I dug my childhood fingers, smelled the sweet dirt
 and small hearts reaching. I have never seen a name like that.
 I paint it on paper and hang it in the museum, your body on
 the roof where it kisses me and tosses me off into the cur-
 rents of your name. Lap me up, ocean tongue. I want you like
 tantrum bruises. I want you like coffee broken by August rain.
 I am fever. I sweat drinking water. I am those pictures of sand
 magnified by hundreds into strewn glass spectrums. I don't
 trust them. Maybe I don't trust you either, you salty sea suck-
 ing up the photographs I ship across your briefly solid
 surface. They mush into inky octopi that burgeon and burst
 liquidly into the lines of your name. I say it, curl my wet
 mouth over its syllables and shake. It is best read, spread,
 smeared over pages. I eat them. Your name germinates from
 their mastication, seed planted in my belly and sprouting
 from my throat, the child with the watermelon stomach. The
 letters, hanging above me, are blossoms of your name. When
 I look up, I don't see stars.

elizabeth mack

Currency

You push your buggy towards the checkout at Marvin's IGA, scanning and rescanning every item, making sure nothing will attract the attention of the other shoppers in line or the checkout girl, Rhonda, who you went to high school with before you dropped out last year and had a baby. You need toilet paper and tampons, but the \$50 in food stamps are only for food. You really want the strip steaks, but steaks get comments so you put them back.

You've told your mother over and over you'd never use the damn things again, you've said you didn't even care if you starved to death. Now, here you are. You wait by the magazine rack until the woman in front of you checks out - Mrs. Strickland, your high school math teacher who said you were making a big mistake the day you turned in your algebra book. You get in line behind an old man you don't know who asks for a can of Skoal while you recount your food stamps for the fourth time because it draws too much attention if you don't have enough. You pile the bag of pinto beans, three boxes of Hamburger Helper, and a jar of JIF peanut butter on the belt. You save the meat for the middle: three packages of hamburger, some chicken breasts, and pork chops - in between the macaroni and gallon of milk, thinking the meat will be less conspicuous that way, thinking that if you cover it up with more practical food, real necessities, no one will think twice.

While you're waiting for Rhonda to get to the meat, you remember the last time you tried to buy t-bone steaks for your birthday. You can still hear that bitch who works in the bank and pays to get her hair done up every week say to no one in particular, "Those are some nice steaks" as you were handing over the food stamp funny money. You remember the bitch from the bank and the checkout woman exchanging smirks while you fumbled over your purse for no reason. You

remember the carry-out boy taking your sacks without asking, saying he'd cart them out. You told him "no thanks" twice, but he insisted and started talking about the god-awful heat. His mama probably paid with food stamps too.

As the cashier takes your stamps, she lifts the register tray and places them underneath the real money. "Have a nice day," she says as you hurry out the automatic doors that screech with each open and close. You'll come back in a few days with some cash to buy toilet paper or a chocolate bar, just so they see you're not as dirt poor as they think you are. Just so they know.

mariah wilson

Father's Death

Mom told
me sternly
to drop
the subject.

It slipped
from my fingers
crashed
to the floor

It broke
into a million
tiny pieces.

john rodwan

Graveside Costume

I bought the black suit in anticipation
of a funeral that has not happened – yet.

It's not that I haven't had cause to wear
the black thing; I have – people did die.

But whenever I put it on I feel guiltily unnerved,
as if I'm dressing for the wrong person's wake

or rehearsing for an event sure to come
for which I know I'll always be unready.

gene goldfarb

Alone

The condor's wings
that long black fan
a cloudless sky
the high white peaks
too old to blush
they only stare
to honor winds
that tease and bray.

A boundless heart
once loved me too.

dennis herrell

Afterthoughts on M

Stretch your self
 (my dear)
and let me see
 you be
less of
even though
and
more than
 (just) etc.

The Crickets Got Out

Only a few out of forty, but it's enough to surround the house. I must have been slow on the draw, dropping crickets into the cage of an animal I thought might love me. You tell me how you hear them from your office. You say their desperate mating chirps are ear-scraping. You spent all day filling test-tubes with kaleidoscopic liquids. I tell you I'll find the crickets or they'll die soon enough; I'm the one up at night distracted by the chorus of our little indoor symphony.

But you tear up the house: ripping bookcases from walls and toppling our only television over as you scavenge corners for the antennae-exploring insects. I think about how the lizard will not go hungry because of these three missing crickets, but I feel starved watching you.

There's energy in your hands I haven't seen in months. The way your knuckles look blister-white as your anger grips the furniture excites me. Your teeth, hugged in a clench, make your jaw measurable by anything with a sharp edge. The clear bulges of neck sweat remind me of how good you taste after losing a baseball game.

I feel predatory now, stalking the heat you've generated on your rampage. I was maintaining the debris of your search, but now I'm stepping over fallen books like forest floor leaves. I reach you, and press my form into yours.

You try to swallow your panting as though each breath is a hiccup. You brush me off and tell me you need a shower. I invite myself, but you lock the door.

I plant myself on the couch with a tumbler of bourbon. I sip while watching one of the crickets decorate the wall with its haphazard path, obviously and without question.

Jazz

it's a pattern
of rainfall, a patter
of pauses, a platter
of catfish
and a smoky bottle of wine.
the piano's notes scatter
the ashes of ampersands,
and the sax solo
comes after the mute trumpet's
smattering of gin.
each night the notes
are bats caressing these rafters,
jiving the clock and cooking
the spoon, scattling
through the caverns of your ears,
igniting the air
with their laughter.

leslee wright

The Only Souvenir You Need

Because I love him, none of this is meant to be ominous. I have a gift for him that he can't live without. Don't mind the syringe and the associations that come with it. The needle is just a means of delivery, like carrier pigeon, or pony express, but more shiny and more sharp. Remember the ways in which a needle is truly a wonderful thing, arriving on the scene with thread to unite our fabric in an eternal kiss, or flushing the veins with a life-saving, pain-sapping elixir. When needles are feared they are feared unfairly.

When I think of things that are feared unfairly, here I would be at the top of the list, stacked far and above needles. Not all parts of me, since my stature is small and predictably female. I have no combat skills, no lethal fashion, and not even a voice that can inflict more than a minor assault. Yet my mind has the uncanny ability to log all of the minute and explicit details of an event. Photographic, some call it, but photographic doesn't cut it. Just show me someone who can walk into a photograph and caress its walls, or lift their nose to sample the scent of the air. Some call it photographic because they imagine that my mind must be a giant video recorder, which can be rewound to any point in the past, examined frame-by-frame. I wish it were as simple as that; if so, I might not be where I am now, topping the list and above the needles.

He knows about my mind, of course. I can only be with a person for so long before they are struck by how easily I recite dates, facts, and conversations. Wikiperson, he calls me. I've been told than I am eerie, but I have a funny smile. As for my parents, they knew something was different when I was able to lasso them whenever they floundered in those slippery lies that kids tend not to notice, the ones that adults rely on to get out of a tight squeeze. *Remember how you*

promised me a kitten if I got all As, Mommy? You don't? We were in the car on the way back from dance rehearsal and I told you about Dana's new kitten and asked if I could have one, and you said 'Some day,' and I said 'but when?' Then you took a long drink of your coffee and swallowed too many times and said 'When you get straight As.' And the radio was singing a song that went 'he stopped loving her today,' and the window-wipers were swishing hard even though the rain had stopped. What was left of the rain wormed and curled its way down the glass on my side, making the shapes of a new alphabet.

Gifted, they said. So there was no reason to not have all As, to not squawk out deadlines when they were asked for. Most people like the trick of me. My own sister used to quote half-lines from her favorite movies at me, then sit back on her beanbag and wait for the return volley. It didn't occur to her or anyone else that just because something can be remembered doesn't mean it deserves to.

That's what made him different, and his difference is why I love him. He has never once said tell me what it's like because he knows it can't really be told. No amount of figurative language can create a meaningful approximation.

In fact, one of our best early conversations was about the utter failure of simile and metaphor—a failure that everyone recognizes but rarely admits to. Anyone can come up with a good “like” or “as,” mortar them together in a shoddy way, and think they've got the job done. *What's the weather like? It's hot as hell, you say? Well are we talking about Dante's version of hell? Or is this more the Greek version of Hades, without sin or flames, in which case hell might be more or less room temperature?* Figurative language thinks itself above interrogation, but people ought to be more careful before they go bashing about with their unlike comparisons. They do more lasting harm than they know.

Take Shakespeare and the way he ruined roses forever and ever, in a way no hyperbole can measure. They were perfectly interesting on their own, but then he had to go and drag love into it, never asking if it was wanted. Picture the velvety petals, how they smear bright excrement on our

fingers, and how the flower's heavy head wobbles back and forth like that of a disgruntled lion, the rest of its body bristling with fangs. They could have been ferocious, our roses, but poetry has bred them into sweet and sentimental pets.

So it was a relief to not be pressed for words—to not have to say *It's sort of like a video recorder, except not really, not at all*—and then watch his face buckle in frustration. Yet even with my dissatisfaction, I never abandoned analogy altogether, and for that matter, neither did he. Figurative language is literally the only sort we have for sharing, even if it leaves us both groping in the dark.

Recently, I've decided that I can't put up with being in the dark. That's why the needle is necessary. That's why I've made him a gift, which I'll do my best to describe soon enough.

The first time I felt the sightless groping—the barest brush of my fingers against his—we were talking about roses, about how they had been too long brutalized. I asked him to tell me about the first time he had ever received a rose. He thought it might have been on the Valentine's Day when he was fifteen—one of those school fundraisers with candy and balloons—but he couldn't be certain. I prompted and poked, hoping for stories about a girl named Sheila, with fairy-blue hair and a battered flute case, but he only shrugged and said he couldn't remember. I clasped my hands on both sides of his head and wished I could syphon out his thoughts and claim them for my own. He wrestled me to the carpet and kissed me alive.

His lips were on mine but the rest of me was somewhere else, bathing in the day I received my very first rose: a peach-colored, gas-station mongrel that went limp in the heat of my locker. It was a gift from a boy I didn't especially like but agreed to go out with, in the way that young girls do when they want anything to lay claim to. It was doomed from the beginning because I could not pry from my mind my initial impression of the boy as rather potato-shaped, with thick and meaty lips; yes, he was the picture of Midwestern supper.

His body smelled of moldy band uniform and fatherly soap. On our way back from the dance the boy kept lifting his hand off the gear-shift to clasp my knee, all oblivious to the way the vehicle hurtled over insects who dawdled on the road. The next day the boy gave me the rose, and I thought *I hate roses*, and I did.

I wanted to tell him all of this as he kissed me—it had all the right words in all the best possible places—but it wouldn't do, so I didn't.

The day he threw out all his band tee-shirts, I knew there had to be a better way. When I met him, all he wore was band tee shirts, their lettering cracked from coin-op laundry. He was wearing his favorite when he pinned me to the floor for a kiss while we both thought of roses, so to see him stuffing those shirts into a bag meant for lawn clippings gave me a bit of a start. I asked him why, what had the shirts done? He said that they were reminding him of things—specifically, things like himself, and the person he was before he became the age he is now. Back then, he had judged people by how endangered their record collections were, but now he was beyond that. He wadded up one last tee shirt, and his shrug denoted unspoken embarrassment. I understood then that throwing the shirts away was part of a plot to forget.

It's true, I may have been jealous. There's nothing for me to forget, not when every low and high bend in the road is carved for me to travel again. I was also alarmed. I've seen how people are—embarrassment fades, and before long they end up wishing they remembered what they made themselves forget. I can see it in how they tell stories, how they alter the details and fill in the gaps, gussying up a trauma until it looks like a lesson. Everything happens for a reason, just squint until you see it.

It's true, I may have been worried. If he wanted to forget the person he was when we met, where did that leave me? Kiss-less on the carpet, or clawing through the veil of a garbage bag along with his tee shirts.

I knew what he needed, so I went about getting it.

Drugs and science were on my side. I had a madeleine, a scent camera that distils olfactory memories into potent perfumes, and I filled the tubes with the stink of roses and musty curtains. I recorded the sound of stifled summer air for days in a row until it was in precise harmony with the hum in my ears. I gained eight pounds, cut my hair, and painted my nails. When I finally had the right balance of details—the shattering light that came through the blinds, the taste of his wine-stained mouth—I boiled it all down into the perfect simile. I'm like a syringe, and I'll inject him with me.

shanalee smith

Medusa's Husband

You walked as though
 you were dancing,
 hips sashaying the undiluted swagger,
 azure molecules of melody
 seeping through your mask
 of indestructibility.
 I've spent decades contemplating
 your passion for the gorgon
 and utter lack of self-preservation.
 Didn't you know,
 she would pickle the pieces
 she plucked,
 organs accumulating in her china cabinet.
 She started with your pancreas
 the night you placed your firstborn
 into her alberene womb.
 Extracted this from you
 while cognizant and smiling
 in your Delphian way.
 I witnessed your demolition;
 thin strips of heart muscle
 peeled like fruit skin.
 Gobs of lymph nodes
 for her to suck on
 like hard candy.
 The Acheronian bliss
 etched on your weathered face,
 a reflection of
 the inherited impulse
 to court my extinction
 a plague upon my features.

Autumn Child: A Sestina

We met at a party. You, with your legs
 furled in the corner of the room, cracked
 one eye and said you were learning to breathe
 the way trees do: pulling air straight into your
 skin. Your sister wandered over to explain
 how you loved the phrase "putting down roots"
 and wanted to grow a set yourself. Rooted
 in one place, you went quiet, made a thicket of your legs
 and elbows, a forest in the midst of carpet plains
 and beer foam lakes. No shouts or insults could crack
 your calm. Even trees bend in wind. I thought you
 stone instead, until I saw the fog of your breath
 on the spoon we held to your lips to check your breathing.
 That ruffled you. Flying upwards, uprooted,
 you stalked outside to the garden, lit one of your
 Marlboros and made yourself into a forest fire. I legged
 it soon after as the party splintered and cracked
 into cliques I didn't belong to. I can't explain
 why I sought you again, but you asked no explanation
 when I sat beside you at the library. We breathed
 quietly and listened to the A/C hum and crackle.
 You watched me write, and ripped paper by its roots
 from your notebook when I ran out. Our legs
 brushed when we sat beside each other. You
 smiled. Later we took to walking in the woods behind your
 house. You wove nettles in your hair and explained
 the trees had the right idea. No aching legs
 from moving year after year. They took time to breathe,
 to learn the cool soil beneath their roots.
 They shed autumn leaves, a second skin that cracked
 beneath our feet. You smiled, but I saw the cracks
 around your tired eyes when you said you

5
 didn't know what it meant to have roots
 of your own. A home, I thought. You breathed
 into me, but I pulled away. No explanation.
 I wish I'd said something, done more than stare at my legs.
 I say it now: I'm sorry I couldn't be your roots. I cracked
 under the weight of that pressure. My legs were made for run-
 ning, yours
 for tying to the earth. A paltry explanation to the empty air
 you once breathed.

Contributor's Notes

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CAROLYN ADAMS' works have been published in *Aesthetica*, *ThunkBook*, and *Trajectory*, among others. She has edited/co-edited journals such as *Curbside Review*. Her chapbooks are *Beautiful Strangers*, *What Do You See?*, and *An Ocean of Names*. Nominated for a Pushcart, she was also a finalist for 2013 Houston Poet Laureate.

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ALEXA DORAN is a poet who is currently working on her MFA in Poetry at UNC Wilmington. Her work has been featured in *Ekphrasis* and *S/tick* literary magazines and is forthcoming in the *Petrichor Review*. Two of her poems were finalists in the 2011 Pocatigo Poetry Contest. She is also the current recipient of a Shannon B. Morton Fellowship.

WILLIAM DORESKI

FALCONHEAD

GARY GLAUBER is a poet, fiction writer, and teacher. This past April, he took part in *Found Poetry Review's* Pulitzer Remix project. Recent poems are published or forthcoming in *Agave*, *Gravel*, *Stone Voices*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Dead Flowers*, *Fjords Review*, *Flutter*, *Found Poetry Review*, *Extract(s)*, *Foliate Oak*, *Northwind*, *Kindred*, *Tendrils*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Bay Laurel* and *Noctua Review*.

GENE GOLDFARB, a hearing officer for two state agencies for over 30 years, does volunteer work now. He lives on Long Island. His poems currently appear in *Cliterature*, *River & South Review*, and *Empty Sink*. His work is scheduled to appear in upcoming issues of *A Narrow Fellow* and *Stoneboat*.

CHRIS HAVEN has poetry that appears or is forthcoming in *Redactions*, *Nimrod*, *Sugar House Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, and *Poet's Market* 2014. He teaches writing at Grand Valley State University, where he edits *Wake: Great Lakes Thought & Culture*.

DENNIS HERRELL is a former teacher. Later a sporting goods wholesaler. Then gift/card wholesaler. Now an antique dealer. He got hooked on poetry in college, when my mind finally started working, and made the big commitment. It has been an interesting, challenging, always rewarding relationship. Fortunately, he has found other ways to make a living. Recent acceptances by *Atlanta Review*, *Aura*, *Aurorean*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Bogg*, *Ibbetson St.*, *Pearl*, *Poem*, *Poet Lore*, and others.

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