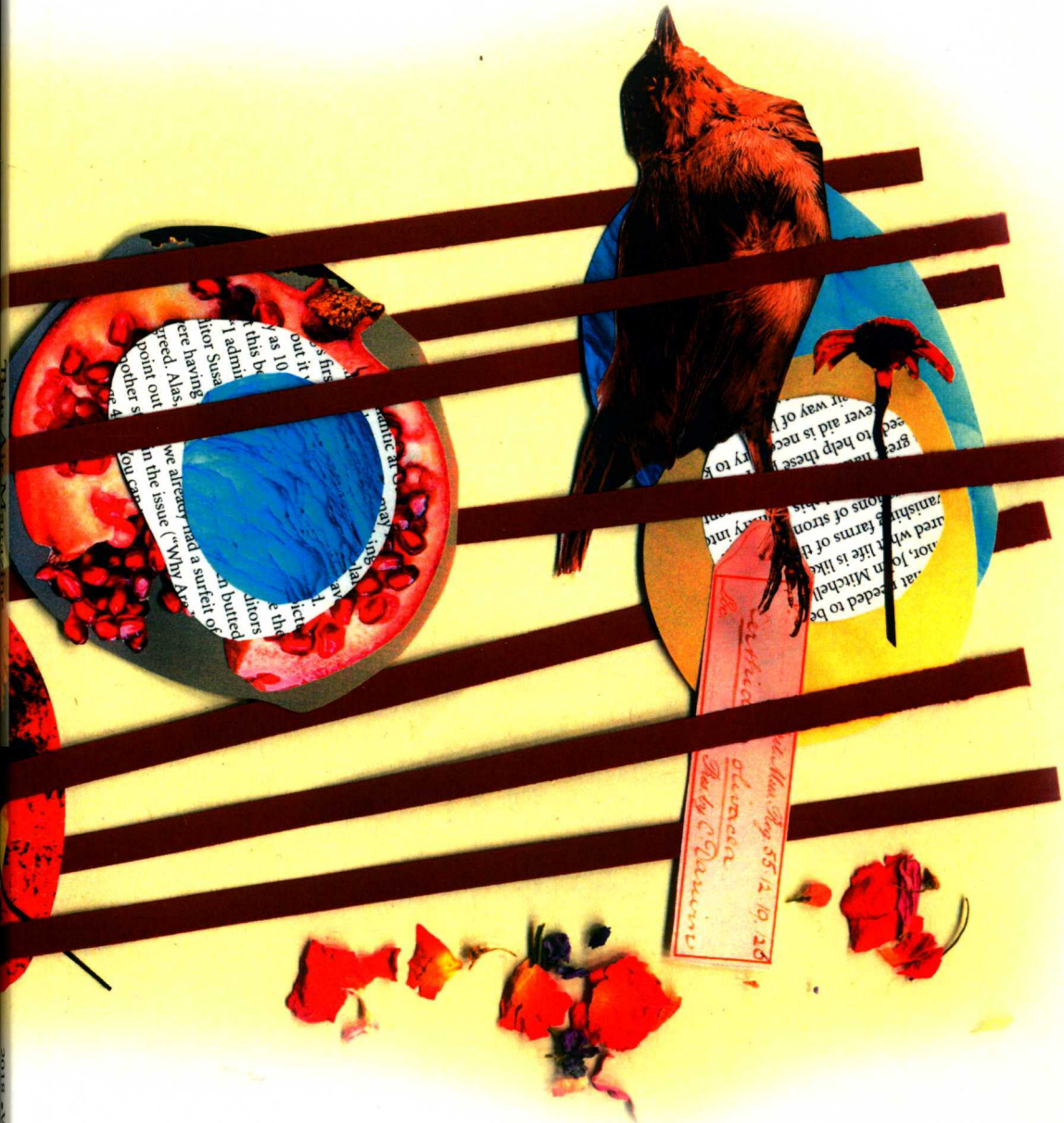


Thin Air

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THIN AIR MAGAZINE



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EDITOR'S NOTE

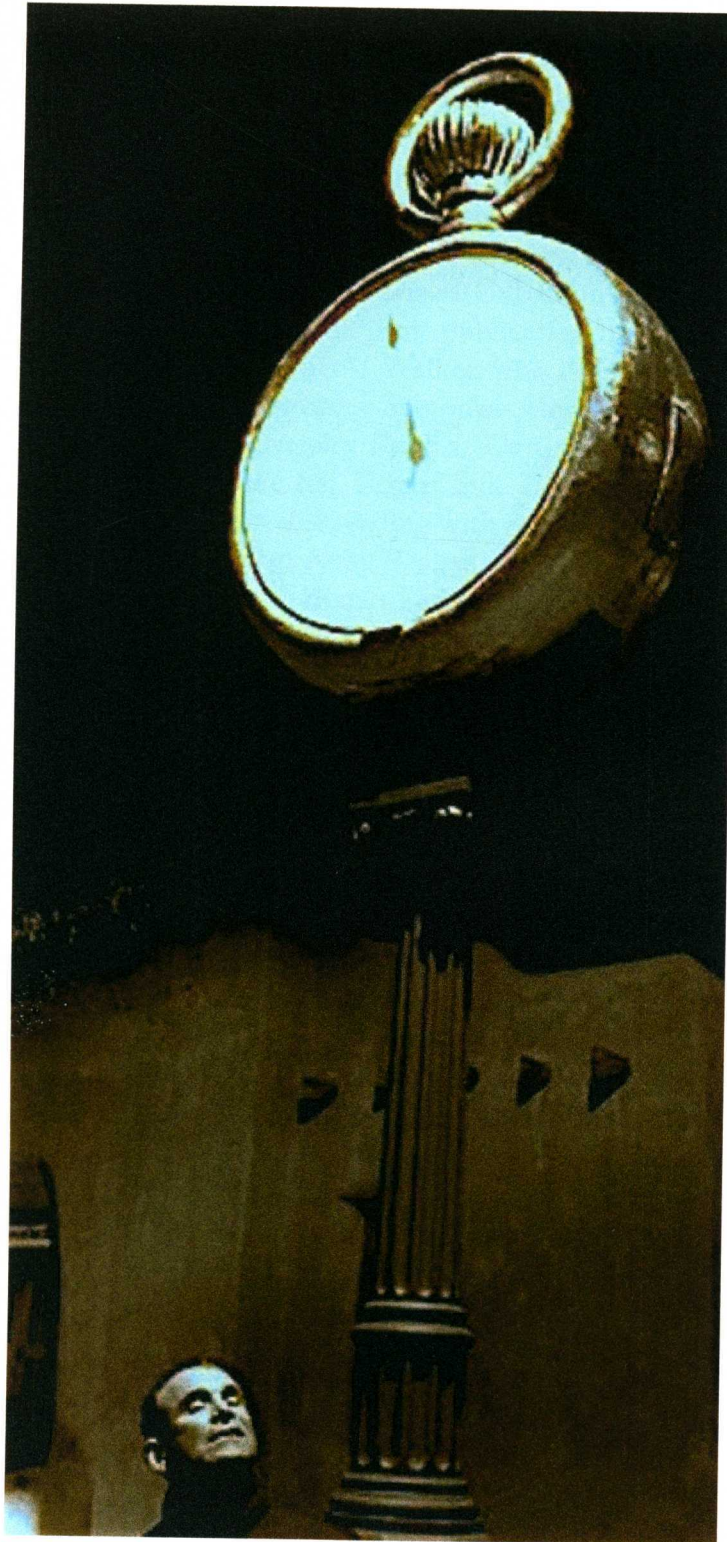
In the spring of 2017, a group of graduate students sat in a windowless room on the first floor of a library in Flagstaff, Arizona, and talked about what we wanted for the next year—what we wanted to see happen with this literary magazine that we had just inherited from the graduating staff. We were ambitious. We held nothing back as we made long, long lists about what we could do with a little less than 12 months of time. We wanted, as most editors do, to make the magazine better. One of the ways to do that, we thought, was to become a home for literary work that might not have a home elsewhere—pieces that slipped between the carefully drawn lines of genre conventions, or straddled those lines by self-identifying as multiple genres.

The name for this “other” category on our Submittable page would become “The Gas Station,” as a way to pay homage to the distinct, quirky, and prevalent gas stations of a region built on the basis of the automobile—the Southwest. Gas stations, especially those in the Southwest, are places where XXL T-Shirts exist in the same aisle as homemade beef jerky, collectible magnets, and the mundane: cough drops.

Thus, the Gas Station Prize was born, to introduce this new (to us) category and solicit and award pieces from artists working on the periphery of accepted genres. We were exceedingly lucky to receive beautiful, astonishing submissions to the contest. We were perhaps, somehow, luckier to have the chance to work with the discerning eye of our judge Sarah Minor, author of *The Persistence of The Bonyleg: Annotated from Essay Press*, curator of the visual essay series at *Essay Daily*, and the video editor at *TriQuarterly Review*. We will be eternally indebted to Sarah for helping us realize our dream of the Gas Station Prize. In the issue's prize-winning “Medium Warp”, Mike Oliphant combines the forms of error codes, a “User Agreement”, and the language of JavaScript to craft, as Sarah describes it, “an artful ‘Reply All’ to the digital age.”

Even without the inclusion of the Gas Station Prize, this issue is a culmination of dreams and hard work from every single person involved. First, I need and want to thank all

who submitted to *Thin Air* this year—for choosing to send us their stunning work. We are especially grateful to the contributors of this issue for entrusting us to share their writing with the world. The winners of our Gas Station Prize took a chance on submitting their pieces to a brand new award, and I thank them for their bravery and generosity. The production of this issue would not have been possible without the tireless staff of *Thin Air*, the readers, our heroic faculty advisor, the cover designer—Amanda Meeks, and our generous benefactor Diana Gabaldon whose continued contribution to *Thin Air* enables the print publication of our journal. I'm also grateful to the wonderful Nicole Walker, who does a lot behind the scenes, to Sarah Wishnewsky, Beverley Suetopka-Alex, and Kelly Burkhart, to the Northern Arizona University English Department, ASNAU, and NAU Printing Services. In the fall, Bright Side Bookshop allowed us to host a marvelous and unforgettable reading with editors from the esteemed journals *Sonora Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Mud City Journal*, who I appreciate endlessly. I'd like to thank: Lawrence Lenhart, Mia Aguilera, Blake Carrera, Mekenzie Dyer, Celeste Jackson, Stephen Kersh, Katy Sperry, Weldon Ryckman, Jamie Shrewsbury, Nick Carassanesi, Addyson Santese, Margarita Cruz, Aidan Aguilera, Bridget Lyons, Paul Snyder, Alex Gerber, Samantha Hu, Morgan Richardson, Hope Brosseau, and Michaela George.



The Lady Next Door

HANNAH PELLETIER

EVERY MORNING NEXT DOOR LADY and her husband would walk up and down our driveway with their dog until the husband died and then it was just her and that dog until the dog it died too and then it was just the Lady walking up and down our driveway. Sometimes she got our mail and left it on the porch sometimes she complained to my father about the other neighbors sometimes about my driving habits and sometimes she just sat in our lawn chair while my father smoked a cigar. She only asked me "How are you?" when I was with my father and never alone and I would tell her "I am good thank you." She would sit in that plastic lawn chair with us even when it was damp with rain and she was so small her feet would barely touch the ground in those small white sneakers. She would stay forever just sitting there even if the mosquitoes were bad and biting and she was never fast enough to slap them. The three of us would sit in strange silence my dad and his cigar and his shit eating grin while she would pretend not to notice when the cigar smoke blew in her face because I could tell she really hated that. Sometimes we did talk about her family that was mostly gone: her kids her husband the dog. And her voice would be as shaky and thin as her bones in that plastic lawn chair.

Driving sometimes I would see the small white barely there cloud of her hair and slow down because I didn't want her to think I was going to run her over. Every time I drove past she would stop dead in her tracks wait and stare. In my rearview mirror I would always watch her watching me until she disappeared. One year a little while after Christmas my dad got her a gift for bringing the newspaper up even in the snow and asked me to take it to her tiny sad house in the snow. So I did and she answered the door like I was the NYPD and she was the most wanted and I tried to quickly explain you know my dad wanted me to give this to you and holding the gift she looked at me like it was an incurable disease or a bomb. I left counting all of the times I saw cars in her driveway and it was one or two or three but one of the times it was a UPS truck that pulled into the

wrong house. Sometimes if I did not see her for a few days I would look through the local newspaper: the weather (snow) the comics (ha-ha-ha) and then the obituaries. I never find her name and on the internet it is always her husband. Sometimes I wonder how long it would take for them to find her. Sometimes I wonder if when she goes if she will know that she is going. Sometimes I wonder if she still dreams and if in her dreams is she young? Is that dog still there? Is her husband around to touch her hand again? I wonder about if death is a thing that comes slowly, if she can sometimes feel it sitting in the bed with her, or if she ever catches her breath on air and thinks that this must be it. Sometimes I forget about her until I am speeding down the driveway and I see her anxious glare with so much detest and I drive away without slowing down.



Desert Reservoir

JACKIE ALEKSANDROVICH

PAK HEE-SUN WEARS RED GLOVES. Long, red evening gloves clutched up to her elbows as though her arms had been dipped in a river of red paint.

Pak Hee-Sun parks her Mazda in a lot above the reservoir in the high sage of the valley. There, she waits until dusk with a dwindling soft pack of Winstons, waiting until the last vehicle leaves the lot and she is alone with the stippling waters below. Then, Pak Hee-sun opens the trunk and slides her red arms beneath something dark and heavy which she gently extracts and curls up to her chest.

She carries the burden down to the shore guided by the contorted bodies of lodgepole pines hemmed into the trail. In the loam beneath there are spiders who unbury themselves from the sounds of her footfall—thick-limbed wolves with legs like roots leaping across the surface of her feet and back into the crystal sands below. They follow Pak Hee-Sun to the water.

A demon, the water. Once calm but shapeshifting with torment the closer Pak Hee-Sun brings the burden to him. He folds upon himself and groans with the histrionics of a spurned child.

Laying the burden just beyond the water's fingers, Pak Hee-Sun peels her garments from her body and places them behind her, everything except her red evening gloves. She prostrates herself at the body of the burden, ass resting upon calves, knees plugged into the sand.

"I am not a shaman," she says, raising her arms up above her head.

"I am not a healer." She plunges her hands into the burden.

"Do not ask me for miracles." Her twisting knuckles suck deeper and deeper inside. The meat of the burden coils and squirms, slapping against the wet sand.

"Do not ask me to sing. Do not ask me to read you books. Do not ask for the eye, the dog, or the shirt on the back." She is striking it now. The percussion of flesh empties into the valley of the reservoir. As it becomes supple and pliant, Pak Hee-Sun runs her hands down its

bone and snaps each joint like it were a chicken wing, tearing it from the the host and flinging the limbs into the upset of the water.

As the last hunks are taken by the thieving tide, Pak Hee-Sun leans forward until her head is pressed against the grainy earth. There, she recites a prayer until a thick dewy body crawls to rest above the reservoir. By the water, Pak Hee-Sun finishes her prayer. The reservoir is still. She removes her red evening gloves and places them neatly on top of the pile behind her. Standing up, she exhales, then follows the pines back into the world above.

In the morning, I draw a glass of water from the sink and rest my elbows upon the counter to watch the climbing citrus of the dawn draw breath into the valley. Gulping my glass down, I wonder why the water leaves my tongue feeling mealy and dry.



Tale of the Red Frog THOMAS PIEKARSKI

I've never seen a red frog. But there have been lots of green ones, toads too, and tropical fish in various colors, bright exotic parrots as well as people of many shades and hues.

Most of the travelers who chance upon the preserved old rail town of Colfax after a drive through mountain forests have never seen a red frog either. Typically they'd have to go to a jungle or some remote secret island to find one.

If you've grown up in the burbs a red frog may be beyond your belief. You could absorb internet propaganda with relish, imbue fairytales, enlist in the Marines, deny climate change, or even swear space runs counterclockwise, and yet think the concept of a red frog totally ridiculous.

It comes as a surprise for most who encounter the Red Frog while passing through Colfax. It isn't an actual living frog, rather a hip roadside ale house and grill with a kooky twist that ropes people in. Passersby get hooked by the sign fronting the highway that depicts a gangly red frog. They're intrigued, often tired, hungry, curious, or need to get out and stretch, so peel off to give it a shot.

Stopping in Colfax it's natural to contemplate the transcontinental railroad that ran past here. The builders paid by the mile of track installed and got filthy rich, but workers were brutalized.

First they had to tackle the rugged California Gold Country foothills, and then were faced with treacherous, nearly impenetrable Sierras.

They blasted long tunnels even through granite with black powder and nitro, and built elaborate trestles over steep gorges. This required men willing to do bone-crushing labor day by day.

There was a huge need for sawn timber with construction the highest of priorities. The race that ended at Promontory ran right through here, below the edge of this cliff in Colfax where the Red Frog is visited by an abundance of customers.

At the parking lot of the Red Frog one reads the plaque which explains how they lowered Chinese coolies way down to the bottom of the river canyon, where they would level earth and lay miles of track. Those coolies arrived by the boatload from China or recruited at camps around California, sorely needed since much of the white labor had lit out for the Nevada Silver Rush.

Look down the cliff and it gives you the willies to think of anyone being so bold as to be lowered all that way in a wicker basket at dawn, and then raised back up at dusk, having worked like a mule.

From the parking lot one can also observe how the Red Frog is structured, built on stilts. Its 8 by 8 posts anchored at a perch where the side of the cliff juts out, provides a landing

for them to be anchored in concrete, pillars that maintain the building level, but debatable whether they'd withstand a severe quake.

From the time you enter the Red Frog there is only the floor under your heels to prevent you from dropping unchecked onto a rounded earthen ledge, and then tumble more than a thousand feet down to the ravine bottom.

But this will be the last thing on your mind when you walk through the door at the Red Frog. It's considerably Disneyesque, at front the main grill and tavern, with a covered deck out back.

One is immediately struck by surreal impulses because the walls are covered with ceramic frogs of various styles, blended with nautical artifacts like mermaids, Neptune bust, and big manta ray. Here the music adroitly advances this gonzo hodgepodge of charade, amusement and rapt imagination.

One quickly recognizes why the Red Frog is an in spot supporting natives and fortunate find for road warriors as well. You simply can't beat a ten inch hot dog for a buck, nor view without gaping from the rear deck the wide open expanse and majestic rolling mountain ridges.

The gathered people have nothing to hide, jabbering away about summer heat, jobs, football, alimony, state of politics, grandkids.

They're mindful of perils to come, the chance of a nuclear hurricane's arrival at any minute to vaporize them, but appear quite casual since they bask in conviction of their liberty.

On a pine-scented summer afternoon you may occasion to observe upon the back deck a slim Filipina kibitzing with a favorite female friend as they plan their cruise down the Mississippi seated under a chartreuse parasol through which sunlight streams with wonder coursing its rays.

Upon this deck you become virtual as time, with replica sail boat above the octagon bar, lush potted firs on shelves, and wild oaks so near you can reach out and pet them.

You shudder at the intimidating model great white shark hung from rafters, then scan a slice of the Gold Country and eavesdrop on two drunks who carp about dishing out welfare to the poor.

Or maybe hone in on the sloppy fat local telling a stupid joke that arouses the crowd to a fit of laughter. And if inclined you may tap your fingers along with hot guitar licks slung from the multiverse sound system.

If you're one of the vacationers lucky enough to have discovered the Red Frog, dropped in for a quick burger and suds, to languish a spell in this citadel of unabashed fantasy, you may be continuing south fifty miles or so to Angels Camp where the mines yielded plentiful gold. If you're fortunate you'll arrive just at the time when the county fair is holding the annual Calaveras frog jumping contest.

The tournament held in memory of Mark Twain, who spent a stretch there while still known as Samuel Clemens, and wrote a silly story in a hidden cabin that catapulted his rise to fame. It's about

two men who met at a mining camp and bet that one's frog could outjump the other.

One of those contestants was an outright cheat. He loaded up the other guy's frog by pouring buckshot down its throat while his back was turned. Due to this despicable deed that frog was unable to leap.

Now, imagine if the the victim of this fraud had been a red frog rather than a green one. It would be perfectly plausible and reasonable to speculate about what might have happened.

Had the crooked contestant weighted any red frog with a bunch of buckshot it wouldn't be preposterous at all for you to propose that it could have nevertheless leapt in a single hop all the way to Albuquerque.

Seamstress,
LAUREN JETER

I meet you the year we learn
about bodies: skeletal and circulatory systems.
We watch videos of platelets and I learn of your fear
of blood and your love of bones. I remember
the playground with a dinosaur skeleton under
the rock wall, remember tracing a bone
with one finger and wondering for the first time
how long I would feel so full.

I remember the teacher
blew into the lung of a pig and accidentally sucked in
blood. This is the year Renee, my first friend, stops
taking my phone calls. This is the year of dissections,
and I fear cutting into thick skin to see organs spill out,
plucking something almost-alive apart.

And when she leaves, when I am deflated
and emptied, you—seamstress, with fear of what pours out, take me in.
Where I see loneliness, you say independence and stitch
me together with gentle hands.

I Remember Jason
MIKE KOENIG

I REMEMBER JASON'S EYES. There was this sensitivity to them. He moved here in seventh grade, mid-October. He looked like he was going to cry when Mrs. Stanford introduced him to the room. I remember the kids laughing. He was so skinny and timid and looked so utterly scared in the front of the room. I think he was shaking or twitching that day. But I was just looking at his eyes, they drew me in right away with that wet quality. I think I wanted him to cry. I don't know why. I didn't know anything about him, didn't really have any impression of him at all. But I wanted him to cry. I wanted the whole class to see him cry and then wanted to have the whole school to hear the story about him crying on his first day. I was wishing for the tears to come, for the class to laugh harder and make him cry. I might have even been praying for it, praying for his humiliation.

His eyes were blue, like the fifty-dollar bill in monopoly. He came over after school every now and again and we played video games. He got serious when he played games and his eyes never blinked. His cheeks didn't move and his mouth hung open just wide enough that you could throw a piece of popcorn into it. I think it was that wide. My aim was never good enough to actually hit his mouth. If I missed and hit his cheek instead of his mouth, he would come out of his video-game trance and smile at me. But even then, in those happy moments, the eyes had a sort of wet quality to them.

They were wet that first day in the woods when he looked at me with so much feeling and they were wet that last day at the train tracks when John Carlson gathered the guys. Jason wasn't crying. He was rather calm when he said, "You don't have to do this." That's when I threw the bottle. I thought he was talking to me and not the group, and I didn't want anyone to know about us, about our friendship. So I threw the bottle hard and the guys started to laugh. It was then that he started to cry. Not from the broken glass but because I'd thrown it. I knew I'd hurt him before that day: when I wouldn't sit with him at lunch, or pick him for basketball in gym, or partner with him in Biology. But that was the first time he had actually cried

I remember Jason's hair. It was short and spiky. He didn't get haircuts too often, so it was noticeable when he did. The kids would always say something. And I'd laugh. It was never funny or memorable, but you had to laugh cause it was aimed at the right target. I actually liked his hair. I liked that if you waved your hand just above the tips you got a spark of electricity. In the winter he wore a wool cap and his hair looked flat and weird. The tips didn't catch the light so well and his face looked a little dull. But in the summer, when our moms first started to make us spend time together, it was magical. It was that type of blonde hair that gets super blonde in July. And even on the hottest days he didn't sweat much. Back when we used to go to the woods we'd walk around for hours before deciding what to do and he'd never be sweaty at all.

We mostly hung out in the shadows: my basement, or his, the woods, once in a while the movie theater, though never the one at the mall. Anyone would recognize his hair, and he wouldn't wear the baseball cap I bought him. "I don't like sports," he said. I told him I knew, and we went back and forth a little before he realized it was meant as a disguise.

If he'd been wearing it that last day in the woods he might not have been recognized.

At the railroad tracks John peed on Jason's hair. I don't know why we let him do that. No one thought it was funny, but no one wanted to be the one to say anything either. Jason wasn't speaking by that point. His face was already wet with blood.

I remember Jason's knees. They sort of bent inwards. He was such a klutz. I don't know why he thought I'd pick him for basketball. He could barely walk. His legs were hairless. He was fifteen and didn't have any body hair on him at all. On his left knee was a birthmark. It was in the shape of a peanut, and it made me smile whenever I saw it. He sometimes asked if I wanted a peanut. Said it like he was talking to a bird, "Matty want a peanut?" Jason thought that was the funniest thing ever. He'd just laugh and laugh and I'd give him a light punch on the arm.

That last day we were in the woods he fell pretty hard on a rock. His knee got cut and I wiped the blood up with my shirt. I was on the lower part of the hill and as I cleaned off the cut I could sort of tell he was excited. He looked around the woods and then at me with a smile. I told him we weren't deep enough but he just undid his pants anyway and I tried to finish him off quick. I don't know how he didn't see John or how John didn't see me. In the story according to John I was some random homeless man in army fatigues and Jason was nice enough not to correct him. The cut from the rock was reopened when we threw him onto the tracks. I should have fixed it better the first time.

I remember Jason's hands. We sat next to each other in homeroom in eighth grade and when he passed me a paper our hands would linger together for a second or two. His were soft. That was before I lifted weights, so maybe mine were soft too. But his stayed soft. I didn't realize at first how much we flirted with our hands. Cathy Sterling pointed it out one day. She said it looked like we were holding hands as we passed the assignment back. I ignored her, realizing it was kind of true. Jason just kind of gave me this knowing look. He knew what we were before I did.

In some ways we were together because of Cathy. That was what got me thinking about him. Before the comment I didn't realize we touched so much; after, I realized how much I liked it.

His hands were much smaller than mine. They were almost like a girl's, so those first experiments didn't seem so bad. And then later when we would go to the woods he'd play with the hairs on the back of my neck, and it would make me shiver.

When he told me "You don't have to do this" that last day on the tracks, I thought his hand was rising. I couldn't have him point at me. I didn't hit him with the bottle. I wasn't even trying to. I just wanted to scare him a little. Anyway, that's when it all started.

Someone kicked his stomach, someone snapped his finger. Seemed like a game of one-upmanship until John won the contest by peeing over the bloody mess. That's when we realized what had happened. That trickling sound made everyone else silent. I think he was still breathing then but it was an awful mess. I don't know if the train was always the plan, but after everything else, it almost felt humane.

I remember Jason's coffin. It was closed after the incident, and the closed lid seemed so mean to his mother. I knelt in front of it and asked Jason to forgive me, but I wasn't willing to tell his mother I was involved— more than involved, I'd been the one that talked him into coming to the train tracks so John and the others could talk to him about being a fag. The lid was brown and thick and shiny. Why are caskets so shiny? It's hard to pray with reflected light in your eyes.

His father put his hand on my shoulder and told me what a good friend I was and that they would find the people responsible. That's when I cried for Jason for the first time. I knew we wouldn't get in trouble, not the amount of trouble we deserved. I knew his father would get no comfort from the justice system just like his mother found no comfort in the closed casket funeral. And I knew Jason deserved so much more. Yes, I remember Jason.



The Women Who Love(d) Abuelo
JENI DE LA O

I never saw Abuelo drink anything but espresso.
Sometimes his paramour,
an Amy Winehouse type draped on the couch,
did her whitest-best to defend my body
against the casually sizeist remarks he'd make:
 she's just a kid, Aldo.
Languid softness is required to love a black hole,
it coated her delivery, her words became smoke, her body cinders.

Abuelo always had a cigarette in his mouth.
The woman for whom he left Abuela,
 a blonde nurse named Linda,
taught me how to jump rope when I was seven,
had two kids, bones of steel, and when she bled
 he always drew blood
dug concrete out of skin, bound wounds with cigarette ash,
hid the spots of missing hair, and went to work.

There was another girlfriend type, her name escapes me,
she looked like a fish. Lauren? No. It's on the tip of my tongue--

She did not surface when he died.
Instead, it was my Grandmother,
whose head he adorned with broken glass
and Linda, who had been dragged down a stairwell
and Dolly, balancing my uncle on her hip,
sifting soot into his urn.
My Mother, like them all,
carried his ashes in her throat long before he died.

Was her name Misty? I don't think it was--
And we miss him, sometimes; even me. When strange lights appear in the
sky,

I remember our metaphysical conversations,
: Mom, the way he played Tchaikovsky
: Linda, how he taught her son to fix a flat
: Dolly, discussing aliens and pipe bombs with equal solemnity
: Abuela, how he swept her off her feet in the streets of Havana
when she was just a girl.
We take care to avoid each other, now.
We take care not to sink in the ashes between those memories.



Lessons on Detachment, Volume One
HANNAH PELLETIER

1. THE NIGHT BEFORE I LEFT FOR PARIS, he placed a set of clunky headphones over my head and sat me on his bed. He gave me the smile he always does, the one that looks like an apology about something secret. I listened to him play *Comptine d'un autre été l'après*—midi through the headphones, his back turned to me at the piano. I didn't understand how he could fly airplanes and play Tiersen perfectly on a silent piano—yet was unable to drive a car without running a red light or swerving into the other lane. I thought about how absurd our second date was, a trip to DC as near strangers. How “taking turns” ended up with me driving the whole way there because he could not keep his eyes on the road when I kissed him, and I could not stop doing it.

2. HE NEVER TOLD ME HE LOVED ME, but on our last night together brought up the subject of marriage. “We can decide after the summer. I want to make sure you really want to live in France,” he said. I didn't tell him that in order to receive his green card, he and I would have to stay in the States together for five years. I wanted to ask “is this even about us?” but I already knew. I let him finish his Japanese whiskey while I excused myself to the restroom.

3. I NEVER CONSIDERED MYSELF WILD, although everyone always insisted I was. That summer I did things I normally wouldn't. I climbed to the top of a blue roof in Saint Michel with a boy I just met and kissed him there. I spoke Russian with cab drivers. I broke into a national monument in Bellevue in the middle of the night. I rode on the back of a motorcycle in heels while picking up weed and ‘something else’ in the ghetto. I considered the possibility that I might not know myself at all. When letting a forty-three year old DJ from Peru bite and suck on my ear on the bus back from Switzerland, I resolved it was less about wildness and more about indifference.

4. I SPENT SO MUCH TIME ALONE without becoming lonely that I knew something in me had changed. I wandered through Venice and moved

past crowds of tourists, honeymoon vacationers, street vendors. A man selling roses to unsuspecting couples convinced me to buy three for myself even though I was short on money. I left the flowers behind me on the bridge. I stayed in the city so long I missed the bus back to the hostel. I spent an hour walking along the highway back to Margherita in a dress. What would seem adventurous and romantic to others was really poignantly strange

5. MY FLAT WAS THE ONLY ONE ON THE STREET

WITHOUT FLOWERS until the first week of August. It reminded me that waiting isn't always a waste. Even after we stopped talking, I always expected to find him outside my apartment every time I came home. I couldn't help but to adjust my hair and clothing every time I turned the corner from my place. I always kept one headphone out, I always played the right song. The gravity of waiting built and built and built until I had found out he had been back in Paris for weeks. By the middle of the month, the flowers started folding back into themselves. Moving out of the place, the sidewalk was littered with wilted blue petals.



Chaise Poem

MARK GOSZTYLA

is different than a daybed poem, like
the difference between no, and no,
thank you. Enough. My wife, when
she can't stand another tremor
of afternoon orgasm she says, That's good
enough. The multidimensional quality
of those things called clouds graspable
only after take-off, this jet-age knife-blade
thru cake's fondant cutting the only
slice of heaven anyone's permitted. Then said wife,
in the role of ever-seductive travel companion
grabs my arm desperate for the seat
belt light to ding off because Holy Shit,
she's gotta piss, and that second airport
bar beer was the best/worst idea ever.

Now, I can't decide if this is a love poem
or a catalogue of things one dreams
about when yesterday was one's wife's
birthday and a long weekend in New Orleans
is on the mind. The soundtrack by the police
practice range on the edge of the neighborhood,
pitter-patter of officers popping off over
the rain falling. Be warned, love. I, too, am
skilled in the arts of wounding. My smooches
are dyspeptic. If you think this is a love
poem, then yes, I love you.

Text Me
THEA ANDERSON

Text me
Let's go to coffee (spill our guts)
She does (both)

I was engaged at 21
We laugh, doubled over on Malcolm X Blvd
I know it's outrageous
 he flew to TN on my mom's flight benefits to fuck his girlfriend
cheating is the worst,
 except if he'd just told me, maybe there would have been
space for him to have his thing

My mom cheated
 and I didn't blame her, she took authority when she had none
She (friend in freckles) doesn't say a thing
 because I don't say this, instead I say, again
cheating is the ultimate betrayal

We avoid an ashy man reeking of piss on Decatur
 I don't want your money, I just need food
It would've been better if he'd ask for money
 We nod, both thinking about how poor we are

I tell my freckled friend, in blond waves, who dates black men
 When he (my Jewish/Irish husband) works hard, he gets "tired"
And I think of how my arousal is always on my skin
 And I think of my mom claiming her authority
 My husband snoring in a curve away from me
 And how I could've broken off a piece of this or that, given it to
the ashy man without a word, and instead I spoke over again of my

dissatisfaction mantel, heavy damn thing, I got the day I got my period, I chew my beet and goat cheese on ciabatta and watch my beautiful friend address her body like a mantel, and describe her tautness that comes with anxiety, and she goes over in detail the Tinder dates, the ones that get to spend the nights and the ones who don't.

Then she got serious,

I just want someone to fuck me and respect me at the same time

Then I (the married one) nod.

I want a union and a division. All my girlfriends and boyfriends still hang around, you know.

Timber

BRIAN KAMSOKE

AFTER DOUG RETURNED FROM HIS SECOND TOUR OF DUTY IN AFGHANISTAN, he knew things were different. Things were different in the world. And things were different in his marriage. But mostly, he knew, things were different with him.

Although honorably discharged, he hadn't been able to find employment, so he decided to start his own business—woodworking. While Beth worked at the county DMV, Doug worked on the thirty-acre wooded lot that surrounded their cabin, land they'd inherited from Beth's father. Doug cleared a section of trees beside the gravel driveway and built a small workshop to house a portable sawmill.

Every day he scouted the forest for usable timber. Some of the timber was used to fuel the outdoor wood furnace while the more marketable timber—the cherry, the oak, even maple—was dragged by the tractor with a heavy steel chain back to the sawmill. Also each day, Doug patrolled the perimeter, sometimes three or four times a day, often times with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Sometimes he even patrolled at night with a flashlight checking for tracks—searching for evidence of the neighbor's four-wheeler or for foot tracks that were not his own. Although he never discovered human intruders, the patrols were something he felt compelled to do.

During one of these patrols in early March, with pockets of snow still piled in the forest, Doug spotted a fox between two pines. Doug immediately dropped to one knee and sighted the fox through his scope. The fox stood motionless staring back at him as Doug squeezed off one shot. The fox fell dead alongside a snow bank splattered with blood.

When he came upon the carcass, he poked at the soft flesh with the toe of his boot. Then he pulled on his heavy work gloves and carried the carcass to the wood furnace, where he tossed it into the fire chamber. He stood and watched a thin, gray column of smoke rise from the chimney, and then darker spirals of smoke formed until the chimney belched great clouds of black soot. The smell—charcoal, sulfurous, then nauseatingly sweet. Putrid and meaty.

As the fire roared hotter, bangs and thuds came from inside the combustion chamber. Was it really dead? Yes, he assured himself. It was just the expansion of metal joints. Nonetheless, when he emptied the ashbin the next day, he carefully inspected for bone fragments, but nothing of the animal remained. He scattered the ashes behind the cabin so nobody would ever know what he'd done. Then he scattered the ashes behind the cabin, so nobody would ever know what he'd done.

That summer Doug began seeing a counselor, not that he wanted to, or felt he needed to, but sessions were paid for by the Army and Beth had urged him to take advantage of them. Sometimes he went alone. Other times, Beth accompanied him.

Doug didn't like being there because it pulled him out of the woods. He was always being asked to share something, but all he wanted to talk about were his plans for the woods—how he wanted to thin out the scrawny trees that crowded the larger ones, wanted to clear the brush.

But Beth couldn't understand his working in the woods all the time. Even when she was home, he was working in the woods. She felt, she told the counselor, that he didn't want her around. "I'm not the enemy," she would often say.

What Doug wanted to say, he couldn't express. He wanted to explain how a tree—formed of millions of cellulose wood cells, together stronger than nylon, silk, and chitin, or collagen, tendon, or bone, organized in a honeycomb—like structure—effectively distributes weight, allowing the tree to transfer and share load-bearing stress. To sway instead of break.

Come fall Doug busied himself cutting, splitting, and stacking firewood. One by one, he balanced a log atop the cutting block and brought down the ax, and one time, the thought occurred to him how wood split differently, depending whether it was softwood or hardwood. Softwood, the ax stuck. Like in pine—the log split but remained connected, held together by strands of wood fiber, and he'd need to work the ax back and forth to dislodge it. Then he set another log on the cutting block—hard maple—and with one blow the log exploded, one piece remaining perfectly balanced on the edge of the chopping block while the other spun off in a beautiful pirouette.

He considered then—what would the blow from an ax do to a human head? Would it split open easily like a piece of hardwood, or would the ax land with a sickening thud, wedged in the skull like a piece of softwood?

Late one night as Doug slept on the couch, he was awoken by the great heaving groan of a tree falling, followed by a loud, sweeping swoosh outside the living room window and then an enormous crash that shook the house. Startled and at first disoriented, Doug sprang to his feet and raced down the hall, where he collided with Beth, who had also been startled awake by the frightening noise. He pushed past her into the bedroom and, after grabbing his rifle and a flashlight, ran back down the hall to burst out the back door into a cold, moonless November night.

He followed the flashlight beam down the deck steps, across the lawn behind the cabin. There, the beam caught the crown of a fallen tree—what looked to be a cherry tree, its thick, black trunk lying only feet from the corner of the cabin where Beth had been sleeping. He followed the trunk to where it had peeled away from the remaining stump, and there he saw the evidence, scooping out with his hand a mushy pile of wood fiber. Beetles.

He knew they must have been feeding on the cellulose in this tree for years. He examined the trunk, branches, and bark. The tree appeared perfectly healthy on the outside, yet all this time it had been slowly dying on the inside. The strength of the tree compromised, it wasn't beetles that eventually killed it. With cellulose eaten away and wood cells weakened, no longer stronger than bone or tendon, all it took was a light breeze to topple it.

By late morning the next day, Doug had cleared around the cabin seven more trees, carefully notching each tree so that it fell away from the cabin. "What are you doing?" Beth shouted from the back deck. "They can't all be bad."

But Doug couldn't take any chances.

Some of the wood was salvageable and those logs he would keep for the sawmill. But the other trees—the ones that looked diseased—he cut up and threw into the wood furnace. All day long, even as the temperature climbed into the low sixties, Doug continued to feed the furnace until he had a great, roaring fire.

Beth opened all the windows and doors, and she shouted again from the back deck over the drone of a chainsaw, "It's hotter than hell in here. Are you trying to drive me away? Do you hear me? I'm not leaving."

Doug sat at the kitchen table bathed in frosty moonlight. Through the window and in the dark woods he saw an amber glow flickering like a campfire. The light became brighter and brighter until it moved out of the woods and into the backyard. There it was. His fox. He saw the black eyes, staring back at him, surrounded in flames.

The thermostat clicked on and warm air rose from ducts in the wood floor. The dry heat sucked moisture from the cabin walls and the logs again smelled freshly cut. A metal chime that hung over a heat duct in the living room chimed. The fox scampered around the side of the cabin trailed by its luminescent amber glow.

Doug slid his chair back and walked down the dark hallway to their bedroom where Beth was sleeping. The wood floor groaned under the weight of his steps. In the bedroom, he went to the closet to remove his rifle. Standing quietly over Beth as she slept soundly, Doug checked the rifle's chamber to ensure it was loaded. He considered kissing her forehead. Instead, he turned and left the bedroom, and after grabbing a flashlight from above the refrigerator, slipping on his boots and a heavy jacket, wool gloves and hat, he walked outside.

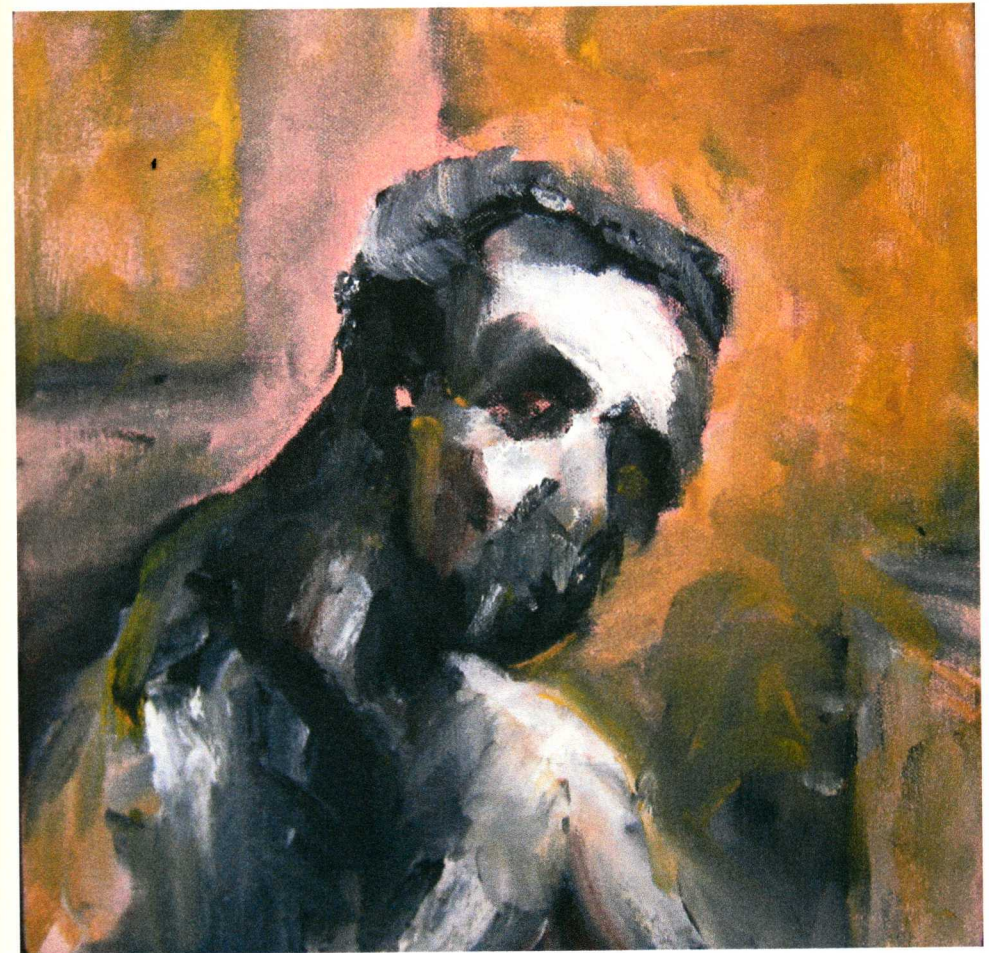
Patches of snow clung to the side of trees. Doug scouted the perimeter but discovered no tracks of any kind. Stopping at one tree, he placed his bare palm against the scabrous bark. Was this tree infested with beetles? How would he know? He followed the flashlight beam higher into the naked branches where they appeared pinned against a lavender sky, and he told himself, he would never know for certain.

On his first tour of duty, he discovered the depth of human depravity. Not so much in the mutilated bodies, but in the human heart and its deceit to those loved left behind. He pondered the purpose of it all. What he was doing there. On his second tour, he discovered the condition in himself. The evil that lies in all men, bound by a flimsy film of flesh so easily torn.

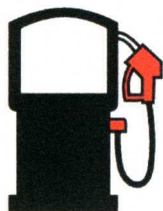
Inside his workshop, Doug turned on the power to his sawmill and began feeding pieces of cherry lumber toward the biting blades. Bits of sawdust fell in neat piles on the dirt floor as Doug worked under a bare bulb that hung from an extension cord looped over a rafter, his icy breath caught in the white glow.

This was the wood salvaged from the trees he'd dropped around the cabin. He would use the best pieces of lumber to build a cherry hutch for Beth to surprise her on Christmas morning. This was fine, fine wood, he told himself. Something that would last. Something that might make a difference.

He concentrated on the sights, sounds, and smells of his work—the steely whine of the saw blade, the swinging bare bulb casting shadows on the wall, the sweet, hot scent of cut lumber—knowing full well he was being watched from the doorway as the workshop filled with a flickering, amber glow.



GAS STATION PRIZE



The **Gas Station Prize** is *Thin Air Magazine's* inaugural hybrid contest, named for the versatility and variety of merchandise found in gas stations throughout corners of the American Southwest.

- I. *Bible Garage*
LUCAS BAILOR {*third place*}

- II. *Beyond City Limits*
DF PARIZEAU {*second place*}

- III. *Medium Warp: Excerpts of a Digital Consciousness*
MIKE OLIPHANT {*first place*}

Judged by SARAH MINOR

Sarah is the author of *The Persistence of The Bonyleg: Annotated* from Essay Press, curator of the visual essay series at *Essay Daily*, and the video editor at *TriQuarterly Review*. She is from Iowa, graduated from University of Arizona (MFA), Ohio University (PhD), and teaches at Cleveland Institute of Art.

Everything a history of movings.

Seven and a half or eight under my breath.

Series of accruments and sheddings.

Attention too close to the movements in a given moment.

The run-up of wooden path/ball up the carpet route.

The direction a deliberate expression of movement in space.

This is all there is inside or this is all I want to show or this is both.

stacking is personal

stacking is political

2007/08: a first question.

A wondering about will. The concrete wondering aloud. The matter of everything already set out, defined. A structure already built. Breath filling out the spaces. The implication of a life predestined. No answer to come trickling. Instead an excused history. An expressed benevolence instead of cruelty. The non-answers unconvincing.

Fastened to string. Bouncing against hood of car. Close enough. Hanging next to flypaper. Absorbing the light. Mucus yellow stretched from the ceiling. Catching what sticks. Often twisting and ineffective.

Taking up space. The sight unsettling. Words to explain misunderstood. Battling space. Battling intrusion. Up against the walls and ceiling. Death hanging among the boxed pages.

The autobiography is poetics.

Wondering if anything crawls between the boxed pages. Wondering if the hyperpresence of ants makes its way to the garage. Wondering if spiders like this dark.

Wondering back to the cracked stump. Wondering how deep rooted in the dirt ground. Wondering how deep rooted in a history/tradition. Wondering back to half familiar. Wondering what happened to the other half. Wondering whose responsibility it was to carry. Wondering around the topic.

LUCAS BAILOR is from Moreno Valley, California and currently teaches at California State University, Monterey Bay. His work has recently appeared in *Deluge*, *Angel City Review*, *DUM DUM Zine*, and *SHARKPACK Poetry Review*. He occasionally tweets @lucasbailor.

What's on your mind?

How a thought about a thought is still a thought. Every variety of cloud, from cirrus to anvil. Why I still rattle off Hail Mary's in takeoff and landing. The brass key on my ring that fits nowhere I can remember. The customer who handed me a fistful of change yesterday, telling me her patient was diagnosed beyond repair. How maybe me too. The name for sun seen between trees: Shivelight. Voyager 1's battered opulence. Its gold body bursting outside our solar system, reporting back that there's still wind. The blinking red eye I imagine on its antenna. How maybe it stares back at us across forty years. How believing in anything at all is a blessing.

Off Topic:

I asked the boy what he meant when he said meaning means nothing. He looked me in the eyes for the first time that year and said the words Medium Warp, which meant meaning is almost always lost between two people, the degree to which determined by the medium. I asked him how he might write about this phenomenon and when I think back to it, he never answered, but I knew the answer by the language of his eyes.

Reply:

If you leave the pieces on the floor and walk away, then you're a cracked egg always emptying out, but never empty. You're a grave paved over, turned into sidewalk, waiting while everyone else above is putting one foot in front of the other. Pick yourself up and put your hands here: On the band saw, the paper and pen, the keyboard, the shovel, coins and bills, the map, the pistol, and build.

Reply:

Here's a thought: hoard less. Reverse. Empty out one by one. Enlightenment costs everything, but release is not the same as expurgation. Just let each one go. One thought dropped like a stone into a long white pool of nothing. Hold it first. Like an egg, but softer. Less smooth. Wrap your fingers around its uneven roundness until it's warm, and then—

Subject Was:

Why not just tell a story? A story sealed tight in its own container. Don't accrete your needless detail. The less said, the better. So say: What an empty crib. Point at nothing and say: No small pink new toes here. That will start the story. (Of course, the story's about an absence

of baby now.) So ask next: Where in the hell is the baby?

Off Topic:

If severed, the arm of an octopus will search for food, believing there is still, somewhere, a mouth to feed.

Reply:

The point being: Anything untethered grows hungry. At my best I only know what a tentacle knows on its own.

The Universe and Everything in It, A User Agreement

To hear the story of the universe and everything in it, you (hereafter referred to as Party A) must read and accept the following terms and conditions as established by me (hereafter referred to as Party B):

1) There will be no way to begin in medias res. No way to even begin at all. This hereby implies Party A's understanding that the beginning has been happening all along.

a. This includes, but is not limited to:

- i. crescendos of living debris in arc around the birthing stars;
- ii. forbidden fruit, rib of Adam, and any convincing serpents;
- iii. puzzling at the box marked DO NOT OPEN;
- iv. prone crawling out from the primordial soup;
- v. a graceful diver sent falling towards earth to awaken some nascent sleeper;
- vi. emergence or delivery from the womb by an eight-armed

2) There will be no way to point HERE and say this is sloped hillside of rising action. By continuing, Party A agrees to abstain from the following:

- a. any scenes in straw-filled mangers;
- b. taking distant aim on the head of the archduke;
- c. forbidding the child from opening up the window;
- d. cutting power to the ballroom, suspending the dinner party in darkness;
- e. ascending the staircase towards the boarded door.

3) Please read this next section carefully:

- a. Party A will abandon the urge to point and say HERE is character flaw. Shun the thorn in the muscle of will. Still the hand that moves to blind the eyes in repentance. Cover up the tattooed iron cross on the uniformed bicep. Shoot out any overhead lights that betray the contents of the garage storage space. Ignore the thudding heartbeat tucked neat beneath the floorboards.

4) This acknowledges Party A's understanding that there will be no context, subtext, or easily digestible meaning. It will also ensure the rattling skeletons in the black-box closet remain silent, stilling their bones and dimming the rubies set deep in their eye sockets.

5) Party A, in listening, grants Party B permission to present no catharsis. No exposition. No centric volcano. No spinal column in the script. To reveal no blood-stained knife discovered in the wrong suitcase. No trigger pull followed by crack. No tsunami wave crashing from six stories up.

6) Furthermore, this signifies that Party A understands there will be no taking of anything, for everything is already where it ought to be by mistake.

7) If Party A consents to the terms of this story, they admit some responsibility for its ceaselessness. Party A also admits to no beginning or end. To no parting lines, no curlicue fin. No fade to black. No clasping of hands over horizon. Above all, Party A admits there is no punched-up fist through fresh soil.

a. Alternatively, Party A acknowledges no end to ending.

b. According to Party B, since the year 1000, the human race has survived well over 100 predicted apocalypses.

Party B cannot be held responsible for cascade of that which pools over. For occasional barrage of nothing. For invisible Coriolis curving of air. For sixty-first second. For empty nest. Party B is hereafter absolved of what's next.

Enlightenment, A Search History

< How will I know the burning;

< Does it in invisibility bend

all the visible around it;

Red rock now waving; willow wrestling away;

hot sand snaking its way towards?

< What else besides fire and dove is the third face?

< As of mirrors; I know the father the son but what's between them besides two well-burning tongues?

< Why won't the voice sayeth; Here I am; instead of Samuel;

< Does it sound the same as the one that snarls: Cut?

< What if there is no bush; no stones on which to write the words; no words with which to shape the meaning?

< If I eat any red fruit; wrap my lips around

the opened flesh; to which god must I confess?

< Is what smells like smoke smoke?

< How paced is the erosion of a name; by finger or by tongue;

< What wears my edges out; is it this intimate act that results in an ecosystem of bound, tired ghosts?

< How simple am I under microscope?

< Drawn in dotted lines the human body resembles pure shank; sheer meat; so what leaves us when we shudder off?

< Shifting the weight every few minutes; I can carry this wood forever; but when is it waiting; when wasting?

< What I mean is; what is breaking point and what is simply what comes next?

< Must I admit I am not worthy over and over and over again;

< What makes anything worthy of gold or lapis or white marble;

< And since I cannot hew the altar with the tools in my hands, then tell me; please; what am I to do with all these nails?

Error Code 404

We could not find: "my grandmother walks her own way down apparition hill"

Did you mean: "all the stones were pale rose the whole way home"

Conditional Ascension in JavaScript

```
if (I jump) {  
    my falling hand will reach and find  
    my other hand,  
    all of me flying in one long spoke,  
    fingers dove-tailing together,  
    my empty mouth wide open,  
    between my arms, a whole wind;  
} else {  
    what an awful bird I am;  
    what bastard of flight holds fast
```

to so many smooth stones;}
 if (I house you, O hole-in-the-holy-of-holies) {
 my hands make a cup for you,
 palms up, enough space in there
 to fit a few toothed peach pits;
 } else if (a third of you in there is dove) {
 my asking will whisper
 its way through your pneumatic bones
 and molt you down to a shiver;
 } else {
 you don't answer and the answer
 is yes is yes is yes;}
 if (I marry my ear to earth to hear its inner rustlings) {
 it only takes two knocks to know
 who all is down there;
 } else if (I have no avian instinct) {
 no internal imprint of stars guides me,
 my vision isn't saying: This is North;
 } else if (I wear my one light like an eye) {
 the miner's hand is in me,
 my hand holds a cage, praying;
 } else {
 the bird inside keeps quiet;}
 if (horizon is gold standard of dividing) {
 a binary: Its ups, downs
 that's that;
 } else if (an elm beneath bears fruit) {
 blossoms soon-to-be wind-blown
 blossoms that sail like thumbnails, down.
 } else {
 what you see of their scatter is not
 the same scatter I see;}
 if (I put me in perfect dark, the cave kind) {
 I hold up my open palm
 and for all I know I look at nothing;
 } else if (I make of me whatever I need) {
 a web of love and life lines,
 a minotaur, sword-swallower, a whole
 flowerless vessel;

} else if (I am all in here) {
 no height allows for same thinglessness
 } else {
 even looking down is only looking;}

Being Prayed To

10:36pm

hey, hows it goin havent seen U in awhile
 not since i stuck a fork in the toaster woops
 or wait was it when ? no that was
 another time anyway how r Ur folks?

10:48pm

remember one year we broke my mom's glass
 ballerina? shes still bitchin about it ha ha

11:21pm

remember the 2 weeks u slept in a tent out back
 in raven hollow with all the birds & oak wilt
 all over some crystal dish Ur mom said U broke
 she was pissed more pissed U left last dish
 Ud ever drop U laughed when she kicked my door in
 lookin for U she burned my ear off with her tongue
 her eyes wet with sweet venom no kidding

12:18am

hey so i kno u heard bout my dad u know he rly
 liked Uyea even tho hes gone I know not really
 he isn't really remember the time? one thanksgiving
 he invited U over ur parents left cuz Ur grandma
 wuz dyin (srry again) but he invited U no one
 asked he just knew right? he gave U what
 he called very best piece of meat his racist ass
 meant the white part he was good intended gave
 us the wish bone to crack we did & it splattered
 we screamed & later we laughed

12:27am

o & hey those flowrs U sent my Mom
 were somethin yellow so yellow almost Gold
 thanks a lot any chance U still around

12:46am

well anyhow srry about the crystal ur mom
 srry about the missing jewelry about the stolen

TV about the stamp collection my dad left
a big wood box of cuff links its gone tho now
my mom says they cost a fucking fortune asks me
if I melted it all down in a spoon wont let me
drive if U wanna getta drink sometime
lemme know but ill ha haha need a ride

1:15am

look, fine u think U know me? U think u knew
My dad?? U didn't whatever U do or dont say
I knew my Dad better than anyone best
i dont need wishbones bcuz theres no fuckin wish
in there . never was only splatter & matter & shit

1:52am

there R days I want 2 forget same way u even a bit
forget too knot in my gut when I wonder where 2 sleep
what does it cost? everything easy-to-see? im scared
to think how many holes are in me yea u never askd
so now im tellin how many as many times it takes
to hit heaven & back my body whistles in wind
i know it isnt funny so im not laughin

2:03

ok dont know if U remember this time
in high school we shared a bottle of ur mom's
coconut rum on the edge of the creek & u
skipped rocks like an expert one, two, three, four
five six seven eight nine times over water
& i swore if U tried Ud reach the other side

2:31am

U know i remember? anything i cant forget
rememberings not hard its so tragic funny
harder to forget what do U think iM tryin
to be with out the Weight u know what else
I remember: first time my dad came home
loaded he broke every egg in the fridge
trying to make omlettes for my sister & i
mom was pissed bcuz it was late & he drank
like that sometimes & he told me no not
in his house not under his roof yea so yea
& look here I am still so yea look
who was or wasnt right in the end

2:49am

i get It look ive tried too too many times
but getting better is only words so my sister says
she cant find me is she even lookin is she
I wanna walk my way back up to the loud
the purpose & better what kills me is outer shutter
what i see out side watching sun wear its way
across wall remember when we drove tunnels
holding our breath til we made it through gold
arrival light at end all so we could wish again

Forum on How to Get Inside

guest 5434: Inside is not a well-furnished chamber.

From outside that much is clear.

guest 2159: The only certainty is a small light,
soft freckle in the window's dark face.

guest 3472: Assume at least one lamp, a table
Nothing else need be wondered at.

No spoons, terracotta soldiers,
god's eyes, nor jade.

guest 5434: No need to case the joint.

The goal being not to plunder but behold.

And enter. Crack open or else force
overflow. To be in, all wind and whipping
out from under.

guest 1097: The way to do it is to be non-negotiable,
like the hive chock full of hard honey.

guest 0158: The way to do it is to shatter any surface
unable to return.

guest 5434: The way to do it is in every step.

Sound new music. Some swift utter
like flutter or pluck.

Fall in with the circle and just keep
spinning.

guest 6845: The way to do it is to keep pace.

Not to smolder. There is no savvy,
but selling and specific heavy-lifting
of eleven ounces: sole weight:

the difference between the still-
tumbling and tumbled heart.

guest 3472: And if there are trees outside,
hard rattle any branches overhead.

Unsettle whatever acorn will fit
in two fingers, index and thumb
required to read the exposed radicle.

guest 7219: The way to do it is to pry open and pull.

Put a stop to sowing, salt the ice
and then the earth and then the stone.

guest 9886: To enter, there will be an inquisition.

When the questions start, be willing
to point and shovel any damn thing.

Dig until it hits. Then, still, deeper.

guest 3472: Every answer is a pearl. Every pearl, a gate.

But then they're open, and the real work
begins—

guest 2159: Abandon abandon. Lay flat your hand upon
the engine. Know no way but in.

Error Code 404

We could not find: "interrogatory Walther P38";
"the wooden chair they sat her in"

Did you mean: "because soldiers know how well
countdowns work
they start at three"

Subject: Antler Story

To: Marketing Team

From: Human Resources

Date: 10.2.2016 17:13

I know, I know, everyone said no more wasted time,
but I remembered my antler story. No bodily fluids
or catheters or ten-minute runway. This time, full speed.
Straight to the point:

Wood was my mom's worst habit.

She'd scoop acorns up with a shovel and whittle them
down to bullets. But, even with the sun low behind
the house, she never shot worth a damn. What's there
to shoot with acorns anyway? That's not rhetorical.

I'm honestly asking.

Best guess: No real target.

Her face bloomed and rent her open all the way down
from teeth to toes, there in her blueberry stained shirt,
breathing fast in a surrender to laughter. Fresh holes
whistling in the leaves. A new rifle ruined at her feet.
Don't know where she aimed, but at the age of thirteen
I believed it was my mom who shot out the sun, each
and every night.

(Moon being bullet hole left behind.)

The name for her behavior couldn't fit in my mouth,
not then and still not now. Instead I knew her
as woman fashioning herself antlers from driftwood,
as woman burying the burnt remains of a treehouse,
as woman I watched climb trees to the wagging top,
as woman who, putting dinner on the table, disappeared
into the dark basement where the unholy screaming
of a table saw fed my imagination.

Anyhow, that's the story of the photo on my desk
where my mom's wearing antlers and cracking a smile
sharp enough to swing.

[dominion]: a definition

ADMIN blessed 1 and 0, and said re: "[Be fruitful, multiply], [replenish
the earth], and [subdue it]: have [dominion over] the [fish of the sea], and
over the [fowl of the air], and over [every living thing that moves upon the
earth]."

- 1 : [Be fruitful, multiply] in narcissus renderings of : an outward
ripple: from 0 + 1 emerges virgin hunger to draw lines
like clumsy blades across the earth : a first bite of meat
teaches : always place a silver bowl below the neck
to catch crimson : a new butcher never reads the eyes
- 2 : a fish bowl shatters : a quick shock of water crosses the floor
: the child says re: "I didn't know. It was so heavy."
: his mother removes her silver rings : helps him bury it
: to [replenish the earth] : to show how it is to dig a hole
- 3 : crack down : [subdue it] : color and knock of knuckle on skull
: stems bend over thumbs : are not dead but dormant
: a leaf translates to recycle : but our bodies refuse : nails
outlast soft wood : the wild circus of our guts outlives
us : even our smiles : our persistent crescent moons
- 4 : [dominion over] every April shower : an appropriate rain will
fall here and here : not on any whitepink petals : long wind

and soil will send birds down south, dreaming blue-bleed-
 ing glaciers : asphalt will be painted over islands : oases
 replaced with hot ghosts wavering in noon
 : o beauty is matted : the fur of this bird-turned-dirty-
 smear-of-mauve : no : don't call this kill : just call it road
 : a mouth moving is magic : 0100101110 : anything can be
 claimed : there is no cage : only a length of rope
 5 : when the [fish of the sea] were all surfaced : every silver scale
 : sucking mouth : wide eye : we shivered : rejoiced
 : at long last the shadow floating below us was gone
 6 : flooding the sky : the [fowl of the air] rupture into every dawn
 : paths belonging to some secular schematic : an eye
 tremors always : never rests in one place : traces around
 the sacred before it : around the host of angels : the halos
 : the sun : not a metaphor : sets to the West of us
 7 : this is having an end to clutch at : if it fits between fingers it fits
 between teeth : an organ donor lives longer : in limbs
 and torsos : what if all we are is parts : a spine known
 by fingertip under Sunday light : a temple in rhythm
 with a chest : a knee with memory of earth sculpted
 into it : an ear haunted by rifles at night : a battered, soul-
 less shin : what if no one named [every living thing tha
 moves upon the earth] : what if there is no word for this

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 & Lyre*, *IDK Magazine*, *Shooter Literary Magazine*, *NANO Fiction*,
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 Editor of the *Bellingham Review* and a recent Pushcart nominee.





Peeps
RENOIR GAITHER

They came to watch skin flicks: Sid, the Io-eyed heroin addict who read Lautreamont in the original. Terry, who invited male hustlers on weekends to his cliff-side mansion to admire the Agam painting as the sun set on a golden calf. Hollywood types in Dick Tracy suits, midwestern boys from farms the size of clouds, those with pockets full of kale and poppers. And those with nothing at all, except a creeping suspicion that Capellanus was right, that no one should be denied love without the best of reasons. Then the cops arrived and led them away into a starry, rummy night as bossa nova from the bar next door hectored a lady's roan chicken pecking at peanut shells in the parking lot. Soon the boss phoned, exuberant about the deal he'd struck. Three van-delivered college kids ducked in, mopped the floor, and said that all it took was lack of imagination. And within an hour the regulars returned, dropping quarters. Outside, a Rastafarian strained to look through the window, his cupped fingers glowing in phosphorous, morning jiggering his locks.

Aunt Eileen

ABIGAIL WARREN

My Aunt Eileen
snapped chewing gum
like a maniac
snapping and popping
and always had a cigarette
between her fingers—
Pall Malls.
Sitting in the back seat
of our family car,
the four of us, waiting for all the goodbyes
outside her Baltimore row house,
she would pop out her false teeth
and clap them together
to entertain us until
our parents got in the car.
On one of our visits
I rolled down the window
and asked her,
“What did my grandmother
die from?”

She pointed to an area
near her vagina
and said,
“She didn’t clean herself
enough down here.”
I was pretty sure people
getting cancer
had nothing to do with
cleaning yourself down there.

But I could tell
she wanted to
soften the blow of death.
Though it did change my
shower habits for a few months.

And sometimes we were embarrassed
when she and Uncle Jack visited

our small Southern town,
and she would give her
New York directives out the car window
when someone cut her off,
as in, “Go shit in your hat, and pull it over your ears.”
Or the day she lit up a cigarette at the grocery market
and they told her she couldn’t smoke in the store,
she said, “But you sell the goddamn things, don’t you?”
She was right, but we were mortified.

And when Uncle Jack, drunk,
would yell out
“Gone With the Wind”
to every movie guess in
our family game of charades,
to amuse all of us cousins,
she would stand up and say,
“Someone get me a knife,
I’m going to kill him.”
My cousin Siobhan,
the youngest of us,
would go in the kitchen,
bring back a knife,
and say, “Here Aunt Eileen,
do it.”

Years later, she visited,
and my own son came in too late
one night. I yelled like her,
and she came over to me
and told me that was good,

“But now go tell him how
much you love him.”

At her funeral,
dead from heart disease,
I imagined
it wasn't the Pall Malls
that killed her,
but rather she died from
an area behind her breastbone
that she always opened up,
and gave it all away,
piece by piece,
until it was gone.

Cowboy in store window, Winslow, AZ roger camp



Broadcast

BRIAN PHILIP WHALEN


I'M READING THE DIARIES OF MARCUS AURELIUS beside my open third story window on a brisk, sunny autumn day in Albany, NY, when I hear a man singing on the sidewalk. I press my face to the window like I do at night when the drunks and college couples argue in the street. The man is standing beside my garbage cans. I've seen him before—he's homeless. He holds a brown paper bag and hosts his radio show. "Ladies and gentleman, Michelle Smith is a liar and a fraud. Now another hit from the 1950's." A dime store cowboy, he sings: it's an iterative, plaintive country lament that suits his forlorn voice. His rusty baritone is one pack shy of a voice box. He belts out half the chorus, drinks from his paper bag, then delivers the end of the chorus. In lieu of a bridge, he repeats his line about that woman, Michelle Smith, the liar and fraud. He loops again: a verse, half the chorus, a swig, the rest of the chorus, Michelle. I don't recognize the song, so I write the lyrics in the cover of my Meditations. A bird lands on my oriel. It's a goldfinch, I think: a yellow belly, black wings. Fugitive harbinger. The homeless man—an auger? Michelle Smith—a signal; a symbol; a sister? I watch the bird until the bird flies off. I lower my head and read about Rome.

An hour later and the man is still hosting his radio show. I've had enough meditations for one day. I set the book of stoic aphorisms on my desk and open my laptop. The first hit on the stolen lyrics is the 1954 film *The Outcast*. "Yesterday's gone. Love me from now on. Be true to me. Forget about the past." There's a Ricky Skaggs version of the song. A Willie Nelson cover, too—and one by Billy Walker. The Internet tells me the original was written in 1955 by Webb Pierce and Cindy Walker. Pierce was a honky-tonk musician. A reviewer of Pierce on amazon.com complains that Pierce's songs are not very "well-preserved" by artists, citing the discrepancy between the number of covers of Pierce's songs compared to covers of the luminaries of the 50's and 60s. Preservation. Cover. Protection. A city is a fortress of plywood and brick:

a song a ploy. Something tells me the search I'm running is a foxhole, want for a fox. The name "Michelle Smith" returns too many hits. The Internet won't give me what I'm looking for. I listen to the song online. It sounds all wrong.

My sister is a homeless opioid addict living in Richmond, Virginia. She will never leave her city, where she knows the locations of the shelters, churches, dealers, and the abandoned Section 8's. Some nights my sister sleeps under a bridge. Some nights she's a prostitute. She emails—off and on—when she gets a hold of a GoPhone or the man she spends a night with has a Wi-Fi connection. I'll send her my replies, and weeks go by. Months. Two years once passed before I heard from her.

The homeless man moved on. I remember his voice. His song gave weight—*the tragic?*—to that sunny morning in a city where I never felt at home. A city that never loved me. I've since flown those concrete pastures for the peaceful green of country living. Now the only homeless men I see are those who cross the Dunn Memorial Bridge in the evenings: seeking refuge in the city shelters. Like me, perhaps, they desire freedom from the denser populations; by day they cross the Hudson, passed the suburbs and rural outposts, returning to the city at night when the cold sets in. Or maybe they've just arrived, by Amtrak, from a former life, stepping off the platform at Rensselaer station; and across the river the city calls to them like a jewel, a token gleaming in the night. The city, from far off, appears clean, well-lit, and small: a museum display—an exhibition named "The Promise."



Trail of Giants

A.K. KELLY

as you pass by, they stand hand-in-hand
inside their bodies
are circular-lined stories
of life.

outside, their skin
is like the roughened shell
of a coconut
that only seems impenetrable
until one or two
lie recumbent
on the earth--
like prehistoric elephants
scratched bare
by small or curious hands.

the young ones feed
on the bodies of the old
whose shallow roots
follow the road to where all things originate,
and eventually return.

you walk among them
when the world is crisp
and fresh and permanent
or when the daylight hides
and the sky is lavender and blue.

they call out
from the creek beds and snowmelt

and you think their weakness is patience
but you come to find that time
is also their friend.

it is unlike anything
to know, you are
where you need to be
at the edge of the world
among giants--
their needles and cones,
in the heart of the mountains.
staring at beasts
as old as time itself.
The You Within You

you return to a place
beneath Douglas fir and cedar
near knee-high nettle
and wild berries, bursting sweet'n sour
across your lips

you go back
to the starry days of your youth
because in the damp
in the briny winds
and the mollusks
in the sea foam green waves
and the ferry horns that blare like humpbacks
you remained long enough to grow
as forest trees do
with eyes on the horizon
with feet in the earth
with untamed hair
near the ocean
and beneath clouds

you never left
the soft fur of the ferns
the oozing sap

the childhood house
that overlooks Puget Sound

you never left this place:
your memories stick
like golden dust
to the pine shaven earth

you come back to find
that mossy amalgam
that untainted little you within you
that real and alive you--
that free and wild you--

you come home to foggy mornings
to Rainier cherry trees
to infinite spider webs
to a first kiss in the woods
to find her, to find
the you within you
is waiting
at the edge of the world
beneath rain clouds
and sun

you were made
where your imagination thrives
and the you that is you beneath all
the "you" life made
never really left--
she is right there
waiting, waiting
for you.

Datil Yucca

AMARIS FELAND KETCHUM

Yucca baccata

-for Zaira

When La Virgen appeared
in a bent yucca stalk
in the city sprawl

nearly four hundred years after coming
to Tepeyac on a woven yucca cloth
framed by rigid spine-tipped leaves

in dry rocky meadows
when La Lupe used to speak Nauhautl,
before she adapted

to staying silent
and showing up on tortillas
(she has her reasons

for sidestepping potatoes and rye loaves)
La Virgen emerged as a slender
silhouette in a bent yucca stalk.

She likes a ruckus
when she comes back
crowds coveting temperance, Ave Marias

pumped from low-rider stereos
down the main drag. Only
the devout light votive candles

to cure their shock
when seeing yucca casting her shadow
against the crosswalk not some metaphor

about her grace being the breeze
bowing the hollyhock. You can do anything
with yucca. Its roots make soap

and shampoo or a laxative
too strong to be consumed.
In midsummer, chew

drooping waxy flowers raw (pollinated
by small nocturnal moths
who deposit eggs in blooms

where larva ingest the seeds)
to relieve arthritis. From the fiber
you can make sandals, buckets,

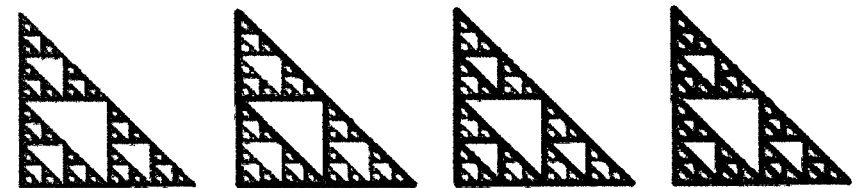
or weave a new world goddess
whose name glows on your tongue
like an ancient language

snatched by a hawk and dropped
in an inaccessible rocky outcrop forever
creeping back in another yucca stalk.

The Fractalist
JOEY POMERANZ

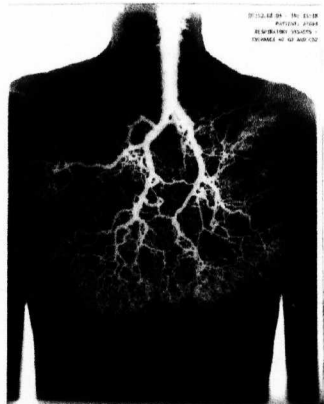
IN SOME OLD ENCYCLOPEDIAS, you will find under the article on Spain, the border between Spain and Portugal is 620 miles long. In the same encyclopedia, under the article on Portugal, it says the border is 760 miles long. It's the same border. The geometry we learned in high school—circles, squares, triangles—tells us nothing about the shapes of nature. Where the land and sea so variously lie about each other and lightly kiss is no hyperbola. If you measure in kilometers, you reach a certain length. In meters, you'd pick up more wiggles and wobbles of the coastline. Centimeters? Even longer. There is no well-defined length for a coastline; the length depends on the scale by which you choose to measure it and the scale of your perspective. This is called scale ambiguity.

Michael Crane was a mathematician studying and teaching fractal geometry at Cornell University. Fractals are great for finding simple descriptions for complicated shapes. Take Sierpinski's gasket, for example. The gasket possesses an infinite number of triangles, and the equations of those triangles aren't straightforward. Yet, if you shrink it by a half, take another copy and shrink it by a half, then move it over by half, and then take a final copy, shrink it by a half, and move up by a half, you get the gasket. A fractal description of an object is the story of how it grows.



I learned from Michael he was dying of cancer and it was everywhere. It was inside his brain; it had taken one eye, which he hid by covering his glasses with duct tape and joking about being a pirate. It was all over his lungs and he would exclaim, "Our lungs, oh my God! There are

half a billion alveoli in our lungs—it would take the whole genome just to describe the lungs! That’s why the genome just tells us how to grow instead. If we take these structures apart, study the patterns in smaller scales, anything visually complex can be decoded into something very simple.” And he’d be totally out of breath, and I could see and feel it hurt



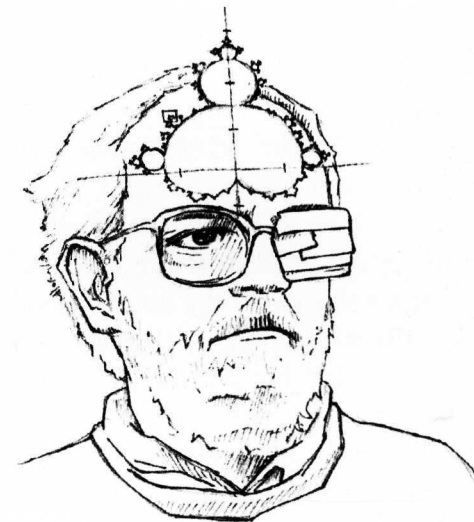
him now, every time he chose to use those lungs to speak. There are, on average, twenty-three levels of branching in the lungs, and they have a volume of five to six liters and a surface area of 130 square meters. It’s like taking an envelope and folding it up to fit inside a thimble, yet evolution discovered a way to do it by branching, and branching, and branching. Every bit of the lung looks like the whole lung. It’s a fractal and dually simple and complex.

With Michael’s disease progressing, I wondered how much of his nature, nature itself would have to destroy before his childlike curiosity for nature itself would be destroyed. He still had this gentle, vivacious curiosity in a dying body. As a child, he had wanted to understand the different shapes of clouds, or why flowers grew the way they grew, or why mud cracked the way it did when it dried out in the sun. As an adult, he wanted to be that tottering old guy ambling into class with a piece of toilet paper stuck to his shoe, still telling the same dumb jokes. And the sicker he got, the more I wanted to walk the measuring tape back on his life, giving him more time with his wife and his seven cats.

Michael taught me that science has a narrative component that we too often forget. He was a storyteller. The shape of a snowflake is the story of the pressure, temperature, and humidity it encountered on its flight through the clouds. A coastline is the story of rocks and tides and waves. A mountain range is the story about plate tectonics and erosion. A child’s face, a field of daisies, a fall of snowflakes: bilateral symmetry for the human face, translational symmetry for the field of daisies, rotational symmetry for the snowflakes. Fractals.

Near the end of his life, they took one of his arms. He used the one arm to walk with a cane. He told me, “I feel disgusted that I’m being betrayed by my body,” and I knew he understood it was by the nature he found so beautiful. Cancer cells are fractals too. He died a few days afterward at night.

I sat on my porch. I cried because I felt it was unfair for a man to understand so much about the uncontrolled elements of life and still have to die. I looked up at the night. I had this very clear sense that instead of looking up into the heights, I was looking down into the depths—something flipped, and the space between the stars was just immense and empty, but there was something else to it too. And I couldn’t explain it. And I missed him already.



Bedtime

MICHAEL MURRAY

I

Certain night sounds can be disquieting to the little girl. A car alarm gone shape-shifty after midnight; heavy winds (the chimes on the back patio jangling crazily, the branches of the eucalyptus tree scratching the side of the house); owls; the wail of a thirsty coyote off in the foothills. The little girl, an only child, has a bedroom down the hall from her parents. When she's uneasy, or when, for whatever reason, uneasiness has segued to fear, she calls out for her mother, and her mother comes to her, perches on the side of the bed, takes the little girl's hands in hers. The woman listens intently to the details of the particular fright, nods understandingly, brow furrowed with concern. Then, she tells the girl she has no reason to be afraid: her mother and father are right down the hall; they would never let anything happen to her. She reminds the girl, also, that the family dog sleeps beneath her bed, and should she awaken to any unfamiliar sound—if, in the middle of the night, she is afraid for any reason - all she need do is reach out, and the dog will lick her palm, comforting her. The mother kisses her daughter on the forehead and, in returning to her own room, leaves the girl's door to the hallway open; a tiny nightlight in the shape of a lighthouse glows dimly in the hall. The girl drifts back to sleep.

One night, starting awake in the darkness of her room (and the residual fog of a recurring nightmare about Daddy Longlegs), she is aware of a dripping sound coming from some part of the house. At first she thinks to call out, but then remembers what her mother told her, and reaches beneath the bed, and the dog licks the palm of her hand once, twice, three times. Comforted, the little girl falls back to sleep.

The next night, starting awake again (darkness, residual fog), she hears the same dripping. Without even considering a call to her mother, she reaches beneath the bed! The dog licks her palm three times. Comforted, she falls back to sleep.

The third night she is not frightened at all. She doesn't think of her mother, she doesn't reach for the dog. Instead, she pulls back the covers

and crosses her room on bare feet, intent on finding the leaky faucet and stopping the drip; why her father hasn't taken care of this already she is not sure. Into the dimly lit hallway and toward the bathroom. Into the bathroom where another feeble nightlight glows. She flips on the overhead light and looks at the twin sinks in front of the mirror. Reflection of herself in blue pajamas, hair tangled with sleep. She waits. When she hears it again the sound comes from neither sink, but from the other end of the room. She walks toward the shower and pulls open the curtain triumphantly, but as to whether or not there is a leaky nozzle inside cannot be said; she certainly doesn't notice if there is. Instead, she is greeted by this tableau—the family dog, gutted from belly to chest, hanging by a cord from the showerhead, canine blood splashing down onto the tile floor, one drop at a time.

II.

A large oval rug covers much of the little girl's room, but does not extend beneath the bed. Beneath the bed on the hardwood floor, intermittent sleep and shivering, recurring nightmares as well; aches and cramps; the need to defecate fought down. In the distance, a tiny bit of light, but nothing to speak of. Just enough time passes between drops to believe that each will be the last, but not so. Fear that each will not be the last. Fear of the coyotes in the foothills. Fear of flying, fear of fog. Fear of the electricity in the walls, fear of the walls. Some solace in the gesture of a tiny hand, the warmth of human contact. But with the subsequent unabated scream, solace eradicated: what they did to the dog when they found him; when the bright lights shine beneath the bed; what they are likely to do here.



Observance

LANCE NIZAMI

A mountain town: in-deep the valley in-between the hazy Sawtooth peaks
An inn; the far-north-side of town
A room that faces north, too, with a balcony
And there we sit and eat, late sunbathed autumn afternoon

The Chinese food is good here, unexpected in this mountain town
The hillsides golden-grassed between the pines are dry and dusty
So, too, the air; each moisture-molecule is bound to dust
Below us, close nearby, the one exception: grass that's green and wet and trimmed

The cemetery; stretching northwards, linear, road-side; cemetery
There, a lone black road, well-paved, loops in, then out of graveyard
And as we watch, a ritual unfolds:

A car rolls in; it stops along the right-hand-side of tarmac, though no markings are apparent
The doors will open; grown-ups exit, kids are left behind to wait
Grown-ups walk short-ways, in silence; disappear, in conifers
And then: no motion

Grown-ups trace their steps back to their vehicle
They step inside, the doors close, and they leave –
A minute passes, sometimes two; and then a different car appears, or sometimes two
Then debarkation, walk, and pause; then embarkation, drive away –

The minutes pass; the ritual repeats
As dusk approaches, cars decline in frequency
We sit and watch, few words between us, waiting

And finally, our greed for food is sated and our greed to know breaks free

We walk downstairs; across the moist green grass; along the tarmac
We estimate the spot where others stopped their vehicles
We turn, and walk across wet grass in lessening autumn light
And there's the grove of trees, the conifers

A gap between the pines leaves room for two flat slabs of greying granite
Side-by-side; a man, and final wife
And on the husband's slab, we see an unexpected scattering:
Coins and plastic pens, and one lone paper note: it's "Thank You"

A name's carved deep upon the greying slab:
ERNEST MILLER HEMINGWAY
And suddenly, we comprehend the ritual
And suddenly, we're cast into a silence

And now we know why cars will stop here, next day and the next
And now we sense that we, like others, realize the place's meaning
Pausing now, remembering

Hemingway; his novels, read in high-school class; we had no choice
And later, when we wrote, we understood that obligation
And here, in this dark grove, we now recall:
An aging Cuban fights for hours against the vicious sharks, to keep a massive tuna-fish

He fails; his tears add salt to salty water
And here, beneath the conifers, our unexpected tears add salt to soil
A mountain town, so far from sandy shores of far-off Cuba
A mountain town: in-deep the valley in-between the hazy Sawtooth peaks.

Money, Blood, Heroics, Love TERRANCE WEDIN

I'd borrowed some money without asking. Took a few twenties from Erica's purse figuring I'd pay her back before she noticed. This was around the time I'd started burning through my tips faster than I could make them. She knew what I'd been spending my money on before work and after work and sometimes during work, but she'd been too busy studying things like Brutalism and Modernism to worry about what I was doing when we weren't together. "They were trying to build things that would last forever," she'd said, trying to explain those concepts to me, months before this, standing in front of an art gallery in Houston. But all I saw was a whole lot of concrete.

Luckily, I had an envelope waiting for me at the bar from the happy hour shift I'd worked the day before. I'd even up with Erica, I thought, try talking my way out of it looking like a theft, and she'd, maybe, after a few weeks, forgive me. Because I needed her in my life. Without her, I wasn't sure how long it would be before I completely slipped into the service industry abyss. A couple weeks before all of this I'd lied and told her that I was going to stop buying coke from Cory and start being more like the guy she'd met when we started dating. I gave her this weepy speech about how I was over partying and ready to start thinking about Life-After-Bartending. What Life-After-Bartending meant exactly I didn't know. My mom thought it meant schoolteacher. A few days after that, I found myself in some guy's apartment smoking meth—to be fair, I didn't know it was meth—and huffing duster for the first time.

Erica drove us over to the bar around last call. She'd been driving me everywhere since my DWI. It was one of those slow nights at the beginning of the week where you worked alone, got a regular or two from the Ambassador apartments, the servers from the Indian restaurant down the block, maybe a straggler or two from the hotel nearby too lazy to venture down to Sixth street, and called it a night. You walked with sixty or seventy bucks, but you could play your own music, and drink in relative peace throughout your shift. I worked those shifts all the time. But when we got there the bar was empty: nobody working, nobody drinking.

It wasn't like Tony to disappear on his shift. He didn't dip into the back room to do lines off the ice machine while he worked like I did. Every morning after closing the bar he'd run down to Town Lake on no sleep to throw kettlebells around, boot camp style. You didn't have to worry about the deposit being off or the alarm not being set when Tony worked. I couldn't say the same about myself.

Erica waited at the front door in her sweats and sandals, hair tied in a messy bun. That night, before she realized her cash was gone, I'd fallen asleep in her bed while she graded papers. My tips from happy hour were in the back room. I figured maybe Tony had gone back there to restock a bottle or grab the mop to start closing.

"Tony," I called.

"Where you at."

"Can't you just get the money," Erica said.

"See if he's in the bathroom for me."

"How is nobody being here our problem?"

In the back room, instead of getting my tips, I checked around the ice machine for a bag I couldn't remember if I'd dropped the day before. During that shift, I'd watched a man take three shots of well rum and puke neatly next to his bar stool. He wiped his face with his shirt sleeve, composed himself, and asked me for another one, as if he had no idea that his dinner was in a pile on the floor next to him. He handed me fifty bucks as I swept his burrito into a dustpan. I texted Cory after that and within thirty minutes he was stashing a bag under a shaker tin. My search was cut short, though, when I heard Erica yelling for me through the build-out wall.

Inside, the bathroom was like some kind of dream. Green glass from a broken beer bottle everywhere. Blood on the dirty-white tiles. Tony, shirtless, the deer head tattooed over his heart staring back at me, struggling to keep his t-shirt tied around the arm of a blue-haired girl with a nose ring who looked like she couldn't keep her eyes open. And Erica, on her knees next to them, squeezing the girl's blood-slicked hand, both of them looking at me like I was supposed to know what to do next. None of it made any sense to me.

"I gave her a shot because she seemed sad," Tony said. "I didn't think she'd go and do this."

"You know her?" I asked.

"No," Tony said. "She was sitting alone drinking gin and tonics."

"I told you my name is Mary," the girl said.

"We meet a lot of people in here," Tony said, apologetically. He was the bartender who felt immense guilt at forgetting a customer's name.

Mary shook her head, suddenly alert. Her hair was the

same murky blue as our sanitation water. Tally mark scars showed above her knee. Mary looked like one of the girls Erica was running with the summer we'd started hanging out, the summer after her dad had died, when she was working as a hostess and I was still barbacking. After that summer, the shock of death out of her system, she traded in her leather skirt and Parliaments for a grad student's life of khaki chinos and kale salads and running shoes. It seemed like I was the only hold over from that era of Erica. She'd confessed to me that she was afraid of being alone and I knew that was why she hadn't cut me off completely yet, even though I'd fucked up enough for her to be right in doing so. I missed that girl who'd sneak back to the walk-in to drink from a stolen bottle of whiskey and shove her tongue down my throat. Now and then, after one of the dumbass grad school events she hated attending, the Erica from the summer would show herself, drunk and reckless and fun, and I reveled in being her accomplice for those evenings.

"Don't call an ambulance," Mary said. "I'm okay."

"You're bleeding," Erica said.

"Not that much," Mary said.

"Call an ambulance," Erica said.

"Ambulances are bad for business," I said. I'd learned that early on in the service industry. Any flashing lights outside your bar and you were suspect.

"Are you serious?" Tony said.

"What are you going to tell Jim?" I asked Tony, thinking about what our owner might say about a girl trying to kill herself in the bathroom.

"He told me he couldn't give me the love I deserved," Mary said.

"Who told you that?" Erica asked.

"Werner," Mary said. "Do you know Werner? He's my light."

"Dude, she's losing a lot of blood," Tony said.

"We can drive her to the hospital quicker, anyway," I said.

I grabbed Erica's keys off the floor. Tony adjusted the t-shirt. The slashes Mary had cut into her arm looked dark and cartoonish. Like they'd been drawn on.

Outside, the traffic lights blinked yellow. A man pushed a busted shopping cart down into traffic down the street. The only car out front was Erica's. I wasn't supposed to be driving. They'd taken my license after my DWI. I'd sold my truck to a regular for a thousand bucks and burned through that money in a month. But Erica was busy keeping the girl calm, holding her hand, cooing at her that it wasn't as bad as it looked. It was a chance to be heroic, I thought, a chance to win back some of whatever I'd lost with Erica. So I got behind the wheel, anyway, scanning the block for cops.

I can see it in my head, even now, like a scene out of some B movie on late night cable: Tony carrying the girl out of Anchor in his arms and helping her into the backseat of the car. Covered in blood, in the halo of light from the sign above the bar, Tony looked like a tattooed angel, waving at us as we drove away. I wondered if the name Antonio meant anything biblical.

"Where is the bartender?" Mary asked. Her eyeballs were all pupil. Like they'd been replaced with marbles.

"He had to stay at the bar," I said.

"He was nice," Mary said. "I liked him."

"Keep your eyes open for me," Erica said to Mary.

"Is she falling asleep?" I said. "She can't fall asleep."

In the backseat, Erica balled up some of her new workout clothes to support Mary's head, keeping hold of the t-shirt around her arm.

"Are we going to Werner's house?" Mary said.

"We're taking you to a hospital," Erica said.

"I've done this before," Mary said. "Werner knows how to help me. He knows that I'm more than a rock in a stream."

"What is she talking about?" Erica said.

"Is his house close by?" I asked, convinced cops were waiting for me on every block. I realized then that I didn't want to get put in handcuffs again because of this girl.

"By the donut shop," Mary said. She craned her head to look out the window and described the house, a gravel pile, and a red light on the porch. "I don't want to go to anymore hospitals."

I was careful not to speed down the Drag, the road that bisected Erica's campus. We passed the drag rats wearing denim vests covered in crust-punk patches, mutts tied to their backpacks staring blankly into the night; passed the mural with HI, HOW ARE YOU written above an alien frog that Erica and I had posed in front of when we first started dating; passed the undergrad girls in shrink-wrapped micro dresses tripping toward their dorms; passed the adult video store with the inflatable dolphin on the roof. The thought of answering questions about being behind the wheel or the bench warrant I had out for unpaid fees started closing in on me. We were close.

"Turn," Mary said. "Turn here."

"Don't turn," Erica said.

I turned.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Erica yelled.

Erica kicked into my shoulder over the seat, connecting hard over and over. I swerved the steering wheel, running the front tire up a curb, but then righted us. I kept driving. I told myself I was doing the right thing.

"How do you let water rush over you?" Mary said. "Do you know the answer?"

"Mary, did you take something earlier?" I asked.

"Just a little acid," Mary said.

The house in West Campus Mary directed us toward had been roughed up by generations of college kids. A pile of gravel covered most of the yard. The porch planks were all broken or warped, the paint job stripped to the lacquer. A young guy with patchy black facial hair sat shirtless in a lawn chair smoking. His chest was all caved in, like someone had punched into his soul. Plants in baskets hung from the porch support beams. I got out and told him about the girl bleeding in our car. He kept smoking in his chair.

"Werner's inside," the guy said. "But she's not supposed to be here, you know."

"Why not?"

"Because she busted the place up last time."

"Can you just get him?" I said.

The guy pushed himself out of the lawn chair finally, flicked his cigarette toward the gravel pile. The car door opened behind me and I heard Erica coo to Mary that she was at Werner's house.

Another guy, this one tall and wearing oversized glasses that made his eyes bug out, came to the front door, holding a can of diet cola. A kid, really, he hadn't shed the baby fat in his face yet. It made his attempt at a mustache even more pitiful. He had to squat down to get through the doorway, like maybe he had played high school basketball once before all the stick-and-poke tattoos. He took a look at Erica's car in the driveway.

"She in the car?" He motioned the diet cola can toward the car.

I told him about the cuts, that she might be on acid, and that she'd been reciting poems.

"They're not poems," Werner said, putting his can down on the porch step. "They're healing mantras."

"We can take her to the hospital," Erica said.

"They'll just pump her full of chemicals," Werner said. "Bring her inside."

Erica and I carried Mary into the house. Weed and cat piss stunk up the living room. A guitar droned from a hidden speaker. The guy from the porch wandered through the room with a bowl pressed against his lips and disappeared into the kitchen. He came back and put a tackle box on the floor next to the couch. The only light came from a lamp with a t-shirt tossed over it. Werner eased Mary onto the stained futon, adjusting her arm so that it was propped on a cushion.

Erica glared my way, the disappointment on her face meant to hurt.

Mary looked blissed out, though. Lips parted, eyes closed. It made me think—very briefly—that I'd done right by not taking her to the hospital. Erica had been so calm helping Mary in the car, but now, her hands shook as she watched Werner grab a bottle of vodka stashed behind the couch and pour some on a beach towel and a little into his soda can. These people I ended up surrounding myself with! Who were they? Even then I didn't know. And when I think about them years later, like I'm doing now, a few years sober and clean, they skid through my memories like ghosts waiting at the periphery of that other life that I somehow escaped

"That can't be sterile," Erica said.

"Don't worry," Werner said. "I've done this before."

Werner squeezed a lemon into a shot glass and shook some cayenne pepper in after. At his feet was the tackle box, and when he opened it up it revealed a first-aid kit that probably rivaled an army medic's. He held up Mary's arm and examined the slashes again. "Not too deep this time," he said.

Mary half-opened her eyes, said, "I'm not just a rock in your stream."

"I know," Werner said. "Think about those plains."

He dripped the lemon and pepper mixture into Mary's cuts. She let out a feral scream. Her body convulsed on the couch.

"This is fucking barbaric," Erica said, turning away.

"Do you hear the wheat rustling?" Werner said. He wrapped his hand around Mary's bicep and squeezed. "Listen."

"I'm listening," Mary said, through tears. "I can hear it."

I tried listening, too, but I couldn't hear anything. The girl seemed alright, somehow, and we had avoided the hospital. Wasn't that what mattered? Erica and I watched this couple fade into each other like we weren't even there. I reached for her hand, but she pushed it away. I remembered again that day we visited the art gallery in Houston. After all the lying I'd done, I'd suggested the trip from Austin to Houston as a way to get our relationship back on track. There was a chapel that Erica wanted to see filled with huge paintings of muted colors. That afternoon, we walked through the galleries together, one by one, and looked at all the paintings and sculptures. We held hands as we walked through a garden path to get to the chapel. Right then, I thought, we were living what our relationship could've been. Erica sat on a pew and stared up at the canvases. They looked like swaths of boring color to me. The other people in the chapel looked suspended in silent prayer. Erica closed her eyes. It was only then that I understood that she was there for her dad. "Should I wait outside?" I whispered.

"Yeah, I think you should." Erica had said.

Mary whimpered as Werner wrapped the vodka-soaked towel around Mary's arm, staining it a dark red. He unwrapped it a moment later, revealing the cuts, pink and swollen. You could see scars, older, faded ones of the same kind. He touched the back of his hand to her forehead. "You're coming back to me," he said. He rolled white gauze around her arm. He assured her that she was not a rock but was, in fact, the wind.

What else can I tell you about that night?

I can tell you that Erica still wanted her money. So I gave her the keys and she drove us back over to the bar. Birds called in the almost-dark. Tony was gone by the time we got back. The bar had been properly closed, the bathroom mopped and bleached as if the events of the night had never happened. Erica took a seat at the bar, staring at all the bottles lined and capped in front of her.

"I need a drink," she said.

I poured her a shot of vodka. She slammed it—no chaser--like I'd only seen her do a couple times. I poured her another shot, a half pour, and went to the back room again for my tip envelope.

I counted the bills. Told myself I could go a week without calling Cory for a bag, told myself that the next week was going to be all about change, that I wasn't going to drink or buy drugs, that starting tomorrow I wasn't going to lie or steal, that I was going to be the boyfriend Erica deserved. The boyfriend that could support and love and be there for her. I was afraid of losing her. I was afraid of how much further I could go if she wasn't there to bring me back.

But before I left the back room, I changed my mind. Picked a couple twenties out of the envelope and stuffed them in my pocket. During those days my selfishness knew no bounds.

"This is only half," Erica said when she counted the bills.

"I can give you the rest this weekend," I said.

"You said you had all of it."

"I was wrong," I said.

Erica got up and walked past me and went behind the bar. There was a blood stain on the sleeve of her hoodie. I tried blocking her, my instincts kicking in about someone that didn't work at the bar coming back there, but she pushed right past me. She reached up and grabbed a bottle of the expensive vodka and filled her glass.

"It's not about the money," she said.

END NOTES

i. Beyond City Limits

I've been back in Nanaimo for days and we're already hitting the road: "Operation Okanagan" is a go. Mum says if we fill up now, we won't have to stop until Chilliwack. There's room in the trunk for another person and maybe some beef jerky, but I'm not sure if we'll make it beyond Vancouver; Taylor IS in his 20s. I wonder if we've outgrown this—the "family vacation" trope. Dad taking a detour, mum getting angry, and Tay on the toilet for two days because he hogged all the snacks. I could fight it, but it makes them happy...I think...The best part is, they'll be divorced in six months. Can you imagine driving nine hours with that hanging over your head? I should stop complaining. This is probably the last time we'll all be together in this context. I'll let you know how the expedition fared once we get into the valley. Hope you're managing alright with the kids.
xo Jack

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