



THIN AIR
MAGAZINE

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EDITORS' NOTE

This year has been one of loss and separation. Since our last issue, we have witnessed the violence of police brutality, political insurrection, and an ongoing global pandemic. We have seen language be weaponized to spread misinformation and enact racial violence. Pointing out the severity of our current circumstances feels both obvious and unnecessary; it has already become cliché and commercialized to call these “unprecedented times.” Nevertheless, it is important to us that we mention this here: it was the profound work of our contributors that sustained us through this year of grief. We want to give our deepest thanks to these artists. Thank you for creating a more hopeful future for language.

Thank you also to our dedicated readers and editorial staff. We especially appreciate Lawrence Lenhart, our faculty advisor, for guiding our efforts to improve the diversity of voices represented in these pages. Thank you to Dr. Nicole Walker, Dr. Donelle Ruwe, and the entire NAU Department of English. *Thin Air Magazine* would not be possible without the generosity of Diana Gabaldon. Many thanks to the NAU Virtual Design Lab for our beautiful new logo and website. These pages were designed, printed, and bound inside our beautiful cover, thanks to the hard work of Arden Paugh, NAU Printing Services, and Amanda Meeks (respectively). Finally, thank you to Jake Skeets, who served as the inaugural judge of the Bird in Your Hands Prize

We look forward to the day when we can celebrate the work herein with our Arizona writing community, including *Curios*, *Carbon Copy*, *Sonora Review*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*. We feel lucky to be part of Flagstaff's literary scene, alongside Cinder Skies Reading Series and the Northern Arizona Book Festival. As we present the 27th issue of *Thin Air Magazine*, we'd like to thank prior editorial staffs for their dedicated work.

Ryan Drendel, Lee Anderson, and Matt Medendorp
Editor-in-Chief, Managing Editor, and Creative Director

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*WINNER OF OUR EDITOR'S CHOICE HONORARIUM

LA ÁNGEL DE
FIRST RESPONDERS
[WOODHULL HOSPITAL]

BY ISA GUZMAN

After Rafael Alberti

ella piensa en vela y vela y vela
on every stoop her chest opens
to the sound of banging calderos
her mouth sings psalms para quiet sidewalks
quieto con palomas y lluvia
de hope down Broadway, where the sirens
hacen nidos con sus alas
que todo va a estar bien
eventually y every traffic light se flash
verde y verde y verde

CAESURA

BY SNEHA SUBRAMANIAN KANTA

Before the name for a sky
cochineal for carmine tint
in an expanse of turquoise
autumn shades all sallows
if not a seasonal brandish?
A bifurcation of spatial
cloud, sprawl of lake,
a city & white birds fly
Collinearity burns a pack
These indomitable roads
of a perineal ghost.
fulfilled by a pale yellow
of houses, liken to a ritual
A completion of scattered
of a town with the ghosts
birds fly like polystyrene.
hunger. Every bestiary
more gravel. Ghost near
to become a wolf. Cipher
stones is the probability
of another animal. Horses
of lustrous light is a slow
fly over a block column
near their slope of descent.
& their songs wake rows
of pastel mauve into teal
carapace. What bird moves
disappears at the heel
of deferral is a saturation
kept for birds out in a lawn.
still at a distance, ripples are
begin to embrace a shade

we had a bluet to unname
or vermilion ether birthed
a slant burnish dawn glow
into yellow. What is flesh
Grief is a corpuscle syntax.
arrangements of blue: rain
ether. Rainclouds empty
across all directions.
of leaves in windfall gusts.
are a continuum
The myth of eventides
tincture smudged on roofs
of mouths in mourning.
hue joins the dark ends
on water. Broken-winged
Animal in a hollow with
is the rub of gravel into
a receded shoreline flares
carved over prehistoric
to understand the feast
gallop in a field & the pull
harness. Barnacle geese
of space & a ghost floats
The sky plucks crows
of houses. The juxtapose
at sundown. Call the sky
through us; what animal
of sunrise? The semantics
point. Loaves of bread
When water appears to be
carried by a ghost. Maples
of mauve & a bird dithers

through whetstone mosses
the dimensions of wind.
for sparse. Holographic
the lake. A ghost passes
& northern cardinals
as nectarine with wings.
a landscape of more oak
When fecundity spores
multiverses spring into
the surrender of hyacinths
Animals move in the path
guide us toward their own
hold the reentry of fruit
residual salt at the edge
See how tides gravitate
of being retracted, unmade.
orbit of upheaval as swelled
A chain-link of woven net
safekeeping. Animal spelunks
flooded in the garb
sings for the empty pier

along the joists, toward
Space is a renunciation
sky releases bluebirds into
through the viburnums
perch in the geology
Oaken doors open to
trees lined up in verdant.
into vast fog, its dotted
trees. What violence is
in a country of longitude?
of a glacier. Our tendons
unknotted gospels. Claws
among a reef. A sea leaves
of every diminished wave.
toward the constant shift
Jupiter moves in a widened
waves band in crepuscle light.
by spiders. Every house is a
to hibernate. A trail of sea
of midsummer beams. A ghost
in the concavity of bent light.

CHRONIC WANTING

BY KIT TEMPO

The blood ties that bind the women in my family
are septic with chronic wanting.
A history stripped from one side to fill the belly of the other,
my ancestry has parentheses left empty,
holes our women trip into surely as their own grave.
This want buried pearlescent in their stomachs,

leaves them wishing for spring births
and complacent daughters.
Their babies are blueprints
built to house old traumas in unburdened bodies,
tape measure our torsos and tailor the old clothes.
She puts me in her wedding dress and zips up the back,
catches her fingertips between my shoulderblades,
her pain caught in her pretty
caught on my body.
My mother never learned how to see her own pain
unless it was reflected in somebody else.
I look just like her and no one will let me forget this.

I was built in the image of my ancestors,
both stolen and stealing, history dripping deviant in my blood.
I find a picture of my great grandmother and my uncle says he sees
me in her,
my mother and I wear her face through sunbleached film,
he doesn't tell me what this means.

I infer;
Every woman in my family has been named deviant in her own time,
so I must always live with ample space to hide.
Instead, I warp deviance until I am no longer woman.
A shame of inheritance.

My mother wished for a springtime birth,
a baby bleached of her Blackness,
a balanced daughter.
I wasted away in our intergenerational wanting,
wore dresses to graduations
which I sometimes starved to fit in to,
but mostly to prove that I was a Woman in my family,
complacent blueprint under tape measures
wrapped tight around my throat
and I wonder how I can justify recovery when it breaks tradition?

I want to look at these women and see myself
in how they sometimes survive,
but there are women in my bloodline buried under stolen soil
from Waco to Toronto
and some put themselves there.
Not all graves have markers,
and I wonder how I'm expected to be ladylike
with all this dirt under my nails.

I have been gifted this body.
and I broke it down,
an un-woman housed in an incorrect ancestry.
When I die, what wanting will I bury in my granddaughters' stomachs?
Where in the blueprints will the women mark my grave?

SYNESTHESIA

BY LUCY ZHANG

When we were 14, we had our eyes removed. We stayed awake throughout the procedure, listening to the metal tools clatter on a tray as the surgeon cut through the muscle and tissue attaching our eyeball, one hand holding the globe and the other slicing through the optic nerve, the last lifeline clinging to our socket. Then the surgeon placed marble-like implants into the holes and sewed our extraocular muscles to a fake sclera. An hour after we first entered the operating room, we left with balls of polymethyl methacrylate stitched into our faces. At first, we were clumsy. We'd swing the door open too far and it'd crash into the shoe stand, a flimsy structure of poles and plastic connectors. If we were lucky, only one pipe would dislodge itself and we could reach for the dangling connector and snap it all back together—but most of the time, the whole stand would tumble and we'd have to feel for matching shoelaces and soles to pair shoes back together. We adjusted. We learned that some owls hoot during the day and some shriek. We learned to identify people from their handshakes and voices. We were fitted for new wearable sensors to help with proximity detection. But for the most part, we spent our time playing VR games, headsets snapped shut around our faces. We liked the ocean game: walking on the seafloor, feeling the bedrock against our feet, calcium shell fragments digging into our heels as we walked over tubes of sediment created by worms. When the battery signal vibrated against our forehead, we'd plug the headset into the dusty extension cord curled around the bedposts like a snake. We'd rest our minds by staring at the ceiling. We'd raise a hand upward like we were trying to block sunlight as we had done before the procedure, outside on the damp grass. But not seeing anything now, of course. Not the color of our skin, not the blank canvas of the ceiling.



KING TIDE QUINAULT

BY JUDITH SKILLMAN

JOHN DÔ

BY JENNIFER F.

John Dô got his dick wet when he was 15. That summer, like every summer in Boston, was the hottest anyone could remember. By August the Public Garden greens were baked yellow and John and his friends were fried red from sweating out all of their afternoons on Carson Beach, a perfunctory patch of sand halfway down the Red Line. It was no Nantucket, but there were fewer syringes rolling in the ripples than there were in Revere, and girls occasionally turned out in bikinis.

“I bet you a hundred bucks you can’t get laid today,” said Phu.

“So if I get laid, you’ll give me a hundred bucks?” That would give him enough to buy something from the new Supreme release, which he could resell for twice as much.

“Yeah, and if you don’t, you pay out.”

The rest of the boys yelled the “ooohs” that they reflexively yelled whenever anyone said anything that aroused them. John wondered briefly why Phu felt like putting the bet on him instead of anyone else in their group. If anything, he gave Phu the worst odds. He was the tallest, and the time they all had taken out their erect penises in a fit of pubescent curiosity, John’s had been the longest. None of them had ever so much as pawed a blouse, but—at Vietnamese school, at least—John had caught the eye of a few girls who asked him where he got those light eyes and soft brown hair.

Maybe Phu just felt like shedding a hundred bucks. His dad was pretty well-placed in the complicated bureaucracy that ran the main underground casino in Chinatown, so he had more reliable pocket money than the rest of the boys. He liked to wave it around occasionally, a maneuver he’d learned from the casino men.

“Deal,” John said, and shook Phu’s hand. The rest of the boys patted his back.

There weren't many people on Carson Beach at 1 p.m. on a Tuesday. It was mostly idle guys like them, high schoolers and the older, more worn down youths who hang around the high schoolers long after their own graduations. A few of these guys had girlfriends in tow, but hardly any of the women on the beach looked unattached. There was an ambiguously foreign nanny watching heavy-lidded while her blond Beacon Hill charges played something pugilistic. Two women past 50 made righteous-sounding conversation in a guttural language, faces shaded with wide straw hats. They appeared to be pointing some of their disapproving head shakes at the one lone woman on the beach, reclining on a folding lounge near the water. Her swimsuit was not a bikini, but it was hot pink and cut high on the leg. Her long black hair was tied back in a scrunchie in a similar shade of pink. She made John think of his little sister's Asian Malibu Barbie.

Technically, the doll wasn't a Barbie; the box she came in said her name was "Kira, Barbie's Exotic Friend." Her face looked vaguely Asian, but her irises were painted a strange blue and yellow pattern that matched her original earrings (now lost). They were almost a plasticized version of his eyes, which looked blue in the brightest sun and bilious yellow in the rest. Kira didn't look anything like John's sister Jess; her dad had overridden his mom's half-white blood with his own unambiguously Vietnamese features. John could remember the man who used to come around to see his mother seven years ago, one of the regulars from the casino, his black hair slicked back with so much pomade it perfectly reflected the twinned fluorescent tubes in the ceiling.

Jess had other Barbies, half a dozen of the standard Caucasian ones, stripped bare of their differentiating accessories and now assimilated into one homogeneous pile of tangled blonde hair. But only Kira did it for John. Once he'd taken the doll out of his sister's room and peeled open the velcro back of her swimsuit. Though the breasts were nippleless, the subtle V carved into her pelvis was so enticingly suggestive that he hardened immediately. It was only after his ejaculate dripped onto the doll's pert plastic ass that he

felt shame. He ran her legs, molded from a stickier, more pliable plastic than her arms and torso, under the bathroom faucet and patted them dry on his mother's pink bath towel. That was his first and only tryst with Kira. Now, when he watched his sister play with her Barbies, arousal and discomfort bubbled simultaneously in his lower gut, a cocktail as dangerous as ammonia and bleach. He felt the same when he looked at the woman on the beach.

"Go for it, man," said Phu.

John stood up. His friends cheered discreetly. Every step towards the woman seemed to pull him deeper into the sand.

Up close, the woman in the pink swimsuit looked older. A little fatter. The black makeup around her eyes has flaked away in places and settled on her cheeks like dandruff. No—those were freckles, the same dark patchy ones his mother had. She only looked up when his shadow passed over her paperback. Their first eye contact sent a jolt through John's stomach and into the base of his penis. Her eyes looked blue in this light, with a golden edge.

"Can I sit here?" he said, gesturing to the space beside her.

She looked back at her book. "Go ahead."

He should have brought his towel. He couldn't go back for it now, so he sat on the bare sand beside her, knees pulled close to his chest. In his head, he ran through the pickup lines he and his friends tested on each other, culled from websites lousy with pornographic pop-up ads. His favorite had impressed them all, made them break into their chorus of "ooohs." "Damn, son," Phu had said. "Any girl would drop her panties for that one." And John had believed it. Maybe it was because he read it next to an animated GIF of a woman rubbing her own breasts, but the line seemed genuinely sexy to him. Now, even in his head, it sounded ridiculous.

John rubbed some sand off the top of his right foot. "What are you reading?" he asked the woman.

"A book." She turned a page.

The blond kids ran past them in the ripples. One pushed the other, who tripped and splattered his face into the wet sand. His

nanny approached slowly, as if to allow herself to enjoy a few moments of his cries. John was reciting one of the less overtly phallic lines in his head when the woman finally spoke to him.

“Hey, are you trying to pick me up, or something?” she asked in a Boston accent tinged only slightly with the tones of some Asian language.

“Uh.” John’s first instinct was to deny it. Then he remembered the bet. “Yeah.”

“How old are you?”

“18,” John said in the deepest voice he could manage.

Her eyes, light as his, scanned his hairless face, the folds where his wet swim trunks clung to his skin. “Okay,” she said at last. “Let’s go.”

They rode the Red Line to her place. There weren’t many commuters at this time of day. When the train descended to its underground tunnel past Broadway, their reflections came into view in the dark window opposite them. John stared at his face in the glass. He looked younger than he imagined himself, rounder. He tried to catch the woman’s eye, but she was engrossed in her dog-eared paperback. He could only read a few words over her shoulder: Bodice. Breasts. Horse.

At Ashmont they got off the train to wait for the streetcar that connected the Red Line to Mattapan. They stood silently on the platform, one foot apart, staring in the direction the streetcar would come. John hadn’t waited on this platform since he was six years old, when he and his mother lived in a cramped corner of the sprawling Mattapan projects. By the time he realized that they were retracing the path to those projects, they were already there.

The woman’s building wasn’t the one where John spent the first six years of his life, but her place was similar enough that he felt like he could find his way to her room without her help. They passed the empty reception desk, climbed the stairwell, dodged the larger puddles in the hallway. When she opened her door, the lived-in smell burst out like gases from a can: fish sauce and charred meat, mildew and a stronger concentration of the

musk he had noticed when he got close enough to her body.

After closing the door behind her, the woman finally started to play the role that he had imagined for her when he first saw her on the beach. She turned around and smiled, scanned his face from his forehead to his lips, held her gaze there. The half-second of eye contact was enough to send the blood back into John's penis. He leaned in and kissed her—his first. She took control of the kiss and of his body, pulling him backwards towards the bedroom. Halfway across the living room John stepped on something small and jagged, with a sticky give that recalled Kira's legs. He yelped in pain and looked down reflexively, but the woman pulled his face back to hers before John could see what he had stepped on.

The woman's bed was sedimented with layers of bolsters, throws, tassels; the decorative buttons on her duvet pressed into his back when she straddled him. This was uncomfortable, but it didn't last long. None of it lasted long.

John awoke to the morning sounds of clattering pans and sizzling oil. He could smell garlic and meat; his mother must be cooking something better than Pop Tarts this morning. He stretched out as long as he could, taking pleasure in his stiffness, and opened his eyes. Then he shrieked the way he had before his voice changed.

There was a child staring at him, leaning almost close enough to lick his face. John tried to make out the face hanging inches away from his own. His eyes couldn't lock into focus. When he looked directly at any one of the boy's features, the details seemed to fade, like dim stars in a city sky.

"Get out of there, Bao," the woman's voice called from the other room. The boy scurried away like a cockroach.

John remembered where he was. The light was lower now, the gauzy curtains closed, and it took some effort for him to find his clothes on the floor. He didn't want to touch the light switch; that seemed like too much of a trespass. While he was stepping into his shorts, the woman looked into the room. He covered himself, but she didn't seem to notice his nakedness.

“*Đói bụng quá?*” the woman asked.

“*Da,*” said John, before he could check himself. Yes, he was hungry, and also drained, like someone had stuck a tap in him and dripped out his vital fluids. He didn’t want to expend the energy required to have a whole conversation in Vietnamese. His fluency was confined to the kind of interactions he had with his mother: eating her food, scrubbing her floors, and cursing back at her while she chased him with a slipper.

The woman, however, continued in English when they sat down at the kitchen table. “So you’re Vietnamese,” she said, handing him a plate of chicken scattered with stringy pickled radish. “You don’t really look it. Where’d a Vietnamese kid get a name like John?”

“My mom said it’s her dad’s name.”

“Oh yeah? That’s supposed to be my dad’s name, too. But I guess all the white guys are Johns over there.” She paused to do the math. “So your mom’s a GI kid? One of the *bụi dờ?* Came in on the Amerasian Act?”

John hated getting into this. It was easier to let people assume that he was just a regular kid with one white parent and one Asian parent, like Victoria Kim-Smith at his high school. Tall and bronze with a perfect ovoid face, she was both captain of the field hockey team and salutatorian of the class. Whenever anyone asked her how she did so much, she would laugh and say “Hybrid vigor!” Her parents showed up for every event, always together, trim and healthy and brimming with entirely explicable love. When Victoria herself fell in love, she could tell her beloved a sweet, clean story about how her parents met, maybe at the supermarket or a town hall forum. She would never have to think about dusty teenage parents who met on a refugee boat, each drawn to the miscegenated features of the other, parents who bred as thoughtlessly as shiphold rats even though they in all likelihood had the same father. “I don’t know,” he said to the woman.

The woman wasn’t listening to him. She mashed at her rice. “Get a visa for a face. If *Ba* John hadn’t swung his fat white dick all

over the place we wouldn't be here, right?" She looked around her public housing dining/living room, along the walls splattered with years of food debris, the cardboard boxes pushed into the corners like she'd just moved in.

Suddenly the kid reappeared. John didn't know where he could have been hiding in the one-bedroom unit; maybe behind one of the stacks of boxes. The woman pushed a small bowl and spoon towards him. He ate with one hand while clutching something in the other. John recognized the toy: a Jungle Tunnel Rat G.I. Joe. He'd had the same one when he was a kid. Those rippled abs and realistically nipped pecs must have been what dug into his foot on his way to the bedroom.

The woman got up to wash dishes in the cubby-like kitchen, leaving John alone with her son. He didn't make eye contact, but John could feel a familiar energy emanating from the boy. He'd felt it emanating from himself every time his mom brought home someone new. This empathy created a tenderness in John. The boy needed a dad. Maybe John could be that dad. Maybe he'd ride the Red Line here again, become a presence in this one-bedroom unit. He could teach the kid to play cards and use the bet money from Phu to take him to a game at Fenway Park.

Just when John was imagining catching a fly ball for the kid and giving it to him to cherish forever, the boy looked up from his doll. For the first time John, could see his eyes: a sickening toilet-bowl swirl of colors, set in a face that had no racial markers ever associated with any human community. "You fucked my mom," he said a voice that had neither place nor age. "Fuck you."

John stood up and left.

When he got back to his house in the last lingering hours of the summer afternoon his friends were all lounging on the stoop, passing around a blunt and eating his mom's homemade sesame candy. Phu was the first one to see him coming down the sidewalk. "Yo, it's John!" Suddenly the boys were whooping and cheering like he was the hero at the end of his movie.

"How was it, man?" said Phu. His wallet was already out.

The inside of John's head felt as dry as if someone had split it open and laid out the halves in the sun. He tried to recall the sensation of the woman's vagina closing around his penis but could only remember the boy and his placeless face.

"Got my dick wet," said John, grinning. The boys ruffled his hair and patted every accessible inch of his body and followed him into the apartment, where his mother, sensing a beginning, had prepared a special meal.

MOONJUG & THE WEIGHT OF AIR

BY CHRISTINE BYRNE

We all know the story: she met him through Bunny (using recreationally)
& Moonjug wanted to get married.

We know the later story: a second cell phone, *how dare you speak
of any violence turned against you* she couldn't remember the
aftermath of my brothers' faces—this isn't a crossroad.

We can't dampen innocence with last summer's paper towels. Someone said
police cars lined our block. I offer to fly *What you've done, this will
ruin us* say ascendant, turning voices,
turning damage
to peculiar weaponry walking in envisioned slowness
—what are the origins of these blistered hands?

Slaughter containers. Arms. Dogs in strollers. My father
making cinnamon pancakes. Filling propane tanks. My mom, leeching over
don't tell
your little brother. Wait for things to settle, for him to come home.

All the dressing and distressing shame
looked by knowing, shaking by the shoulders something short-lived.

I can't understand why her eyes wander into guidelights whenever it gets
furious outside. Someone tells me my father is worried
I won't speak again

My father used to fill my tires
with the weight of air

She asks me how—to concisely say—there are certain sounds that bring her,
how to say—it's okay just not so simple I have been with
thirty-two years and sex and

raising three children trying to have sex and
the dog was depressed and eating paper in the nighttime. That old house
with the folding chairs, green linoleum, where I once
had to help dress her yes once or twice *let me wash your hair let me* mom
help you *what was the hospital*

like Eyelids, yes—soft folding corners
I thought I was in a kitchen

Bunny, like an incarnation of hell, coming with her own
moonshine to heal the structure

and my mother, Moonshine, leaving with the roses wedged
in the passenger sun visor for Arizona.

HILLENDALE COUNTRY CLUB, MORNING GUARD

BY DAVID GALLOWAY

I turn rusty tumblers, free the gates,
send a spray of droplets to the cement.
Blue-white chaise lounges float in the upper pool,
flung there by last night's storm.
A green frog scoots about in the deep end—
fifteen minutes to catch him with a skimmer
and toss him outside the waist-high chain-link.

The manager left a note—*reprime baby pool filter*.
Lifeguards drift in with biscuits and orange juice from
McDonald's, or cook omelets in the snack bar.
Between the chaise lounges they find a thick paperback
on the founding of Australia that was left out in the rain.
Thwack of golf balls on the driving range, a tank explosion
and machine gun *rat-a-tat-tat* from the empty game room.

No icemaker in the snack bar, so daily we bring ice
from the clubhouse “up top”—
if you're lucky you'll pass by the back door
as the chef carves an ice sculpture with his electric knife.
You take a double-layered garbage bag to the kitchen,
fill it with cubes, and stagger down the service drive
like a crazed Santa, spine on fire and frozen.

The swim team moves to the upper pool, its steel
sides made from a liberty ship. A guard climbs
the chair made of painted plumber's pipe to watch.
Thunk the tennis machine spits balls over the net.
Two elderly women properly attired bounce
like white pillows as the pro shouts,
“You've got to go after those low ones!”

The local alcoholic has settled in to sun herself,
alternating hard liquor with her iced tea.
A teenaged girl practices springboard dives,
emerging from the deep end she tugs her neckline higher,
black suit slick as a seal, hugging every curve,
as the guards watch through the plate glass window
like primitive man seeing fire for the first time.

HOLD ONTO ME (I'M TRYING)

BY JOANNA ACEVEDO

He sleeps like a new poem, curled like a comma, no covers, no air conditioning. When she first met him she couldn't believe he didn't have air conditioning. They're in the middle of a heat wave, but they can't stop clutching at each other in the night. He wakes her up in the morning by curling his body around hers in a loose banana shape, pelvis to pelvis, big spoon to little spoon. She stirs against him. "Good morning," she says.

"Stay asleep," he says. "I'm just gonna stay here."

"Okay," she says.

Usually she wakes up before he does, then falls back asleep with her phone in her palm for an hour or so until he wakes up. She can never wake him. She likes to watch him sleep. His eyes closed, mouth open. Who knows how many mornings they will have like this? Not very many. In just a few weeks, he is moving home to Greece and she is staying in New York, and then their little affair will be over, and who knows when she will see him again? Who knows if she will see him again?

The uncertainty permeates everything she does. Waking up in the morning, going to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee, no pants, his arms circling her waist. Thinking, is this the last time?

She is 23. He is 38. She is young enough to believe in fate, destiny, and most of all, in desire. She thinks that desire is enough. She does not know enough. She does not know anything.

"Stay," she says when she finds out that he is leaving.

"New York has nothing to offer me," he says. They have been doing this, whatever they are doing, this affair, for two or three weeks. In that time they have seen each other almost every day. It has peaked into an obsession for her, although she tries to hide it from him: the way she thinks about him almost all the time, the

way she wants him. She has always been a slave to her desires. She falls in love quickly, or not at all. She has always been this way. “I’ve been here for nine years. I’m tired of the hustle.”

She loves the hustle, the back and forth, the runs to the coffee shop in the morning. In the last four months, New York has shut down. The coronavirus has ground everything to a halt. Her job, adjunct teaching at a local university, has ended. It is July. In September, she will go back to teaching, studying poetry for her PhD. But for now, she lazes around the house, smoking cigarettes in the morning out on the stoop. The heat makes her lethargic. She hasn’t met a man in months, hasn’t been touched by anyone but her roommate in careless hugs that leave her breathless and wanting human contact.

He touches her. He runs his hands down the base of her spine. In public, he is cool and collected, but there are signs. He sticks his tongue out at her. He spills his drink on her leg. He defends her in front of his friends, even though she is perfectly capable of defending herself. They go home together, almost wordlessly.

“New York has something to offer you,” she says, when he tells her he is leaving. “I’m here.”

“I know, baby,” he says. “But I have to see my family. It’s been nine years.”

“But what about me?” she says. She wants to know what happens to her, when he leaves.

“I know,” he says. He touches her face. They don’t talk about it anymore.

So now she watches him sleep. While she can. While there’s time.

“We should do something together,” she says. All they do is go to the bar, go to the house, have sex, sleep. “We should go to the beach.”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I have work to do.”

“Come on,” she says. “Or the park. Let’s do something. We never do anything together.”

They are lying in bed. It is morning. “We’re together right now,” he says.

“I just want one day with you,” she says. “Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes. We’re not dating or anything,” he says. She squirms beside him. “Besides. We go to the bar all the time. That’s something, isn’t it?”

“Just give me one day,” she says. “That’s all I’m asking for.”

He rolls onto his back, looks up at the ceiling. She looks at his profile: arched nose, heavy beard covering the bottom half of his face. He’s 38 but looks 30 except for the gray that peppers his dark hair. There’s a youthfulness to his movements, to the playful way he wraps his arms around her, but right now he’s not playing.

“I give you enough,” he says. But she can tell he’s wavering. “Alright. You want to go to the beach? Let’s go to the damn beach.”

“Yes,” she crows. “Let’s go. When do you want to go?”

“Let’s go right now. Grab your shit.”

They talk on the long train ride out to Coney Island about nothing. She is jittery and excitable. He’s wearing a tank top and purple shorts, faded brown hat on his head. She likes his hair; wants to run her fingers through it. Sometimes she does that when they watch movies together, plays with his hair. He never tells her to stop, but never says he likes it, either. She doesn’t know what that means.

He’s always treated her like her body is something special, a place of worship. It’s just a body, she always says. It’s just a body. He treats her like she’s something precious. She doesn’t want to lose that feeling. She doesn’t want to give it up. On the train, his hand strays to rest on her knee. Just for a moment, just a tap. Just enough to know that he’s there. He doesn’t say anything about it. And for a second, she feels like everything is going to be okay.

Then she remembers. He’s leaving.

It’s a hot day. The train car is extra air-conditioned, but as the Q train goes above ground, they can see all of Brooklyn illuminated in sunlight around them, the low-lying buildings of Flatbush and Sheepshead Bay glowing in the rays. She looks out of the window at the passing scenery, wondering how you could ever want to

leave a city like this? “What’s Greece like?” she asks him.

“It’s beautiful,” he says. “Beaches. The Mediterranean Sea. Mountains. Everyone not so close together, like this.”

“It’s far away,” she says, trying not to pick a fight and failing.

“I know that.”

“Really far away. Too far to visit.”

“I’ll be back.” He looks out the window at the passing Avenue J stop. “A year or two. Then I’ll be back.”

“I could be a completely different person in a year,” she says.

“What if I don’t want to see you anymore?”

“What if you don’t?” he says. “Then you won’t.”

“Promise you’ll come find me when you come back,” she says.

“I can’t promise you anything,” he says.

“Then why bother to say anything at all,” she says. She looks out the window again, trying not to look at his face. Trying not to cry.

Outside, they both wear masks. He has a bandanna wrapped around his mouth and nose; she can’t read his facial expressions. It’s almost better that way. It would be too hard, she thinks, to be able to see his face. She walks next to him on the boardwalk, which is teeming with people trying to maintain a six-foot distance from one another. Coney Island cannot be shut down, she thinks to herself, not even in a global pandemic. Life and color are everywhere. Children run screaming in between the legs of adults who are trying desperately to keep them in check. They walk down the boardwalk until they find a place with fewer people and put down their blankets.

They’ve brought a six pack of beer, two prerolled joints, some water, and a blanket to sit on. It’s a little after one in the afternoon. The sun is blazing. She peels off her shorts and t-shirt and stretches out on the blanket. He lights a cigarette, an American Spirit. She doesn’t know what to say. Maybe they’ve said everything, she wonders. That doesn’t seem possible. She looks down the beach at the other people lying on the sand. Do they know how long their lovers will stay with them? Do they hold onto them in the night,

wondering, is this the last time?

She puts her hand on his chest. He's lying on his back, sunglasses on, lost in thought. "What are you thinking about?"

"Don't ask me that," he says. "I know that trick."

She smiles, despite herself. "I know."

"I wasn't thinking about anything in particular," he says. "Do you want to smoke one of the joints?"

He stubs his cigarette out in the sand and they pass the joint back and forth. She watches him out of corner of her eye. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm just going to miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

"Will you? You're going to be with your family and friends. You're going to be with your whole life, and I'm going to be alone."

"You're not going to be alone. Your life is here, too."

"I know that. I just don't want you to forget me."

"I'm not going to forget you."

"I just don't want to be one of another procession of bodies in your bed," she says. "How many have there been? I'm just one of who knows how many? You're going to go home and move on and I'll just be nothing."

Suddenly she cannot stop talking. "I'm nothing. Just another girl. Admit it."

"Baby."

"I'm sorry," she says, putting her head in her hands. "I just—I don't want to move on. I just found you. I'm not ready to let you go yet."

"You don't have to let me go."

There are tears in her eyes. They're supposed to be having a nice day at the beach, and she is ruining it. She hates herself. "Baby. Shh. It's going to be okay. We'll see each other again."

She feels stupid for letting herself get attached so quickly. She fights back the smile on her face, the smile she always gets when she looks at him. She looks out at the ocean, at the crashing waves. The sound of the water soothes her. Slowly, her breathing returns to normal. "Just tell me you won't forget about me when you're gone."

“I won’t.”

“Promise.”

“I promise.”

“Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

They jump in the ocean around sunset. The water is cold. “Hold onto me,” he says. She jumps on his back. He carries her out into the waves, as far as they can go, until his feet don’t touch the ground anymore and she doesn’t know if she’ll be able to swim back. “Hold onto me,” he says.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do,” she says.

“What?” he says.

“Never mind,” she says.

The sun casts long rays of golden light across his face.

“I’ll hold onto you,” she says, and they duck underwater, kissing salty.

Wet, bedraggled, half-drunk, stoned and tired, they drag their bodies back onto the train around 10 p.m. “Are you sleeping over tonight?” he asks her.

“I think I want to be alone,” she says, but when they finally get back, she follows him home from the train station. They shower the salt and sand off together, fall into bed damp but happy.

He wraps an arm around her waist. She falls asleep wondering, how many days left? How many days? It doesn’t matter. She holds onto him as tightly as she can. She’ll let go when she has to, but not yet, not yet.



NOTHING IN THE DOTS

BY SIJIA MA

BOOTS

BY JOSEPH CHARLES MOLLICA

I wanted him for the boots. If there was more to him than the boots, I hadn't the foggiest. Turned out, the boots were just the prologue. There were the usual misconceptions to sort through, so it didn't happen all at once. The slow realization of more-than-boots added dimension, but this wasn't a love affair. Still, at the start, the boots had been good enough. They were clodhoppers with grungy crepe soles and the patina of physical labor, but he worked in IT, or another field that ended in the word technology, of which, I came to understand, there was more than one, and some required heavy-duty footwear.

Also, I had a weakness for macho. Minus the cumbersome allusions, he was coming in a little short of the mark. Lucky for him, Murray Hill macho was in bleak supply.

Inez says my taste in men is underwhelming, which was her way of putting it nice. It was none of her business, but it was good that someone cared. I thought of her every time I met a pair of boots, wondering whether they would meet her approval. Our apartments were vented into each other, so I played crashing wave sounds whenever I had a pair over. I always figured she was listening from behind the wall, stuffing her face with ice cream or cake, judging my new pair of boots. She wanted to talk about was the animalism of men. She showed me old photos as though to prove she had once been an attractive woman. Even without the photographic evidence, she gave the impression of a woman who'd spent a lot of time in a bikini. Now she had been divorced for nearly as long as she had been married. Her hairline was ruined by years of overtight ponytails, and her forehead had become shiny and prominent, like polished marble. She was lately experimenting with bangs, and gravity was only going to make the stoop worse. Her enormous breasts must have been a miserable burden. She probably sensed that she was about to embark on a long and indelicate phase of arid celibacy.

That first night Boots got us an Uber back to my apartment. “You have such nice teeth,” he told me in the backseat.

I took the stairs gingerly, like the many overburdened and under-loved women in my building. It was good practice for the future. He seemed worried that I might take a tumble, which was sweet.

“Wow look at that view!” he said entering my studio. A few twinkling lights on the Brooklyn Bridge, glimpsed through a transom over the bed. I never looked at it much since the twinkling lights were only visible from the doorway, but the transom had been a real selling point. A touch of whimsy and character, the agent had said, as though saying it made it true.

I handed him a glass of wine, which for some reason he sniffed. Which made me think back to the last time I’d tidied up down under. We stared at the pile of takeout containers I’d pushed into the sink.

He sat at the desk chair to yank off his boots and turned it into a big production.

He called himself something like Alex.

Later, he commanded me to turn over and get on my all fours. “Knock yourself out, Boots,” I said, and shook my ass in his face like a belligerent cat. He giggled like a small girl seeing something here to now off limits. I remember thinking: a sense of humor could redeem even the most counterintuitive footwear. If I looked down I could see the boots, neatly arranged under the desk I never used. By this point I was no longer thinking about whether I’d tidied up in the place where he was aiming. It wasn’t easy, but neither did I blurt out that I hated the boots, or that I thought it was wrong to wear them if he wasn’t mixing concrete or climbing a pole in a hard hat. My father had worn actual steel tipped ones to protect his toes from getting crushed by a rogue I-beam. It was a problem of context.

That’s what those boots are for, asshole, was what I really wanted to say. Wouldn’t be long till macho guys were wearing lab coats to the bar.

Besides, fashion, I had been wanting to say for a long time, had lost all its meaning.

I had a way of never saying exactly what I meant or what I was thinking. The world was built on lies and I believed in protecting it from itself. It was a dilemma. I had hopes once of achieving a state of perfect transparency. Gracious and fashion-forward and living in the moment.

After Boots finished up, we shared a beer and a cigarette on my fire escape. I was newly impressed by his subtle macho. He told me where he was from, but I don't remember a proper noun. He stopped talking and looked at me sweetly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm a thinker, not a doer," I said. "Are you okay?"

He said something nice like, "Of course. Why wouldn't I be? I just hope it's not me, whatever it is."

"It's not," I said. "You're the solution."

"Well," he said, "that's high praise."

"I usually like working class guys," I said. "Don't take it the wrong way."

"That's what that boots thing is about?"

"Don't take it the wrong way, please! I said you're the solution. Isn't that enough?"

"Sure, you're thinking about a problem and I'm the solution. You can tell me about what it is that I solved at some later date."

He was certainly not going to force me to dislike him. I told him I would like to know more. He said, okay, I really always wanted to be a doctor. A small town doctor, he said. Not a fancy doctor or a TV doctor. He mentioned a TV show about doctors and laughed and said, "I don't really watch it as much as it sounds like I do." Technology was not his passion, but the world still needed good technology. Some people, he said, didn't even think about their technology. It was unfair that the privileged took for granted their easy access to good technology, while others had to risk life and limb for theirs. And the technology they could eventually get access to, if they were lucky? Highly inferior.

"A lot of people just do it for the money," he said.

"I wouldn't judge," I said, but that was not what I meant. "Of course, I've had my own issues with technology."

"Who doesn't?" he said.

"Not I."

We should cut ourselves and forge a blood bond to take equal blame for the coming doom, is what I wanted to say. We laughed at our faulty understanding.

“Anyway, I think your technology is perfect,” he said.

“It’s my claim to fame,” I said. “Perfect technology.”

He admired my technology for a while longer, then got back into my bed and pulled the covers over his chest. He seemed unmoved that I was not joining, and said, “Do you mind if I sleep?”

“Knock yourself out,” I said. He was gone to the world in less than a minute. I thought about how easy it would be to murder him and how trusting he was that I wasn’t a psychopath, or just a spiteful butcher of a bitch with a bloodthirst. When he began to snore, I shoved him into a better position and watched him sleep. I noticed then the pathetic state of my pillows. It looked like they’d been stuffed with shopping circulars.

Before I joined him in bed, I took inventory. My room was just big enough for a bed and a desk I never used and a leather Chesterfield loveseat with a good wrinkly patina. And because I was on the fifth floor of an old row house, I had dormers. I could have afforded to move someplace with a uniform ceiling height, but low ceilings were not part of the solution. Same me, different room—that would never move the needle.

I took one last look at the boots, too, thinking I would probably never see them again. I held one in my hand and sniffed it. They had certainly been worn for some time, possibly years—so at least they hadn’t been made to look that way. And at least he wasn’t wearing flip-flops, or boat shoes.

Do you want to move in together? That’s what I had wanted to say.

I had a dream that night that the lights on the bridge had gone dark, and Boots had stood on my desk chair and switched them back on. It was a very heroic action. By candlelight, he showed me the panel hidden behind some loose bricks. Future reference, he said.

He tried to wake me in the middle of the night to say he was leaving, or so he wrote on the back of a Verizon bill that I found

on the counter as I dropped Frosted Flakes into my coffee. The rest of it said in so many words that he was happy to have met me. He signed it “Boots” and added a phone number. I waited a few hours and had two large glasses of wine before I dialed. “Gramercy Dental,” said the woman on the phone.

“I’m looking for Alex?”

“Gramercy Dental office,” the woman said. “Do you need an appointment?”

“My teeth are perfect,” I said.

“So why are you calling, hon?”

“Alex? He’s about six feet tall, maybe 180. His hair is dark and kind of brushed across his forehead, like K-pop style. He’s in technology?”

“Dr. Bunting’s in dentistry, hon. His first name is Fred. He’s Black.”

I gave up drinking for a while after Boots left me with the dentist’s number. I was too young to be so literal about the world. Who was I to say what a man in technology should or should not wear? I owned a pair of Western boots, but I was no cowgirl. Sometimes I wore yoga pants, although yoga had never occurred to me as a thing truly well adjusted people do. Personally, I knew several friends of friends with dreadlocks, yet they weren’t Black or even Rastafarians.

Sobriety gave me an idea: I wished to be pure again. The movement was linked to an article titled, “How Long Does it Take to Re-achieve Virginity?” The gist of it was that women all over the world were declaring themselves fiat virgins. So that’s what I did, too, following the steps in the article. Yet I couldn’t get over the fact that a fiat virgin was still very different than an authentic virgin. And the difference between them was everything.

I called my father to make sure that he was still alive. He asked about work. That was the extent of it. I think he was relieved that I didn’t need to borrow money. I did wonder sometimes if work could be the solution—it seemed to be for so many others—so I worked harder. It was easier without the hangovers and the remorse. The florid irony in my prose reflected a newfound pride.

My colleagues noticed, but seemed aware of the potential jinx.

One morning, the bodega guy where I get my lunch told me very earnestly that I was “glowing” and asked if I was pregnant. “Yes,” I said. “Twins.” He smiled like this news confirmed his belief in the world-saving power of fertility. I almost went back and told him I was lying, but he seemed genuinely uplifted by the news, and I wouldn’t have been able to explain why I’d lie about such a sacred state of being.

Also, I stopped reading other fashion blogs. And I sat downstream from the smoker’s perch and allowed poorly dressed passersby to wear whatever they wanted, without casting an eye in judgment. If it was my job to be superficial, I could change my personal habits. That was my thinking. I stopped avoiding Inez, but she had lately been missing from the hallway. My newfound virginity must have been tough on her. I even entertained the idea of joining a church, a nondenominational kind that’s friendly to LGBTQ, but there were just too many. Everyone, it turned out, was already searching for their solution. Apparently, what they had wasn’t enough.

I am an easily satisfied woman, is what I had wanted to say to Boots. I am a low-maintenance kind of gal. A slacker’s wet dream.

What I wanted was to try something no one else was trying, but where to find such a thing? My father used to say *it’s a lose-lose, or they get you one way or another*. There’s one—was it my father who’d said it?—that went, *if you can’t spot the sucker at the table within a few hands, the sucker is you*. For a while I considered doing something cinematic, like quitting my job to take a pilgrimage, but the journey/destination vortex thing bogged me down.

Then one day the solution reappeared when I found Boots outside my building holding a six-pack. “You never called?” he said.

“The number you left was for a dentist’s office.”

“That’s because I’m a dentist,” he said.

“You’re a dentist,” I said. “Since when? I thought you were in technology.”

“Since, like, four years ago. Were you listening to me when—”

“Can you prove it?”

“Would you like me to show you around my office.”

“I thought your name was Alex,” I said.

“Do I look like an Alex?” He smiled and stuck his chin out. “No comment about me staking out your building?”

He pulled a card out of his wallet. Gramercy Dental, Fred Macdougall, DDS.

“You're Black?” I said.

“What?”

“You're Black. The woman who answered the phone said you were Black.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “On my mother's side. Father's Korean.”

“Let me ask you something, Fred,” I said. “Would you date a virgin?”

“Why?”

“Because I'm a virgin.”

He switched the six-pack to his other hand. “Another interesting update,” he said. “Is that what you were thinking about after—”

“Definitely not,” I said.

“I was thinking, in case you were wondering, that I wanted to be the solution again,” he said.

“Then why are you not wearing the boots?”

He looked down at his feet. They were clad in bright orange running shoes. And then I realized he was wearing athletic shorts, and had obviously just come from the gym, or fresh from a jog.

“If you like them so much, I'm happy to go home and put them on.”

“So you're okay with dating a virgin?” I said.

“Is this a joke?”

“Go home, Dr. Fred, and don't come back without your boots,” I said. “Leave the beer.”

I am the catch of a lifetime, is what I had wanted to say.

LES DENTS DU FOND QUI BAIGNENT

BY ANDY KEYS

Le Garage, Bushwick

I'm sorry for that last drunk text—
I was in Brooklyn, bellied up and

deeper than intended
into several little grapefruit gimlets
because it was brunch

and I was alone
and the girl beside me also

had a book and a few
and so slipped too
into a noon wooze

and the colors
in the sunflower bar

untethered and the mirror
behind the bottles became
a map of the world, and you

were a distant pinprick
I was losing, my head

between the St. Germain
and the whiskey
and when I learned

the owner was French
I tried to tell her

je vais faire les vignes la bas
but my teeth were already swimming
so she was kind instead of curious

and ushered me
into the flowing street

I floundered
and for a stable thing
I reached

INVASION

BY KIRTI BHADRESA

In the last weeks of her pregnancy, Leya developed a headache that started behind her left eye, radiating vertically around her skull, and down the back of her head into her neck. When she said the headache was keeping her up even more than the ache of her hips and the baby pressing hard against her bladder, her doctor blamed hormones or stress, and joked that she'd better get used to not sleeping at night.

Soon after the pain in her head began, she also started finding ants in her house. The first one, a black speck small as a splinter, wandered across the bathroom counter as she was braiding her hair. Out of the corner of her eye Leya saw it move, and thought that the headache was somehow distorting her vision.

But when the insect passed behind the stainless steel faucet, she dropped her hair, squashed the ant with her thumb, and then rinsed it down the sink. The baby in her belly shifted.

Leya had spent the first day of her parental leave lying on the sofa, watching *Sex in the City* reruns. She had started the leave early because of the headache, and also because she could hardly wait to begin a full year off, away from all the drama of her work at the NGO: the office politics, the weight of doing work that never seemed to really change anything.

Soon after she killed the ant, Nathan called from his office.

I booked us a few days away. Before the baby. Everyone at the office thinks it's a good idea.

When?

This week. I'll take care of everything.

Leya felt that she should say that there was so much left to do at home, but she felt a weariness come over her, making the words feel like too much effort. Nathan was the kind of guy who got things done. When they needed a new fence he organized a group of friends to come over on a Saturday, ordered pizza, rented

equipment, and bought beer ahead of time so they had the whole thing built in a day. Just last month he'd repainted the whole living room in a single afternoon.

But every time he brought up the baby, saying he liked a certain name, or so-and-so had a rocking chair they were giving away, Leya could only say, not yet, I'm not ready, and he would look at her with worried eyes, exhale, Okay tell me when.

She had the feeling of the baby not quite being real. As though if she really acknowledged that they were about to fit a new human into their house, she might somehow jinx the whole thing. She had continued, throughout the entire pregnancy, to be surprised when people would notice her growing belly, ask her how far along she was. It was as if the pregnancy was still private, happening only between her and her own body, and she could hardly imagine there being an actual person, a combination of herself and Nathan, a complete human that she was about to bring into the world and share with others.

She felt awkward and embarrassed, unused to herself. Nathan, unlike Leya, moved with ease through the world: in his life before her, and now with her. Leya could feel his concern over her lack of desire to plan and prepare, and yet she couldn't participate, not even to ease his worry.

With the phone pressed to her ear, she considered that planning a weekend trip was Nathan's way of doing something, feeling productive somehow. She pictured him calling from his gray cubicle, talking in a low tone so the others around him wouldn't hear. So she said, Sure it'll be great. Pressing the hang up button, Leya felt her headache shift from behind her left eye into the bridge of her nose. She rubbed it between her finger and thumb.

Over the next two hours, she found three more ants. After killing each one, she thought that she should have found a piece of paper and taken the little thing outside, but instead she found herself squashing all three, instinctively, as she had the first. She rolled out the vacuum and sucked up the tiny carcasses with the gray hose, and then had a nap on the sofa

in the afternoon sunshine. Sleeping dreamlessly through the baby's hiccups and kicks, curled around her own belly like a cat.

It was late afternoon when they made their way in their blue Subaru to the resort in the mountains. The hotel sprawled luxuriously, stoically as though it had always belonged there, rising from the gray rock and green forest like magic, a fairy tale.

Leya and Nathan spent three nights at the hotel, sipping lemonade near the windows in the lounge, looking out at the impossibly blue lake and the peaks around them, eating heavy meals they could barely afford and Leya couldn't finish, the food kicked back up her throat by the baby's busy feet.

As a child, when Leya had come to this same hotel for her father's annual conferences, her family was often the only dark-skinned one, and the hotel seemed sparsely visited, the lobby quiet and empty. She felt embarrassed then, especially of her parents who didn't seem to notice how they stood out, though they were regularly asked where they came from. These days, the hotel was busy, especially in the summertime, with wealthy tourists from Asia. No one seemed to care about her and Nathan or their mismatched skin tones. Much of the staff was Indian or African, their rolling accents warm in her ears.

They didn't go out hiking or stay up late sitting close together under the night sky, as they would have in the past. Instead they spent evenings and mornings in their cramped room, watching old movies, pressing the mute button through the ads. The two caught glimpses of the late summer sunset through the window and turned off the bedside lamp before 11 p.m. The headache shifted again, this time circling both Leya's left and right eyes, as though she was wearing goggles.

On the drive home they both kept their windows cracked so that the air whistled around them, making it hard to hear each other. The road was familiar and the drive easy in the summertime. Nathan drove with one hand on the wheel and the other on Leya's knee, so she tried to keep it very still, lest he see her movement as some kind of rejection. She considered asking him what he

was thinking about, but instead they both looked out toward the shimmering mirage that the sunlight made on the smooth road in front of them, the shadows of dark green forest on either side

When they got home, Leya slid her silver key into the lock and pushed open the door. She kicked off her black flip flops and beelined for the bathroom, then back to the kitchen for a drink of water. Over the rushing water she heard the front door squeak shut, the thunk as Nathan dropped their bags on the floor.

Nate, we have ants.

She had started pouring a glass of water, which overflowed under the running tap in the enamel sink. Nathan reached around her to turn off the tap and looked over to the countertop, where Leya was watching several bugs hurry away from her shadow in different directions. He looked down and saw another on the floor. He squished the ant with the toe of his sneaker, then pulled a tissue from the flowered box on the counter and wiped the dead insect off his shoe. He folded the tissue in half and used the other side to dab away the ones on the counter. Leya dumped the glass of water down the drain without drinking it.

The ants were all over the kitchen. As if sensing the house had been left untended, they'd invaded. Nathan got the vacuum out and went around sucking them off the countertops and floors with the hose, without even killing them first. Leya, on her hands and knees, washed the floors with a mixture of soapy water and vinegar. The best way, according to the internet, was to wash away all traces of scent that each ant left for the next one. The acrid smell made her gag; her belly hung so low it nearly touched the floor.

They threw out the rice and a whole bag of flour. When he opened the white plastic bucket of honey that they kept on the bottom shelf of the open pantry, Nathan saw that was nearly black with the insects, as though someone had spilled a bag of ground pepper into gold. The lid was left open a crack, wasn't sealed all the way around, and so the hungry ants one by one had made their way into it. Stuck and engorged, they were unable to bring

the sweet treasure back to their queen. Nathan slammed the lid down hard and took the whole bucket out to the trash, trapping the live ants inside.

Leya and Nathan stayed up most of that night, washing and vacuuming. Leya wondered again if they were ready for parenthood.

Stepping out of the shower the next day, Nathan at work and the house quiet, Leya looked down at the expanding white lightning bolts stretching across her dark skin, and reached for the coconut oil. Rubbing it into her belly and talking in a whisper that she wasn't sure the baby could hear over the internal clanging of her body, a memory came to her, sharp as worry, of her mother's childhood home in the coastal Kenyan city of Mombasa. The last time they'd visited was when Leya was a teenager, just before her grandparents died and the rest of the family moved away, evacuating, as most of the Indians did at that time, transferring their money to more stable British Banks, then leaving in a generation, as they had arrived only decades before.

Leya's family had moved over generations from India to East Africa, then on to England, the US or Canada, her home. Clusters of the family followed each other, stopping here or there along the way. She used to say they were travellers, adventurers, but now she wonders if they were only opportunists: moving for jobs and money, setting down roots that reached just below the surface but no deeper, driven by a need more basic than adventure, and always loyal to the sprawling British empire, to a belief in that crumbling hierarchy.

Back when she was a child, when they would go visit the family still in Kenya, Leya and her two brothers argued all the time, but on those long overseas vacations they became allies, sleeping in the same row of narrow beds their mom once slept in with her sisters. As teenagers, they would talk about things they missed—Christmas, skiing with their friends, video games, pepperoni pizza. The siblings spent afternoons sprawled on their grandparents' ornate wooden furniture watching a slow fan stir the heavy heat

around them. Evenings they would visit one relative or another, crowded into small cars with the windows closed despite the heat, down potholed streets lined with palms, the road busy with honking cars, pedestrians. At relatives' houses they would watch TV with groups of cousins, eating elaborately spiced meals that were consistent—if not identical—at each house. The kind of food Leya craved now.

Leya got dressed and called her mom on speaker. I'm coming over, she said.

Leya's parents lived in the same house in the suburbs they had bought when Leya was only four. It was comfortably similar to the others in their cul-de-sac, all with pale shades of vinyl siding that had faded over the decades. Still, the lawns were neatly trimmed, the trees all pruned.

Inside, the house was clean and dated, living room walls lined not with boughten art, but with photos of the family through the years. Leya and her brothers on the beach, laughing. The whole family in front of an artificial bookcase in a studio photo for school pictures. Leya alone: wearing a sari, elaborate yellow gold earrings, and heavy black eyeliner. Down the hallway and along the stairway to the basement were pictures that she and her brothers had drawn as children: yellow suns and red flowers, green strips along the bottom for grass, set in plain frames and dusted weekly.

As she let herself in, her mother greeted her with a call from the kitchen. She dried her hands on a dishcloth before pressing them on either side of Leya's belly when she saw her, then rubbed her daughter's shoulders. I'll make tea, she said.

Sitting at the same spot at the dining room table where she had sat as a child, her spot, Leya told her mom, While we were away the house got infested, hundreds of ants, all after a bucket of honey we didn't close all the way. Just ants, so it could have been even worse, but still, it was disgusting. We cleaned and cleaned, but we're keeping the traps out just in case. In case they come back.

Was she testing her mom, she wondered as she was talking, expecting her to also wonder if Leya was ready for motherhood.

Leya's mom faced the window, in the same spot she too had always sat. Her face, Leya noticed in the bright summer light shining in from the window, had aged around her eyes and mouth. Her hair was still dyed brownish black, with the same bronze streaks and no gray showing. She laced her fingers on the flowered tablecloth and listened without fidgeting.

As Leya finished telling her about the ants, her mom said, Do you want to come and stay here?

Leya considered temporarily moving into the room that used to be hers but that now contained only a narrow desk with a computer and a printer, a double bed with a department store comforter on it. She imagined crawling into the bed and sleeping for hours, letting her mom cook for her. She rubbed at the headache, now lodged between her eyebrows, took a sip of her sweet milky tea, and considered staying just for a nap.

Thinking of how easy it would be to stay and never leave and the impossibility of it, she said: I'd better go home.

The mid-afternoon drive home back to the inner city took about half an hour. There were only a few other cars on the street at this time, though the cafes and restaurants she passed were busy. Paused at a red light, Leya looked up at the white lines of contrails crisscrossing the blue sky. Her head felt as though she was wearing a too-small helmet. Her arms reached far for the steering wheel, like two narrow bridges over her belly. A song she remembered from high school came on the radio. A slow dance that Nathan might sway and sing along to, as a joke. She might have smiled.

Alone with her baby inside her, a feeling of longing came to her, as though she was missing something or had forgotten something important. She turned down the radio.

At home, Leya kept her flip flops on. She washed her hands and pulled a glass jar of dry red lentils from the cupboard. The house was quiet, squares of sunshine from the windows patterning the floor.

She pulled an enamel pot from a shelf and put it on the stove, added a drop of oil, found an onion, and cut it into narrow lines on a wooden board. The onions made her eyes water, and she felt the pressure in her head loosen, as though someone pulled upward on the top of her skull and then let go. She added the slices of onion to the pot. As they browned, she chopped a carrot, took spices from a rack and added them without measuring to the sizzling mixture. The carrots, the lentils, lukewarm water from the kettle, a bit of salt. There was a bag of wilting spinach in the fridge, and she added that too, altering her mother's recipe only a little. She hummed to herself and to the baby as she worked, stirring until the lentils were soft and fat.

She tore a piece of paper from a coiled notebook she found in the junk drawer, and scribbled on it with plastic pens until she found one that worked, then set the paper and pen down on the table. She got a clean bowl from the dishwasher, filled it from the steaming pot on the stove, and pulled a single spoon from the cutlery drawer.

As she put the bowl of soup down and eased into the chair in front of it, she looked out toward her narrow yard, crowded with the green of summertime. Kicking off her flip flops, Leya stretched her arms upward, rotated her neck in a slow circle, one way then the other, and ate a spoonful from her bowl. She picked up the pen and titled a list in blue ink. Things a Baby Needs.

An erratic mosquito bashed against the screen door in front of her, attempting escape. Down the street, a humming lawnmower coughed and sputtered to a stop; a bike bell rang four times. The baby's foot pushed into her ribcage. With the pen still poised in her hand, Leya used her elbow to push back down on her belly, until the pressing weight eased a little again.

CONVERGENT BOUNDARY

BY DANI PUTNEY

For Cody

It's always a mountain
— through me into
you, or is it simply
 us, as in the glacier
 that carved our initials
 across this valley —
take me back, I want
yarrow on my fingertips
again, like your pollen, like
my blush under starlight,
I know you've looked,
precious, it doesn't take
metaphor to recognize
the dazzle of *we*
— through you into
me, is this geology
 yet (an adverb meaning
 perfect), we were frozen
 then but taste of dirt
 now, I swear another
 word for time is
 petrichor —
cyclical, rain on yarrow,
or valley's blush, I didn't
mean to write a science
lesson, but if we began
on a mountain, our through-
way to love is convergence
— take me back.

THE DSM ONLY HAS SO MANY ANSWERS, EDWARD

BY VICTORIA MALLORGA HERNANDEZ

skin sore clear sheets with
 maws open underneath the
 lilac lymph that blooms
 running down thighs &
will lead to hyperalgesia
 break my nerves until fire starts off
 under dermis,

did you know that
cancer is born too from constantly irritated skin
eternal wounds, picked scars open that call for
warning bells at wrists, cut nails, mittens,
the worried disgust of caretakers asking, begging

*“What do you need, my love,
for your hands to turn from
scissors into warm flesh”*

but the genetic tendency to mania
climbs up my throat in dreams
as I wake up,
clear sheets crumbling maroon
mittens off, nails greedy,
you can see the moment before glial cells are activated
before hot shower, poultice balm starts working,
before astrocytes struggle to create the scar,

where I lie restless, biting off my nails
wondering how to get to the laundry room
without shame, holding the aftermath
of my hands cutting deeply
sharpness begging to alleviate the pain
excuses that build up like this:

if I bleed, I rest
and if lymph responds to my call
synaptic transmissions slow down,
logic stopping its flight,
it's softly tearing me apart to reach
calm.

there's the cost:
endless bleeding,
scissor heart.

DISPLACEMENT

BY WALE AYINLA

(n.) the act of displacing, or the state of being displaced; a putting out of place.

After Chelsea Dingman

to call back a dream as if it were a world
outside the body. sphere of dislocation.

night is dotted with fragments of ash,
its loveliest poison brushed into the nostrils.

it is not for the ending halves, the map
of a country torn apart. clarity of desires,

a hot rod pressed onto the chest. how sad
it is to be deprived of one's arrival. waiting

for the signs that will call me home. an inconsolable
displacing. I interrogate flight in the simplicity of words.

vapor dripping from a trellis. a garden rolled out
in a foreshadowed cubicle. I think of grace,

the perfumed silence of my lover. fading face
of my father in my dreams. the sun in his eyes,

a blinding. and if there is a world outside
the body, may it adopt all of me. a lost prayer

fetches from its wanderings. may I be my mother's
son again. the festivity of disappearance, a reinvention.

FRIDA'S BATHROOM

BY ELLIANIE VEGA

After Frida Kahlo's death, her husband, Diego Rivera, kept the door to her bathroom closed off because it reminded him of the intense pain she had struggled with during her lifetime. The door of the bathroom remained shut for five decades after her death until it was reopened and photographed by Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide.

black and white gelatin prints
trap what is left of you in Casa Azul,
your smock like a murder shot,
paint like blood as you
eviscerated yourself,
smeared it on a canvas,
and only Graciela found the aftermath.
your husband couldn't stand
the sight of it all, that
drain you were slipping towards
with two broken feet, then one,
two broken things, then one,
your life slipping through the water
while Stalin's portrait smiled
above the faucet that feeds you.
trees scream outside the window,
you take another pethidine,
you take off your leg
like the weight of the day,
rest for a good minute,
a year and then a decade,
waiting for Graciela to
open the door and
let you fly out,
let you free.



WHERE WILD GROWS

BY SARAH BRADLEY

MISDEMEANOR VILLAGE

BY LYNN MAGILL

About six years ago, my estranged mother had asked (via one of my cousins) if I would clean out her storage unit for her. In the advanced stages of COPD after nearly 60 years of smoking, along with early dementia brought on by nearly as many years of substance abuse, she had sold my childhood home in the suburbs of Seattle and moved into my grandparents' vacant farmhouse on a squalid gravel road in Iowa that was still in probate. (It was much more Deliverance than *Bridges of Madison County*, but that's another story for another time.)

We hadn't talked for a full decade, so I bristled at the proposition. *Doesn't contact me for ten years, and now she wants me to clean out her storage unit? What storage unit? I thought she moved?* Instead, what I said to my cousin was: "Look. If she can ask me herself, like an adult, I'll do it. I just think that if you're going to ask someone to clean out an entire storage unit for you when you haven't talked to them for ten years—which is kind of a big ask—you should be able to ask them yourself. Because this is weird." And families are complicated.

So I reconnected with my mother, in the familiar way that addicts do. She waltzed back in without apologies and with many demands, her absence unexcused and unspoken. Overlooking things is often the toll paid for family ties.

The storage unit itself was one giant metaphor of opening things both forgotten and unknown and packed away for years. After a couple of false starts, I'd finally gotten the correct padlock key from an old family friend who lived nearby that my mother had entrusted it to. The first key I was given hadn't worked, and there were a few days of panicked calls from my mother where she phoned my uncle (who had a few of her things in his safe) and I in alternating succession, insisting that she had a spare and they should just FedEx me hers.

The friend was implored to go through their keys once more, and so on my way home from work, I retrieved an envelope from under their doormat and headed back to the storage complex. Punching in Mom's code to open the entry gate between the rows of cement buildings with bright orange doors, I double-checked my purse on the passenger seat to make sure the envelope was still there and hadn't magically vanished somehow in the drive.

Success. The lock opened easily, and I tucked the key into my purse along with the envelope. Whoever had crammed everything into the unit had done the best they could; albeit haphazardly, because the rolling bay door would only raise about ten inches from the cement floor before catching on something solid. Shit. Sighing, I knelt down on the concrete and tried to see what the problem was, but the light was too dim. Using the light on my cell phone, I laid on my stomach, ear pressing on the cold floor, and squinted underneath. Was that...? It was. My childhood nightstand, proudly bought brand new from Sears as a set with my canopy bed: genuine dark wood laminate and faux-carved detailing. The first new furniture my mother had ever bought or owned in her life. The overhang of the top of the nightstand was sticking out just enough to obstruct the rolling door.

My eyes adjusted and made out a laminated puzzle against the wall, pieces apart on the floor. A cardboard box rested atop the nightstand, covered in dust. Cobwebs stretched from a black plastic garbage bag to a large Rainier Beer sign. A faint smell of musty cigarette smoke, like an abandoned tavern, hung in the air. The hard cold on the back of my skull started to dissipate as I felt a mixture of nostalgia and revulsion. *Spiders?* Rolling over onto my back like an arthritic auto mechanic, I bent my knees and placed the soles of my tennis shoes flat on the cement and scooted my butt until I was partway under the door. Grabbing a leg on the nightstand, I braced my feet and shoved hard. It moved an inch. Reaching up with my free arm, I pushed the bay door up and 1/3 of the way open.

Lying there upside down, I looked up at what was left of my mother and I, fascinated with what her deteriorating mind had

decided to be worth immortalizing in this concrete shrine, worthy of paying the monthly tithe to *U-Stor-It*. *Whose doll was that?* Not mine. A fleece pullover. Posters? The nightstand, its veneer peeling: another metaphor to be sure.

My efficient German sensibility wouldn't allow me a trip that was unproductive—*for shame*—so I propped open the exterior door near my Jeep and loaded the cargo hold with haphazardly grabbed boxes and a few disturbingly squishy garbage bags. *One less trip later.*

I had been ordered to phone Mom from the storage unit the moment I discovered whether or not the key worked, but I was already well past forgetfulness and solidly into willful disregard of a command, so I let her two calls go to voicemail as I drove home. She was still astute enough to know enough time had passed for me to have arrived at the facility—and heaven forbid I do anything except go directly there as instructed. I needed time to process the altar of neglect I had just genuflected at; I sat in my car amongst strangers on arterial streets with my random load of vulnerability.

Everything was dingy, so I decided that the best place to unpack things (both physically and otherwise) would be the basement. Grabbing a fraying old pink towel and some hand wipes, I sat down on the brown corduroy loveseat, two boxes at my feet. Opening the larger one, my brow furrowed as the flaps unfolded to reveal its contents: *Victorian Holiday Town*. I'd never seen this before in my life.

Hitting the call button on my phone, I set it on the steamer trunk and kept its speaker on as Mom's low income senior apartment landline rang. She answered on the second ring.

"Did you get in?" she asked, wheezing and out of breath.

"Yes. I brought a few things back with me this trip."

"Good." I could hear the hiss of her oxygen machine in the background. "Go back tomorrow and tell them I want to vacate in three days. Can you have it all out by then? Cancel my contract and then send me a copy of the paperwork."

"I think so, yes. Ross can help me and we can probably do it easily with two cars."

“Okay.”

No *thank you* or anything like that. More orders: “Go through it and I’ll tell you what to do with everything. I might want you to send some stuff here, or sell some of it.”

“All right. I opened one of the boxes I brought home today, and there’s Christmas stuff in it?”

“Christmas stuff?”

“Yeah. A holiday village I’ve never seen before. Like you set up on a table. Looks like it’s porcelain or ceramic?”

“Oh, that! I took that from Wyndham.” She laughed raspily until a wheeze cut it short.

“How did you take it from Wyndham?”

“One of the last years I was working there, they didn’t give us in the restaurant any kind of Christmas bonus. Assholes. So when we were taking down the decorations, I just took it. There should be some Christmas ornaments somewhere too. Thomas Kincaid ones. That artist guy? I thought you might like those. Still in the box.”

I detested Thomas Kincaid, but there was no point in telling her that. She’d heisted them just for me, out of the pureness of her motherly heart. “You stole the Wyndham’s Christmas decorations?”

“Yeah. Those cheap fuckers. Not giving us bonuses when we worked our asses off.”

“You haven’t decorated for Christmas since 1989.”

“I know. So? Fuckers.”

Mom died a few months later in September, a few weeks after her 67th birthday. I’d donated the old fitted sheets she’d saved along with my nightstand, and the random talking doll (also new in the box) was given to a delighted neighbor girl after being wiped down and deodorized. I couldn’t bring myself to keep those godawful Kincaid mall art ornaments she’d once pilfered for her artsy child, whom she both couldn’t understand or bring herself to sober up and talk to. I just couldn’t do Kincaid, even for her. Into the donation box they went.

The Holiday Village, however, I couldn’t let go of. Having

absorbed her ambivalence towards holidays in general, I knew I'd never spring for anything that frivolous on my own. It was everything I aspired to be, and the opposite of everything we'd been growing up: on the verge of elegant, festive, unblemished, heirloom, and tasteful. The *Wyndham* was fancy, weren't they? It must be; Natalie Cole had stayed there. Chi-Chi Rodriguez, too. Mom had gotten his autograph once.

Starting that December, and every December since, the *Holiday Village* is ceremoniously unpacked yet again, in all of its boosted glory. As I gently set each piece on the polished wood buffet amidst glittering white pine trees, I take a sip of hot spiced wine and whisper a tribute to the miracle of Christmas reconciliation and motherly love: *those fuckers*.

PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER AS ABANDONED HOUSE

BY DANI JANAE

My mother is a black pause.
Counting the skin of its nails,
the hoarse call of its voice, inky
wound, hot, trembling walls.

In our company of mourners:
eleven crows, my tongue, a
livid silence. Sweat makes
itself known in all corners of

my body. Her big, sour breath.
The funk of the living. We are all but
what quakes us. We are destined
to howl a little, to bay on our knees.

Of my mother's body, I have inherited
three things: first, the tacky beat
of her walls, their frantic nulling.
Second, the beast of a heart

where a cold wind is always
willing to embrace. Third,
the faint whisper of something
at my shoulder so I am always

watching my back. I press an
ear to a door and hear the shuffling
of time, its muffled feet kicking
up the gossamer of her heavy,

what it is she discards. I eat
a paltry dinner at the head of her
table, feel her bones slack and twist
at my presence, her jaw slung

like a swing. What possesses
my mother is a terrible might.
It feasts on me, throwing my skin
and hair between its teeth with

gaunt fingers, slick tongue
begging to eat what haunts it.
This strange wild, this malevolent
solstice. Grooved sorrow, my waist

cinched by its yearning. The
reflections in the mirror a gaunt
haze of woman. I can't bear the hum
of the things that swallow me.

The horrid drip of nightfall catches
my throat. The way a beast smacks
its gums at blood, my longing
turns the house on.

PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER AS BEARER OF MONSTROUS SEED

BY DANI JANAE

If the child is hooved then the child is a beast
If the child is horned then the child is a beast
If the child is fanged then the child is a beast
If the child is winged then the child is a beast
If the child is scaled then the child is a beast
If the child is harried then the child is a beast
If the child is clawed then the child is a beast
If the child is hungry then the child is a beast
If the child is a beast is the child a child
Is the child a child if the child is a beast
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ABRAHAM'S ALTAR

BY PATRICK T. REARDON

Voice stone,
boulder, wall, chips, chinks, light.
Carpentered timber.

Raise voice, soil.

Voice blade slice, knee scrape,
compound fracture.

Raise voice, cropland.

Streets of America, empty.

Announce lake pier, transmission tower,
planned unit development,
sewer pipes, sewer pipes,
system.

Raise street grid.

Voice belladonna weed,
west wind, final word.

Raise upper room.

Last glass goodbye.

Voice broken bread.
Look, dismantle Pesach table.

Look, empty tabernacle.
Look, record elk clop altar steps.
Look, incense fire.

Raise dome.

Voice laugh track, chorus,
backup, mob.

Raise peek-a-boo, hide-forget, dark trees.

Winged death past blooded doors.

EXODUS ON THE ROCKS

BY PRESTON SMITH

Words unfiltered in the sieve
of the brain pulse
the granular connection
between gemini's twins
shoot
what remains in the cabinet beneath
honeysuckle rum—the constellation
born of night we haven't met
since the exodus on the rocks

IN THE DARKNESS

BY DANIEL DIAS CALLAHAN

A blue jay hops branch to branch,
floats between each breath.

In and out.

Two men discuss cell biology, conspiracies on their balcony.
A woman whispers the tabby cat from yesterday closer.

I watch

figures dance between the slits in the fence.

Each passing day, the sky darkens and the clouds
disappear.

I thumb another page of the Book of the Dead,

press a pencil to my temple,

drag its point towards my cheek,

outline the pocks,

the landmarks of my flesh. The dance, a reminder of feeling.

My diaphragm rises, breath falls

back towards the ground,

in the corner of my backyard

beneath the budding mulberry tree

wild grass grows with

out a name. I watch—

Each inhale reminds me of September winds where the leaves
drip gold during sunsets.

A favorite season

now rotten with memory's mildew.

By 9:27 p.m., the sky has erased the blur

between beginning and end.

Shelter in place. Everyone is inside.

A plane
flies by, flashing lights blink, I count, 1...2...
1...2...

TO MAKE A FOOLISH MOVE

BY JEN HIRT

On a muggy Monday night, there's no one at the dog park with us except a groundhog just outside the fence. Concern furrows my black dog's brow. Wesley has this year killed two. Kits, cubs, pups; they go by a range of names. This dog needs no name for his sworn enemy. He spent his first five months fending for himself on a farm, from what the rescue told me. His background plus his breeds—retriever, hound, husky, Akita, and terrier—make him a reliable killer, and I say that as an animal lover. The times he bested the groundhog pups, he beat them to their holes and wasted no time at the neck. I had his name picked out before all this. John Wesley Harding, the outlaw from the Bob Dylan song, who was “never known to make a foolish move.”

The groundhog trundles around, and Wesley's back stiffens. One foot forward, ears pricked, his ribs betray a slight uptick in respirations. I've read widely on “high prey drive,” an energy attributed to dogs skilled at all four stages of the hunt—stalk, chase, grab, kill. I've not been around many dogs with high prey drives, but with Wesley his religious observation of the stages of the hunt comes at me clear and clean as his coal coat against snow. I can't not see it. I'm not a hunter, but with Wesley there is no choice. We will hunt, in the animal definition of the term: he on point, me the acolyte.

With fence between him and this prey, I'm not worried. A faint breeze sweeps down through the sumac, empress trees, and catalpas, then kicks back through the only shade in the park, cast by a pair of mulberries. The catalpas are the last to bloom, and tonight their damp tiaras smell like vanilla and storms, but also like fading, if fading has a scent. The mulberries are fading too, their shiny fruit drying and shrinking on the branch while the leaves thrive into expansive deep shade. Everything is a trade, a barter, a coming and a going.

Just as the groundhog scoots closer through the rich grass and Wesley lifts himself out of his stoic sit so he can stalk proper (stage one), a gunmetal Ford F-350 Super Duty truck slows on 7th Street and turns onto the one-way lane bordering the dog park, right in the vector of dogwatching vermin. The truck is so wide and long, it barely makes the turn. Tint hides the cab's backseat, but there is a man and a woman in the front. The groundhog flees to his hole, and Wesley, triggered and beholden to his prey drive, chases for ten paces before he skids to a stop at the gate. From a stalk he always has to chase (stage two), no matter the chances of stages three and four, the grab and the kill. The big truck rumbles just feet from him. What's happening with them? Do they have an equally big dog in the cab? Do they want me to pull Wesley from the gate so they can let their dog in? Instead, they drive off to turn right on 6th street, a main thoroughfare.

A minute later, the rumbling truck makes a second drive-by. Now I'm wary. What are they doing? They make a third pass. They pull in to a vacant lot and park about 50 yards behind me. I watch them watching me as I watch the dog watching the groundhog hole.

Wesley is a good judge of character and will put his hackles up and growl anytime he sees someone he doesn't quite like, or someone I don't quite like, for that matter. He too is watching the truck, but he disregards it in a split second. The people aren't getting out, don't roll their windows or anything. No dog barks from the backseat. They are nothing, not a threat. He returns his gaze to where he thinks he might see the groundhog again.

But instead of the groundhog outside the gate, there are now two mourning doves henpecking at the mulberries. The doves coo and strut through their amazing buffet. They are the exact color of the dirt, and their spots look like the fallen fruit. Were they not moving I would not have seen them.

They approach Wesley. I realize the birds don't see him, maybe because he, like them, is camouflaged—like a black fence pole, he's slim and tall and still. To them he's just a thicker post.

I could clap or cough and scare them away, but the truth is

I want to see if he'll catch one. I've seen a lot of stalk and chase on this channel, only twice the finales of grab and kill. The doves shimmy under the gate. They are insanely close to the dog. Why are birds walking toward him? I hold my breath. I'm certain he's going to kill one, just a quick nab and crunch would do it. Consolation prize for the groundhog.

But John Wesley Harding does not snap his canines around their hollow bones, their plain soft feathers, their tiny smooth heads. He watches intently as they preen and peck about six inches from his paws. He's like a benevolent farmdog guarding the hens.

His tolerance strikes a parallel with an encounter from the night before. We'd skipped the dog park to walk on the bike path just outside the city proper. Rounding a corner, we'd startled a doe ankle-deep, if not deeper, in a swampy area full of the first ripe raspberries. She didn't immediately bolt, maybe because she could not. She was very skinny. She turned to see what kind of threat we'd brought to her solitary evening. And it was like she knew the dog was on a leash and I had no weapon and never a taste for venison. She twitched her ears and tail at the swarm of insects, cast shade at the curious canine, put more mucky steps but not a lot between herself and us, and went back to eating. We watched her and she watched us and then we went on our way, Wesley trotting amicably ahead on a loose leash, as if we'd just seen one of his friends. It was a 180 from the first time he'd seen deer while with me—one snowy day in the woods, the herd leaping across the trail, and my months-old pup taking off, the leash whipping being him, all animals disappearing into the dark of winter. He'd come back to me eventually, tongue lolling and tail wagging, just as my heart threatened to burst with loss.

I've read that dogs with strong prey drives can fall victim to "predatory drift." It means that if they start out killing groundhogs, they might then "drift" to killing something that sort of looks like or behaves like a groundhog, such as any animal low to the ground. Predatory drift is not desirable. It portends a dog that might inflict a kill-bite on just about anything that moves. Instinct without

brakes, or an engine always revved.

It occurs to me, however, that maybe Wesley is consciously refraining from snatching a mourning dove off the ground at his feet. They aren't what he wants; they present no challenge. Does he have predatory restraint, not drift? Maybe these are honest doves, I think, recalling Dylan's lyrics about John Wesley Harding: "He was never known to hurt an honest man." What's more honest than a mourning dove pecking a fallen mulberry, or a thin doe wetting her lips on fresh raspberries, or a young dog wanting to chase big deer in deep snow?

Then one of the doves suddenly realizes the danger they are in and flails like a clumsy oaf to the top of the fence. The partner follows. They strut and wobble, cocking their heads. Birds check danger with one eye and find food with the other—that's a fact. Wesley regards them with what can only be described as nonchalance, shifts his weight, and then refocuses on where he thinks the groundhog will emerge.

Behind me, the Ford F-350 backs out of the spot in the vacant lot and promptly leaves, as if they too have been watching the dove vs. dog drama. I'm glad it's all over, all actions decided and taken and none violent. My shoulders have been tense, my back like a rack of antlers, my senses amped. I make myself breathe deep and I close my eyes. I try to clear my mind, but my mind wonders if I should have looked harder at their license plate, or taken a photo. Just in case.

I leash the dog and swing open the gates and let him pull me to where he last saw the groundhog. Wesley slinks between the two holes. He's trying to decide over which hole he will sit vigil, and the answer is neither, because we're going home and drawing the blinds. The truck's drive-by has me feeling bothered.

A few days later, my neighbor stops me on the street. Last night, she had seen a suspicious guy standing on the stoop. Just standing there. Late at night. Her dog, a hefty reddish cattle dog who wore a blue bandanna and walked off leash all the time, started barking. "My dog is a really good judge of character," she says, "he won't

bark unless something is wrong.” Suddenly we are friends, then, because I too think of my dog that way; I trusted him to make the call on the Ford F-350. He would have barked at the guy on the stoop. She describes the odd guy to me and we agree to keep an eye out or call the cops if it happens again, even though it will take them hours to get around to driving by to check things out.

I realize then, with some belated regret, that maybe the couple in the truck drove by the dog park more than once because they saw Wesley but didn’t see me. They could have had the conclusion that he’d been dumped or abandoned. They were probably really great people, not creeps. Maybe it was only after they parked and looked harder that they saw me, the woman in gray shorts and a khaki shirt sitting on—camouflaged by—the cinder block and woodplank bench. I probably uncrossed and recrossed my legs, and that movement caught their eyes, making them realize they would not need to swoop in to rescue a handsome black dog left alone in the heat.

That seems like a logical explanation. No one sees everything at first glance, and I want to believe that people have good intentions. I have good intentions. Maybe I should be grateful that they cared enough to look, to stop, to make sure everything was okay. Or maybe I should be annoyed that they drove by the city dog park on the assumption that they would find abandoned dogs who needed rescuing—what do they think happens here?

On a whim the next night, I scour the Internet for more information on John Wesley Hardin, without the “g,” who lived from 1853-1895. That is the real outlaw, the one beyond Bob Dylan’s 1967 lyrics. Turns out the historical John Wesley Hardin did make foolish moves—he was a violent and racist man who shot Black men and Union soldiers. He was infamous for his justification, which was that he shot only people who deserved to die. That’s all a matter of which side of the gate you are on, and the historical John Wesley Hardin was on the wrong side, for sure.

I cringe at my choice of names for my outlaw dog who isn’t really an outlaw at all. He’s just a serious dog-dog. Maybe, when

people ask about his name, I should say it's in honor of filmmakers Wes Anderson and Wesley Snipes. Or I'll just say I like the name.

Or, I'll emphasize the "g" at the end. *He's named after John Wesley Harding, the Robin Hood-esque folk icon in the Bob Dylan song.* I'll tell them the story about the night he did not bark at the strange man on the stoop but would have, and about the time a truck passing by was just a truck passing by. I'll tell them he spared the doe and the doves, and that deep in his heart, he's a good dog who knows how to kill.

THE SHADOW

BY PATRICK ARMSTRONG

Before Cosmos
the Void was full
of shadow.

Before Logos
the Mouth was full
of shadow.

Close your eyes
and you will see the shadow
for it is steadfast.

In brightness
the shadow is most clear. In darkness
the shadow is most clear.

Sherbets melt
and galaxies disperse.
The shadow remains.

Close the window
and lock the door.
In seepeth the shadow.

The shadow of a hand
sometimes resembles a turkey
for the shadow is not without humor.

Brain is in shadow.
Copulation is in shadow.
Words are of shadow composed.

In the mind there is a place
with no dirt
on the pant cuff

no bruise on the peach
no cloud
in the old dog's eye.

It is colorless there
odorless
there is no sound

in that place
there is no rest
the light cuts like fire.

MEANWHILE THE WORLD

BY LISA RHOADES

Meanwhile the world
shimmers and shimmies around—
a constant weaving of insects and bees,
the warblers moving through
on their way further north,
all the perennials unfurled,
and the canopy of the maples complete—
not even a dapple
of light remains beneath.
In pots, heirloom tomatoes
started from seed
and gifted to me by a friend, wait
for their turn to go in the ground,
the lilac needs a hard prune,
the iris will open next week.
However high the neighboring plants,
the Star of Bethlehem sends its stalk
a little beyond so the flowers lift
their faces well into the sun,
as the chameleon plant stretches roots
sideways under the bluestone walk
no matter how often I weed it back.
Which is to say they make a path.
Which is to say they get it done.

INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

BY JOEL PECKHAM

The bike wheel flashing up the hill and into August evenings, its long tendons straining toward the crest, is bright with bitterness. Church bells ring and hum like chilled berries in a bowl. The month of March flows down the throat like water from the mountains carrying the many tastes

of bone. And of course there are the flavors of smoke swallowed in the feathers of the wind or trapped in snow, caught on the tongue, bearing the memory of the living

and the lost. At wakes, powdered sugar sprays the face of grief and catches in the stubble as salt runs down the cheeks in rivulets. I knew a man who stopped eating after his son died on the operating table. *They said that they could help him*, he said. To starve

oneself is to taste the pulp of sunbeams set ablaze and stumble down the stairs and out into the street to turn about in wonder, folds of skin hanging from your arms

like wings. And yet to make a feast of famine is a blasphemy. Tell the story of the orange that you didn't eat to a mother who cannot feed her children. The velvet flute notes of the body arching to the tongue rebuke the celibate. It is not hunger if chosen. But another kind of privilege—the way that we deny ourselves. Better to taste it

all, not desperate in the dark, not trying to fill an emptiness until our little apartments fill with empty bourbon bottles, crusted pizza boxes, and ice cream tubs and ants march in rows through cracks in the window casings and the walls. But to savor

like a book we've been reading out loud to an echoing room,
relishing the music, taking it into ourselves one heady,
honeyed syllable at a time (though sour and bitter, sharp
and spiced would also do). Would it taste of God? I think it
should, it must. Does

abandonment hold the tang of the ocean, of fish drying in the
sun? Joy, the jewels of pomegranates bursting in the teeth.
Perhaps regret is another, deeper, kind

of hunger, a craving that aches like empty chairs or the silence of
a kitchen or the memory of a kiss that burned itself away
before it was consumed or consummated, and filled the mouth
and gut and lungs instead with absences like dust in a well or
a chill in the center of a stone that just might be the aftertaste
of love.

NORTH COUNTRY DERECHO

BY ALYSSA DEVLIN

The sky, a heliotropic dousing. Misgiven malevolence gathered at
the hem.

Rust harried across electric-charged developments. A heavy light
is blinding but lacks warmth, still threatens with friction, flame.

Rain, whose presence is unseemly, pressed aside, resisted.

The wind, prone to violent murmurs, leads to the fates at hand.

Trauma spits itself out with an ear to all-encompassing terror.
Come here, see it mongered as straight-faced common sense.

A tenor pierces debris-laden air. What remains, a pigtailed pine, a
battered screen door.



EBEY'S LANDING

BY JUDITH SKILLMAN

COL LEGNO

BY BARBARA DANIELS

Mice whisker secretly
through my kitchen. I'm
dressed to be elsewhere,

black shirt and pants, black
bag of books, crushed
tissues, cough drops.

I've listened to painters,
shoe sellers, tired cops
dispensing careful quantities

of pastoral care. Stars
lost their purposes. Pollen
slimes every surface.

I need a new emblem:
col legno—violinists
whacking strings with backs

of bows like bones splitting.
I look in both directions,
past, future, ready myself

to step onto steaming
asphalt as traffic brakes
for a moment, and I cross.

Awkwardly, sweetly, despite
the empire of worms
in bones my body bears.

SELAH

BY BARBARA DANIELS

Gordon died. My cousin Amy. Uncle Nick.
Before that my mother. Then we suddenly
had too much clothing, too many shoes, boxes

of books in Spanish because Mom studied
Spanish until that last month. I almost
understood her Spanish Testament

because Dad read the Bible in English
each night after supper. Is he still sitting there?
Saying “selah” when he found the word dozens

of times in the psalms? We never knew
what it meant. In the fall, my favorite season,
elms by the street twisted their branches and

dropped their leaves. Those leaves won't be back
except as they turn, finally, into dirt, and shoots
rise from them, rhubarb, carrots, sweet corn.

In those days we cleaned our plates. Peas revolted me.
I refused. So I sat in the yellow kitchen and looked
at red scallops pasted up at the tops of the walls.

Last birds called. I finally mashed the cold peas
and ate them with a spoon. Perhaps selah means
stop, listen? On the stove a blackened frying pan

stood sentinel. Beside it salt and pepper,
a coffee can for bacon grease. The Bible
was closed in a drawer with pot holders,

dish towels, and a trivet I made from cardboard
covered with tinfoil. Could I have it back, please?
That lovely thing I made and couldn't keep hold of?

WHO AM I? ¿QUIEN SOY?

BY ARTURO MAGAÑA AMAYA

Sometimes I think about how I got here. The things about me. I see the colors in the Sonoran sky, and I feel the loves in my chest. There are many loves that come into peoples' lives, and I believe to truly love something, you must know yourself. Your hang-ups. And deep-downs. But knowing yourself is something else altogether. It is difficult to learn about yourself. It is not as difficult as recalling what song is now playing on my record player, while I write this here. The song is: Van Morison's "Beside You," from his *Astral Weeks* album. Now I'm thinking, as I listen to this song, that I have never thought about the question who am I? What am I?

Am I the green *Rio Nazas* that my father lived beside as a boy, while my *tios* sold newspapers in *Torreón* on those street corners that looked like revolution? Am I the garden my grandmother kept when we were children? A garden where the *bugambilias* hung from the walls. We boiled *manzanilla* leaves for tea. And we sat in the shade of the citrus trees. Tangelo and lime and grapefruit trees. I remember the neighborhood children would come to the green tree and pick for figs. There weren't all those buildings that there are now in town. It wasn't as big as it is now.

Am I the poems that I write? The wisdom my grandfather who fished in the Sea of Cortez gave to me? Am I the memory I carry with me about my mother? She worked two jobs and was a single mother. Or am I the diploma that hangs on the wall? The diploma I earned with my father's example. I must be the songs that I listen to. Javier Solis's *rancheras*. Jim Croce's soft rock songs. I've read some books. Am I the books that I've read? Or am I the red Salinas Valley that John Steinbeck colored with prose and my father and grandparents and uncles plowed with their hands and backs?

Years before, some twenty years ago, a mural decorated the western wall of Rosita's Café, a now defunct restaurant in Somerton, Arizona, my hometown. The mural depicted an Aztec

serpent as it curled into a ball down the length of wall before a large Spanish chapel. The mural was Catholicism and the Aztec past. The mural sticks in my memory not because of its artistic qualities, but because it clouds the atmosphere of my childhood: when I was a child, I would walk to church with my grandmother. We sat on those hard pews. And she recited the psalms. Kept a black rosary in her hands, in her pockets. I remember she wore the black veils in order to cover our sins from the others. *Mi pobre abuela*: 11 children, night work *en los empaques*, yet still her psalms and songs. *Abuela*, you are to me what spring is to us after the winter.

I still ask the question: who am I? Am I the smell that lingered throughout my grandmother's home every Sunday when she prepared beef stew? Maybe so. My grandfather too has passed on, now a few months ago. But I still feed my soul with his *alimentos*. I want to have another cup of coffee with you, *abuelo*, and talk about the tyranny of the tides in these times. Maybe all these things make me who I am. Maybe my history defines my future. My memories of my family. What I feel is true. I speak Spanish. In my mind, I think things in Spanish, but I voice them in English. And we do not know people in high places. The producers. The teachers look like the kids from the north side of the train tracks.

I saw a cardinal of the church once, a long time ago. My grandmother said he came to us from far away. *Abuela*, *abuelo*, I want our hopes to become our realities. And I want our realities to go as far as where the cardinals fly. I cannot escape my history. History is a shadow. I see it about me. It is distorted, but it is always with me.

POSTCARD (VIENNA)

BY KAYLA KRUT

wish you were here
cheeks bulging strudel
dipping your sandals
into the Danube laughing

at something you said to yourself
with one side of your face
singular dimple crumpling

swabbed strip of cirrus
dissipating

woodland eye a Fibonacci firework

we'd follow long twilight's
black stones lining the shore

stars thinking of shedding their husks

SPACE NEXUS & PELOPS

BY MARY MAROSTE

I dreamed a story of a liquid blue snake that craved
longevity & depth, so he created space. He spent decades
tapping light into stars, his tongue soft & filled with plutonium,

then devoured himself & the ripples that spilled
from the hole his body left a strange void,
leaking pink clouds & stretched, like a glass eye

fit in the center of a keyhole. Early people in
Indonesia evaded komodo dragons to survive
& in my own bed I'm most worried of a liquid

snake from another reality, or fingers with too
many bones curling around my skull, arching my head
back & forcing me to swallow melatonin or snake oil

disguised as CBD crystalizing my lungs & forcing sleep.
There are things I want to stop growing—numbers of
animals burning, holes lamprey leave in salmon & pike,

certain buildings—& others I want to become larger, unfurl
like a fern & pollinate until the air is yellow. If I were a stronger
golem I'd redirect water & plant brussels fully grown trees.

If I was a deity I'd rewrite myths, instead of a shoulder I'd feed
Pelops lemons & garlic fermented in honey to stop her pain,
or turn every bone in the garden into fresh ivory, every dead seed
a sparrow.



GRIEF

BY SIJIA MA

FARM FOR SALE: MORA, NM

BY ALEJANDRO LUCERO

Past the long-abandoned church de San Rafael and through that cemetery where the old gate creaks when the young children dig near their ancestor's graves, along that trickling river where fat trout once splashed, shaded by the Jicarita mountains,

an escaped alpaca eats what's left of that blackberry bush the poor farmer's wife hasn't picked in years. He's already forgotten the taste of her pies.

Even her red chile comes canned now. All his livestock is sold. All his crops are harvested.

The nearby cottonwoods have retired. In their small bedroom, the farmer's lazy daughters draw eyebrows that arch like open books and talk about running away

as the grease from a burnt cheese taco drips on the floor at the cafe two miles up that main street with no name.

Once Daddy sells the place, they say in front of makeup smudged mirrors. That bunk bed they share creaks too.

The farmer's son and his friends play ball on that basket bolted to the barn, their slender arms brown and ashen. Their teeth coated with dust.

He doesn't want to leave his friends but wants to shoot hoops on pavement, not dirt. And besides, those adobe bricks of their home are crumbling fast and the gaps between the slats of the house's frame now show the stars in the desert dark sky.

The poor farmer could fix the roof and those walls, he could run out that thieving alpaca, but he knows they need to get off this farm. He's just waiting for an offer.

BAREBACK RIDER

BY NADJA MARIL

The painting on the easel is taller than me. I am four years old in my father's studio located in the garage behind our house. I look at the woman standing on the back of a white horse. The horse is being led by a man holding two yellow balloons. The balloons are almost invisible, translucent like two soap bubbles. Is one of them meant for me?

The dancer, for she must be one to balance herself as the horse is walking, wears a tutu. She and the skirt defy gravity. I am captivated.

To someone else, the woman may appear abstract, without a face, hair, or detail. But I like this sort of figure because it allows me to fill in everything that has been erased and make her into whoever I want. This absence gives power to my child's mind. The world is full of possibilities and I fill in the blanks. I want to be a dancer. I want to twirl and point my toes, holding one leg high behind me in an arabesque.

"I like your painting. The lady on the white horse."

"Do you?"

I feel important. It's just me and my dad. I have him all to myself.

I see the familiar array of wood stretchers and rolls of canvas in one corner and a work table with two drawers below and a slab of marble where my father mixes his paints. The studio smells familiar. The scent of oil paints and turpentine remind me of the aroma of my father's plaid shirts and khaki pants.

The circus? I think but do not ask. I've never been to the circus but I've seen pictures on the curtains in my room. The bright colors of circus tents; red, green, and blue. Always there are beautiful horses and bareback riders wearing tiaras and feathers in their hair and a ringmaster with top hat and boots.

I consider this exotic world. Wild animals. Elephants. Perhaps I've seen this world on our black and white TV or on the pages of a picture book. My father lifts me up, hugs me to him. He smells of coffee and tobacco. I'm still small enough to balance on his shoulders, a wonderful way to make the journey back to our house.

The painting is finished. Exhibited. Stored in the racks of my father's studio, a larger studio. And maybe because it is one of the first paintings I remember consciously examining and discussing with my father, it sticks in my mind. Every so often I ask my mother or my father about that painting of the bareback rider, you know, the one with the white horse with a dancer on the horse's back. It's got red in it, a brilliant rectangle of red. My favorite color at age four. A vibrant hue that says look at me, look at me. I want to own that painting.

Years later it is mine. A housewarming gift when I moved into my first house. The title of this painting, "Vanishing Scene" is now an appropriate name. Circuses are past tense. Endangered species can no longer be caged. Horses must be treated with respect.

I stare at the painting and see the white steed is looking down. Reluctantly he follows the man dressed in blue. My eyes focus on the dancer with the long bare legs. She is me and I am her, performing for the audience. Secure and self-possessed. Not afraid of falling. Keeping her balance she remembers early childhood. She remembers watching her father devote time to his art. She remembers watching him paint in his studio. The two of them talking about a painting, this painting. Sharing a moment.

THERE'S A BALLROOM AT THE END OF THIS DUSTY ROAD & YOU NEED A PASSWORD TO ENTER

BY JOYLYN CHAI

I

i got the password from a cowboy / trying to lose myself / lose
my thoughts / trying to set them free / flying over soft plains /
snagging on sharp horns / an unsuspecting bull collapses / mister
cowboy / whispering buzz in my ear / at night 'round the campfire
/ embers glowing against floating ash / "remember, sister, the
password is / feelings" / fanning the dying flames with his hat /
jutting his belted hip / "you better know how to dance"

II

i've tried to lose myself / in never crowded office towers / slinking
out / from sliding elevator doors / my crotch snug / sweating in
girdle-control pantyhose / i tried to leave my thoughts with / a
very friendly lipsticked receptionist / the words begin / she smiles
/ raises her manicured finger / "hold on a sec, hon" / she answers
rattling plastic phones / someone else's thoughts / someone else's
words / scribbled down / verbatim / on pink message pads / i am
always waiting / in line

III

i tried to lose myself / under the covers / my bed sinking / hot
summer evenings / the tired sun / knocking against walls /
how long can i stay awake / how long can i sleep / when will
my thoughts pour out / drain away / slick sweat comes off me
/ thoughts pool underneath / staining like midnight menstrual
blood / i will never get back to sleep / so / i leave my bed / leave
my house / walking on this dusty road / toward a secret ballroom

IV

the password is / feelings / security at the door / looks me over /
still in my pajamas / barefoot unwashed / stinking / dried blood
sweat / unwanted thoughts / is it possible for someone to stare
/ indifferent / disapproving / maybe just disapproval / without
consequence / the door unbolts / i enter / music lights laughter
/ everyone turns / stares stops / the conductor quiets the band /
someone points a finger / i wonder if i should / take my leave / i
am interrupting / a big woman in the back shrieks / “she’s here”
/ instantaneously simultaneously / each mouth opens / rimmed
with pearly white teeth / smiles turn to cheers / cheers to song
/ wine glasses / champagne glasses / martini glasses / crystal
tumblers are raised / “she’s here” / the band starts up / a lively
number / revelers tumble out / the dance floor trembling / colors
are erased by / glitter shimmer glow / shine movement / joy

HAIR

BY ROBERT RENÉ GALVÁN

My *abuelito* Lalo
had an idea
of what a good
haircut was:
shorn like a sheep,
buzzed with those
boisterous clippers,
peloncito,
finished off
with *Tres Flores*
brilliantine.

My father
had more difficulty
in his youth,
as he had his mother's
wiry strands,
muy *Africano*,
she would say,
and tried to part
the waves
with a tortoise
shell comb.

It always looked wrong,
as if trying to force
the issue,
worked against its
true nature.

Sometimes he had
a bulbous bush,

at times a rigid
part like a cleft
in a stone,
but later succumbed
to its desire
and combed it back
as he looked in the mirror
and muttered,
“*Que suave...*”

As a child my own
hair was cropped
around my ears,
anointed with
Johnson’s Baby Oil,
parted with plastic
tines, my pate
divided into uneven
hemispheres,
at first soft,
then grew coarser,
unruly,
disciplined
by the blow-dryer
and fragrant gels,
untamed until
it hung in a braid
down to my waist
like those
of my ancestors,
which seemed
to upset the Puritan’s
descendants,
that I would not
wear my hair
like a banker

or a greasy senator,
or like those slugs
in my dad's
yearbooks,
square
after
square
of the
same style
and identical
eyeglasses,
smiling
in a smug
solidarity.

So much
consternation
over what the follicles
formed,
as if to deny
the beast
that we scrape
from our faces
with deadly
blades,
crop our crowns
as if mowing
grass;

Polite society
shuns
the Mohawk,
and dreads,
colored topiaries,
and medusan locks,
preferring the tonsure

of the workplace:
the pompadour
of the scoundrel,
the desperate
combover,
the coif of their
idol, Clark Gable
and his ilk,
strands plastered
down with motor oil,
and then dare
to call *us*
greasers.



AL MORIR DE LA TARDE

BY SARAH BRADLEY

WATER WORKS

BY DAI LIN

By 10 a.m., the African sun has baked me into the ground at 97 degrees. Like an overgrown, overripe mango, my body drops, collapses, puddles. The Ghanaian women around me are fasting from dawn 'til dusk, without water, for Ramadan. At the dugout, they dunk and fill their water vessels with a blurring swoop. The brimming canister, one I can barely lift empty, rests gracefully on their heads as they saunter back to the village, a mile away. Full of breakfast, clean water, and sunscreen, I struggle to keep upright.

Each morning, our alarms break the silence at 5:30. My roommate and I quietly step our way to the cafeteria, filling up with Nutella sandwiches and the occasional egg. By 6:05, I am in the trunk of a rusting hatchback, our driver and translator up front, and my three other teammates in the backseat. By 7:15 we are parked in front of our village chief's hut. Myriads of children circle our car.

Despaaaaaa

Naaaa

Despaaaaaa

Naaa

Ebeera

Gohm-bien-nay

Despaaaa

Naaa

In Dagbani, we greet and repeat as people filter in and out, in and out. Good morning, naaaa, good morning, naaa, How did you sleep? I slept well. The three weeks move chronologically like this:

In the morning, we are in the village,
assessing water resources

meeting the chief
meeting the community
setting up the stand
cleaning the polytank and the three drums
training the women on alum and chlorine
watching the women take ownership
watching the women lead
watching the women customize and improve
distributing safe storage containers and educating households
Opening Day! watching the women entrepreneurs sell water at
1/40th the market price—
watching 112 households line up for clean water—
arriving quarter past 7 the following day to tanks already filled
with clean water—
to women already onto their next task.

In the afternoons, we are in the markets—half acre pocket squares of alleyways and portable stands scattered throughout Tamale—shopping for supplies. My neck is unsure of which way to crane. My feet are trying to sidestep trash, sewage, and feets. My elbows are trying to keep to themselves. My head is trying not to knock over the markets on other people's heads. My body is trying not to walk into a car. The rhythm of exchanges excites my body, but not enough to overcome the weight of the afternoon heat.

In the evening, we return to our compound, secluded. 24 American students tucked behind story-high walls. At 6 p.m., our program leader facilitates group reflections. It has the uncanny tempo of summer camp.

In the village, they are thanking us, blessing us, and appreciating us, always. I'm speechless in my own gratitude. At night, I grumble to my roommate, "development is a world where the longer I hang, the more uncomfortable I feel," as we sprawl over our stiff beds, dissipating the day's worth of heat under the A/C. She says it just feels right for her. So, I burrow into my thoughts. *It's my first time*

working in development since Peace Corps and I realize it is a space where time spent exponentially correlates with deeper emotional, psychological, and intellectual discomfort. Is it this exact challenge that hinges me to this work?

I am angry. I'm angry we run daily showers in our compound while the dugout runs dry half the year. I'm angry on behalf of the global north for extracting and continuing to extract from their land. Deforestation is all around us. They burn to cook. They chop to export. Mining carries on. Foreigners enter. Families uprooted. Grounds blasted. Diamonds sold. Gold smuggled. Yet, here they are, teaching me about love, acceptance, joy. One woman had asked—can we bathe with this clean water?—and they laughed and laughed and laughed before we could respond.

I am ashamed. My hands are soft, free of callouses. I can wield a wrench, tightening tiny spigots on the safe storage containers. They ask us to paint their village name on the polytank because our handwriting is prettier. Appreciation and admiration for hands that look and feel so small. Hands that can't carry. Hands that don't work.

Time whirls by and I am back in Boston. Those first few weeks, turning on the faucet brings me tears. Weakness overtakes my body as I put a cup under the flow of uncontaminated water and bring it to my lips. July, I cannot open my laptop. The world's market fingertaps away. Fresh, new, minted items, available at my doorsteps within 24 hours. Gold, that's traveled halfway across the globe on a trail of blood, just two mindless clicks away.

The market in Tamale is scattered with recycled materials. Scattered undersells it. The only new materials I can recall are food, handmade goods, and fresh fabric. The fabric designs have tales, many of which are lost, but some are captured by shoppers and shopkeepers. Tales that weave together long-lost stories with timeless fashion. I see our driver, who works 16-hour days,

commutes for two, and sees his family briefly, shyly rest his hand on a fabric before quickly turning away. They break fast tomorrow. He is to dress in new attire, but this he cannot afford.

Piles of used clothes, still bright and without holes, printed with English or Chinese, lay in heaps on street sides. Soccer league jerseys and school uniforms that have traveled far from home to rest. Women bend over to ruffle the piles and examine the goods. The babies wrapped on their backs sway up and down, up and down. Who decided these outfits, tires, cars, metals, phones were no longer 'good to use'?

Behind me, the streets sing. Beepbeep beepbeep, the taxis, tuk-tuks, and cars honk hello as they pass and give way to one another. Walking markets sway through the streets, the men and women attached advertise their goods in shouts I can't comprehend. Children carrying styrofoam boxes of FanMilk ice cream sprint and scream after cars, hoping for a trade. At this exchange rate, nothing is unaffordable so I eventually come home with four handmade jumpsuits and their matching blazers. The feeling of wealth hangs heavy with responsibility. Again, the waterworks begin to bubble.

It's hard to unpack what has quaked in my soul. Their kindness, generosity, and love made room for me to blossom in tranquility, laughter, and contentment: flow.

Flow is sitting inside the chief's hut with all the kids who don't have schools to attend, scooting our positions, as the rains, bellowing through the two doors, slowly find our toes and feet, giggling at the tickles. Flow is knowing time, not as numbers, but as the sun and as the heat. Flow is handing over tampons and our translator finding himself leading a demonstration, threading the plastic tubing through a circle formed by his forefinger and thumb, his spontaneous makeshift vagina. Flow is his not breaking eye contact, his not cracking a smile, his asking and translating so

he can teach with responsibility. Flow is accepting that things are different and choosing curiosity over certainty, being okay, the day before opening day, when the women complained that the water was 'too clear. Flow is driving away as the thunderstorm swirls dirt as high as my eyes could see, enveloped by its maroon darkness. Flow is my team sprinting into the thunderstorm to fulfill my dream of a group photo with a majestic tree, standing singular in the horizon of stumps. Flow is my body in a car driving away, but my heart, spirit, and soul rooting even deeper into the red dirt.

flow

KQ̄Q̄ SIN DIITS'Á'

BY MANNY LOLEY

Chahalheel unfurled her celestial shawl around us, draping over chamisa, yucca, juniper. Yikáíschífn arched from horizon to horizon—luminescent, kq̄'disxqs, kq̄'alzhish. Yé'ii's sang their woo woo song, each verse rising from ni' asdzáán to yádilhił, from Crow Mesa, Haystack, Tsoodzil to fiery orange scorching above Grants.

He sat beside me, pressing his thigh into me. “Nidlohish?” he asked, his dark brown arm around my shoulders. He was dark brown from working in his garden all summer, chasing his grandmother's sheep down the mesa, and dirt baths after táchééh.

It was winter, but his arm was lightning rippling the atmosphere of my shoulder blades. His heat became my heat. His skin my skin. His sweat my sweat.

The fire continued to lick the darkness, and he stayed by me all night, but my breath still escaped my mouth in mist.

Shizéé'déć

k'os

nidahale

yá'kaashbaq̄h

k'os

nida'ajool

From my mouth, the language of clouds settles in that place only we know.

Kq̄q̄ sin diits'á'

They say Haasch'éshzhini stomped his feet and dilyéhé moved from his foot to his hip. He stomped again and dilyéhé moved from his hip to his temple. *That is my power*, he said, *to move the cosmos*.

Sq̄'. Stars. Fires breathing in sacred darkness. Alive. Alive. Like stories.

Kq̄ sin diits'á'

They say my great grandpa was a medicine man. *He knew the inner names of creation. Tóyisdzáán Shimá. Nahasdzáán Shimá. The rest cannot be written here.*

They say my great grandpa was a medicine man. *His patients paid him with multicolored fabrics, Pendleton robes and shawls, turquoise jewelry, baskets. He pawned everything for Garden Deluxe, niteelígíí, The-Wide-One, the one that fit perfectly in hand. He used to pour some on the ground first before drinking. It was a brown liquid that burned orange in the sunlight.*

They say my great grandpa was a medicine man. *He was the husband of Asdzáá Sneez. Her English name was Jenny. She was a weaver. She froze a few feet from her hogan. They found her the next morning, body fetaled. He never stopped drinking.*

They say my great grandpa was a medicine man. In my dreams, he is alone in a hooghan's womb, delirious, singing to himself. His hair, long and gray, tamed by a black bandanna tied around his forehead, the knot above his left ear. There is no fire. His breath clouds from cracked lips. As he sings, my life unfurls into mountain song, dawn song, the rim of a bottle brown like my eyes.

Kq̄ sin diits'á'

We become constellations circling Náhookqs Bikq̄'. Fire in your eyes. Fire from fingers sliding off our clothes in a backseat, in a dark canyon, dark as clouds in my throat. We are the Sun-Carrier and Moon-Carrier at the beginning of the world, a song etched in storm pattern. I have the night scattered across my chest. You lick dilyéhé on my hip—admire each star point. You sing my body back together.

Kq̄ sin diits'á'

Sq̄'
yá'kaashbaq̄h
si'q̄

WHY THE MOB PICKED OHIO AS THE PLACE TO DUMP A BODY IN THE SUMMER OF 1969

BY ROY BENTLEY

Maybe the Jersey Shore was that spectacularly bloody,
and the landfills were practically running over with bodies,
the docks and beaches of Barnegat Bay rimmed with floaters.

Any ditch beside the road in rural Ohio might as well be Mars,
provided you've lopped off the tips of the fingers and thumbs.
Pulled all the corpse's teeth—after you've done what killers

in the Garden State know it takes to get away with murder.
Besides, one said in his memoir, *I-70 had that truck stop
with the swell waitresses who laughed at our accents.*

One corpse after another for weeks as if the East Coast
was a lunger coughing up young men of Italian descent.
Men with lives that meant what they meant for a time.

Sometime after Labor Day, the late-night transfers
started tapering off. And law enforcement sighed
as they leered for cameras. Said what they said.

At about a baker's dozen, I decided that America
is one tough motherfucker bleeding out in the trunk,
the Cadillac crossing an anonymous river in the dark.

TURF WARS

BY EVAN MASSEY

Another rapper has been murdered. Tray Savage, 26, was killed in South Side Chicago on June 19th. At 11 a.m. on Friday, after dropping off his girlfriend, shots rang out towards his car, hitting Savage in the shoulder and neck. The wounds caused him to crash into three other vehicles. Tray, a member of GBE (Glory Boyz Entertainment), which is led by Chicago rapper Chief Keef, is known for his many features with Chief Keef and his single, “Trap”—it’s gained around 90K views on YouTube. I’ve never listened to Tray Savage. Probably never will. But I’ve knocked Chief Keef’s 2013 hit “I Don’t Like,” a few times in the car. The song took off and was later remixed by famous artists like Kanye West, Pusha T, and Jadakiss. Chief Keef, who has also seen his fair share of violence, dealing with threats from rival gangs, is from O’Block/300, a nickname adopted by the Black Disciples gang in Chicago. “Steve Drive,” this dude playing FIFA online said into my headset. He had recruited me to play. Steve Drive is the name of his team in FIFA 20 Pro Clubs. “What the hell’s Steve Drive?” I said. “A gang in Chicago,” he responded. It should be mentioned that he, my FIFA homie, isn’t from Chicago. He’s from North Carolina. He chose Real Madrid’s kit for the “Steve Drive FC” uniform. Steve Drive, another branch of the Black Disciples, is named after gang member Steven “Lil Steve” McGee after he was shot and killed in 2011. After I read the article about the death of Tray Savage, I scrolled through more news on my phone. I read that Clark Atlanta University has promised full scholarships to the four children of Rayshard Brooks. Brooks, after a scuffle, was recently shot and killed by Atlanta police officer, Garret Rolfe, in a Wendy’s parking lot in Atlanta, Georgia. The scholarships are worth more than \$600,000. I think to myself, I can’t wait to see or read the article when his first child graduates. To see them walk across the stage. Receive their degree. Point to the sky. I figured it was a good,

though bittersweet story to end my scrolling. I put my phone down. Cut on my PS4. Fired up FIFA 20. I hopped in a Pro Clubs Drop-In match, a game mode that allows you, with other players around the world, to play a specific position on the field. I choose Center Back. Defense. I love defending my team's turf. While I'm playing, I'm listening to rapper A-Mafia's mixtape, "Lord of the Streets." A-Mafia, now 38, who hails from Harlem, NY, started rapping when he was incarcerated. He was 15. He flows with an old school street style, reminiscent of Big L. Rugged. Hard. A grown-ass man. With an occasional declaration of threats at the end of his punchlines. A declaration like this one, "The feds scooped up Raheem / My crew plot and scheme like the Mujahideen." Translation: His crew should not be tested. I have to say, I'm impressed with A-Mafia's world knowledge. And I put money on it, you're asking yourself, "Who are the Mujahideen?" The Mujahideen were the original rebel group who declared jihad over the Soviets when Russia tried to conquer Afghanistan. Several soldiers and officers deserted from the Afghan Army to join the rebel forces. They traveled on motorcycles and horseback. Armed with Kalashnikovs, bolt action rifles, and anti-aircraft weapons. They'd shoot Soviet and Afghan helicopters out of the sky. They'd slip in and out of Iran, hiding and attacking from the mountains. The Mujahideen were supplied by Muslim supporters. Even the United States, in order to stop Russian expansion, filtered in \$20 million to train and arm the resistance forces. It worked. But on May 16, 1988, when Russia withdrew, they left behind more than 7-8 million landmines and unexploded ordnance. Years after the war, unexploded ordnance still takes the lives of hundreds of civilians, including children. The Russians also left the door wide open for the Taliban. On September 9, 2001, Mujahideen leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, enemy of Osama Bin Laden, was assassinated by two assassins backed by Al Qaeda. Two days later, 9/11. Thus sparking America's longest war. A war that I've fought in. In 2012-2013, I was stationed at FOB Salerno near Khost, Afghanistan. I've seen those discarded Soviet ordnance lodged into the earth. Escaped IEDs on 20-plus convoys. Drank fresh chai with local nationals. Been mortared by

the Taliban while sleeping at patrol bases. Rode on a crotch rocket confiscated from a school teacher who was making bombs. Pulled hours of tower guard while being bombarded with rocks thrown from Afghan children who'd also, on several occasions, scream that they'd sell us hashish. Then, as the sun fell into the horizon, they'd start up a game of cricket. The game on FIFA 20 ends 0-0. A draw. Still, I played one of my best games. 8.5 match rating. Few tackles. A bunch of clearances. Cancelled out numerous attacks. On the main screen I see the ad for preordering FIFA 21. I'm not much of a preorderer. I'll just buy the game whenever it drops. But I wonder if there's a cricket video game. Turns out, there is. Cricket 19. The game allows a user to create their own club, stadia, logo and uniform. I'm surprised to see Afghanistan is included in the game as a downloadable unlicensed team. Maybe I'll buy it one day. Maybe. But I doubt any game can replicate actually witnessing a gang of Afghan kids play cricket just yards from the guard tower. Their youthful voices yelling out in Pashto. Breaking into explosions of laughter. Kicking up dirt and sand while sprinting after the ball, which, at times, made it seem like they were floating.

PASSES

BY JULIA KOOI TALEN

On the way to work a stranger told me he liked my legs because I was wearing
tights. His dog's fangs ripped me. Barks ruptured my morning dawn.
Shadows that ran across my bedroom curtain when I was five.

Another night was dark blue & I passed a stranger. He smiled at me
said good evening. A rotating door a lantern. I was alone in the dark &
I was wearing different tights & I didn't say good evening back. His dog jumped up
on me. Damp nose. Nylon legs. Wet. He apologized for his dog &
I said it was okay like a chime.

A different day I walked through fresh snow, white snow in the neighborhood park.
A bulldog with dripping jowls looked me in the eyes while eating mouthfuls of
precipitation. My legs froze.

On Avenue C that one spring the sun pierced through the city drab &
my mother & I searched for a cafe to get a coffee. A terrier peed on the concrete.
Up ahead I saw a man devour me into flickers while my mother told
me about my father. When he passed me he grabbed my
bare thigh & breathed into my ear that he liked my thick legs.
So subtle my mother didn't notice & kept talking about my father.

My colleague brought her dog into school.
The dog sniffed my inner legs. Me. The fluorescent light when she
introduced him as Buddy. Her voice changed octaves. She told her dog to
stop that. Later she complimented my skinny jeans
& asked me what I eat to have my legs. Hated her thighs.

Dogs & legs & the light on my curtain always.
A breathing zoetrope inhaled me into fractals.

MY BEST ADVICE

BY MARY ANN SAMYN

Two of my favorite poems ever mention cake, which I think about as I make one from scratch.

From scratch requires ingredients on hand, which I usually have, which makes me feel like me, and I begin.

Cake might be a language, but it's not words and for that I am grateful since words are my usual business, and everyone else's too, when you think about it, and very tiring.

Cake might also be a metaphor, but like all good ones it's cake first. Chocolate-chocolate, with sprinkles. And you can eat that.

Sprinkles are top shelf in the sense that I don't need them that often and so I'm okay with standing on a chair to get them. Again, literally is just fine.

There are the usual assortment of colored doodads and also snowflakes like ones you once cut from paper, and shamrocks and top hats, and hearts in pink and white, thin like communion wafers, and pearls you could cut your teeth on. This time, though, just sprinkles will suffice. It's nice to be pleased.

One favorite poem ever is about desire and the other is also about desire, as is often the way.

Both might also be bedtime stories in the traditional sense. So, not comforting, per se, but full of lessons tangly and real. Palpable. Like feeling your own heart beating quite loudly, loudly and a lot, when you roll over in bed. So that just before sleep there are a few moments of very much not-sleep, of surprising insight and

memory—I am a body—and right beyond that is the entrance and that's the way you go.

And when you wake you know you were dreaming and you remember nothing or everything but can't explain it or bits and pieces or it was so clear then but now it's fading and you're a little sweaty and maybe sad and filled with longing.

I have to tell you my dream, you say, or at least I do. But the listener hardly ever wants to listen as much as the teller wants to tell.

Recently, my mother and I dreamed of the same person on the same night. A long gone great aunt who I rarely think of in waking life. Which just goes to show.

Some people profess not to dream, but really? Dreams do work, don't they? I think I read that somewhere. *Dreamy* doesn't mean *unnecessary*. And cake isn't an everyday thing but why not, who says? Cake is real and very delicious, and if you don't like chocolate, I can make another flavor.

All poems are about time is a truism I happen to believe. Time might be made up, or whatever, but it sure does help bake a cake.

A belief should help, I think, on the whole.

The iced cake waits on its pedestal; that took no time at all. The poems wait, well, wherever poems wait. The favorite ones ever are timeless.

Oh cake! someone will say. (Someone always does.) *Did you make that?* (They're cutting a slice.) *Can I have some?* (It's a rather large slice; oh well.) *What's the occasion?*

BRITISH AIRWAYS

BY JAKE GOLDWASSER

Heirs to the lilt of our conjunctions
we negotiate our means with tongues

teeing vegetation for peristalsis
in the black boxes wthin our cheeks.

Inches away, partitioned
by the rest of an arm,

a stranger does the same on her unfurled
desklet of a seat back.

Airs beyond the fuselage impose their acrobatics,
the sways we exact approaching islands

(business, pleasure, relocation)
like the sways our predecessors made

—in boats, on foot—diversions,
flight risks, mumbling and morphing over terroir.

No one particularly wants to be here.
There was a time we'd daub blackberry jam

on venison we stalked in the heath.
Now I smear Cornish clotted cream

on a scone, my snore
half in old Norse and half in Norman.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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MARY MAROSTE is an MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University and received their BA from Western Michigan. They are the recipient of the 2018 AWP Intro Journal Project, and their work is featured in *Mid-American Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Great Lakes Review*, *Winter Tangerine*, and *3288 Review*. Their chapbook *Blueprint for a Home Without Tampons* was published by dancing girl press in 2017. Mary is from Houghton, MI, but currently resides and studies in Richmond, VA.

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JOEL PECKHAM has published seven collections of poetry and prose, most recently *God's Bicycle* (futurecycle) and *Body Memory* (New Rivers). His poems and essays have appeared in many journals, including *Brevity*, *Cave Wall*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *River Teeth*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sugar House Review*, *The Sun*, among others.

DANI PUTNEY is a queer, non-binary, mixed-race Filipinx poet originally from Sacramento, California. Their poetry most recently appears in *Alien Magazine*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and *FERAL*, among other publications. They're presently a PhD student in English at Oklahoma State University, though they permanently reside in the middle of the Nevada desert.

PATRICK T. REARDON, a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, is the author of nine books, including the poetry collection *Requiem for David* and the history of *The Loop: The "L" Tracks That Shaped and Saved Chicago*. His prose-poem memoir *Puddin': The Autobiography of a Baby* is forthcoming from Third World Press.

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MARY ANN SAMYN'S most recent books include *Air, Light, Dust, Shadow, Distance* (42 Miles Press Prize, 2017) and *My Life in Heaven* (FIELD Prize, 2012). She teaches in the MFA program at West Virginia University.

JUDITH SKILLMAN paints expressionist works in oil on canvas. She is interested in feelings engendered by the natural world,

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KIT TEMPO is a poet, singer, and unreformed emo kid. They are a biracial, nonbinary lesbian who resides as a settler on the unceded lands of the x̣ṃəθḳẉəỵəṃ, Skwxwú7mesh, and sə́lilwətaʔ peoples. Published in *West49 Literary Mag* and *Van Pride Magazine*, they were a finalist in the Canadian Individual Poetry Slam 2020, and have self-published three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Give 'Em Hell, Kid* (2020).

ELLIANIE VEGA is a latinx poet currently based in Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Elevation Review*, *HASH Journal*, *Chitro Magazine*, and the Academy of American Poets website. She works in a museum come day and writes poetry all night.

LUCY ZHANG writes, codes, and watches anime. Her work has appeared in *Fractured Lit*, *Contrary*, *New Delta Review*, *Jellyfish Review*, and elsewhere, and been anthologized in *Best Microfiction 2021*. She reads for *Barren Magazine*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Pithead Chapel*. Find her at kowaretasekai.wordpress.com or on Twitter: @Dango_Ramen.



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