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1. THE STORY OF THE ONE THOUSAND AND ONE METER TOWER

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Wholly Compassionate. Said she to her king. It was told to me there was once an emir whose port lay on the road between the East and the Holy City, and the travelers on that road brought great riches to the port.

The emir, who was a pious man, who loved his people as his family, second only to Allah, said to his vizier, Old Friend, we have gained much from the people Allah has brought through our lands. Lo! I watch them pass by my windows each day like a parade for our Lord, who has raised this earth up from the sea. We must use our riches as did the princes of the Golden Era: to welcome our visitors, to celebrate Allah.

So along the road, which led from the East to the Holy City, the people of the port pushed sand into the sea, using machines purchased by the emir, who looked out from his home at the rising islands, their edges thinning into widow’s peaks, the people of the port shifting the gears of skidsteers and excavators against the ageing of the sea. Ya Allah, said the emir, how great are you, and effortless, that this labor is but an imitation.

Down below on the island, two young men dallied. Not workers, they, but lagabouts. Not brothers, they, but friends, waiting on one’s father. Fahd, the younger, lean and seamless, a body so long it seemed without angles. Khalid, the elder, though only months, short, stout, yet knobby, his beard so thick he might be well guessed as any man’s son.

Why, asked Fahd, should they do this? We couldn’t use ourselves better?

Why do anything? said Khalid. You use yourself so well now? That’s your problem?

They’ll raise an island and in the island an island and on the islands a city and in the city a tower a thousand meters high. Allah is up there, a thousand meters high? One thousand and one?

As much as anywhere, said Khalid.

Then I’ll stay here, said Fahd, and drink wine
and sleep. Arabs, he said, doing nothing at all and always that on such useless work.

Fine by me, said Khalid. I’m proud to be an Arab. You know that tower, he said, will be so tall, they’ll use three towers to support it—the way real Arabs need four wives: three to hold the base while you show off for the fourth. The weight of Khalid’s head struck suddenly forward, he knew his father had returned from surveying the houses where his family would live, someday, on the east end of the outer sand of the port’s new manmade islands.

Ya Uncle, said Fahd.

Ya sons of dogs, said the father of Khalid, raised almost to anger not by the tastelessness of the humor but by the inference, however jokingly, that anyone presume to know the reasons for the creeds of Allah. The young men knew this of him. Only a decade ago they had been young boys in the madrasah. Staying afternoons in the house of Khalid’s mother, they would lose hours to internet searches on alcohol abuse and cirrhosis of the liver, to blogs dedicated to food and medicine where they sought out stories of toddlers vomiting to death from pork trichinosis, and no matter how many times they had been told, they would run after to Khalid’s father crying vindication for Islam against the Nonbelievers. And each time Khalid’s father would strike them and rage against their insolence and presumption.

Peace, ya Uncle. I’m so happy to see you, said Fahd.

And Peace to you, ya Fahd, said the father of Khalid. I don’t, he said, turning to Khalid, like this talk.

Ya Babba, said Khalid.

Ya Babba, said the father of Khalid. Sons of dogs. If you are not careful you will find yourselves in the position of the king who presumed to know the desires of women. And did not Allah make all men—and women? And if a ruler of peoples cannot know the heart of even his wife, how do you claim to know the purposes of Allah? What is this of which you speak? asked Fahd. Tell us, ya Uncle.

2. THE STORY OF THE RULER WHO PRESESUED TO KNOW THE DESIRES OF WOMEN

The father of Khalid said to Khalid and Fahd, There was once a great king whose name was—

Fahd, shouted Fahd.

No, Khalid, shouted Khalid.

Don’t be children, said the father of Khalid. There was a king who presumed to know the desires of women and—

Everything went poorly for him, said Khalid.

And he talked, said Fahd, to animals.

I don’t think so, said the father of Khalid. But he was a fool who caused much sorrow, which was faced with courage and beauty. And such a man hears the angels of his shoulders logging and taunting regrets.

3. THE STORY OF ABU MOHAMMED IBN MOHAMMED

The father of Khalid hacked irritably from the top of his throat as men do who know their conversation has been stopped up with drollness, men who wish to make their seriousness comical and cannot. So the talk of the two young men and Khalid’s father loped along much the same, all through their walk to the sedan and over the bridge which connected the islands now to the city of the port, where Khalid’s father left the young men in a café to spend the evening at their leisure.
The father of Khalid almost never thought of himself as the father of Khalid. He had had three wives and eleven sons, and a daughter, the last of his dozen. The father of Khalid fancied himself The Man with a Daughter. Mustn’t Allah want him to think thus, thought he, to have given him first a wall of men to see her against, his sons like himself all burnt ochre with sun, but his daughter fair as her mother, fairer, for her mother had veiled the girl, even when she was very young.

The Man with a Daughter went to visit his first wife, who never called him The Man with a Daughter. Nor did she, as did the people of their apartment, call him The Father of Many Sons. The Man with a Daughter was called by his first wife Abu Mohammed ibn Mohammed, the father of Mohammed the son of Mohammed. They had too many Mozahmeds, she said. This should not have bothered The Man with a Daughter: his father had been Mohammed; his first son had been Mohammed; he was, in fact, a Mohammed. And when his eleventh son was born—by his second wife, his second wife who was thought to be barren, so much so she had never objected to his marrying a third—Mohammed, not then yet The Man with a Daughter, declared his son a gift of God, and named him Mohammed, after himself.

Mohammed, the father of Mohammed, had been so encompassed in his sense of this miracle, it never crossed his thoughts that a man ought not to have two sons of the same name. Mohammed’s first wife, however, whose first son was the first Son of Mohammed Son of Mohammed, thought ill of this immediately and long, and though the second Mohammed, born to the second wife of Mohammed, was of twenty years and had for twenty years been called Khalid, though Mohammed, her husband, was now a man with a daughter, a daughter fair and beautiful and of eighteen years, the first wife of Mohammed, who thought of herself as The First Wife of Mohammed, greeted him at the door with kisses on each cheek, saying, Abu Mohammed ibn Mohammed, there is a young man in the apartment of your third wife who wants to marry your daughter. He is the friend of one of your sons. I have forgotten now his name.

4. THE STORY OF THE TWO YOUNG MEN AND THE BEAUTIFUL JINN’S WIFE

Khalid and Fahd drank coffee, percolated and milked and with hardly any sugar. The café played dubstep renditions of American pop hits, loud enough to be recognized and soft enough not to be listened to. From time to time a barista came by to ask after the young men, their coffee, their comfort. Fine, they said. Humdullah, habibi. They marked in their minds to give him big tips.

Across from their table in a circular booth by a window, through which the two young men saw jasmine fast in bloom, a woman sat, as beautiful as the mind could imagine, her face in the blue light of a tablet. Said Khalid to Fahd, she is perfect for me. She must be my wife.

Perfect? said Fahd. She’s tall for you. She is a height for me.

What of height, cried Khalid. Short, she is. You want to touch her. I, I would make this woman my wife.

I would make her my wife, cried Fahd. And the two young men continued as this, growing louder and more vehement until the beautiful woman, acquiescing to the critical eyes of other customers, rose and came to them.

You make such a commotion, she smiled.

You must marry me, declared Khalid.

Not he but me, then shouted Fahd.
Pretty Ones, said the woman, and I would. Both of you, I would, but of living men I can only marry jinn, and a powerful one.

I knew, said Khalid, his arm lurching forward, his empty mug cracking decisively against the table.

Don't talk nonsense, beauty. I won't be swayed by nonsense, Fahd said. Do marry me.

He's drunk, accused Khalid. Not now but always, he is drunk.

Smiling mutely still, the beautiful woman pressed her hips into the table. Stand, she said, and the young men stood. Don't touch me, she insisted, but place your hands at the height of my eyes. The men did—Khalid five centimeters below the height of his, Fahd five centimeters below the height of his—and at the same moment saw each other and cried: What is this?

5. The Story of the Cuckolded Jinn

I will tell you, said the woman pulling up a chair and laying hands to the table, but you must sit now and be silent.

We will, said the men, and sat down to listen.

I, said the woman, was the youngest daughter of the emir, by his second wife, whom he loves but for whom he is passionless. She is quite ugly and has always been so. Allah made her body for worship, she used to tell me. I worship. I worship.

I was very ugly too, much as my mother. Said the daughter of the emir, I was long of limbs and squat of body. My fingers stayed close to my hands. Such a woman could be beautiful if she wished, if she learned to carry herself. But, like my mother, I never wished to fetter time by pottering in the affairs of men. If Allah, I said, wanted me to be beautiful, he should have made me so.

My father objected to this. He said to me, I must marry you to the son of my friend, the vizier. We spoke of this even long ago when the two of you were small—you were a gorgeous child—and how tarnished will his memory be if you are shaped thus and yet obstinate. I know this pain.

If I must marry him then, I won't unveil, said I. Not even in our marriage bed. He will know me by my eyes and by the scent of my body.

Then you won't marry, said my father.

Then I won't marry, I agreed.

The emir could not abide this disobedience. He went stomping through my mother's home clattering platters of sweets, lifting and setting glasses down on a half set table and complaining after to the maid that the dishes seemed array. I had too often seen such insolence, and told him as much. He said he should send me out in the streets with the rest of the dogs. And I left.

That night I walked the streets along the bay, one eye to the ground and one to the glistening of the waveless waters as they rocked beneath the city lights and the white gleam from the moon. I am hopeless now, I said to myself. I can have anything.

Beneath the shimmering waters rumbled and from them rose a jinn whom I could not see but by the flashes of moonlight on the drip as it rolled from his immensity. You can have anything, said he, and I will grant you it. But you must first agree to marry me.

Ifrit! I shouted. What a wretch you must be to want a woman such as me for a wife.

A woman such as you, he said, with passionate eyes and the scent of a virgin.

Leave me, I cried to the demon. But he persisted.

I am the son of the Son of Iblis. He said, You will marry me and I will make you all the things
which are desired. He took me up then and lay me in a trunk, upon which he placed many chains held with seven locks, and carried me away into the sea. Thus I come to you.

Thus? said Fahd. What thus?
Ya Pretty One, she said, but you have spoken.

6. THE STORY OF THE BARISTA AND HIS BANKER

What is this? yelled Fahd.
I will tell you, said the daughter of the emir. But you must be—
Quiet, pleaded the barista. Ya sir, ya sir, my customers complain of your shouting.
Ya son of dog, said Fahd.
Ya son of dog, said Khalid. In their minds the young men decided not to tip him.
Come, said the daughter of the emir. I will show you. Leaving her belongings in the booth, the beautiful woman walked out of the café. The young men followed behind her.
When the young men left, the men who had been shouting at the grotesque woman, the barista went to the woman’s seat and collected her effects—her purse, a small package, her tablet. He might, had he just then put it in mind to pursue the strepitous threesome, have been able to return to her these items, but presuming they must not be belongings of which the woman was in great need, if she could afford to be so negligent, he took them to a back room and placed them in amongst the items of his reticule—a change purse, a novel, a gift for the banker, a small Qur’an. Having thus attended to the booth of the woman, the barista wiped its table clean and did the same to the table of the two young men, and having no others to whom he was obliged, the barista set his sights to the evening’s amusements.

The barista folded his apron top to bottom, then symmetrically. His employer had a distaste for this, theorizing that the first was the dominant fold, that which was redoubled by the fabric folded again: thus the fabric folded downward first asserted a horizontal line at the center of the stomach rather than supporting the vertical red stripes that made the baristas, all hired trim, appear tall and much leaner than they were. The barista did not believe this, rather he did not believe cotton thread behaved as such, nor that he, spun long by God, could be made to look otherwise, whatever shape pulled the eyes. A man of mischief and yet unwilling to accept the consequences thereof, he set his soiled apron on the pile of clean aprons and took a clean apron from the pile, arranged it neatly, and lay the clean and correctly folded apron on the shelf of the coatrack.

In the evening dim the heat of the air had become bearable. He stood on the corner south of the coffee shop waiting, hearing somewhere nearoff boys playing at football. They yelled, Yalla! Yalla! They cursed at mislaid kicks. Yalla, he shouted at the boys unseen. Yalla, yalla! Hinnah, hinnah! He pictured the abrupt torsion of their bodies, offenders and defenders both seeking for the open child. Delighted with the notion, he cupped hands around his lips and in the most boyish tenor he could produce called, Come on, come on! Here, I’m here! again, and again.
Someone took him by the shoulder while he did so, a delicate, long-fingered grasp that he knew a moment even before he spun his countenance around on the banker—his banker—and cried out involuntarily. She said, I’ve frightened you? Ah, well, I’m sorry, but it is a shame some other holds so much of your attentions.

No, said he, only I must occupy myself in waiting lest I become overwhelmed with anticipation.
The banker—his banker—convulsed with laughter. She said, Your face. Your face. And the sudden wind of his sorrow led her quite hastily to suggest they end their loitering and begin their walk to her home.

The banker lived on the edge of the sea, in the final story of what had once been the tallest building in the port between the east and the Holy City. She had shared this home, once, with her husband, who was gone, said the banker, and not dead, she explained whenever given condolences, but whose current engagements she would not discuss. The home was hers, she said. The silver was hers. The view from the windows, which now gazed over the houses of the islands and the low and starlit windows of man’s largest tower, were hers.

Alone with his banker, sitting beside her on her divan, the barista set his tea down and laid a hand upon her kneetop. She continued much as she had before, discussing with the barista affairs of her business—a minor argument between two men with whom she was employed, the conception of which was mysterious even to her, the heat of the vault, an error in accounts of the rate of exchange, which profited her firm so negligibly and marred travellers so little that to draw someone’s attention to it would be an undue burden to all.

He said, Yes, but the day is near over and the dawn is near. Won’t you offer me something on which to muse come the dawn?

Wasn’t once, she asked, sufficient?

The barista recalled to her then how before herself he knew no woman in the flesh. He professed to her that, had he not wished her forever his bride, he would not and could not have so debased the two of them, but having once done so, the insatiability of his desires had become evident. Please, he said. Allah will surely forgive us our indiscretions when we are wed.

The banker took him by his hand and kissed its back, only after to leave to the kitchen and return with tea and a tray of delicate pastries. My lover, the barista pleaded. If he loved you so much as I, how could he resist but each night be here—and yet!

He did once, said the banker laying her tray to her table and warming the barista’s tea, and as all objects of pleasure our nights were diminished by their own addition. Some visitors come to eat camel so when they return home they may say they have eaten camel like the learned. A blessing.

The barista watched the shoulders of his banker while she arranged her glasswares on her table. He said, You speak, I think, of an impure love. But I—

I, she interrupted, see into your heart. I see into your eyes that blink so often you never think to close them.

7. THE STORY OF DABBAT AL-ARDD

On the center island, beneath the sands pushed even in twilight mechanically up and up again, a beast, who too could see into the hearts of men, was shifted by the feet of a girl being chased by two of her cousins. The children, whose maidservant was trailing them quite frantically amongst the new and uniform houses, raced to the tower, the doors of which were not yet hinged, the stories of which they proposed to climb.

Small though she was, the girl sped ahead of her pursuers, hurrying into what was not yet an exit, leaping up two stairs in a motion. Her cousins, frightened by the shadow greys of the building’s low floors, unfinished and lit colorfully though only from the exterior, called up to her.
You must return, they warned. Trouble will soon commence.

But the girl only paused, challenging them to chase her, counting time as did the children whose parents brought them to the city of the port so they might have some winter sun. One, one thousand. Two, one thousand. Before reaching three, she heard the echoed smacks of the boys feet rushing up another flight, and she took off down the next floor’s hallways, hitting doors with her fist, hither and thither. The map in her mind of the movement of boys drawn from the map in her mind drawn by her eardrums: she wanted them to think she darted through many rooms.

The map in the mind of the beast drawn much as any waking thing, an instinct of lumbering in the direction of its duties, a wariness of the waking earth concomitant with the time of its repose. It rattled amongst the houses, the ring enstoned on its hoof turning them black and burning to cinder. The houses collapsed into the sands, upon which drug the rod of the beast and by which they glowed in the darkness brighter even than the lights of the tower, the luminous arboreal forest of the tower—its spotted flowers of reds and blues, its green underbrush streetlamps, the diaphanous chartreuse canopy commanding all that which flies to yield. A pitiful imitation of Jannah, or a sculpture of Eden carved from a story carved from a story carved from a tree some son of a son thought close enough to what Adam had called this thing some now called tree.

The girl, not mocking the boys but with sincerity, insisted, You wanted to come. Now you come as you asked. And the boys, so much taller than she, only heard the distant chiming of her voice. They sat upon the stairs, one then the other, much too tired to worry of the maidservant, who, following their pants and heaving, was soon to take them by the ears. The maidservant, who would be the first struck by the Rod of Moses, the small, quick girl, the second.

8. THE STORY OF THE SON OF THE SON OF IBLIS

On a street nearby the emir’s beautiful daughter unlocked a small black sedan, its passenger seat stacked with books above the height of a man. Khalid and Fahd each in turn offered to move them, but the woman only asked them to take the seats in back.

When they had sat and shut their doors, the woman drove, silent, forward, seeming never to turn. She took them to the center—the island in the island. The sky had hued dark but for a dim moonlight. She walked them to the end of the sand, the rocking water wending off with a grain, or five. Dig, she said.

And the men dug.

Beneath their hands, a jinn, the Son of the Son of Iblis, one such jinn, for these most impudent creatures have befouled jinn and women without number and their progeny walk every place amongst the living and rest every place where buried are the dead, sleeping within his enclosure dreamt restfully of his father. He envisioned that story his mother had told him hundreds on hundreds of times. She said, Your father was bound in Jerusalem by the ring of Sulâmon, king of the Jews, who knew the tongues of all beasts and took of God the power to command jinn, every one.

The Son of Iblis, like his father, of a single mind and jealous of heart, was amongst those jinn tasked with attending to the needs of Sulâmon, while he was carried on his great carpeted platform high above his dominion, which he hummed approvingly of while observing. Always,
m-mah...m-mah...he would hum, and when the son of Iblis delivered to him baskets of dates and proffered him wines, the King would say, A fine palace. A delightful wall, he would declare. He would ask himself, Mustn’t we have our jinn build us another bedroom for we haven’t place to rest without our servants or our wives to disturb us.

Quite vexed at hearing this question so oft repeated, the Son of Iblis asked, Shouldn’t we all hope now for a bit of rest, Master, with your kingdom already the grandest in all of God’s creation.

Jinn, said Sulâmon, if only I were built as you, without muscles to be wearied, and still thought myself in need of what God had not granted me. Having scolded the Son of Iblis, Sulâmon sent the jinn to fetch a chamber pot, and then to empty it.

Outraged at such a dismissal, the Son of Iblis took the King’s mud and covered himself with it. Your pleasure, he said to the King, is my obligation.

Ifrît, cried Sulâmon. Ya shaitan, what sacrilege doest thou?

That which you have asked of me, Master, only that. If you wanted, Master, I should lick the filth from your bowels.

Never do this, commanded Sulâmon. With his signet ring he pushed the demon afield of his platform.

Lo! Master, like God I make, and like Him my power lies in my birth before thine and in my passing after. You are the last commander of jinn and after few again will see us. When you are muck in the sand, when your temples stand as fairy tales, the children of mine will bathe in the wretch of your offspring. Your children will plead for companions, even in the night, because they will never know solitude. Mine will lie with them above and beneath the rubble.

9. THE STORY OF SHE AND HER KING

And the men dug. Hardly. Just beneath the sand they felt what they thought to be wood scraps and metal. In moments, they had raised from the beach a small trunk, not big enough for a skull. On the trunk were many chains, which were held with seven locks, on which were inscribed seals much too rusted now to read.

In this I lie, said she, and my husband-lover, who has made me all things desired. In his trunk, she lies beside him, king of his dominion, outside of which there is nothing. Inside, she is elegant and lustful and his want for her is raised again each time between their lovemaking when she tells to him a story.

They are endless and all imagination.

Above two young men and a woman the highest tower of this god’s earth rises, and it rises.

NOTES

1. Literally, school. The word has the broad and indefinite configurations that the American-English word would take on and has no necessary relationship to Islamic teachings, though because of the cultural ubiquity of Islam in the Arab-world, schools of many kinds have elements of Islamic education, much, I think, as American public schools are invested in Christian morality and ideologies.

2. In many cases major search engines filter results based on a given user’s location. While most of these conditions are recreatable in the United States, American media hegemony has led to situations wherein individuals in, say, Cairo or Kuwait City may receive information from American sources as well as from more local ones upon first
searching, while the reverse is unlikely.

3. رافقال (al-kafirun, the Concealers) in Arabic refers to those who do not believe in Islam, especially those who practice Islam and do not, in their hearts, fully accept Islam. I dislike the term Infidels, which sounds to me like a late-colonial hangover and which rings, in my 21st century American ear, as unknowingly absurd.

4. Not unlike cartoons of the angel and the demon on a character’s shoulders, Raqib and Atid, the kiraman katibin, are the “scribes” who record the acceptable and unacceptable actions of human beings. They don’t involve themselves in human decision making. In Islam, angels and jinn are different species. Angels, made from light, are without free will and so only serve Allah. Jinn, made of smokeless fire, have different bodily constraints than human beings but, like them, have the power of choice and the capability of self-actualization.

5. A particularly heinous caste of jinn, often described as having great strength and the power to fly. Sometimes also associated with that class of jinn that luxuriates in toilets and other unclean areas. The Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH), according to hadith, stories of the Prophet’s life told by one of his associates or their associates, you can fend off such jinn using certain du’aa, incantations. For example, before going to the bathroom, it is recommended you say: In the name of Allah, I seek refuge from evil and malice (implicitly of these jinn): لَنَبَدْوُغَٰنِيَّٰكَ إِنَّنَّا لَنَقْتَرِنُونَٰكَ وَنَصْبُ ُحَلَّإِرَٰاً نَٰمَ نَلْوُنُ إِنَّنَّا لَنَقْتَرِنُونَٰكَ وَنَصْبُ ُحَلَّإِرَٰاً نَٰمَ Not all jinn are evil, but ifrit are almost always considered so. Interestingly enough, Ifrit has historically also been a racial slur against black Africans.

6. See Note 9.

7. In Islamic lore, “The Beast of the Earth” is a chimerical creature that hails the end of days. While the Qur’an, itself, is fairly unspecific about the “Beast” or whether that beast is a metaphor, later sunnahs, secondary teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, PBUH, expounded by those close to him and his companions, and consequent mythologies become very specific about the Beast as a literal being. While understandings of the Beast and its qualities vary, it does tend to have wings, camel hooves, elephant ears, and an oxtail. It also, in some interpretations, takes on parts of small cats, pigs, lions, bulls, and human beings. The Beast usually carries the Rod of Moses and wears the signet ring of Sulāmon (Solomon). Those struck with the rod are marked for Jannah (Heaven). Those struck with the ring are marked for Jahannam (Hell).

8. In Surah al-Jinn (a chapter of the Qur’an entitled The Jinn), a party of jinn describe how, once able to eavesdrop on the talk of angels in the heavens, the transmission of the Qur’an (from God/Allah to the angel Gabriel/Jibril to Mohammed, PBUH) coincides with the appearance of a fireball (sometimes translated as comet) security system, which denies jinn access to the heavenly realms.

9. Iblis, the Qur’anic character most similar to the singular entity of Satan, is a jinn (rather than an angel), who like the Christian rendition of this figure, refused to bow to Êdam (Adam), and was banished from Jannah. The access jinn had/have to Jannah differs according to different sources. What is clear is that jinn, like human beings, have free will, and with that free will comes an ability to accept or reject Allah and Mohammed, PBUH, as His final Messenger. The word shaitan, related to Satan, may either refer to Iblis/Satan or to any jinn who rejects Allah.

10. In Islamic mythology, Sulāmon (Solomon) asks Allah for a gift that no other human has had or will ever have and to have a kingdom greater than any that has or ever will exist. Allah gifts him
both the powers to speak with all animals and to control all jinn—which power in some accounts is directly associated with Sulāmon’s signet ring, much like Samson’s strength and hair are bound. In some such narratives, the signet (likely featuring a Star of David) controls or contains jinn, as in “The Fisherman and the Jinn” (typically the first second-level story of the 1001 Nights), in which a fisherman lets a jinn out of a lamp in which the jinn is contained by Sulāmon’s seal and is able to recapture the jinn by tricking him into the lamp and simply placing the seal back on its spout.

11. The platform was not made of carpet. Nor am I all that certain it was carpeted—I concede this detail to Western jealousy of well-crafted Arab and Persian rugs. Islamic mythology holds that Sulāmon had an immense flying platform, one on which he could seat many guests and sometimes stayed comfortably for months on end.

This story appeared in the first edition of Territory, edited by MFA alums Thomas Mira y Lopez and Nick Greer. It is a reinterpretation of the 1001 Arabian Nights as translated by Sir Richard Burton.

Adam al-Sirgany is completing a work he considers “his little book of abortions”—subject and execution.
LITTER

I become a part of this garbage crew
empty cans along
the Wanapum pool
Peel condoms off rock
beside fire pits—
call them *snakeskins."
I learn quick.
When there’s a hoof
in the road I know
to grope through the ditch
for the rest of the goat.
Sling bags so they won’t split,
my uniform juiced with intestines
of liquified King Salmon.
I shovel a pit bull
from a plastic tub
in a parking lot—he’s dense &
flat at the belly,
a figurine.
I stop dry heaving

over the dead-animal-dumpster
at head quarters, even as it vibrates
with maggots, the stink
generating its own heat.
And as the torso
of a man is fished from the river
I wade in to my knees.
Watching for bones, coils
of skin, I try to imagine
his knife-bisection
at the hips, the sound
of a spine snapped.
My litter grabbers outstretched,
I’m combing for the bottom half.
we were taking lunch, sharing a crumpled bag of goldfish below the dam when we met Bill & Tim.

They rolled down a window, pulled up next to our truck & strained their necks—looking over me—to introduce themselves to Jim.

They have the same face when I remember them. Two guns propped between seats, smell from the old engine.

Tarp over a load in the bed. What've you got? Jim asked.

They stepped out, undid a rope. Something soft hit dirt on the opposite side of the truck.

You might not wanna look. Bill glanced at me, slid the tarp off. The mound there was grey & white at first I thought dirty laundry.

At least eighty seagulls just dead, ropes of blood at the chests. Shot so their shoulders folded apart like wet book covers.

To protect salmon. Doesn’t make sense, but it's not bad getting paid to hunt.

Tim motioned to a trash bag on the pile. Show them our girl.

Bill drew it down, ripped the knot, lifted an adult heron with a hole blown out the chest.

He held both webbed feet like the arms of a trophy. You could look through her body.

We found her in the road. Hit by a hatchery cannon.

The bird seemed frozen, wrongly intact—gold eyes cranked open, neck coiled tight over her slaty back.

When I cried it made them comfortable like I could be a daughter, wife or something they knew how to see. Hands on my back.

What's the matter, Tim asked. Didn't you care about the gulls or were they too ugly?
Where did you meet her, he asked.

By the park fence, the weed whacker

she was towering her hair fingers teasing out dead grass.

It was her job, she shoveled the bathroom snakes in half.

I didn't know how.

Stained glass
at the peak of the house.

Crouched in

her attic room. Wood & wire.
Insulation stapled with tapestries.

I put my leg between her legs.

I could.
I didn't want to be

a boy sliding

off her bra with one hand.
First time
both ways

burning the end on a short string—

thinking
I only have a little left of
what

She cut a flower from
the yard

when she left
before me.

It’s the same when anyone leaves
their handwriting.

It’s the same.

She hasn’t.

I feel she’s done a bad thing.
When I hear your name
she said

I think
of your wrists.

This made lake.

As empty as
water gets.

You're easy for me because I have a daughter,
he said. But you can't forget how you look to us.
Ex-construction-ex-loggers. Pushing sixty. You're
a squirrely thing. The music you like. If you could
let it be quiet on the highway. Six in the morning.
We're all watching the hill-light cut off the wind
turbines. We don't want to talk about our wives.
It's true they should let you drive. That's why I do,
but who shoveled the tires out. For you. Painted
over the torn fence. Hard to take you seriously as
a guy who's had a saw through his face. Watched a
razor pluck stitches off his glued eye. I'm not de-
ning this is a shit hole. It's the last one, though.
Our careers. Think how easily you got here. I know
you try you scrape your little arms up. You're right.
They should handle you. It goes both ways. None
of it's you, really. Just you in this place.
ii. Grave by the lake

he was like a dad. Told me to stay, I jumped from the truck. Followed to a melting tub in the gravel lot. Plastic opening white & fanned as dead leaves. In the sun the contents of the case set a body shadow. We gloved our noses. The smell of every dead animal the same except how it burns to breathe. Ice in your nose inhaled chlorine. Jim crouched beside it, some pit mix. Pet out there meant no money to cremate or yard for burying. We lifted the tub. Hands under both sides the top wedged with my chin. Close up to his patched body I could see had been stuffed to fit. There was what we had to do with the dog & what Jim knew I wanted. Digging a grave requires a permit. Our bosses provided a dumpster for this purpose half a mile from headquarters, downwind. Jim turned to me drove away from the dam. Country music at that time a reel of three we let go quiet behind the vibrating dash. We found a field without cameras & lugged the mutt out. Our fingers cut through grass. We dropped him in a shallow hole. Covered damp dirt with gravel. Projecting what the family would've wanted we said a few words, unclipped & hung nearby the heart-shaped tag. Jim was a dad he knew to set a flowery weed. Those were the ways he made it light for me.

Hands on my shoulders. Said if someone were here with his daughter—standing by the flat water old blood on her baseball hat—he would want him to tell her not to come back.
That was me combing the bee legs out. My ponytail a hot nest. Wanting simple. Eating french fries from your mouth. Saying yes I would like. Series of company website photographs. Click on me posed in a tube where the horse floated out. Washington’s Palm Springs. Please come visit you your whole family. My pulled up weedy feet. That was the purple eyeliner month. Landshark & Burnett’s buried in dirt behind my parents. When I ate the most hot dogs extra large pizza lunch. How small & how much. I hiked a car door from a pasture in the summer drought. Strapped to my belt. Waved while stabbing cups off. My friends Slurpees & bikinis. Guys called them a bald eagle sighting. Added four to the tally. We were the kind they’d like to see at the nude beach but a nude beach is never what you think. Twenty person tents. Golfer wearing a yellow dick-sling. That was when they left me to clean. A man should never see another man fucking even in the movies. Worst things work against biology. For example who would put a teenage girl this far from cell service. Problem of access. Car tires stuffed in vault toilets. My new awareness. Burying tampons in an open field. Dirt stamped my bright hands. It was funny they drove away when I pulled down my pants. I could run the two miles back & it was like me to hold the radio to my mouth. So they’d hear. I heard too from the truck speakers driving up the road. How balanced how practiced I was at that clipped breath.

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THE STORY OF STAYING

JAN BINDAS-TENNEY

Williston, North Dakota

A NORTHWESTERN MIGRATION

There are two kinds of people in the waiting area for a flight to Williston, North Dakota: the company men and the roughnecks. The roughnecks are white men with steel-toed boots and baseball caps slick on their heads like onion skins, they might even wear these hats in the shower. They are tattooed white men staring into their smart phones with muddy-bottomed jeans. The company men are skinnier white and east Asian men with leather loafers and Mac computers. The company men hunch on conference calls with headphones. I am the only woman.

Jobs on an oil rig: Roughneck, Toolpusher, Derrickhand, Worm, Roustabout, Giness, Mud logger, Company Man. Everyone sleeps on the rig; the mud logger wakes at 11 p.m. for a 5-hour-energy drink breakfast before the night shift.

Crops that used to grow in North Dakota: wheat, barley, oats, alfalfa. Specialty crops that now grow in North Dakota: beans, canola, flax, safflower, lentils.

Flying into Williston, North Dakota at 1 a.m. is like flying into Paris or Dallas. If I squint my eyes to make them blurry, the light from the oil rigs and the natural gas flares on the prairie glow the same orange as a suburban cul-de-sac. The rigs are small Eiffel towers. The flares are jet engines. I push myself against the window.

Man camps in Williston clutter the outskirts of town with white recreational vehicles crowded on rectangle patches of grass, many have plywood skirting, most are quiet on the outside. Some unfold a spiderweb of rectangular metal cabins, a future vision of settlement on Mars.

Things people say to me in Williston: Their supply and demand is going to bite them in the butt. How many years do I have left? We need people to group up and help each other. Most of us make too much to qualify for assistance. I never used to lock the doors. I do a lot of hollering.
There is a lot of dust. It's a natural disaster.

The census can't handle the numbers. What they're sure about is that the population started at 12,000 before this round of drilling in 2008. Some say the population is 30 thousand now, 50 thousand, going to be a hundred soon. Some say the ratio is 50:1 men to women. Some say the ratio is 5:1 men to women. The man camps are hard to count. As are the people sleeping in their cars at Walmart, hard to keep track of who is squatting what awning.

How to frack: drill down two miles to the Middle Bakken Shale. Take a left turn and drill out another two miles. Send in the frack team with an explosive perf gun to hairline fracture the shale. Pump the well bore with water and sand, among other things. The sand will hold the cracks open like a shunted artery. The sarcophagus sludge of ice age algae and the lipid insides of prehistoric fish ooze: crude oil, mixed with salt water from an ancient seabed and natural gas, mounds of sand. The pumpjack dips and hunches as it pulls the past to the surface in a repeated resurrection prayer. And some people make money, lots and lots of money.

Other things people say to me in Williston: There was an eviction notice on my door. They waited until dark to send some high school kid to tape it up. Ten people got eviction notices that first month. I wasn't living high on the hog. There's a little bit of Indian in us–Chippewah tribe. My brother's a jerk; he won't mow the grass. There's somebody sleeping under the trailer next door. I own some rights, but I won't let them drill on it. I'm sick of oil.

Coffee shops in Williston: Meg-a-Latte (owned by Meg in two locations: one on Million Dollar Way and the other in the mega church called New Hope Wesleyan with its big TV screens, electric guitars, young pastors in flannel shirts, and everyone in the movie theater-type pews with grande machiattos in their drink holders), C Cups Espresso (as in bra size), Boomtown Babes Espresso (bright pink shack along route 2 where men in trucks can drive through to check out the “babe-ristas”), Daily Addiction (my favorite, located on Main Street).


Number of votes cast for the mayoral election a day before I arrive: 5,000. Candidates for the mayoral seat: newcomer venture capitalist named Marcus Jundt who recently bought up 5 restaurants in town; a long-standing city commissioner Howard Klug; and a recent transplant named Jim Purkey, who lives in a RV, running on the platform of affordable housing for Williston. Howard Klug won.

I CAN'T SLEEP IN WILLISTON, NORTH DAKOTA

The parking lot of the Super 8 in Williston along Million Dollar Way, the four lane causeway from town to the oil fields, is packed with trucks: muddy trucks, dump trucks, utility trucks, construction trucks. Trucks revving their engines at odd hours of the night, trucks peeling out, trucks driving too fast, trucks returning and sputtering to a stop. In the hallway of the hotel, a construction worker keeps asking if I'm married.

I have a hard time with hotels. When I worked as a labor organizer, I lived for almost a year in a
hotel much like this one on the edge of an industrial town in Pennsylvania. The same hard white sheets, the same paisley carpet, the same bad continental breakfast featuring a waffle-maker. And look at me, watching the same episodes of Law & Order at 1 a.m.

In Pennsylvania, the hotel staff stopped cleaning my room everyday and asked if I wanted extra coffee filters as I glided by the front desk. They started to include me in their gossips, “Did you hear about Ricky?” I realized that I had a parking spot everyone left for me and I always entered through the dirty concrete back stairs. The strange Christmas tree display went up and came back down: Christmas Trees of the World with shellacked red Chinese good-luck charms and the Puerto Rican flag on a stick.

Here in Williston, Diane the head housekeeper tells me she stays out at the Buffalo Trails Campground. Diane is from Michigan, a white woman with thin greasy hair pulled back and bad teeth, a hard worker. She and her boyfriend snagged a FEMA trailer somebody caravanned up from New Orleans after the flood. She beams, we really lucked out.

**WE HAVE ENOUGH OIL WELLS**

I drive out to Carole’s ranch on a Saturday morning. What a savanna, what big swaying wheat, to be driving through the North Dakota fields on a morning in June, broke, awake, almost ridiculously awed, with nowhere to be but here. An endlessly humming landscape, still fields spin with trucks, dust, pumpjacks, and oil rigs. The oil horses bow and rise like persistent suppliants. The blue sky rips the grasslands wide open.

Carole, drinks her coffee on the cold porch, Carole smokes cigarettes in the fog, patrols her land from the control tower of her small red house, a watchdog ready to snarl at interlopers. Carole learned to raise cattle first, then to manage an oil field. She's a fourth generation rancher outside of Watford City, North Dakota. Carole invites me to join her on the porch. By the door she tacks a sign in all caps:

**BEFORE YOU KNOCK ON THIS DOOR, PLEASE READ AND FOLLOW DIRECTIONS ACCORDINGLY.**

1. **WE BELIEVE IN THE LORD AND WORSHIP HIM IN OUR OWN CHURCH. WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN YOUR RELIGION, THANK YOU VERY MUCH. GOOD BYE.**

2. **WE HAVE ENOUGH VACUUM CLEANERS, SO WE DON’T NEED YOURS. GOOD BYE.**

3. **WE HAVE ENOUGH INSURANCE TO COVER OUR NEEDS AND WE PAY THROUGH THE TEETH FOR IT SO WE DON’T NEED WHAT YOU ARE SELLING. GOOD BYE.**

4. **DO NOT ASK TO SURVEY. GOOD BYE**

5. **WE HUNT OUR OWN COYOTES. THERE IS NO ROOM FOR MORE HUNTERS, SO DON’T EVEN ASK. BTW, THE DEER AND PHEASANTS ARE PETS, SO DON’T ASK TO HUNT THEM EITHER. GOODBYE.**

6. **WE DON’T HAVE ANY LAND FOR SALE. GOOD BYE.**

7. **WE DO NOT NEED OUR DRIVEWAY PAVED. GOOD BYE.**
8. WE DON’T NEED A PICTURE OF THE YARD. IF WE WANT AN AERIAL PICTURE, I’LL HAVE MY UNCLE TAKE ME FOR A RIDE IN HIS AIRPLANE. GOODBYE.

9. WE HAVE ENOUGH OIL WELLS AND PIPELINES AND OUR LAND HAS BEEN DEVALUED ENOUGH. WE DON’T NEED OR WANT ANY MORE. PLEASE LEAVE BEFORE WE HAVE YOU ARRESTED FOR TRESSPASSING, OR WE SIC THE CAT ON YOU.

10. IF YOU ARE A FRIEND AND HAVE COME TO VISIT, BY ALL MEANS, KNOCK ON THE DOOR! WE WILL INVITE YOU IN AND MAKE A POT OF COFFEE OR A MEAL AND VISIT.

I examine her face, the deep creases around her eyes, young sparkling irises, heavy cheeks and a short blond haircut, the transitional lenses of her glasses blue-gray in the daylight, her hooded sweatshirt. We sit facing out on the land in folding chairs. It’s raining and cold, I’m chilly in a jean jacket, not prepared for summer in the north country. She asks if I want coffee and if I mind if she smokes. Yes and no, I say. Hot coffee on a cold day, cold hands around a hot mug, and the rain dropping splashy puddles on the porch just out of reach, Carole tells me she is sick of the hype.

"Are they telling people what it costs to live here? Are they telling them about the trespassing and the traffic and dumping? People have no respect. They were never taught respect. Everybody wants a piece of the Bakken and they’re all going to cut corners if you let them, big or small."

Carole inherited the land from her parents, who inherited the land from her grandparents, who inherited the land from her great grandparents. Now Carole leases the land to her tenant for ranching, and space and mineral access to the oil companies who operate four oil pads or “locations” on her property. She receives money in the mail based on production rates, but not all the extra cash from the production comes her way. The money spreads out between various distant relatives who live in Boston and Detroit, Virginia and North Carolina. Owning land in North Dakota, does not mean you own the right to profit off the crude sucked up from your section of ground. Mineral rights were severed from land rights during the first oil boom in the 1950s and the mineral rights to Carole’s land were divided years ago. Her grandparents deeded the mineral rights back to her great grandparents at their request, which Carole thinks was likely more of a demand, but she wasn’t there so doesn’t know. There are many distant relative mineral owners, but as Carole explains, “I am the only one who has to give anything up so we can get royalties. The fact is that I had to give up 25 acres of land that I will never see back in production for crops or grazing in my lifetime.”

We pile into Carole’s Dodge Ram. Her green bucolic hills are pockmarked with reddish brown oil patches and shifting steel. Cattle swarm the fence. Tossed up and down by the pitted gravel road, leaning forward into the jolting breaks, my stomach queasy from the turns, I listen to Carole’s headaches with the oil company, she takes a drag off her cigarette heedless of the bumpy ride that’s rattling my brain. As we pull up to the location, the pumpjack looms larger than I expect. The pumpjack is the symbol for you to visualize the industry. Every pumpjack has the same world beneath it, in the end: the layers of shale, the explosives, guar, sand and water, the black carcasses
of ancient animals and plants, the broken families, disputed documents handed down the generations, the monthly checks, the flaming ground water. Yes, you can go underground and exhume the details.

Danny, the construction foreman for the oil company pulls up, a smiling middle-aged man in a muddy white truck with a wedding ring on his finger. He stops out of courtesy to Carole. Immediately she starts barking. Not angrily, or with real rage, simply sparring, sportingly, to show him who is boss. She yells about the erosion, alfalfa vs. wheat grass, about the fence. Danny attempts to calm her by talking about his wife and his horses back in Washington State. As we pull away Carole grumbles, “I told them to move the fence, they didn’t listen to me. They are slowly learning to listen to me.”

We drive farther down the road beyond the boundary of her land, to a new set of hills, turn left at a grain silo, right at the dilapidated frontier shack, right again, past a trailer park Carole calls “Little Mexico,” and onto the highway. Carole is probably wealthy, of course, wealthy by a rancher’s standards, but not 1% wealthy, not Dubai tycoon wealthy.

After Carole buys me lunch, I drive away. Looping back to town, I pass an abandoned school house with chipping white paint, a new red dirt oil pad directly behind, the up and down, up and down of the pumpjack as it pulls.

ORIGIN STORY

The armored jawless fish of the late Devonian period and early Mississippian crawled to the shoreline of silty embayments, warm deltas, and inland lakes for a few short breaths then back underwater, nearly 400 million years ago. Imagine the endless water. The plants waving like water-logged caterpillars in the Age of the Fishes. Some fish horseshoe-shaped, some 33-foot long carnivorous monsters, some slick and toothless, all covered in shell-like brigadines, eventually developing lobe-fins, flat appendages to hand-over-hand up to the muddy land.

The phytoplankton, so small and floating like a chlorophyll blanket on the shallow seas, named for the Greek: wanderer plant. In a permanent back float, the small spirals, arrows, and elbows of green had it made: sucking up sunlight until death. Then they sunk. On the seafloor, corpses in a silty coffin, their proteins quickly melting to slime. But fats last forever. The small lipid bubbles covered over by sediment bits on top of sediment bits. The marriage of kerogen and fat, procreating the hydrocarbon predecessors for crude oil.

A wide sandy bowl later called the Williston Basin collected plant cadavers and mud layers in the water. Nobody can agree if the water was shallow or deep, salt or fresh but everyone votes those carrions, oxygen deprived. Under the heat and the pressure of all that weight of hundreds of millions of years of mud, it got so hot. Eventually black shale in three layers: the upper member, the middle Bakken, and the lower shale. Black shale is fissile and laminate, easily broken.

In 1953 on Henry O. Bakken’s land, a drill hit the middle layer of shale two miles down and the first bubbles of light-sweet crude hit the surface six months later. Henry married that year, became a millionaire the next. Named after Henry, the Bakken Formation occupies 200,000 square miles in the ancient sea bed of the Williston Basin and many estimate contains between three to four billion barrels of undiscovered oil. Henry’s well hit Nessos Anticline, a Bakken “sweet spot” with
natural fissures in the shale causing the oil to flow.

The story of North Dakota oil is a story of lust and abandon. In the 1950s oil companies drilled vertically, sometimes into dry holes, sometimes striking it lucky. Vertical drilling proved persistently unreliable. The practice of igniting explosives deep down is not new: as far back as 1865, companies shot torpedos into well shafts to stimulate production. The vertical wells of the 1950s eventually ran dry and stopped pulling. The companies disappeared to Alaska or Texas, the roughnecks left, buildings emptied, and rusting pumpjacks rested still.

In the 1980s another round of drilling began with the development of horizontal drilling technology. By drilling down then out, wells had a higher likelihood of success. Again, the companies set up rigs on the North Dakota prairie as the frenzy of leasing and lending mineral rights shuffled among the land and mineral owners. Again, the wells reached capacity and ran dry. In the 1980s the City of Williston built new schools, and a new recreation center, then nearly went bankrupt.

In 2008, technology combined the practice of horizontal drilling with underground explosives, what we now call fracking or hydraulic fracturing, to dig the most productive wells in this sordid history of North Dakota’s boom and re-boom. Now, the Bakken produces one million barrels of crude per day.

Lorin Bakken, Henry’s son, still lives on the old homestead, doesn’t own a car and keeps to himself.

“On the one hand…it’s good,” says Lorin. “On the other hand you miss the way it used to be, too.”

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

At the badlands in Teddy Roosevelt National Park, the furry green hills radiant of sunlight, with striped sandstone open wounds, rock of all hues, layer upon layer, like many skinned knees. The term “badlands” first coined by the Lakota–mako sica or land bad, suggesting extreme temperatures, lack of water, rugged terrain. French Canadian fur trappers followed suit, calling the Dakotas “bad land to travel through.” “Badlands” now connotes a geological formation of ancient layered rock poking through, unusual and moon-like on the surface, both then and now at once. Just after the dinosaurs, a landslide of mud, silt, sand, and volcanic ash washed into North Dakota as the Rocky Mountains emerged farther west. The still, sitting water rendered layers of sand and siltstone, clay later covered by millions of years of swamps and forest. After the ice of the Pleistocene Epoch, the Little Missouri River cut its course, a rushing force easily slicing the soft sedimentary rock, revealing the ancient Paleocene rocks alongside Holocene salt grass and prairie dog towns in the park.

Teddy Roosevelt was known as, among other things, the conservationist president. He came to North Dakota in 1883 to hunt big game, found the bison depleted and the land ravaged. He said of the badlands, “it was here the romance of my life began.” He also said over 100 years ago, “The time has come to inquire seriously what will happen when our forests are gone, when the coal, the iron, the oil, and the gas are exhausted, when the soils have still further impoverished and washed into the streams, polluting the rivers, denuding the fields and obstructing navigation.” TR went on to protect 230 million acres of public land. Now from some vantage points in the park, I see
the natural gas flares burning fossil fuels bright yellow like blow torches against the blue open sky.

Greg Tank calls in the middle of a Sunday and tells me to drive over right away. I’m out on the bluffs at TR’s park taking a slow hike. Greg’s been strange on the phone, distant, hazy, noncommittal, but I go anyway, beyond the park, down straight roads that bisect oil fields and sickly safflower patches. The roads form graph-paper borders around old alfalfa fields; the land here green, here brown, here eroded, here industrial, contradictory, breath-taking, ugly, and hypnotizing. Hidden pools of green liquid in the ditches, seeping into the lentil fields, glowing fluorescent under the earth. His dogs run and bark on the gravel at every passing car. As I park my rental in the sun, Greg Tank emerges, mumbling incessantly; he invites me in.

Husky, tall, overbearing, lacking grace, Greg Tank is like an awkward bison as he ushers me in the door and pushes excel spreadsheets into my hands, his abrupt movements unnerving and odd. I was given Tank’s number by someone I’ve never met who said he is a millionaire rancher who has it out for oil. Greg Tank has really no idea who I am. His house is a lavishly updated old ranch home stacked to the brim with clutter. The floor is somewhere below the piles, but I can’t see it, nor is there anyplace to sit, since every surface is covered with stacks of paper, pieces of clothing, letters and postcards, layer upon layer of stuff; there is nothing for me to do except hover over the leg of an armchair. Greg launches into a run-on sentence that goes on for nearly 10 minutes as I nod and look around. I am trying to simultaneously gauge whether I should be scared and still trying to take it all in. He moves about the room, a shifting giant, handing me paper after paper, placing his face too close to mine, retreating, then coming back to the place where I hover. On his desk balanced on top of the piles, teeter several #1 Dad and I Love You, Grandpa greeting cards. Tank used to raise cattle, now he recycles wastewater, accounts for royalties, and files lawsuits.

When he was young and a Grammy’s boy, Tank remembers a man coming to the house in a suit saying, “Sell me 10% of your mineral rights and you can afford a new car.” At the time, it seemed like a great idea. It was right after the war and everything was on the rise, but later his grandmother realized she had signed away not only a claim at that moment, but all future oil dividends from that small acre of land. Tank’s family homesteaded this land. Unlike most, he still owns 90% of the mineral rights. Landowners only claim the surface. Mineral owners claim the miles of compressed sand and fossils below ground.

Now, whenever Greg receives an accounting statement from the company, he runs the numbers three more times. Unlike most people, he maintains a working interest in his minerals, which means he handles the numbers himself. Most private owners lease the rights to an oil company to do the accounting, agree on a dividend rate, and wait for a check. Tank contributes to the cost of production and takes profit back in. Soon he realized that all over the state, these companies skim off the top of owners’ dividends. He maintains mind-bending spreadsheets accounting for every penny to avenge his grandmother’s loss. Last year he won a million dollar lawsuit for slow payment, lack of payment and environmental destruction on his property. Maybe Greg Tank is a conservationist in his own way.

Greg is erratic in his arm movements, compulsive in his organization, ad nauseum in his explanation, aggressive in his speech; it’s hard to take him seriously. Surprisingly, cutting far beneath
the visible surface of his disorder, hidden by an obsessive compulsive collecting, emerges a logical, researched, and accurate argument to prove corruption. A month after our visit, Greg Tank succeeds in the North Dakota Supreme Court with a case about defunct oil leases. He told me about the old rusty pumpjack the company abandoned on his property five years ago. He knows the oil horse can’t pull anymore crude, but the company leaves it there on his farmland like a monument. According to the ruling the company must now reclaim the land after a pumpjack stops pulling and seal over the hole, cover the surface with fertilizer and safflower. The company must restore the land; Tank conserves his own small patches. His wild body, the icy rush of the Little Missouri River cutting a course.

HOME IS A ZONE

Williston became a tent city in 2010 with refugees from the recession. It all started with a single orange pop-up from Walmart in the town park; then another tent; then a hundred more crowded on the brown grass. And then men in tank-tops stooping to cook bacon on gas stoves, blue-ink tattoos on their shoulders. Kids washing their faces in outdoor spigots, before school.

And beyond the edge of town, the engorged RV parks with cluttered edges, unruly, blurring boundaries of the industrial zones, of gravel and canola. The old campgrounds where people stayed by the lake in summer now filled with oil workers from Oregon and New Orleans, white mobile homes with plywood skirting to keep seeping heat inside at 40 below. More informal camps set up in the extra patches owned by oil, in ranchers’ backyards, the RVs in disorganized amoebas, without water or sewer. Now, tin can trailers in precise rows on route 2, owned by the companies, many camps of men. In this town, a home is a zone is an automobile.

In an online forum, men give and receive advice about how to sleep in your car: don’t plan on idling your car, too much of a give away. Everything seems to have an expiration date around here. Is sleeping in public storage an option? Will I freeze to death? Drive to the outskirts of town. Keep your front seat neat. Hang a sheet so they can’t see you in the back. Park in the employee lot. You’re gonna have to move around. The showers at Raymond Community Center will close soon.

The easy endings and beginnings are gone. The fields beyond the church are gone. The slow roads in and out of town are gone. On the west side, new apartment buildings arrive in modular pieces to be slid into place like building blocks. The rugged parks and trees that rose up from town—now those, too, are gone.

A SHORTAGE OF LAND

Barbara Vondell picks me up at the Meg-a-Latte, her blond hair blowing around in the wind as we walk to her blue pickup truck. Energetic, verbose, grandmotherly, and smiling, Barbara asks me if I want a tour around town. The Williston that I see, the Williston that I pace up and down, is not the Williston that Barbara, who was born here, describes with excited hand gestures. She takes me to the west side where the skeletons of new apartment buildings, the upside-down windows, and modular bedrooms stack at irregular angles like broken limbs waiting to be re-aligned. The places where the alfalfa is cut back and the gravel leveled off suggest the beginning
of a cul-de-sac or an oil pad. Barbara walked her dogs up here off-leash, but not anymore. She says, all this, so many of us nearly homeless, 15,000 new apartments, but half of them empty. The rents are too high. The rent here is the highest in the country in 2014, higher than San Francisco, $3000 for a 2 bedroom. Barbara explains that out-of-town developers own most of the new lots, buy up ranch land, and bought all the apartment buildings in town. Developers sit on them empty, waiting. Money talks. The city has to do something, she says, the city has to stop the developers from raising the rent, but when I say rent control, everybody shudders. Nobody wants Washington telling us what to do. Their supply and demand is going to bite them in the butt.

Grandmother to ten, great-grandmother to two, Barbara shares a trailer in the FM Court with her elderly Alzheimer’s ridden mother and four dogs. FM is the latest to sell. Before it, Elm Estates and Schatz went, Glenn Villa is close behind. Once owned by local families who lived on-site, the trailer courts sold for between 8-10 million dollars each. The Schatzes and the Glenns high-tailed it out of town, likely to the Black Hills to prefab mansions to live in some peace and quiet. A realty investment company based in Scottsdale, Arizona: ReNUE Properties holds the deeds. Barbara traced all the paperwork to a series of LLCs, an investment company in Alberta, Canada called Sound Capital then back to ReNUE in Scottsdale. She hands me a stack of court documents with the company names highlighted. ReNUE operates through a Fargo property management company and sent a high school kid to tape up eviction notices on everyone’s door. The lot rent for Williston trailer homes went from 25 years of $300 per month to $750 or $850 this summer with rumors that it will go to $1500 at the end of this year. Barbara started a Facebook group called “The People of Williston Have Had Enough” with 1,700 members. She led a protest on Million Dollar Way when the first trailer court rents tripled.

The residents own their trailers, but rent the land. Trailer courts often operate as unregulated low-income housing, but in a market flooded with oil work and nowhere to stay, the winks and nods of how things always were give way to capitalism. Barbara says it’s extortion. If she wants to sell, she has to move the trailer. Who in their right mind is going to buy a trailer with no land? If she abandons, ReNUE will sue. Everytime someone leaves, ReNUE trucks in a shiny new mobile home and fills it with oil workers who pay $2500 per month. Barbara pays the rent or ends up bankrupt.

Barbara takes me to meet Jo Anne, a 76-year-old live-wire with deep creases around her eyes, work pants and a short haircut. Jo Anne starts yelling as soon as we pull up. I want to quit the grocery store, she yells at Barbara, where she works stacking shelves. Barbara holds her hand. I want to retire, she yells again. She bows her head, God gives us only what we can handle, he must think we are more than women.

THE MYTH OF NORTH DAKOTA

Late 1800s:
1. Williston is largely a tent city inhabited by riff-raff and scoundrels intent on making a quick buck from the some 10,000 workers employed to build the bridges, grade the roadbed, dig out the cuts and lay the track.
2. This is the new land of Canaan, an ideal society emerging in a new inland empire.
3. Two million farms of fertile prairie lands to be had, free of cost. Thirty millions of acres of the
most fertile land in the world. You need a farm! Here is one you can get simply by occupying it.

4. More democracy than any other state in the union. Opportunity and prosperity for all.

5. Sometimes called “Little Muddy,” Williston is a rip roaring hell-raising town.

6. Most of the land east of the Missouri River sold, much of it to large investors.

7. The company decided to lure prospective settlers by advertising for them to “come and see.”

8. Grand rush for the Indian Territory! Over 15,000 Acres of Land now open for settlement. Now is the chance to procure a home.

9. The Act passes and Congress opens full and partial townships north and east of the Missouri River without the Tribe’s approval.

10. It was shortly before I shook the dust of what had now become of Williston from my shoulders, that I witnessed about the last of the “gun plays” that had furnished spectacular diversion in the happier days of the burg.

11. The goal is to attract full families for long-term settlement — not simply more men on temporary work visits.

The story of North Dakota has been, in one sense, the story of people leaving. The “Myth of North Dakota” builds on three ideas: 1) the myth of the garden; 2) the “work and win” philosophy that promises realization of the American Dream through hard work; and 3) an image of an empire in the making, settled by good and just people.

2010s:

Williston is largely a tent city inhabited by riffraff and scoundrels intent on making a quick buck from the some 10,000 workers employed to dig oil wells.

It’s time to find the good life in North Dakota.

In a recent poll ranking of the happiest states placed North Dakota at the number one spot.

We have the lowest unemployment rate in the country with literally thousands of jobs available.

The number of tents in Davidson Park is growing and now a family of 3 has moved in.

“Business is awesome,” she said on a recent Wednesday as she surveyed a growing line of trucks filled with men waiting to place their orders. “I mean, you get cute girls in here that actually know how to make coffee…business is so booming.”

NATURAL DISASTER

Barbara invites me to a meeting at Spring Lake Park later that evening. She says I’ll meet more trailer court residents on the edge of eviction. The early evening sun backlights Barbara, and while she raises her voice and points her finger at the crowd, she shakes her head, an alleyway preacher, a neighborhood politician rallying her troops, with little training or formal schooling. About 40 people are present, some with walkers, some coughing, others pacing the perimeter. Jo Anne at the picnic table, takes vigorous notes with wide eyes, listening to Barbara’s rising tone, nodding her head up and down up and down.

“I’m like the rebel, says Barbara. We want to try to do a documentary to tell our stories, try to make it as public as possible.

A man in his forties with glasses shouts out that he called Jon Stewart, Colbert, and Ellen. Barbara continues that the problem lies with the city’s inability to say no to the developers, that the de-
Developers are taking over this city. Barbara knows how to say no. I was a mean mom, she says. I said no. You gotta say no. If they jack our rent to $1500, we're all going to have to abandon our homes, and why don't we want rent control?

It is a natural disaster, says another young man. Where is FEMA? When there is a flood, the government shows up. When there is an earthquake, here they are. What about us?

A woman in the back stands up and offers her ranch outside of town with 220 acres of land. She says people can move their trailers out if they want. We don't have water and sewer, but we have space.

I kick into my old labor organizer mode. I'm whispering things to Barbara. Plan an action, I say. Set a goal. Give everyone an assignment. The group decides they should hold a town hall meeting to interrogate city and state officials. They will amass hundreds of people! By the end of the meeting everyone is clapping and shouting. They each take assignments: who they can talk to in their trailer courts about the town hall meeting, who will draft the letter inviting the governor, who will find a space. Several of the women say they won't talk to the oil workers, not to them. They won't understand. They are the problem. Melissa, a young mother in the back, stands up and says she thinks we need to talk to the oil workers, the guys in the man camps. They are struggling too. Not them, most of the group replies. Melissa counters that with them, we might have more impact. The issue never really gets settled.

At sunset it is over. The meeting is finished. I pull my rental car down the dirt road, see the sky's reflection on the lake and stop again. The shore is empty and no fisherman on the grass. A few children are screaming their feet into the air on the swings. I look back at the picnic tables to see the old women and their canes, husbands guiding their elbows into cars. The discoid cloud blocks the sun sending a sprinkler of rays all around. I snap a photo.

**CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

The city saw this coming a long time ago, ever since the tents, people sleeping in cars and the oil fields. They knew it would happen, Melissa tells me. The city needs to put a cap on the costs. The other day my daughter found a bag of meth on the sidewalk outside the Super Pumper. Melissa is a small woman in her early thirties, blond hair pulled into a low ponytail, with the expectant jitters of a heavy smoker just off a long shift. This has been my home for the past 10 years. I raised my kids here. They grew up playing in the park across the street.

I have to pay day care for my four-year-old, lot rent, groceries, the electric bill. I just finally figured out how to get off assistance and now this. I haven't paid rent yet and I don't plan to. Probably going to be homeless in a couple weeks. My sister Amanda has land, no water and sewer, but land. It was our father's. He passed it to all four of us, 220 acres each, but I was in the middle of a divorce. Tammy convinced me to sell her my portion and sign over the mineral rights. I am left with just this trailer. We don't talk anymore. She's got some oil pads now, pumping dollar bills into her bank account. She let the house go. She's probably a millionaire.

Marcus Jundt had us all to his restaurant for pizza during his mayoral campaign. I don't trust him. He said what's happening to us is wrong, that it needs to stop. He promised to purchase the trailer court if he won the mayoral race. But, I've
just been thinking how it’s all these investors from Scottsdale, Arizona buying everything up. Do you think Marcus Jundt and Michael Christiansen are connected somehow? It’s just too much of a coincidence that they are both from the same town in Arizona.

Later, when the sketchy wireless in my hotel room sputters and won’t let me search, I look to see if Applebees has free wifi. I struggle to find the connection between Michael Christiansen and Marcus Jundt. There must be one: both have bases in Scottsdale, both are speculative capitalists, both have some connection to Minnesota. There are too many coincidences. I get into the twenty-fifth page of the google search. I scour Lexis Nexis. I draw a diagram in my notebook with arrows and overlaps, but I can’t quite make the connection. I think that connecting Jundt and Christiansen in a conspiracy to leave low-income old ladies homeless might be the small piece of information to help leverage these folks the right stay in their homes, perhaps embarassing Jundt to intervene. I call an old friend who does corporate research for the union. She tells me which databases to search, how to make the tangential connections between executives. She says, but Jan, how will they ever win?

I call the number for Michael Christiansen listed on ReNUE’s website and his voicemail is not yet set up. A couple minutes later I get a call back. The young man on the other end of the line sighs when I ask for an interview. He declines saying that they’ve already gotten enough bad press. I protest, I want to hear your side of the story. He says he doesn’t want to stir the pot. He just wants everyone to forget about it.

**THE STORY OF LEAVING**

As I pack my things, I get a long text from one of the trailer home residents, the kind of text that comes in four different parts out of order. She says, despite all of this, even though I may be homeless soon, I’m happy to know all these people. Before this happened, I didn’t even talk to my neighbors and now we talk all the time.

Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant says that our persistent desire for the American Dream is both continually dissatisfying and always unattainable. The fantasy of the good life always meets the reality of “a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.” She calls this paradox cruel optimism. Never satisfied, always clambering. In this place where the American Dream is supposed to be abundant, everyone seems to sleep in the cold with a tiny blanket stretched thin in an attempt to cover cold toes. Anna Deveare Smith quotes Cornel West about black sadness in her performance project* Twilight: Los Angeles*, that white people “have their own form of sadness. Tends to be linked to the American Dream.” Ann Cvetkovich elaborates in her book *Depression: A Public Feeling* that by linking sadness to the failure of the American Dream, West “suggests that sadness comes when the belief that one should be happy or protected turns out to be wrong” and hopefulness punctures. Any way the blanket gets pulled, frigid limbs ice over, never enough. As gas prices drop later in 2014 and into 2015, I read about oil companies pulling out of Williston. Man camps pack up leaving trammeled grass and piles of discarded plywood skirting. Barbara tells me she plans to move her mother out of the trailer court soon. The rent is too high. Boom, bust, boom.
While I’m waiting to board the plane, a woman comes to the microphone to say that our flight has been delayed. We don’t know how long, she says, could be hours. Everyone sighs a giant waiting-room-wide sigh. I start to pace up and down the hall. A drunk guy in a dirty tank top talks on his cell phone loudly, I need to get the fuck out of here! The man next to me has a pumpjack tattoo on his bicep: the martian head and long neck, the tripod legs, the steel cord extending below ground. He’s shaking his leg up and down, up down so violently the whole bench seat moves, and my head bobs with him, making it hard to see.


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I’ve been ill for three months and I’ll be ill for three more. Six doctors can’t find what’s wrong with me. At their smallest, each tonsil is the size of peach pit. I chase antibiotics with steroids, with big white doses of ibuprofen, with sugary homeopathic pills that dissolve into the walls of my cheeks. Nothing keeps the suckers down. I want to yell at people on the subway: Can’t you see I’m choking?

Random foods make me puke. Yesterday it was quinoa. Quinoa! A shiny, wet rainbow across the bathroom floor. I can feel my own abjection; a leaking rupture, a permanent shift: the daily fevers, the night sweats, the nausea, engorged and cratered tonsils anyone might catch sight of if I open my mouth too wide, the sensation of chewed food clogging up my throat, the paranoia of sudden onset fatigue. It takes hours to leave the apartment. Each day before waking fully I take my temperature and gargle with salt water and spit and feed myself two aspirin and some applesauce from a jar. Then I sit in the shower until I feel like I can stand.

Some mornings I’m too weak to leave, so instead I float in the backyard where a widening lake has been growing and growing between the buildings. I let myself bleed into the lake, brush the cloudy red plumes from me like bothersome seaweed. I drift on my back and raise my eyes, listening to the traffic over the Triborough, the soggy winter pavement. I watch for planes. I wonder about pilots, why they don’t narrate the journey more often (…to the left is the lake where I learned how to swim; and those circles of light down there come from this; take a look at the Mississippi; take a look at the border, the desert beneath us; is anyone from Denver? Go ahead and wave to your hometown)—do they think we’re not interested?

How much slower and louder the world goes and goes—and does it still go?

Like Woolf wrote: Illness enhances our perceptions. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first
time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky.

And maybe that’s not the worst thing.

Give me more tests, I tell the doctors, but they say they have no more tests to give.

So I take matters into my own hands. Every few weeks, once the relief of my last negative test results has worn off, I walk ten blocks from my office to the free clinic in Chelsea, where men with dirt-caked blue jeans and sores around their mouths hang out, and I start the harrowing process all over again.

It’s cold and most of the patients in the basement waiting room wear puffy blue parkas over their tee-shirts. They look hungry in more ways than I can begin to imagine. A television hanging from the ceiling is silently tuned to the local weather channel.

There is one woman, alone, with hair down to her calves.

She watches me from across the room. I’ve seen her before, but can’t place where. These days are like dreams, both watery and vivid. Everyone looks familiar.

Slow down, she says. Be softer.

That’s nice advice, I think.

I sit on a plastic chair surrounded by baskets of free condoms, use my tongue to dab at my gigantic tonsils, while I text boys whose last names I don’t know. Boys listed in my phone as SohoHouseBryan and TallLuka. I want to know if they’ve had tests. I want to know what is wrong with them so I know what is wrong with me. Mostly no one responds. They are nighttime people after all.

The nurse who takes my blood is the same one every time. He likes my veins.

Nice big veins, he says, laughing. You could have a lot of fun with those.

Once, while I’m waiting for my third round of needles, I show up at the clinic director’s office—a cinderblock room with barred windows, an ancient hulking computer and rows of mint green file cabinets stuffed with death and good news.

I’ve been waiting two weeks, I say. I’m desperate.

He’s sitting in a chair behind his desk talking to someone with a clipboard, but he lets me in, looks at me, soaking wet from the rain, and smiles.

They would have called you by now, he tells me. They prioritize the sick.

And sure, the test—each test—is negative, but I’m back at the end of the month still scared.

At night, if I’m feeling well enough, I force myself to run the treadmill, to burn off the angst I accrue sitting at my desk, answering emails and pitching health books to the same NPR producers over and over. I love the way my leg muscles feel, swinging taught against my bones. Once in a while I actually doze off while I’m stretching, face-down into the ripped blue gym mats, their foamy insides bursting out in crumbled chunks.

My white blood cell count creeps higher and one doctor tells me over the phone that it will be time for an MRI if I’m not feeling better soon.

Soon? I think. I could be dead by then.

The abject is the thing we find repulsive, the thing that is cast out, ignored or pushed away in order to preserve our corporeal selves as safe, as healthy. Normal from not. But I’m not sure I can tell the difference anymore.

Kristeva says, The abject is the thing that disturbs identity, system and order. The thing that does not respect borders or rules.

Throat, what are you up to? No one seems to know. What rules will we break, this perverse throat and I.
The worst part is that it comes in waves. I stop eating at the table with the healthy and instead—from somewhere down the hall, through the rushing blood in my ears—listen, I imagine, like a fish in an aquarium, while others chatter softly and whine and scrape their knives, t's and s's slipping downstream.

But some days I feel pretty good. For instance, I'm going to get a cavity filled this morning and last night I was out until three a.m. being skinny and sick and chain smoking cigarettes on a frozen rooftop bench because I have nothing to talk about to anyone anymore. I'm consumed by the mystery inside me; my body is so small one doctor weighs me and mumbles, Good Luck.

The nighttime is the hardest. Something about how quickly the dark comes down (comes up?). I'm prone to anxiety, to claustrophobia and agoraphobia. But I'm also anxious about being alone.

A boy I knew from my hometown was behind the DJ booth—someone's older brother whose mother once taught dance lessons out of her home. I was wearing nothing: a pink bra, something white, some boots. He called me over before I left with my coat over my shoulders and kissed me on the mouth like we were old lovers.

Oh mama, he said, two hands on my face like he really remembered me, like I had always meant something to him.

You got better, he told me.

And I knew what he meant, too.

The dentist tells me I need Botox in my jaw.

Do you clench? he asks. You bite in your sleep, don't you?

He's a huge man stuffed into baby blue scrubs. Black wrist hairs push through his snug gold watchband like determined grass and brush my face as he fastens the crepe bib around me.

I nod. I guess so, I say.

On the wall is a framed photograph of a school of tropical fish. Beside it is a big tank of real tropical fish, blue and yellow, swimming in loopy circles or bobbing gently against the glass walls like little buoys.

I guess I bite in the day, I say again, sort of testing it out, tapping out a rhythm with my teeth.

I recommend Botox for that, he says. Relaxes the jaw. Take the edge off your jaw there.

He reaches out and touches my cheek, strokes my jaw line with the back of his finger.

Your jaw's got a masculine edge, you know?

He spins my chair until I'm facing a small square mirror.

Give you more of a soft, feminine look, he says, reaching out again with a scratchy thumb.

But I can't see my reflection, there's nothing in the mirror but more fish. And now I'm looking around for other women to compare my face to, or to save me from him, I'm not sure which. When I check the mirror again, there she is, the woman from the clinic, perched inside the fish tank, speaking very slowly and loudly, her eyes like big saucers of milk.

Are you ever going to stop being someone else? she says. All around you is softness, waiting. But where are you? You don't think it's possible to release all your old words and now your throat is shutting down. Just listen. Maybe tattoo the word soft on your forehead, she says.

She's pissed. She leaves through the window.

Not today, I tell the dentist, so he shakes his head and quietly fills the cavity.

Later with the DJ I have dolmas and beer, pumpkin pie and wine, pot, cigarettes, gin and sushi and more gin. On a rooftop in Alphabet City I tell him
about the Botox dentist and we laugh. But still. At some point we're at a bar in Brooklyn with a floor made of sand. I knock over a bowl of toothpicks at a restaurant and get hurried out. I ride on the back of his bicycle down Seventh Street, across Tompkins Square. He pulls up my skirt in the basement of Ella, pushes me up against a pyramid of tied-up trash bags, against the ladder that leads to the street; I blow him under the DJ booth while he's working, in the bathroom on my knees, in the cab with his best friend in the front seat reaching back to touch my thighs. I want them both so bad: the anonymity, the oneness, all of it—the immortality of nighttime.

My tonsils ache. I swallow and swallow and swallow but my throat is too dry; it remembers everything.

You have the most perfect body I have ever seen, the DJ tells me. Where have you been? Where have you been?

He doesn't know about the woman in the fish tank or the clinic or the doctors or the lake behind my apartment. I’m the one with the secrets. I’m the one with the power. Something happens in the language and gesture of these kinds of encounters, the kinds of learned intimacies I can control. Something magical. I am together and alone, un-touchable and exposed. So all I can be is proud. And I am so, so proud.

When I get home the next morning it's snowing. I sit on the sill in front of the fire escape and gargle warm salt water and watch a man in a camouflage cowboy hat hoist a heavy black garbage bag from his yard up into a second floor window on a rope. He speaks Spanish to a woman above. She takes something from the bag when it reaches her and then he lowers the bag back down. Then he pulls on another rope and a different plastic bag rises, a white one, filled with what sounds like one hundred glass jars. He passes the entire thing through the window to her. They have a system. When he’s finished, he climbs up the fire escape ladder and unclips underwear and sheets from off a clothesline before the freeze gets to them. He surveys the plot, canopied by crispy vines and the quiet, empty branches of one dark fig tree. The snow is turning to slush and soon it will be rain, because it is only early November after all. A child moves a faded pink curtain aside and watches me for a moment before she lets it fall again and moves back into the apartment.

Kristeva says it’s neither object nor subject, but instead lurks somewhere in between. The abject body violates its own borders, disrupts the typical wish for physical self-control, for social propriety. Instability and vulnerability ensues when boundaries are under threat.

I don’t want borders anymore. I don’t know how else to express it. I’ve never known how to get close without doing something wrong.

In Hinduism they say the throat chakra is affected by how clearly you are able to speak your truth. When it's off balance your whole body will feel it. You might find yourself lying or doubting others. You might feel isolated and misunderstood. Physical and emotional infections can accumulate. It is my fault. Everything.

Sophie and I kiss in the basement of the Maritime Hotel and I want her so bad because I know she wants me back. We fall over each other like dead rabbits in fake fur coats on our way to her friend's apartment uptown where someone plays show tunes on a piano all night long.

On the street men say things like, No fucking way. Surprise, I want to yell.
At the bars, the nighttime boys ask to take pictures—underfed and powerful in our black stilettos and matching leather jackets. It’s late November. We are broke and always cold. We pass out in her bed on frigid Friday mornings and her alarm wakes us up two hours later. She prods me with her skinny limbs before leaving for a waitress job. I listen to her feel around for her bra, her hairbrush, her eyeliner in the dark. She takes everything into the bathroom and kisses me goodbye, still stinking of stale cocktails.

I wear her sweaters. She buys me charcuterie and cheese plates and fancy yellow wine at Eataly. It’s been years since I let myself touch meat but with her I eat prosciutto, use my tongue to hold it against my gums and nibble the paper-thin fat. I sleep between her legs like an old tortoise, like we are the only ones left. A new mine to hack at, a well of becoming more or becoming something else, something not so utterly on its own—illuminated by the fragile mystery that is my unwell body, the one thing I’ve come to love. It’s just us in the backseats of taxis, and us behind fitting room doors in department stores, sucking down shot bottles before it’s dark out, smoking and smoking until we can’t talk—I like to go places where we don’t have to, where we can’t. Where it’s just us and everyone else.

If you look inside the throat, past the tonsils and into the vocal chords—the parts that move when we sing—you can see it, this muscle, gripping and opening. Koestenbaum says: Everyone understands genitals are mythologized, but no one talks about the doctrines clustered in our throats. How do we talk about what the throat knows and suffers? It looks like pleasure in there—the epiglottis is a slick orchid, folds parting with vibration. And like any pleasure, so much can go wrong. Know too much about the throat, he says, and you’ll fall silent.

Sometimes after work I stop by my mother’s studio on 36th Street where she teaches Meisner and scene study. I like to sit in the dark and watch her students feel, perspiring under the harsh black box lighting. The smell reminds me of childhood, falling asleep backstage in New York theaters; musty dressing rooms, latex, makeup and sawdust. It’s a complicated comfort.

One night someone in a white tee shirt follows me into the back stairwell when I sneak out between Chekov scenes. He hands me a composition notebook and tells me to write my number in it. I’ve seen him in class a couple times, working through bits of Sam Shepard—crying and cursing, wiping spit from his mouth. He’s tall with thin lips.

You’re so cute, says the actor, peering down over the stairwell railing.

I meet him the next night at some surf themed bar where his friend works. He’s carrying a gym bag over his shoulder. We compare our arm muscles. I can see the blue in mine. We take shots. I’m thinking (is this all I’m ever thinking?) let’s just get to the part that’s coming.

We ride the subway to his aunt’s pre-war apartment where he’s housesitting. He does that thing people sometimes do where they pretend they know each other. Sometimes that’s nice. Sometimes it’s just what it is: look at us rushing towards the fix. Lately, though, I like to wield it when I get bored, to swiftly take down a tedious, temporary facade with something real, something banal or domestic and vulnerable. For instance, I might make him meet me at the grocery store so he can watch me pick out fruits, smell the navels of can-
taloupe and squeeze avocados, hold up packaged wholegrain crackers and read labels, count calories, decide what to put in my fridge. Watch me shop for what I want, what I actually need, something he could never understand. It works every time. We'll both cringe and later I can cry because I'll never be what he wanted.

The actor stares at me on the crowded train until I stand on my toes and kiss him. I push into his hands so he can feel my ribs through my sweater. I make the sounds. As if to say, everything you imagined is true. Everything they told you is real. It's so easy.

The actor's aunt was a ballerina and the hallways of her apartment are heavy with photographs of long, thin dancers—fingers reaching, feet stretched. Their calves like polished marble. The actor pours us some whiskey or something and talks me through a few of them: this is her with Baryshnikov, this is the American Ballet Company, this is Vienna. Everyone loved her. I mean everyone. Look how beautiful she was.

I don't know about dancers, I say. My dad loves a dancer and she'll never leave her husband.

Suddenly he gets very serious. My last girlfriend was a dancer, he says. I loved her.

He wants to prove how tragic ballet can be. He's planning, assuring me we'll go to the ballet when his favorite ballerina is dancing.

I'll probably cry, he says. I always cry.

One outstretched arm is holding him up, palm pressed into the wall somewhere between clusters of frames. Meanwhile, I'm trying to work out who I am in all this. Not the dancer, certainly not the beautiful aunt. He hasn't asked me one question. He's only told me what he sees.

Kiss me like you did underground, he says.

So I let myself sink. The delicious warm goo of intimacy, real and imagined. Of something I don't even want. A second piece of pie. A sugar sleep.

In his room there are three huge potted plants. I tug gently on the leaves of one of the ferns, feel its compressed mass like candy fluff in my hand.

There's a glass case on the floor, too, with a chameleon inside named Maryanne.

Look, says the actor, turning on the heat lamp and stroking Maryanne's back. Her eyes are closed and she doesn't move. A few brown crickets bounce among the wood chips at her feet.

We fuck without turning on any other lights. He keeps whispering about how he wants to take me somewhere. Costa Rica or something. We lie in the weird orange amphibian glow and he holds both my hands and asks if I'll take care of his plants for a month while he goes to Baltimore.

It's just an understudy job, he says, but I can't turn it down.

He puts his mouth on my forehead. My eyes are closed.

We'll drive them to Queens tomorrow in my car and they can be all yours for a little while. How does that sound? Would you like that?

And I guess I would, because that's what happens.

But before that—before I get into his Camry with the plants and ride across Manhattan; before he lugs them up two flights of stairs and lingers a little too long and tells me he can't wait to get back and be with me; before I realize that I will have to be very cruel very soon—I wake up freezing and damp with fever, a strange clammy arm slung over me. My back is burning; the stubble of his shaved chest has rubbed it raw. It's too much. I throw up in the bathroom, rinse my mouth, put on his shirt and get back in the bed.

When I wake up again it's late morning and the actor is gone. On the kitchen island he's left an apple and a packet of Dora the Explorer fruit snacks.
A note says: *Had a last minute audition—so, so sorry had to leave you all alone. Will make it up to you. Miss you already.*

I take a twenty-minute shower in the claw foot tub and wipe little portholes in the steamed eye-brow window to watch three pigeons on the fire escape. One of them is almost silver, the same color as the outside, as the sky. She is the prettiest. I pretend I am a little girl. I make up a song. With the ballerina’s black clay soap I scrub my winter skin. I scoop two fingers of her French Shea butter conditioning treatment and coat my hair. I pat my face with her Dead Sea mask until it has caked and dried, until my mouth can’t move.

**My landlady lives below me** with her daughter’s family. I hear them through the floor as if we live together, which I guess is true. Her grandsons scream and eat bacon in the mornings. I can smell the crisping fat in my bedroom.

She pleads with them: *Nicky, Nicky, per favore!* Whenever I catch a glimpse of the little boys in the depths of their crowded apartment, they are dressed in superhero pajamas.

Mrs. Grioli is a widow and she cooks all day with the television on in the background. Usually it’s Spanish soap operas, which is odd because I’m sure all she knows is Italian. When I get home hungover and pale on Saturday afternoons, she shuffles to the foot of the stairs with fresh fried calamari and meatballs, and even though I don’t eat meat I take them all, still hot and wrapped in an oil-soaked paper towel.

Eat, eat, she coaxes.

I try to tell her about the clogged shower drain but she doesn’t understand and I am too tired to show her what I mean.

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**The abject is ambivalent** because it can shatter but can’t it also take us to the heart of our existence? Define our identity, make us feel more alive? How alluring, this promise of heightened sensory awareness. Longer looking, harder feeling. More more more.

**Sophie bites my shoulder,** wipes her fingers across my mouth. She asks me, *Are you really here?*

I don’t have an answer.

Don’t know what that means.

I love you, she tells me, I love you, beautiful girl. I need you too, I tell her.

I want to be bad. I want to be peaceful. So I press her against me; my winter bandage, my new best friend. A girl with silver rings and a silver cigarette case filled with anxiety pills. Even her can I keep? Up on the shelf with the rest of the menagerie.

A few months pass and I can’t ride the subway anymore without hurrying to the surface every four stops for air. Can’t walk the High Line without feeling like I’ve lost the surface of the earth, like I’ll fall into the sky and never stop spinning. Like my brakes are busted. I never get enough breath inside me. I cry on the stone steps of churches or on benches outside juice bars, hurrying back to my room before an attack sets in. I am someone who cries on the subway. I am someone others try to ignore. At night I dream that I’m upside down in a swimming pool, that I can’t kick my legs down from where they are poking through the surface of the water. I dream of silent, shadowy hallways in the old house on the river where I grew up, or that I’m losing my teeth—they drop onto my tongue, crunch off in my fingers like hunks of hol-
low bedrock. All day I think about the way they feel in my mouth. I tell Sophie she can't stay over anymore and soon I'm on my own again.

On my walk to the gym I choke down half a bag of dried apricots for dinner. It's been a week since the big storm and lumpy heaps of leftover blizzard still clog up the streets. Car tires spin in deep tracks and wind spits crusted snow back up into the sky, into my boots, my eyes. Stiff, sparkling snowflakes and white wreaths dangle above the hookah shops and halal trucks, the discount dollar stores that smell like hot plastic; above hand-painted Greek tavernas and yeasty Italian bakeries, dusty lingerie stores displaying ancient girdles, Lebanese night clubs with blacked-out windows; above the steamy laundromats and fruit stalls spilling out onto the sidewalks, treacherous with deep oily puddles or rippled black ice. It's nearly February but Christmas music still plays, tinny and electric, almost unrecognizable, piped in through a speaker system that spans Steinway Street.

When I take off my gloves in the elevator my palms are already itching. Half a mile on the treadmill and my lips burn with histamine when I rake them with my teeth; my teeth are like soft pillows. Now the heart is bumping around in the ears and when I look down the hands have swollen up like Minnie Mouse gloves. Stop the machine. Jog to the room with the stuff, the lockers. The face in the mirror is a skinned peach. Pull off shoes and socks because the soles of my feet are stinging. A woman is undressing in slow motion in front of me. Barefoot, I push open a stall door and vomit. My guts are whining, tight and high-pitched. All ninety-nine pounds is too heavy to lift, so I slide down and let the cool tiles work their magic on my limbs, my shoulder, right cheek.

Help, I say aloud. This is what it is like when I need help.

And then it is time to surrender, to recall childhood anthems: stop drop and roll, don't talk to strangers, don't play with matches, this is what you do when you are choking, this is why you wear a helmet, this is what you do when someone is having an emergency. Do the thing they teach you to do when things are the worst they could be.

A woman answers and everything is calm because the words won't come quick enough not to be.

I ate something bad, I manage, it was the apricots, maybe. I ate a lot of them. I was so hungry. It doesn't sound right. It sounds so stupid. And now I can't remember where I am.

Hold on, says the woman on the phone. This is what it's like when your body wants to hold the poison back and away from your heart. Breath thick as steam. I close my eyes and wait for the ambulance. And I'm almost smiling. Someone is coming to save me. This is not so bad, I think. I'm in love with my petite organs, my little heart, the silky blood, how it all warns, how it wants to be encouraged. I have both shrunk and expanded; both lost self and become other, something bigger.

Three men are above me with deep voices and bulky gear. They lay hands on my red belly, my wet forehead, my calves.

Oh yeah, they say. They know what to do. They put a needle in my arm, a mask over my face. My pillow teeth start to chatter and suddenly I laugh.

The fluids are just cold, the men say.

Then the three of them pick me up and wheel me out into the night, lifting the chair over brown snow.

I'm thinking: I almost died. And still I can't stop smiling, because there is something in it that is sweet and loving, something that makes so much
sense. I want to touch the objects in the ambulance. What are these for? What about this? Like a child. Like it’s a rocket ship.

They tell me to relax; they check my pulse. It’s just a van made by men, and the men just have equipment and other things that are really only plastic and metal. And it is regular voices talking about what could be any regular thing and regular men holding me, keeping me here, in winter, in Queens, on Earth.

In the narrow ER hallway I lie on the gurney for an hour until my breath comes back and my skin cools down. The space feels brown and yellow. Peeling and dated—hot with controlled panic. The woman from the clinic is there, of course. Like now this is her thing. Her hair comes swinging round the corner and at first I can’t tell if she recognizes me. But why else would she be there? Her eyes are closed as she walks past my stretcher towards the front desk. I want to show her what I have discovered, what these men did for me, what my body did for me. It’s all so real.

Can the fruit flies hear you yet? she whispers, like her mouth is right up to my ear, like the strings of her voice are knotting inside me, whipping up through her own shimmering throat to touch mine.

What? I say.

If you would just slow down, she tells me.

An ageless man comes in through the automatic doors wearing work boots, jeans dusted in white powder, and a Yankees sweatshirt. He can’t speak English except to say that he is sick and that he took penicillin and it’s not working.

Sounds like you have the flu, a nurse says with her arms crossed, looking down her nose from behind purple framed glasses. You can’t just take penicillin once you have the flu. Where did you even get penicillin?

Down the hall behind a curtain someone is moaning.

It’s my stomach, it’s inside my stomach, they say over and over.

I look at my phone and there is a text message from a strange number. It’s one of the ambulance men: Just wanted 2 make sure ur doin ok and if u need anything just let me know. hope this isn’t weird.

Of course it’s weird. How could that not be weird? But what I’m really thinking about is how he noticed me. He must have liked how little space I took up; starving, demure in lack. A vulnerability I have been so careful to hide.

ALL FOOD GOES NEXT. Maybe it was sulfites. That’s what the ER nurse said.

That, and you were very, very dehydrated. You’re very underweight.

She handed me a sealed Epi-Pen and told me goodnight. I could see her feeling something—pity or distaste.

Now everything makes my lips itch. Everything I put in me, on me, is poison. I swallow six Benadryl a day. Maybe that’s where the headaches are coming from.

Carrying the Epi-Pen in my bag feels like a concealed weapon or a sex toy. A dirty secret that might go off, vibrate or explode. I have to talk myself out of panic all day.

On the commuter train from the city to visit my father I eat a granola bar, same kind I’ve eaten for years, but something is weird—my neck itches and I scratch and feel those bumps on my face, like that night. Stumbling towards the light of the train car’s bathroom in the dark, latching the door shut with shaking hands, pulling at my face in front of the mirror, moving the skin around for signs of reaction; examining, scruti-
nizing. What new betrayals are here? What new
dangers?

See? See? I talk to my face. Nothing. There's
nothing.

I rinse my hands in the little steel sink, throw
cold water on my face and collapse on the floor
with my head on my knees. I push a little white
klonapin out of its foil and let it dissolve on my
tongue. I don't care about anything except not dy-
ing, not coming undone: the hardened clumps of
soggy toilet paper, the sharp smell of blue toilet
water. Whatever this is has made me forget to be
disgusted.

What is it that's so seductive about not tak-
ing up space? What have I been taught? The wom-
an with extra weight has lost control. She's failed.
The body betrays her mistakes. But what's hard is
that I know I've made a mistake here—somehow I
did this, let myself get sick, and now something is
terribly wrong. I've lost control of the inside. I've
lost the fantasy that I ever had control. And yet, on
the outside I am something worth holding, worth
looking at. So the mistake can't be wrong. I have
the most perfect body he's ever seen.

The good thing is no one sees me up close. No
one watches me shake when my skin tingles or
when my mouth goes dry, or when I double check
my wrists for hives while I'm eating. It's exhausting,
being this afraid. But it's only my exhaustion, no
one else's. I go to work, come home, sweat,
make lunch for the next day. When it gets dark I
drink vodka in the shower, shoot my nostrils with
solution and watch yellow mucus drip into the
drain. Then I go back to Manhattan and stay until
someone takes me home or until I can't keep my
eyes open.

Clothes don't fit me. I've lost the fold in my
stomach, the roundness in my upper thighs. The
nighttime boys ask me, Are you shrinking? They
love it. They smile and hold my waist, give me bo-
gies and beer and cab money. It's what I've always
wanted. Smoke gets trapped beneath my mon-
strous tonsils for days—I can taste it when I yawn,
when my throat stretches as though it might crack
like an old rubber band.

But whenever I close my eyes something is
waiting, an ugly sob. The face of that woman with
her giant eyes. And something white. Everything
that is peaceful makes me cry, everything that is
inside, that is true. And maybe what's true is I
don't want to get better.

Woolf knew: There is, let us confess it—and
illness is the great confessional—a childish outspo-
kenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out,
which the cautious respectability of health conceals.

If wallowing is like sex for depressives, bad sex
is something like melancholia for me: pathologi-
cal grieving over a loss not so easily identified. Or
at least, not so easily said. I know this much: the
salve of bad intimacy, like a confession, allows for
the simultaneity of both presence and isolation.

Maybe it's obvious, the link between rupture
and injury—an organ goes berserk, a spinal disc
splits and leaks, or an Achilles tendon splays.
Illness, on the other hand, might come upon us
more like clouds than lightning. Like a fog rolling
in. And yet, doesn't it offer its own kind of rup-
turing? A fever pokes holes, deflates, makes things
go pop. Things like roles and routines. Soon there
are no names to call upon other than “ill.” I am
sick, we tell others. And if months go by with still
no answers, if no path appears to take you out of
your body—to uncurl your thoughts from your
chest, your guts—you might start to bang on the
walls. You might start to push against your own malfunction, test the boundaries of your ruptured self; to reach over the glass for other peoples’ secrets, for safety, for leverage; to air out your abject body like a secret itself. The shattering of the distinction between the self and the other.

I want everyone to see it, what’s inside. I want their needles. I want their tongues. I want their sickness so I can call it ours.

The soap star’s apartment smells like his dog. Damp and humid: a moldy pool house. Some Febreze. A carpeted hallway leads to his bedroom. He flicks on the overhead light and it appears as though there has just been an earthquake. I know. The first time my brother and I slept away from home without our parents was the night Los Angeles shook with the highest ground acceleration recorded in urban North America. I woke that morning to the walls cracking, the fridge puking its guts out, framed pictures dancing off their hooks.

Oh, he says. Some of my shelves fell down. I haven’t put them back up.

He looks at me like, I’m sorry…?

He’s not sure how he should feel.

With our bodies we’re both like, I’m sorry…?

There is a mountain range of clothing and paperback books—peaks and plateaus, no visible floor space, nowhere to walk. The comforter balled up on his bed is covered in dog hair. I can’t leave because it’s late and he drove me out here in his car, some eastern part of Brooklyn miles from a train.

Maybe I can help you, I offer, mostly because I want something to do.

No, no, no, he says, it doesn’t matter.

He coughs into his elbow. He goes out to walk the dog and smoke a cigarette, and in the bathroom there is blood on my underwear, which is only very bad because now what am I going to do with him? I peer into the earthquake closet. A pair of women’s boots is shoved back in the corner. It must have been her sunglasses in the bathroom, too. Her three bobby pins in the soap dish.

Let’s give him a blowjob. It takes less than two minutes.

Let’s stare at his back tattoo in the darkness. His father’s face is inked into a crescent moon across his shoulder blade. The soap star’s father beat him up when he was a kid in New Jersey. Don’t ever put your hands near my throat, he once told me. He keeps his Emmy awards at his mother’s house now that the old man is gone.

You want to know something crazy? I say softly. Sometimes when I fall asleep I get stuck, like I’m paralyzed but my mind is awake. And sometimes something else is there. Sometimes there is music, a guitar. Once, when I’d been crying, a woman sat on my bed. She touched my arm and I could see her hands were wrapped in rags, her fingernails dirty, like she was from another time. But other people have it worse, you know. Like hallucinations that sit on them until they can’t breathe.

What the fuck? he says. That is some fucked up shit to tell someone before they go to sleep. Jesus.

Then we are both silent. I listen to his dog circling and circling. How is it that she moves so steadily among the clutter? Light from a streetlamp swims in through the blinds. The woman, I think. It must be the same woman.

In the morning he thanks me for the nightmares.

I call myself a cab, take a cigarette from the bedside table, and wait outside on his stoop in the cold.

A few weeks later he sends me a message: What happened? Where have you been?
I give him the only answer I have.
I’m sick, I confess. It’s this whole mystery.

The last doctor I see is the third throat specialist. One wall in his office is papered with glossy headshots of Broadway singers. He has an uncanny, plastic face. He wears a suit and tie while he dabs at the tender glands in my neck and chest. I talk for a long time, about the tests and the fevers. I tell him almost everything.

He smiles. There are lots of weird viruses out there, he says. He tells me not to take any more medicine. To just get some rest. Be kind to yourself, he says. Slow down.

I have to call my father to pay the five hundred dollar consultation fee.

That’s all I can remember clearly. His shiny face, smiling and nodding as I spoke, and cold fingers that barely touched my body. But not too long after that the fevers stop and my tonsils recede like soft creatures back into the sea floor. I wake up in the mornings with energy, an appetite. I sleep through the night without soaking my sheets in sweat. A relief, of course.

But still. What was it I used to tell myself about how to be?

Something is always there: tremors of heat, this fragility—like crystallized sugar, some thin membrane. I picture hardened shelves of crusty sand on beaches, the way they crumble. A headache sends a flutter of panic and fucks up my heartbeat, and when I let myself get lonely enough I’m still that person who knows what to do with my eyes, my lips. I’m still that person who wants to shrink down so small that anyone could pick me up and carry me. I’m still that person, clumsy and violent, who wants to be covered up, anonymous, by some other body, to fall back among the sick, back into the lake tucked behind my apartment with plumes of my own blood and god knows what else.

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We arrived at Arcosanti at almost midnight, and perhaps this is the best way to enter and explore renowned and (in)famous structures: in the dark, with no guide, and dim headlamps drowned out behind flickering mosquitoes and odd shapes forming in the almost-dark before entering the building. The key to our room was inside, down two flights of unlit twisting stairs, in the dark dining hall, next to the cash register. A man told me this over the phone four days earlier with a practiced and hurried voice that assumed I was as familiar with the daytime workings of the grounds as he was then looking at them. I was not. I had never been to Arcosanti. I only knew the place by daylight photos on my computer screen that hold the viewer at a suspicious and elusive distance—either too close to distinguish a working purpose or narrative of the photo, or so far that the enticing arcs and sloping rooftops inspire reverie and allure, the ploy that aesthetically designed structures promote forward thinking, or at least promise to confuse the layman to assuming an inherent genius.

That night we slept in a square room with a cement floor with small, tilt-open windows for ventilation, under old wool blankets and stiff cotton sheets, but only after we shooed away a few lethargic flies unrested by our arrival.

The essayist has an obligation to (T)ruth, albeit a subjective truth. For the novelist and short story writer there is a constructed fictional world that produces elements of truth, attributes of truth, to which the reader might align familiarity and awareness, a set of rules built into the fabula of the fictional world created by the writer. There is truth there, but the obvious manipulation of the world, the claim to un-truth, is what makes it fiction. But the essayist’s proximity of truth is through a different claim. Richard Kostelanetz writes: “essays tend to document what the author knows before he begins to write, rather than what he discovers in the course of creation, they proceed not from interior understanding but from exterior knowledge” (xi). But the gimmick, the
façade, is that the essayist is figuring it all out as she goes. This is the first false claim to (T)ruth the essay holds. The reader navigates the structure of the essay by lamplight in the dark, only knowing by memory what is behind her, and foregrounded by promises of tradition, the form of the essay, implying that the story is not simply a long, empty corridor leading to a dead end.

Arcosanti is advertised as an urban laboratory “focused on innovative design, community, and environmental accountability.” Positioned in the middle of the Arizona desert 3,735 feet above sea level and 7,500 feet above an underground aquifer, from which, through a 10,000-foot-deep well, the community draws all of its clean water. There are rainwater catches, a black water pump (the sewage facilities (currently not up to code yet slightly overlooked by the local government)), a forthcoming greenhouse, a swimming pool, and, as far as I can tell, only nine or ten solar panels—the community is “on the grid” a resident reluctantly tells me.

The community began construction in 1970, after Italian-American architect, Paolo Solari’s design. His vision was to create a utopia that would combine the craft and art of architecture with an environmentally ethical ecology, thus developing an (Architecture+ecology=) Arcology. The existing structures on the land are impressive—two wide, forty-foot arcs of, currently, questionable purpose (there is a temporary basketball hoop there now), a massive apse that shades workers at the facility in the summer months as they craft Siltcast Windbells in large plots of above-ground earth, and there is a visitor’s center, the hub of Arcosanti, where guests and residents are fed buffet-style meals three times a day, vegan and vegetarian options available. This is what Arcosanti is now. There are residences and a small amphitheater, the only structures under renovation and construction. And, as a visitor, at first it is difficult to distinguish between guest and resident, but I learn quickly that residents are loud, and yell across courtyards, making outward and public their happiness and adoration while they fix a determined gate toward some clay-clad responsibility. They’re off, presumably, to make bells, though even in the wind I can’t hear their dull, clanking-clay chime. I have to focus—and the breeze grows to gale—to hear the sound of the fiscal life-blood of the aging experimental town.

John D’Agata tells us that for Cicero, there was much at stake. While he was waiting, expecting is maybe better, on a day in 43 B.C. for his murderers to arrive at his home, perhaps he was drafting another speech, another essay, “literally trying to save the very world as he knew it.” For Cicero, for Montaigne, for Plutarch, to write an essay is to explore an ideology, to elucidate one’s perspective in search for better understanding. This requires clarity, focus, and premises developed into conclusions. The structure is made whole as the essay is drafted. The responsibility of deducing or inducing, of reasoning and verifying claims, is placed on the reader. So the reader must rely on logic, informed or inherent, to find meaning in the essay. If there is no argument, there is no meaning, and thus there is only disappointment to be had when the reader reaches the end of the corridor of the essay. This is the foundation of the American Essay: ideology fashioned into an established form.

We take breakfast, my partner and I, on the east cement patio of the Café At Arcosanti. We each have generic brand Frosted Flakes, an orange, half
a bagel, a hard-boiled egg, cheap coffee. The chef asks us if we're staying for lunch, tells us about the forthcoming pork butt and potatoes. We say we'll be around. He tells us about the hordes of people, 10,000+, that once lined the hillside for the bluegrass festival, "But that was a long time ago," he says with a huff. Now, our view overlooks the hillside he speaks of, across from the square, spartan dorms we stayed in last night, and there is a shade structure, a bent pole with triangle sheet, an instillation donated by an artist that looks desperate and overtaken by the sun as it barely darkens enough ground for a couple to sit under.

We pay for the tour upstairs, two flights above the Café, a floor above a couple residents, where there is a gallery of dangling bells made of copper and earth. They range from $30 to hundreds, some larger pieces over $1,000. A woman with a partially shorn and dreadlocked scalp rings us up for ten bucks-a-piece and then tells us the suggested donation is $10 a person, $5 for students. We pay the twenty and are directed toward the corner where an 11-minute video explaining Soleri's vision begins.

Time-lapsed footage of vehicles racing on motorways, plumes of exhaust, smoke, and steam pillar into the sky, overviews of suburban sprawl, and cities choked by concrete and bustle reveal the maladies of the modern city. The fifteen or so guests in the tour group tisk or slightly gasp at appropriate moments of environmental disregard. Everyone is a bit appalled by the ecologically catastrophic state the world is in, as they should be. I imagine everyone has heard a bit of Soleri and his vision, the rumor of his brilliance and his eccentricity. They've all traveled out here into the heart of the desert looking for direct solutions to very complex problems. We want to see the organism of the repaired city out here—its smooth functions and hidden symmetry revealed like an open hatch that we might see the miniature wonders of cosmic balance for ten bucks a head.

After the video our corpulent tour guide escorts us past more bells, to an opposite corner where a scale model of a few taupe buildings loomed over by massive, foot-tall, white half domes resides. A man asks what it is and our guide tells us the darker buildings are the existing structures here at Arcosanti, and everything else is what they're working for. He huffs, "Good luck."

Richard Kostelanetz is an eccentric literary figure, a rabble-rouser of the written word, a "passionate defender of the avant-garde." He is the author of dozens, perhaps hundreds (I don't want to count), of books of criticism, anthologies, reviews, proposals, stories, films, and numerous other artistic assemblages. There is an exhaustive list on his homepage where he claims, "Pleased I am that you've just opened my website." He is a voracious reader with an impressive cognitive access to citable material. He is lucid and direct, and his ability to historicize the avant-garde is top notch. He's also a literary conspiracy theorist that, at times, appears desperate and takes umbrage at publishers, critics, established writers, aspiring writers, and the evolution of virtually every genre. His Wikipedia "Partial list of works/media" matches the lengths of subjects with which he has grievances.

He's smart, and I admire his intellectual capacities and wide breadth of interest. I find most appealing his tenacity, or anyone's, for literary art and his impressive prolific output. But when I read his texts I underline and annotate meaningful reflections, hilarious rants, and a regard for minorities that, for a person so attuned to the future of writing, lacks foresight and compassion.
Everything goes in. The only wasted thought is the thought not written down.

Kostelanetz in 1973:

In spite of Ralph Ellison’s pre-eminence and example, the most currently emergent black writers in America have not yet produced sufficient literary works that are superlative enough to win sustained critical respect. (35)

[Women] are also able to exploit an accumulating reservoir of establishment guilt over past prejudice; they have another advantage in the potentially largest literate audience of their own kind. (35)

In the future, however, homosexuality will be presented as a respectable minority affiliation and then articulated as a sensibility of ‘universal’ relevance. (36)

Two of my friends are in the market for buying houses. They tag me along in visiting these vacant structures that I might lend some advice, some amateur expertise on home improvements given my years of construction work. They ask me about exposed piping, good/faulty wiring, sturdiness of walls, possibilities of remodeling immediately after purchasing. How is this any different than workshopping an essay? A group examines an established form (scaffolding), hunts down faulty logic (plumbing, ventilation), gratuitous exposition (paint, cabinets), possible scene expansion (probable additions), in the hopes to modernize the structure, to make it more comfortable (accessible) while appealing to artistic sensibilities (modern style).

A professor of mine recently held a reading at his newly renovated row house in the downtown Barrio of Tucson, showcasing months of work and an overt display of attention to detail and design. The home is massive: eight of these row houses modified to accommodate two people, with numerous lounge spaces, offices, bathrooms, a kitchen, and a separate but attached apartment intended to be rented out. It is without a doubt stunning and undeniably off-putting. It is grandiose and magniloquent, sleek and modern with pristine Scandinavian furniture and cool, dangling lamps, distressed tables, and retrofit modern appliances. This might be compared to a contemporary reconstruction of a traditional essayistic form—modernizing the old. But in all of its matter-of-factness, the home reads more like an all-too-clever tale of Nabokov’s youth as he performs “The following of such thematic designs through one’s life,” his “true purpose of autobiography,” while he recounts a floundering swan, “making ridiculous efforts to hoist himself into a moored boat.” A memory that would casually, as the timeline of the memoir goes, spring into mind a couple of years later for the author when he learns of his Mademoiselle’s death. It’s all too neat, too calculated and assured by history to be good. Nabokov’s memoir—and my professor’s home—is deliberate and beautiful, but rote and borderline annoying in its undeniability.

There is what the essay could be, and what the essay should be. One is as infinite as the other seems infinitesimal. One abides by the history of the essay in order to disrupt expectation, the other uses history as a scaffolding. As Kostelanetz remarks: “essays must relate to verifiable experience; their frame of reference is exterior rather than interior.” This is true for both the could and the should. What happens during inception, for the essayist, what interiorizes the essay is the form the language takes as it’s produced. An experience is
told, in remembrances, again and again, and each time the tale takes new shape, emerges differently, an architecture with a new façade. For fiction and poetry, if the representation of the author’s imagination is reformed and redrafted, the imagined experience is altogether new, based on a previous design, but nevertheless new. The essay, if it must (and it mustn’t) abide by its Greek origins, should still abide by the attempt of objective (T)ruth.

Our tour group leaves the room of bells, the only outside commerce Arcosanti practices, and heads for an open-air workshop under a massive apse crowned by an broad, angular cross, without its y-axis counterpart. Our guide, and anyone else I ask, doesn’t know what it means or why it adorns the huge structure. In the shade there are two artisans each holding a hand in an un-fired Siltbells like a puppet, carving circular designs on the bells’ exteriors, a popular design found on throughout the grounds. The designs are ornament. Like the gothic half-cross, there’s no significance to their design. I keep looking closer for meaning, but the swirly meandering designs appear to be an unspoken code between the residents—as though when they arrived and took up the clay in their hands, the circles came out. The workers don’t make eye contact with the crowd and they are serious about their work, devoted and intent. Between us and them are numerous, large cement boxes full of silt where forms of bells have been impressed and filled with the liquid material that will lose moisture to the earth, harden an edge, and leave behind the shape of the bell to be design-carved and then fired, hung on a wire and sold as the majority of income Arcosanti takes in.

This technique of casting the bells in silt is the same original technique used to form the cement walls of the apse and the numerous original structures around the property. Tilt-up concrete panels are cast in the silt found in the surrounding area, sometimes dirt from up north, in Sedona, where the silt is deep crimson, was trucked in and those walls still take on a pink hue. This method is part of the Soleri vision, to merge the earth and human construction as one, to form a singular ideological organism between humans, our necessary structures, and the natural environment. Eventually, as the human brain evolves, it will align with the creation process of the earth, of other ecological matter, forming a singular harmony.

Soleri on Arcology:

*Society must become a true organism that will perform adequately. This will be made possible through the power of miniaturization. The physical miniaturization of its container, the city, is a necessary.* (3)

*Miniaturization is the process that minimizes the prime handicap of the physical world; the time-space straight jacket.* (2)

*The superanimal constituting society has not undergone the miniaturizing metamorphosis, and it is by its very nature totally unprepared for the performance of its designated task.* (3)

*Society is still an awkward animal suffering from a kind of 'flat gigantism' that nails it to the surface of the earth.* (3)

After the bells we take another flight of stairs up to two 40-foot arcs that the residents call the Faults. There is a whiteboard with plans for the day’s tasks and activities, a couple boxes of things, and at the other end of the blank, unused space, there is a temporary basketball hoop. An old woman who
appears flustered and confused spreads her arms and asks, "What goes on in all this space?"

The essay is as much an event as it is a space. There must exist a moment when the essay is born into truth, when it transcends fiction. There may be an inherent truth, an innate truth in the world of the story for the teller, but the truth of the story emerges only as the facts presented align accordingly with, objectively, what happened. There is a bent thread, a meandering line that delineates the actions and events of the story. Fiction happens when the narrative knowingly (for the author) moves away from that path. This is the hard and fixed line of event truths in the essay. This is undeniable information, calculable and standardized data, the lattices and scaffolding of unmovable walls.

While fiction is meandering through well-lit labyrinths, truths of the essay, of nonfiction, are secured in rough material bound to the framework. But there are other truths, as sound as the structures of incontrovertible experience. The essay must, as equally necessary as truth, be felt.

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He punched up the fire
and returned with an armload of wood
and the child,
and put the dead child onto the fire.
She said, "Oh John, don't!"
He did not reply
but turned to her and smiled.
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I wonder where the truth is in Reznikoff’s Testimony but in every word. Bonded to the frame of lived and recounted (factual) experience is the reconstruction of a narrative originally presented in court. The content is the content redesigned, repurposed, with the intent of the narrative to be felt. Anaphora, enjambment, and off-rhyme—poetic techniques that do not serve to falter the facts of the story, but to recondition the status of one essay, a court document, into another. Is this a stanza from a poem? Does omitting proper nouns and exact locations drive the content into the realm of fiction? Who verified these facts? Can they be facts, and thus truths? More importantly, what power does the possibility of these alleged facts have to make me fear John? Why am I haunted by his smile? How did that grin become so sinister?

Kostelanetz’s work depends heavily on personal ideologies; for him, there is the way an essay should be—prescriptive, identifiable, knowable. The essay, even in all of its experimental forms, “[tries] to distill and communicate perceptions of the world.” And who could argue with this, in terms of the essay, the novel, poetry, any writing that begins, in fact, with a blank page. The essay is changing and evolving, and so the prescription of what an essay is is changing and evolving. In addressing the established critics of what that is looks like, Kostelanetz writes of the formally experimental essays in the anthology Essaying Essays: “Nearly all of them are so different in appearance that, if submitted to any academic course in America, they would < flunk > on sight” (xix). He acknowledges that charts are essays, as are maps, lists, codes and codices, briefs, missives, legal and financial documents, and so on. If the possible forms of the essay are innumerable, then everything of form is essay. If every form is essay, when does an essay fail to be an essay?

The tour is losing its appeal for most of the group. This might be because it’s hot under the noonday sun. It might be because we each had ex-
pectations of the structures that aren’t being lived up to. For the residents that live here, for the cook I talked to earlier in the day and for the tour guide, for the elderly gentleman leading a group of potential investors into the private living quarters, for those in the living quarters and those peeking in, there is hope that this place and its potential is an answer to something. For them, the completion of Arcosanti is romantic and heavy with purpose. And when I look around the grounds, at the foot-tall weeds that grow around the cracking rubber of the tires on the crane that hasn’t been moved in a few seasons, I wonder when that answer will be presented. Even if the massive housing structures are finished, eight times the height of the existing café, what is the last brick set into place that signifies that answer?

I want to pull one of the residents aside, maybe next to the pin-ups of professional blueprints for a retaining wall somewhere along the two-mile dirt road approach Arcosanti (overtly posted along the tour route), and ask them to be real with me for a second. I want a private admonition of the intentions of Arcosanti, but I don’t know how to suggest to someone that a building, a structure, has failed. How can I point up to the massive arcs, the pretentious and massive apse, the uninhabited dormitories, the newly-formed steps of the amphitheater and say, These impressive parabolas are wrong?!

These structures are, by definition, working. The walls hold up roofs, and ceilings provide shade and shelter. The studios shape workspaces for bell-making, small dorms secure privacy and house humans, kitchens for cooking, the gallery of dangling little catenary bells produces income. The structures, as they are, function properly. But there is such a dreary longing for a future unrealized. Soleri’s ideologies haunt the stony corridors of this place and drive an implicit zealotry usually only found in rural, pop-up churches. They are pariahs here, gathered under numerous roofs, insistent in the way that, for the outsider, equally inspires compassion and sorrow in the presence of crumbling hope.

And there is nobody to blame for this misguidance. The people live here by choice, or pay to come, to work, to learn an art as a trade. They eat together and have community. They have a belief structure that they hope to translate into edifice. There is Soleri’s vision—his dogma—the organic confluence of human/earth/city. And from afar I want to cheer for this practice, I want to apply and be easily accepted and then pay to build bells in the desert. I want to look up and someday see some 50-story bisected-artichoke backlit by the universe and converse with congruent galaxies. But to roam the halls of Arcosanti is to feel that something has failed. I’m not lulled by the valved voice of Soleri’s drawings or the jagged, magnificent miniature models. Somewhere, the content does not beget the form, and the form is perpetually indifferent.

For Kostelanetz, the differentiating feature of the essay is that it’s deeply personal. W.H Auden’s charts of “Paradise” are only as he could have rendered them, and this is without a doubt true. The inherent subjectivity of existence already suggests this. But I don’t know if he is married to this idea, and this is why I respect his take on the essay: it’s evolving. In 1973 (when the section of quotes above were made), he was willing to ostracize much of the literary and publishing community with The End of Intelligent Writing: “Perhaps the manuscript was more ‘threatening’ than even I envisioned it to be, since its own history with publishers was illustrating one of my thesis.” No
one wanted to publish the book, and that only reaffirmed his claim to America’s lack of literary intelligence. But just two years later, after numerous imagined but nevertheless recorded projects (his website lists 79 Proposals including 1001 Stories, and Six-Hour VHS Video Restrospective), his previously mentioned anthology calmly and deftly explains his position of the avant-garde essay: “Innovative essays are those that confront not just dimensions of extrinsic reality but also the intrinsic, literary problem of how else essays might be written.” So there is a progression and advancement of form, but there is an associated ideology—something the essay should be.

I don’t altogether agree with Kostelanetz’s vision of what an essay is. I would agree that the possibilities of its form are limitless, as are personal perceptions of experience, of “the world.” But this isn’t to say an essay, like an edifice, can’t fail. Millions of pages are lost into the ether of out-of-print, crowded corridors of the internet, shelves of second-hand stores and dark archives of libraries. And buildings are demolished, refurbished, changed so drastically as to become altogether something new. Though it is never the form of the structure that fails, only the ideology assigned to it. I walk through Arcosanti and I imagine a rehab facility given its remote location, a summer camp for children to learn practical applications of art and science. In short, the intention of the structures must be made new. The design of the buildings must be reimagined and applied to a constantly changing world. As must the essay.

Soleri, in all of his prolific madness—his publications, his intergalactic drawings, his quixotic ideologies—had a design for what structures and cities should mean, what the shape of those designs should look like. But in all of his drawings, as hypothetical structures morph depending on global location, the form is arbitrary. In the preface of his book, Arcology: The City in the Image of Man, he writes: “The written content of this book is really an endogenous affair for and with myself…There is no one to my knowledge who has an awareness of the environmental consequences of the thesis here presented, much less made a serious effort at the deployment of any proposal.” In other words, arcologies, such as the nascent utopian society at Arcosanti, where Soleri spent two decades guiding young, enthusiastic artisans and architects, should, perhaps, not physically exist and never have been built. But Soleri pushed forward with his ideology, inspired, now, two generations of people who vie for grants and permits and attempt to actualize a dead man’s visions under the constraints of an established social order. He sought the construction of his ideology knowing its form was wrong, knowing the edifice would fail.

As the writer and critic aims to define and redefine what the essay should be, as those walls are constructed, limitations are set into place, thus so are inherent failures. Like a structure, the un-failing essay demonstrates the present not as a static moment, but as a trace at the trice of death and renewal, obsolescence and innovation, expiration and inception. The form of the essay must stand up to linear time, while disrupting the expectations of what should come next. The essay will always be, and everything will always be the essay.

This manuscript project is, stated plainly, about the West. And although this is a region much anthologized, theorized, mythologized, and aggrandized, this project aims to merge my personal experiences in the West with many of these larger social and very public issues. The essays in this collection vary, formal-
ly, from traditional to experimental, focusing on topics including art, architecture, family, religion, landscape, and labor. As no one book can entirely encompass the very complicated issues in this region, or even a multitude of anthologies, this project insists that because I am from the West, reflecting on the West, this text is inherently Western. The aim and motivation for this manuscript is to elucidate elements about the West that are lost in the cracks of the broad theories previously established for the region.

Joseph Bradbury’s work has appeared in Public Books, Essay Daily, Scribendi, The Verde Voice, and other places. He was awarded the Utah State Graduate Studies Academic Scholarship, the Grand Manan Field Studies Prize, and he served as the Nonfiction Editor at Sonora Review for 2015-2016.
Jen is reading when I arrive, a book held casually by her side when she steps out of the feed boat’s cabin. The boat, docked next to the salmon cage in the middle of the Dark Harbour pond, is roughly the size of an industrial dumpster. It is white with red trim tucked up against a turquoise hull. The cabin at the front of the boat is enclosed, while the back, like most fishing boats, is open to the air, and empty except for a metal tank that stores food for the salmon. She sets the book on the tank and boards the dory tied to the west side of the boat. Steering the outboard motor with one confident hand, she navigates the short distance between us, shielding her eyes from the sun with the other. The dory is small and traditional—hand built of oak, pine and cedar. I board and settle near the front. We shake hands and she gives me a life jacket. This salmon cage, the one where Jen works, is in Dark Harbour, and unlike any of the others around the island, it is stocked with wild salmon. But much like the others, it is corporately owned by Cooks Aquaculture. 

Dark Harbour is on the northwest side of Grand Manan, an island in the Bay of Fundy. Salmon cages are scattered just off shore around the island, many in the place where herring weirs used to be, some alongside weirs that have fallen into disrepair since the herring stopped coming. Most of the cages are on the east side, where they are protected by other islands in the archipelago. The Dark Harbour pond is protected by a natural sea wall nearly 8’ feet high, and its waters are calm and shallow. Perched on the sea wall, a couple of shingled cottages, some still in use, others abandoned, are joined by buoys and lobster cages that washed up during flood tide and storms. Silver driftwood wedges its way into rounded stones, deep grey in color. We stand on the boat next to the salmon cage, almost equidistance between the wall and the shore where our cars are parked. The cage itself is 70 meters in diameter and split into quadrants by a narrow network of docks. A black tube, reminiscent of a bike tube and nearly 100 times the size, floats above the surface, providing
structure for the nets that reach 8’ below, forming a purse around the salmon. Above the tube that sits on the water’s surface is another, held up by stilts that extend between the two, and covered in red nets designed to prohibit fish from jumping out, seals and gulls from getting in. This cage holds only about 2,200 hundred fish. Cages holding the farmed salmon measure approximately 100 meters in diameter and hold more than 10 times as many.

The fish in this cage are wild, though “wild” here belongs in quotations. It’s hard to apply a term like that to thousands of fish swimming about a netted circle, even though they’re more closely related genetically to the wild salmon—that who still swim the rivers where they were captured as roe—than they are to their lab-raised compatriots just on the other side of the sea wall. Despite the constraints, the fish are jumping now, not in unison, but at a strangely constant rate, as if abiding by the ticking of some underwater clock. These juvenile salmon, or smolt, swim to the edge of the cage and then, picking up as much speed as they can, leap out of the water, landing close to the other side. They hurl their young bodies with so much force, sometimes rising as much as a foot above the surface, sometimes even bumping the net that’s pulled taut over their heads. They’re practicing. In the wild this is a skill they will need to travel upstream. It’s a skill they’re determined to develop, despite close quarters. It’s a skill the processed salmon in the other cages around the island practice as well, though they will assuredly never use it.

Jen grabs the feed tube from the main boat and sprays it into the cage. She laughs, slow and quiet. “The wild fish get spooked,” she says. “They don’t come onto the feed like the processed salmon.” She feeds them four times a day, at 8, 12, 3 or 4 and then again at 7. She keeps busy on the boat with maintenance and the like in the meantime, and she prefers this job over working on the farmed salmon cages. For one, not being on the open ocean means she isn’t subject to storm-waters, isn’t expected to navigate boats alone from cage to shore, shore to cage in bad weather. And, she feels better about the work here with the wild salmon, a project she says Cooks Aquaculture took on voluntarily. It’s easy to understand Jen’s position, and hard to parse what constitutes wild and what farmed in these conditions; harder still to imagine what the effects of cage-raised “wild salmon” have on the dwindling population of truly wild salmon that live in the South Salmon and Big Wolf Rivers, where the salmon Jen is feeding will be released once they reach early adulthood. It’s hard not to assume, given corporate tendencies, that these wild salmon are a publicity ploy more than a genuine gesture of care. Jen works 15-16 hour days as a manager, making around $40,000/year, a wage she says is livable.

The April before my visit, in 2015, some of the cages around Grand Manan suffered from an outbreak of infectious salmon anemia or ISA, a viral disease that affects Atlantic salmon. The disease, first detected in 1996, is most common in farmed fish. When infected with the virus, salmon lose their appetite and begin swimming slowly, near the surface. They gasp and their abdomens swell, their gills grey. They bleed along their stomachs and on their sides; they bleed internally in the fatty tissues surrounding their organs; they bleed in their intestines and their liver. Their kidneys and livers and spleens darken and swell, their hearts pale. The disease is spread by contact with infected fish, and by water contaminated with the virus, so cages in close proximity infect each other often and easily. Scientists suspect that ISA may also be spread by sea lice.
In 2010, Atlantic Salmon in Grand Manan were subject to a particularly bad bout of sea lice—the small parasitic crustaceans that attach to and then feed on salmon. In their adult phase, the lice graze on the mucus, blood and skin of the fish, preferring to snack at the head, back and perianal areas. On adult salmon, the sea lice are relatively harmless, and in the wild, they fall off when the salmon return to freshwater streams to spawn. So juvenile salmon, out-migrating in spring, rarely come into contact with them. But in the farms, juveniles live in close proximity to adults, and they are raised in brackish waters. These are ideal breeding grounds. Just three lice can kill a juvenile salmon. Jen said she'd seen plenty of salmon infected with the lice; had seen them being eaten alive, sometimes their heads literally eaten off, the bones around their faces exposed.

In his book *The Rings of Saturn*, W. G. Sebald writes about herring, the original fishery on Grand Manan, and a species in rapid and disturbing decline. Sebald writes that the assumption in early fishing days was that herring died immediately upon being removed from the water; that they weren't conscious during the sometimes 8-hour process of pulling their bodies from the ocean in seine nets; that they were in no way aware of the net rubbing against their bodies, the scales being shredded from their drying skin. But, as Sebald writes, observation from natural historians and fisherman alike has revealed that indeed the herring were alive, that in some cases even two to three hours after they'd left the water they continued to flop on the boat's deck.

Sebald says: the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels.

While Jen wasn't working on the cages most affected in 2010, she had seen the effects of both lice and ISA on the salmon, had witnessed the bleaching of the fish once they were affected, had pulled sea lice off the salmon when there were just three or four, had shrugged in disbelief when she pulled a salmon from the cage to discover nearly one-hundred lice consuming its body, and it still alive.

Carly, a friend of Jen's, is a scuba diver, and she's often contracted to dive the cages. Sometimes she's tasked with repairing a hole in the net, ensuring a seal hasn't and can't get in. More often than repairs, Carly is hired to conduct “mort” dives, sinking down to retrieve salmon corpses from the bottom of the net, delivering the bodies that will then be used as mulch. Sebald writes that herring stay away from the dead of their own. And in fact, there has, at times, been concern amongst local Grand Mananer's that herring bodies ground and incorporated into the wet feed for salmon are in part responsible for the disappearance of herring schools around the island. According to Carly, salmon don't like being near their dead either—caged salmon just can't escape.

When the salmon in a cage are infected with lice, the cage has to be decontaminated. One method involves wrapping a tarp around the cage in an attempt to ensure that the disinfectant doesn't leach into the open ocean; the other method involves pumping the fish up and out of the cage through massive plastic tubes onboard, through a hydrogen peroxide solution, and back into the cage. Since the lice are crustaceans there is some concern that other crustaceans, like lobster, have or may be affected by the treatment. The exact chemicals used for the disinfection are not widely known or easily traceable, though Carly explained it as essentially bleach and Jen called it hydrogen peroxide. Carly was once asked to dive into the mystery treatment in one of the salmon cages to ensure there were no holes in the tarp and that
it was appropriately attached at the bottom. She refused, but a friend agreed. She said as soon as he surfaced, the migraines started and they haven’t stopped. The salmon, once treated, can still be sent to market.

It isn’t always disease that kills the salmon. Carly tells of a particularly haunting dive: the fish, all 20-30,000 had grown too big. With prices for salmon falling, Cooks hadn’t wanted to harvest them just yet, hoping the price would go back up. Then a storm rolled in, and the crew couldn’t get out to the cages, and the fish passed the prime sale weight of 8-14 lbs, so they wouldn’t be harvested. They just sat, dying in the cage while Cooks figured out what to do with them. Carly did a mort dive. The salmon bubbled up out of the cage, their bodies pressed taught within its confines. She said it was so slow, slipping in and sinking down through them, that it took hours to remove all the bodies. Recounting the story, she holds her hands near her face, mimicking the way she protected herself against the powerful and desperate movements of salmon swollen up against one another, the futile attempt she made to keep them from bumping up against her body.

Back in Dark Harbour, Jen and I stand on the doc, watching the salmon leap. I notice that some of the smolt near the surface appear speckled, scarred—small pink patches on their backs and heads. Those aren’t lice, Jen says, she’s checked. Those are saltwater sores, common amongst juveniles exposed to brackish water too early in their life. They look like they hurt, she says, her face reminiscent of the one she made earlier when talking about the lice, a face that recognizes pain.

There is not knowing: genuinely lacking in information or knowledge about a particular issue. There is not wanting to know: understanding that once something is known, an undesired change is imminent. And then there is knowing, but having to choose not to know: not being able to afford to know.

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BAJADAS

FRANCISCO CANTÚ

baja-da noun

1: a steep curved descending road or trail
2: an alluvial plain formed at the base of a mountain by the coalescing of several alluvial fans

Origin 1865-70, Americanism: from the Spanish feminine past participle of bajar: to descend

DECEMBER 20

Santiago quit the academy yesterday. We were on our way into town when I heard the news, speeding across the cold and brittle grasslands of New Mexico. Morales must have told me, or maybe it was Hart. I called Santiago as soon as I found out. You don't have to quit, I told him, you can still finish, you should stay. I can't, he said, it's not the work for me. I have to go back to Puerto Rico, I have to be with my family. I wished him luck and told him I was sorry to see him go. He thanked me and said to finish for the both of us, and I promised that I would.

Of all my classmates, it was Santiago I most wanted to see graduate. He marched out of step, his gear was a mess, he couldn't handle his weapon, and it took him over 15 minutes to run the mile and a half. But he tried harder than any of us. He sweat the most, yelled the loudest. He was 38, an accountant from Puerto Rico, a husband and a father. Yesterday, he left the firing range with a pocket full of live rounds, and the instructors ordered him to sing “I’m a Little Teapot” in front of the class. He didn't know the song, so they suggested “God Bless America.” He belted out the chorus at the top of his lungs, his chest heaving after each line. We laughed, all of us, at his thick accent, at the misremembered verses, at his voice, off-key and quaking.

In town, over drinks, Hart went on about the winters in Detroit. I can't go back there, he said, not like Santiago. Fuck that. He asked Morales and me about winter in Arizona. Morales laughed. you don't have to worry about snow where we're going vato, that's for sure. Hart thought it sounded nice. Nice, I asked? Just wait until the summer. Have you ever felt 115 degrees? Hell no, he said. Well, I told him, we'll be out in the heat, fetching dead bodies from the desert. Who the fuck walks in the desert when its 115, he asked? I drank my way through another beer and went rambling on about how everyone used to cross in the city, in San Diego and El Paso, until they shut it all down
in the 90s with fences and newly hired Border Patrol agents like us. If they sealed the cities, they thought, people wouldn’t risk crossing in the mountains and the deserts. But they were wrong, I said, and now we’re the ones who get to deal with it. Morales looked at me, his eyes dark and buried beneath his brow. I’m sorry, I told them, I can’t help it—I studied this shit in school.

On our way back to the academy, I sat in the back seat of Morales’ truck. In the front, Morales told Hart about growing up on the border in Douglas, about uncles and cousins on the south side, and I sat with my head against the cold glass of the window, staring at the darkened plain, slipping in and out of sleep.

3 January

Last week my mother flew in from Arizona to see me, because—she said—we’ve never missed a Christmas together. She picked me up at the academy on Christmas Eve and we drove through the straw-colored hills, leaving behind the trembling Chihuahuan grasslands as we climbed into the evergreen mountains of southern New Mexico. We stayed the night in a two-room cabin, warm and bright with pinewood. We set up a miniature tree on the living room table, decorating it with tiny glass bulbs. Then, wrapped in blankets, we laughed and drank eggnog and brandy until the conversation deteriorated into discussion of my impending work.

Don’t you think it’s below you, my mother asked, earning a degree just to become a border-cop? Look, I said, I spent four years away from home, studying this place through facts, policy, history. I’m tired of reading. I want to exist outside, to know the reality of this border, day-in and day-out. Are you crazy, she said? You grew up with me, living in deserts and National Parks. We’ve never been far from the border. Sure, I said, but I don’t truly understand the landscape, I don’t know how to handle myself in the face of ugliness or danger. My mother balked. There are ways to learn that don’t place you at risk, she said, ways that let you help people. I fumed. I can still help people, I told her—I speak Spanish, I’ve lived in Mexico, I’ve been to the places where people are coming from. And don’t worry, I told her, I won’t place myself at risk—I’m not too proud to back away from danger.

Good, she said. We hugged, and she told me she was happy I’d soon be back home in Arizona, closer to her. Before bed, we each opened a single present, as we have done every Christmas Eve since I can remember.

In the morning we ate brunch at the town’s historic hotel, feasting on pot roast by a crackling fire. Afterwards we climbed the stairs to a narrow lookout tower where people crowded and huddled together in jackets, walking in slow circles to take in the view. Below us, an expanse of sunlit plain stretched westward from the base of the mountain. I watched as the landscape shifted under the winter light. Behind me, my mother placed her hand on my shoulder and pointed to a cloud of gypsum sand in the distance, impossibly small, swirling across the basin desert.

24 February

We caught our first dope load today, only our second day after arriving at the station from the academy. We were east of the port of entry when the sensor hit at Sykes Trail. At the trailhead, Cole, our supervisor, found foot sign for eight and had
us pile out of the vehicles. For four miles we made our way toward the mountains following toe digs and kicked-over rocks. Cole went in front and called us up one by one to watch us cut sign. We found the first bundle discarded among the boulders at the base of the pass. We spread out to comb the hillsides and after about ten minutes, we had recovered two backpacks filled with food and clothes and four more 50-pound bundles wrapped in sugar sacks spray-painted black. Cole had us dump the packs and I watched as several of my classmates ripped and tore at the clothing, scattering it among the tangled branches of mesquite and palo verde. In one of the backpacks I found a laminated prayer card depicting Saint Jude, a tongue of flames hovering above his head. Morales found a pack of cigarettes and sat smoking on a rock as others laughed loudly and stepped on a heap of food. Nearby, Hart giggled and shouted to us as he pissed on a pile of ransacked belongings. As we hiked with the bundles back to our vehicles the February sun grew low in the sky and cast a warm light over the desert. At the edge of the trail, in the pink shade of a palo verde, a desert tortoise raised himself up on his front legs to watch us pass.

2 APRIL

Tonight we stood for hours in the darkness along the pole line. After we had tired of the cold and the buzzing of the power lines, Cole had us lay a spike strip across the dirt road and return to wait in our vehicles parked in a nearby wash. We sat with the engines on and the heat blasting, and after a few minutes of silence, Morales asked Cole why some of the agents at the station called him “Black Death.” He laughed and pulled a can of Copenhagen from his shirt pocket. You have to be careful, he said, the Indians out here, when they’re drunk and walking at night between the villages, they fall asleep on the fucking road. He packed the can as he spoke, swinging his right arm and thumping his forefinger across the lid. When it’s cold out, he explained, the asphalt holds warmth from the sun, even at night. A few years ago I was working the midnight shift, driving down IR-9, and I saw this fucking Indian asleep in the middle of the road. I stopped the truck and woke his ass up. His brother was there with him, sleeping in the bushes. They were drunk as hell. Cole pinched a wad of dip into his mouth. His lower lip bulged, catching the green light from the control panel. I gave the guys a ride into the next village, he said, dropped them off at their cousin’s place. Told them not to sleep on the god damn road. Cole grabbed an empty Pepsi cup from the center console and spat. Maybe nine or ten months later, he continued, same fucking spot, I ran over the guy, killed him right there. Same fucking guy, asleep on the damn road. I never even saw him. After that, they started calling me Black Death. Cole laughed and spat into his cup and a few of us laughed with him, not knowing exactly what kind of laugh it was.

Just after midnight a blacked-out truck roared across the spikes and three of its tires went. We tore after it, speeding blindly through a cloud of dust until we realized the vehicle had turned. We doubled back to where the tire sign left the road and followed it until we found the truck abandoned at the foot of a hill. In the back of the truck we found two marijuana bundles and a .22 rifle. Cole sent us to scour the hillside with our flashlights, but we only found one other bundle. It’s a fucking gimme load, Cole said. I asked what he meant. It’s a god damn distraction, that’s what. They’re wait-
ing us out. But my classmates and I didn't care, we were high from the chase. We drove the truck into a wash until it became stuck, and slashed the unpopped tire, leaving it there with the lights on and the engine running. On the way back to the station I asked Cole what would happen to the truck. He told me he'd call the tribal police to seize the vehicle, but I knew he wouldn't. Even if he did, they wouldn't come for it, they wouldn't want the paperwork either. They too would leave it here to be ransacked, picked-over, and lit on fire, evidence of a swirling disorder.

4 APRIL

After sundown, Cole sent Morales up a hill near the highway with a thermal reconnaissance camera. Let me borrow your beanie, vato, he said to me, it's cold out. I handed it to him and stayed inside the vehicle, waiting with the others. An hour later he spotted a group of 10 just east of mile marker five. We rushed out of the car and set out on foot as he guided us in on the radio, but by the time we reached the group they had already scattered. We found them one by one, huddled in the brush and curled up around the trunks of palo verde trees and cholla cactus. Not one of them ran. We made them take off their shoelaces and empty their backpacks and we walked all 10 of them single-file back to the road. For a while I walked next to an older man who told me they were all from Michoacán. It's beautiful there, I said. Yes, he replied, but there's no work. You've been to Michoacán, he asked? I told him I had. Then you must have seen what it is to live in Mexico, he said. And now you see what it is like for us at the border. Pues sí, I said, we're out here every day. For a while we walked silently next to each other and then, after several minutes, he sighed deeply. Hay mucha desesperación, he told me, almost whispering. I tried to look at his face, but it was too dark.

At the station I processed the man for deportation and he asked me after I had taken his fingerprints if there was any work at the station for him. You don't understand, I said, you've just got to wait here until the bus comes. They'll take you to Tucson and then to Nogales and then you'll be back in Mexico. I understand, he assured me, I just want to know if there is something I can do while I wait, something to help. I can take out the trash or clean out the cells. I want to show you that I'm here to work, that I'm not a bad person, that I'm not here to bring in drugs, I'm not here to do anything illegal. I want to work. I looked at him. I know that, I said.

7 APRIL

Sunday night Cole showed us the lay-up spot where he had almost been run over by smugglers. He led us to a wide wash full of old blankets and discarded clothes and pieces of twine and empty cans of tuna and crushed water bottles. We climbed out of the wash and walked to a nearby cactus, a tall and sprawling chain-fruit cholla, and Cole asked if any of us had hand sanitizer. Someone tossed him a small bottle and he emptied the gel on the black trunk of the cactus. Cole asked for a lighter and with it, he lit the gel and stepped back to watch the flames crawl up the trunk, crackling and popping as they engulfed the plant's spiny arms. In the light from the fire, Cole packed his can of dip and took a pinch into his mouth. His bottom lip shone taut and smooth, his shaved black skin reflecting the flames. He spit into the fire and the rest of us stood with him in
a circle around the cholla as it burned, laughing loudly, taking pictures and video with our phones, watching as thick smoke billowed into the night, filling the air with the burnt smell of tar and resin, like freshly laid asphalt.

9 APRIL

Cole was ahead scouting the trail in the darkness when he radioed about the mountain lion. Come with your sidearms drawn, he said. We figured he was full of shit. We had been talking loudly, walking with our flashlights on—surely a mountain lion would shy away. We continued down the trail until the ground leveled off and it was then that a grave hiss issued up from the darkness beside us, a sound like hot wind escaping the depths of the earth. Holy fucking shit, we said. We drew our sidearms and shuffled down the path back-to-back, casting light in all directions around us. In that moment I felt a profound and immediate fear—not of the danger posed to us by the animal, but rather, the idea that it would show itself to us, so many men armed and heedless, that it would be shot down and lit on fire and left here beside the trail, another relic of a desert unspooling.

7 JUNE

There are days when I feel I am becoming good at what I do. And then I wonder, what does it mean to be good at this? I wonder sometimes how I might explain certain things, the sense in what we do when they run from us, scattering into the brush, leaving behind their water jugs and their backpacks full of food and clothes, how to explain what we do when we discover their lay-up spots stocked with water and stashed rations. Of course, what you do depends on who you’re with, depends on what kind of agent you are, what kind of agent you want to become, but it’s true that we slash their bottles and drain their water into the dry earth, that we dump their backpacks and pile their food and clothes to be crushed and pissed on and stepped over, strewn across the desert and set ablaze, and Christ, it sounds terrible, and maybe it is, but the idea is that when they come out from their hiding places, when they regroup and return to find their stockpiles ransacked and stripped, they’ll realize then their situation, that they’re fucked, that it’s hopeless to continue on, and they’ll quit right then and there, they’ll save themselves, they’ll struggle toward the nearest highway or dirt road to flag down some passing agent or they’ll head for the nearest parched village to knock on someone’s door, someone who will give them food and water and call us to take them in—that’s the idea, the sense in it all. But still I have nightmares, visions of them staggering through the desert, men from Michoacán, from places I’ve known, men lost and wandering without food or water, dying slowly as they look for some road, some village, some way out. In my dreams I seek them, searching in vain until finally I am met by their bodies lying face-down on the ground before me, dead and stinking on the desert floor, human waypoints in a vast and smoldering expanse.

23 JUNE

Last month we were released from the training unit and dispersed into rotating shifts to work under journeymen agents. For the last week I’ve been partnered with Mortenson, a four-year vet-
eran and the Mormon son of a Salt Lake City cop. This morning, at dawn, we sat together in the port of entry and watched from the camera room as two men and a woman cut a hole in the pedestrian fence. Mortenson and I bolted from the room and ran to the site of the breach, rounding the corner just in time to see the two men already scrambling back through the hole to Mexico. The woman stood motionless beside the fence, too scared to run. As Mortenson inspected the breach, the girl wept, telling me it was her birthday, that she was turning 23, and she pleaded for me to let her go, swearing she would never cross again. Mortenson turned and took a long look at the woman and then laughed. I booked her last week, he said. She spoke hurriedly to us as we walked back to the port of entry and while Mortenson went inside to gather our things I stood with her in the parking lot. She told me she was from Guadalajara, that she had some problems there, that she had already tried four times to cross. She swore to me that she would stay in Mexico for good this time, that she would finally go back to finish music school. Te lo juro, she said. She looked at me and smiled. Some-day I’m going to be a singer, you know. I believe it, I said, smiling back. She told me that she thought I was nice, and before Mortenson returned from the port she snuck her counterfeit green card into my hand, telling me she didn’t want to get in trouble if they found it on her at the processing center. When Mortenson came back we helped her into the patrol vehicle and drove north toward the station, laughing and applauding as she sang to us from the back seat. She’s going to be a singer, I told Mortenson. The woman beamed. She already is, he said.

27 July

Last night, finally allowed to patrol on my own, I sat watching storms roll across the moonlit desert. There were three of them: the first due south in Mexico, the second in the east, creeping down from the mountains, the third hovering just behind me, close enough for me to feel smatterings of rain and gusts of warm wind. In the distance hot lightning appeared like a line of neon, illuminating the desert in a shuddering of white light.

30 July

Agents found Martin Ubalde de la Vega and his three companions on the bombing range 10 miles west of the highway. At the time of rescue, the four men had been in the desert for six days and had wandered in the July heat for more than 48 hours without food or water. By the time they were found, one of the men had already met his death. Of the survivors, one was quickly treated and discharged from the hospital, while another remained in intensive care, recently awoken from a coma, unable to remember his own name. When I arrived at the hospital asking for the third survivor, nurses explained that he was recovering from kidney failure and they guided me to his room, where he lay hidden like a dark stone in white sheets.

I had been charged with watching over de la Vega until his condition was stable, at which point I would transport him to the station to be processed for deportation. I settled in a chair next to him, and after several moments of silence, I asked him to tell me about himself. He answered timidly, as if unsure of what to say or even how to speak. He began by apologizing for his Spanish, explaining that he only knew what they had taught him
in school. He told me he came from the jungles of Guerrero, that in his village they spoke Mixtec and farmed the green earth. He was the father of seven children, he said, five girls and two boys. His elder daughter lived in California and he had crossed the border with plans to go there, to live with her and find work.

We spent the following hours watching telemovelas and occasionally de la Vega would turn to ask me about the women in America, wondering if they were like the ones on TV. Then, smiling, he began to tell me about his youngest daughter, still in Mexico. She’s just turned 18, he said. You could marry her.

Later that afternoon, de la Vega was cleared for release. The nurse brought in his belongings—a pair of blue jeans and sneakers with holes worn through the soles. I asked what had happened to his shirt. I don’t know, he told me. I looked at the nurse and she shrugged, telling me he had come that way. We’ve got no clothes here, she added, only hospital gowns. As we exited the building, I imagined de la Vega’s embarrassment, the fear he must have at remaining bare-chested as he was to be ferried through alien territory, booked and transferred between government processing centers and bussed to the border to enter his country alone and half-naked.

At the patrol vehicle I placed de la Vega in the passenger seat and popped the trunk. At the back of the cruiser I undid my gun belt, unbuttoned my uniform shirt, and removed my white V-neck. Then, I reassembled my uniform and returned to the passenger door and offered de la Vega my undershirt. Before leaving town, I asked de la Vega if he was hungry. You should eat something now, I told him, at the station there’s only juice and crackers. De la Vega agreed and I asked what he was hungry for. What do Americans eat, he asked? I laughed. Here we eat mostly Mexican food. He looked at me unbelievingly. But we also eat hamburgers, I said. As we pulled into the drive-thru window at McDonald’s, de la Vega told me he didn’t have any money. Yo te invito, I said.

As we drove south along the open highway, I tuned into a Mexican radio station, and we listened to the sounds of norteño as de la Vega finished his meal. After he had eaten, de la Vega sat silently next to me, watching the passing desert. Then, quietly, as if whispering to me or to someone else, he began to tell about the rains in Guerrero, about the wet and green jungle, and I wondered if he could have ever been made to imagine a place like this—a place where one of his companions would meet his death and another would be made to forget his own name, a landscape where the earth still burned with volcanic heat.

4 August

This evening as I cut for sign along the border road, I watched a Sonoran coachwhip snake try to find its way into Mexico through the pedestrian fence. The animal slithered along the length of the mesh looking for a way south, hitting its head against the rusted metal again and again until finally I guided it over to the wide opening of a wash grate. After the snake made its way across the adjacent road, I stood for a while looking through the mesh, staring at the undulating tracks it left in the dirt.

7 August

Yesterday, on the border road, a woman on the south side of the pedestrian fence flagged me down as I passed. I stopped my vehicle and went over to her. With panic in her voice she asked me
if I knew about her son—he had crossed days ago
she said, or maybe it was a week ago, she wasn’t
sure. She hadn’t heard anything from him, no one
had, and she didn’t know if he had been caught or
if he was lost somewhere in the desert or if he was
even still alive. *Estamos desesperados*, she told me,
her voice quivering, with one hand clawing at her
chest and the other pressed trembling against the
border fence. I don’t remember what I told her, if
I took down the man’s name or if I gave her the
phone number to some far away office or remote
hotline, but I remember thinking later about de la
Vega, about his dead and delirious companions,
about all the questions I should have asked the
woman. I arrived home that evening and threw
my gun belt and uniform across the couch, stand-
ing alone in my cavernous living room. I called
my mother. I’m safe, I told her, I’m at home.

30 August

Last night I dreamed I was grinding my teeth out,
spitting the crumbled pieces into my palms and
holding them in my cupped hands, searching for
someone to show them to, someone who could
see what was happening.

29 August

At the end of the night Mortenson called me into
the processing room and asked me to translate
for two girls who had just been brought in, nine
and ten-year-old sisters who were picked up with
two women at the checkpoint. He told me to ask
them basic questions: Where is your mother? in
California. Who are the women who brought you
here? Friends. Where are you from? Sinaloa. The
girls peppered me with nervous questions in re-
turn: When could they go home? Where were the
women who drove them, when were they coming
back? Could they call their mother? I tried to ex-
plain things to them, but they were too young, too
bewildered, too distraught at being surrounded
by men in uniform. One of the agents brought the
girls a bag of Skittles, but even then they couldn’t
smile, they couldn’t say thank you, they just stood
there, looking at the candy with horror.

12 September

Morales was the first to hear him, screaming in
the distance from one of the spider roads. He
hiked for a mile or two and found the kid lying
on the ground, hysterical. For more than 24 hours
he had been lost in a vast mesquite thicket. The
coyote who left him there told him he was holding
back the group and handed him half a liter of wa-
ter, pointing to some hills in the distance, telling
him to walk at them until he found a road. When
I arrived with the water the kid was on the ground
next to Morales, lurching in the shade and crying
like a child. The kid was fat—his pants hung from
his ass and his fly was half open, his zipper bro-
ken, his shirt hanging loosely from his shoulders,
inside-out and torn and soaked in sweat. Morales
looked at me and smiled and then turned to the
kid. Your water’s here, *Gordo*. I kneeled next to
him and handed him the gallon jug. He took a sip and began to pant and groan. Drink more, I said, but drink slowly. I can’t, he moaned, I’m going to die. No you’re not, I told him, you’re still sweating.

After the kid drank some water, we helped him up and tried walking him through the thicket toward the road. He lagged and staggered, crying out behind us. Ay oficial, he would moan, no puedo. As we crouched and barged through tangled branches, I slowly became overwhelmed by his panic until finally we broke out of the thicket and spotted the dirt road. You see the trucks, Gordo? Can you make it that far? Maybe we should just leave you here, no puedes, verdad?

On the ride back to the station, the kid regained some composure. He was 19 years old, he told me, and had planned to go to Oregon to sell heroine, un puño a la vez. You can make a lot of money that way, he told me. For several minutes the kid was silent. You know, he finally said, I really thought I was going to die in that thicket. I prayed to God that I would get out, I prayed to the Virgin and to all the saints, to every saint I could think of. It’s strange, he said, I’ve never done that before. I’ve never believed in God.

30 SEPTEMBER

Today I went to the hospital to see Morales. He was in a motorcycle accident two weeks ago and wasn’t wearing his helmet. For awhile we had been hearing at the station that he might not make it. I was too afraid to see him a week ago when he was in a coma, and I was afraid, still, to see him a few days later, after he had come out of it, when he would wake up cursing and pulling his tubes out, when he still didn’t recognize anybody. When I finally saw him I was surprised how thin he was, how frail. He had bruises under his deep-set eyes, a feeding tube in his nose, an IV line in his arm, and a huge gash across the left side of his skull where half his hair had been shaved off. Ey vato, he said to me quietly. I smiled at him. I like your haircut, I said. As Morales spoke to me he seemed far away, his eyes scanning the room around as if searching for some landmark, something to suggest the nature of the place he had come to. His childhood friend from Douglas was there. He told me Morales couldn’t see out of his left eye, but that doctors thought the sight would come back eventually. His mother and father were there too, speaking quietly to each other in Spanish. A little while after I arrived, Cole and Hart came, and as they stood talking at his bedside I could see a wet glaze in Cole’s eyes. I excused myself from the room, telling everyone I’d come back, but I didn’t.

13 OCTOBER

Last week I took the border road out to the lava flow, driving for more than an hour across rocky hills and long valleys. The earth became darker as I neared the flow, devoid of plants and cactus. To the south a pale band of sand dunes underlined the base of a nameless cordillera, shifting at the horizon in shades of purple and dark clay. I drove across the lava flow and looked over black rocks glistening as if wet under the afternoon sun, rocks pockmarked from a time when the earth melted and simmered between erupting volcanoes, a molten crust cracking and shifting as it cooled.

25 DECEMBER

At midnight on Christmas Eve, just before the end of my shift, I heard gunshots ring out in Mexico. I stopped my vehicle at the top of a small hill and
stood on the roof to watch the sparkling of fireworks along the southern horizon. After returning home, I woke my mother who had come to visit for the holiday, her eyes bleary with worry and sleep. We sat in my empty living room in the night-weary hours of the morning, drinking eggnog and stringing popcorn around an artificial tree. My mother asked about my shift. It was fine, I said. She asked me if I liked my work, if I was learning what I wanted. It’s not something to like, I said, it’s not a classroom. It’s a job, and I’m getting used to it, and I’m getting good at it. I can make sense of what that means later.

You know, my mother said, it’s not just your safety I worry about. I know how the soul can be placed at hazard fighting impossible battles. I spent half my career in the Park Service, slowly losing a sense of purpose. I don’t want that for you.

I cut her off—I didn’t want to tell about my dreams of dead bodies, about the fires burning in the desert, about my hands shaking at the wheel. Mom—I said—let’s open a present.

30 December

Tonight the scope truck spotted a group of 20 just north of the line. The operator said they were moving slowly, that it looked like there might be women and children in the group. He guided us in and we quickly located their sign and then lost it again across a stretch of hard-packed desert pavement. We split up and combed the hillside, hunting for toe digs and kicked-over rocks. On the walk back to the car I became furious. There were supposed to be 20 of them, they were supposed to be slow, but still I couldn’t catch up, I couldn’t stay on the sign, I couldn’t even get close enough to hear them in the distance, and so now they remained out there in the desert: men, women and children, entire families invisible and unheard, and I was powerless to help them, powerless to keep them from straying through the night and the cold.

Francisco Cantú is an author and translator with an MFA in nonfiction from the University of Arizona. His essays and translations appear frequently in Guernica and his work can also be found in Best American Essays 2016, Ploughshares, Orion, and Public Books, where he serves as a contributing editor. A former Fulbright fellow, Cantú also served as a Border Patrol Agent for the United States Border Patrol from 2008-2012, working in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. He is currently at work on a book about his time in the borderlands.
3 POEMS

JOS CHARLES

i.

It is a luxury
believing a poem without
occasion  A man leans
against a crumbling wall
and sighs

whose ancient air  The way
a thing

comes up
or settles in the dark  These bloody
days have broken my heart

ii.

I am
here  A little kind of while

An old thing stuck
in a name

I will write
the length of one day

The lightness
of the length of a single line

The figment of a window
iii.

I too much a girl
for my sex

I would be the ruin
A figurine Oh so white

So soft So sweet

I would be
the stone in a shallow
fist
of him who needs Christ

White man follows me home

Third this week

iv.

Who could
believe the ruin of the state

of things
A part

of you
always leaning into A wall
breaching the air

v.

Yet we are folded
together The day My

unletteredness Your pains
are my pains

The old word mercy
Glory

The glory of nothing
going away The mercy of nothing

anymore
anymore coming in Our voices

A heaving green Everything
I could’ve been

vi.

A voice is
a head is

a stone is what
a girl could be The matter

that makes

a girl be No
A sun The same
sun everywhere lighting

some other thing And who
could believe

a brilliant thing before

it’s gone
i.

An old trick
light on a pillar

The boys
their shadows forming

natural little pillars

ii.

At night
I think of you always

again You the baptist
of these lines

How you gently obstruct my eyes

The night
a habit Your vigilance

The clarity of night

iii.

To see is just that
To see

the nervousness of some sun

Its artifice Interpellation
a window The world

a light I
a dim thing

I see

iv.

It is one way
to see Sex Blue light

from a screen
Swimmers cut the shoal Footage

of a new and ruining city
v.

Dark night covering what
I cannot bare
to see A body never more
a body
than where I cannot see
Thank the night
working girl
The purchase
of a body That care
is descended care

vi.

To speak
is to speak of structures
A language
only capable of itself
It's true the outside a kind
of organ The world
a body Your eye
on a platter
of silver and laurel The city
around us fallen
The same news
daily Great Troy has fallen

vii.

If pressed
I would say a girl forms
in the fold
Complicitous
any lodged thing
A theory of the narrow
thing
The beauty of a shadow
i.
The rain
distributes within the world

This implies a grammar The map
maker implying

possible trees He says
I follow that world The old

figure of logic places
a public and what is possible
to promise another Imagine
all the uses of a line

between here and yonder
Now outline

the figure of a bruise

ii.
A creature of such purchase
when dead Whose purchase
to mourn the dead Remember
2014 September

or November Any month
the same really Like anyone

working at the street A bar
Free drinks

from the creeps at the bar
But together

A laugh lodged in the air
Taste of blood copper rain

This existence Sister
a kind of theft Wanting

nothing going anywhere When
you left the rains

again picking
up I haven't been the same
iii.

With grace I am
with you

in your labor
until the last And I am joyful

today for its structure
Machinery clipping the master's

hand How impossible it is
the trees have changed

These poems are from *Fuguettas*.

**Jos Charles** is a trans writer and author of *Safe Space*, their debut poetry collection, forthcoming from Ahsahta Press. They are founding-editor of *THEM Lit*, the United States’ debut trans literary journal. They have poetry and writing published (or forthcoming) with PEN, *Washington Square Review, BLOOM, Denver Quarterly, Action Yes, The Feminist Wire, Entropy, LAMBDA Literary, The Capilano Review, GLAAD*, and elsewhere. They are a 2016 Ruth Lily & Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship finalist with the Poetry Foundation. Jos currently resides in Tucson, AZ, where they received an MFA in Poetry from the University of Arizona.
“You always push me so high,” Mouse said.
“Don’t be a pussy,” answered Mills.
“I’m not afraid. I just don’t want the rope to break.”

Mouse’s feet came so close to the river he felt the wind from his body dent the water. He imagined he could feel the shape, the contours of the water through his socks of wind even though he couldn’t reach its wetness. On days when the river was high, he could glide on the tire swing and let the palms of his feet kiss the water. But today the river was low. The dirt on the slant of riverbank was dry and fissured.

“It was so hot this morning,” Mills said, “I think it got cold as soon as we got to the house.”

“It’s these clouds. The sun’s hot but we’re in the shade,” said Mouse.

“I’ve been waiting to go swimming all morning.”

“We can jump in once this cloud passes.”

“And I’m all sweaty from biking here.”

“You can take a turn on the swing if you want.”

“I don’t want to swing.”

“We’ll go in, in a little bit.”

Mills pushed him harder and Mouse felt the branch that held him bend with the push’s force. The comfortable arc of his path over the riverbank was disrupted and Mouse felt himself bobbing up and down as he swung. Mouse tightened his back to steady himself and pulled his legs beneath him so that his calves hugged the tire bottom.

“What the fuck Mills?”

Mouse swung back towards Mills again, and this time Mills took hold of the tire and ran with it as far as he could before the bank slanted away too steeply towards the river. Mills gave the tire swing a shove at the end of his run as if he were tackling a linebacker, falling forward onto the dirt as he let go.

Mouse thought he heard the branch snap when he reached the peak of his arc, but he didn’t feel himself falling like he would if it were broken. Mouse felt himself begin to swing backward, and worried the branch would break while he hung
over the dry hard earth. He jumped out as he swung back, falling with his palms hitting the water just before his knees. The water where he fell was shallow, and he touched the fine river mud with his hands and legs before he finished falling, pushing an even darker cloud up into the brown-green murk around him.

Mouse tried to thrust off of the bottom with his legs, but his knees were in the wrong position. He flailed his arms in desperation for the surface, worried he had broken some part of himself in the fall. Mouse reached air much sooner than expected and took a gasp. Floating, he pulled his legs to his chest and reached his arms around them to make sure nothing was broken.

Mills was laughing from the shore. The tire still jerking at irregular angles.

"Nice face-plant."

"I could have broken my neck."

"A rope swing isn't going to kill you."

"It's not like we have health insurance."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Fuck you, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Come down and get in the water."

"I wanna wait until this cloud passes so it won't be cold."

"Fuck you Mills, don't be such a pussy."

Mills took off his shirt and set it in the grass with his socks and shoes. He was pale with a sharp thin chest and a small but lumpy stomach. Mills dipped his foot in the water and grimaced.

"Oh come on," Mouse shouted.

Mills put another foot forward into the water, walked slowly until he was thigh deep, then stopped and stood with his arms crossed. Mouse floated and did turns in the water. He reminded Mills of an otter, thick with chest hair and turning.

"Get your chest wet already. You're the one who wanted this," Mouse said, and began to swim towards Mills.

"I'm coming. I'm just getting adjusted to the water," Mills shouted, though Mouse's head was under the water and he likely couldn't hear.

Mouse stood up next to Mills and took a gasp of air. Mills was about to speak, but before he could get a word out Mouse dipped again beneath the water, completely submerged this time so that Mills couldn't even make out the red blur of Mouse's shorts through the murk.

Mills chopped at the water and made plops with his fist, as if Mouse would hear the splashes and rise to the surface. He didn't.

Mills gave up, spent a moment looking across the river at the trees. Up river, away from the city, the hills seemed to hold nothing but trees, like some lonely paradise before the coming of man. Mills knew there were towns in the hills, but the trees were tall enough to hide them.

Directly across the river wild saplings grew from the rust of abandoned industry; cranes the orange of cooled coals, and docking platforms of iron grating—roots eating the masonry from the stonework beneath the cranes. An old barge rested there, holding trees in its coal bed as roots tore through its iron sides to expose mounds of jet black dirt.

Trees swaying in the wind made the hills look like waves.

Mouse emerged in front of Mills and spat a jet of cool river water into Mills' face.

Mills splashed at Mouse with hard palm thrusts like punches to the river. Mouse splashed back, sweeping his arms in smooth arcs that covered Mills in waves.

"You're all wet now," Mouse said.

Mills grimaced.

"What, I'm just trying to have some fun with you," Mouse said.
“A lot of fun we’re having,” said Mills.
“Don’t blame that on me,” said Mouse.
“I don’t blame you.”
“You don’t have anything to blame me for.”

A barge hummed as its Ferris wheel of a propeller slapped the river with metal planks. The barge carried a hill of black coal that looked like it had been removed from the landscape of some distant badland.

Rippling snakes trailed from the barge, emblazoned with scales of silver daylight.

“We should go to the house and get drunk while we wait for the sun to come back,” Mills said.

“You can see it shining on the waves in the middle of the river.” Mouse pointed. “The edge of the cloud’ll pass in a few seconds.”

“But I think we’d have more fun if we were drunk. We still have some beer left from this weekend.”

“Cheap beer that’s been laying around all week. At least the beer will be warm.”

“Maybe we can find some money laying around. Buy some liquor.”

“Yeah, I think a good cocktail would fix everything. If only we could afford one.”

“What the fuck Mouse, how do you think I feel about all this?”

“Probably pretty shitty,” Mouse said.

“I’m sorry Mills. I know it’s not really your fault.”

Mills looked down at the water.

Mouse flicked a gentle splash at Mills from the tip of two fingers.

“Don’t do that to me right now,” Mills said.

Mouse started to walk towards the shore. Mouse was a few steps past Mills when Mills turned and followed.

They climbed their way up the dry slope of the river bank.

When they reached the yard their hands and feet were muddy, and they had thin stripes of mud across their chests. They rubbed their hands and feet against the grass until most of the mud was off of them, then rubbed their palms against the bark of a tree trunk to finish cleaning their hands. The sides of their hands brushed the mud from their chests.

“I’m cold,” Mills said.

“Then put your shirt on.”

“I’m still wet.”

“So?”

“I don’t want my shirt to get wet.”

“I’m really cold,” said Mills again.

“What do you want me to do about it,” Mouse said.

Mills opened his arms and faced Mouse. Mouse sighed and looked at the ground, then he wrapped his arms around Mills. They were warm, and they sat down in the grass with their arms locked around each other. The barge sounded its horn as it came around a bend in the river, a deep bellow that scared a flock of birds from their perches in the trees.

Mouse stroked the back of Mills’ hair.

Mills turned his face toward Mouse and tried to kiss him, but Mouse turned away.

“Why are you being like this?” Mills said.

“I just don’t know if I want to kiss you right now.”

“You know I can’t pass it from just a kiss.”

“It’s not that. I just don’t know if I want to kiss you.”

Mouse let go of him.

“You’ve probably already passed it to me anyway,” Mouse said.
“You don’t know that. You still haven’t taken the test.”
“But you knew. You took the test.”
“That doesn’t mean I passed it to you.”
“But it means you knew.”

Mouse looked down at Mills’ toes, yellowed. The nails were like tree bark and Mills was only sixteen.
“So you do think it’s my fault?” Mills said.
“I didn’t say that.”
“Bullshit. Do you think it’s my fault or not?”
“It doesn’t matter whose fault it is.”
“So it is somebody’s fault?”
“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Mills looked out at the river, which was green with silver sun-tipped waves. The sun was hot and they itched in its radiation as their skins dried. They could smell their armpits already, though their bellies were still moist.
“At least you got to choose to fuck me.”
“I’m sorry Mills.”
“It’s not like you were worried about condoms.”
“You don’t even know if he’s the one who gave it to you.”

Mills stood up and walked towards the flood house.
“I’m sorry,” Mouse said.
Mills turned and looked at him, but then turned back toward the house and kept walking.
“I know you don’t want to go to the house and just get drunk by yourself.”
“I just wanna get drunk,” Mills said.
“I’ll come drink with you. We can finish the beers from this weekend.”
“They’re warm and they’re probably skunked.”
“That’s fine if they’re warm.”

“Fine.”
“You do want to get drunk with me, right?”
“Yes. I want to get drunk with you.”
“Then let’s get drunk.”
“What could be better.”

Mouse stood and ran to catch up with Mills. They walked side by side across the yard to the flood house. When they reached the remains of the house’s gravel driveway, Mouse looked back and realized they had left their shirts and shoes in a pile next to the tire swing’s tree. Mills didn’t seem to notice and kept walking across the gravel. Mouse followed. Hard points of the gravel gouged into their feet and covered them with a fine grey dust that clung to them even after they walked across another patch of grass, onto the house’s wooden porch.

This story appeared in Enizagam. It is an excerpt from my manuscript, The Flood House, a novel in stories. Mouse and Mills are two of a rough dozen teens who often stay at a flood-damaged and abandoned house just outside of the Pittsburgh city limits, along the Monongahela River. All of the teens have run away from home, or have been disowned by their parents for being queer. The flood house is not their regular residence, but one of many locations throughout the city where they might bed-down on a given night. At the time of this chapter Mouse is 17 years old and Mills is 16.

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There’s a story about Macho Man Randy Savage that’s been floated around since the territorial days, since his name was Randy Poffo. Randy’s father, Angelo Poffo, started what was called an “outlaw” promotion, that is, a wrestling promotion that operated outside of the established territories, called International Championship Wrestling. As a means of promoting it, Randy and his brother Lanny would go to rival shows and interrupt, pick fights, cut promos in front of the audience.

In 1982, Randy bumped into Bill Dundee. The ICW wrestlers had intended to bum rush a Bill Dundee match and start a riot a few months earlier. They were, oddly enough, prevented by a different, unrelated riot. When Bill Dundee saw Randy this time, he grabbed a gun out of his glove compartment. Unfazed, Randy grabbed the gun and beat Dundee with it, breaking his jaw. The events surrounding professional wrestling constantly fluctuate between two states: the “work” and the “shoot”. Both are old carny terms, from back in the days of canvas tents and hours long matches, of inviting audience members to fight your champion and clubbing them over the back of the head if you think they might actually have a chance. Of two burly men putting each other in holds. Of faux realistic grappling that was, more often than not, a fix. There are other terms too. The audience member is a “mark”, for example. The one who writes and plans the matches is a “booker”. There are “faces”, the good guys, and “heels”, the villains. And there’s “kayfabe”, which is the omerta, the rule of silence, the protection of the whole illusionary world that ties it all together, a world where all of this is real. And there are works, and there are shoots.

A work is a fix. It’s a story. It’s when Hulk Hogan and Macho Man Randy Savage become tag team partners and best friends, even though, in real life, Savage is uncomfortable always being the number two face in the company. He knows he works better as a heel and so, in a work, he turns on his best friend during WWF’s Main Event in 1989 because he’s sick of always being the number
two men in the company. It’s a work. It’s not real, but it’s not untrue.

If a work is reinforcing kayfabe, then a shoot is breaking it. It was, at one point, a rarity. Back in the old territorial days, when men traveled from state to state, wrestling under different identities, different names and masks, where people could be faces one day and heels the next, a shoot was not done. A moment of real honesty. A behind the scenes glance. When Hogan went on another wrestler’s podcast in January of 2015 and talked about almost fighting Savage backstage at a Total Nonstop Action wrestling show a decade earlier, then that was a shoot. When it turned out that the story had probably not happened, then it was real. It came from a real place, a real fight, a real feud. But it was untrue.

Podcasts and dirt sheets, wrestling insider websites and newsletters, and Youtube interviews have made shooting on companies, on the industry, into a side business, and fans, hungry for those snippets of reality, of hard lines between the work and the shoot, eat it up.

I remember the first time I fell in love with professional wrestling. I was flipping channels when I came across the Undertaker, a zombie mortician turned cult leader, and his Ministry of Darkness having kidnapped WWF founder Vince McMahon’s daughter Stephanie. Real life mixed martial artist Ken Shamrock, born Ken Filpatrick, playing fictional mixed martial artist Ken Shamrock, saved her. As a retaliation, the Undertaker kidnapped Ken Shamrock’s sister, Ryan Shamrock, who, in real life, is named Alicia Webb and not at all related to Shamrock, though, to complicate matters, Ryan Shamrock is the name of Ken Shamrock’s very real son.

Ken Shamrock, the person, the man, the actor, speaks occasionally about his time in the WWE, though he never brags about the time when he saved the boss’s daughter from a Satanic cult in the boiler room of the arena during a live taping of that boss’s incredibly successful television show. He also never talks about how the Vince McMahon’s son was also a member of the Ministry of Darkness, nor how Vince McMahon later came forward as the true leader of the group who kidnapped his daughter.

To explain the work like this is to do it a disservice. To unleash it as a couple paragraphs makes it sound snarky and irreverent. It makes me feel dumb for having enjoyed it. But to watch it roll out over the course of months, each week unfolding another twist, it was an addictive and exhilarating sort of experience. I was twelve, and used to comic books and horror movies, and this world felt right, in its own, off-kilter, psychedelic way. Critics dismiss pro wrestling as a soap opera while ignoring that soap operas carry a sort of obsessive pleasure. Shot on videotape, and later on digital video, filled with long running characters, both with their own “three month rule”, as in, nothing that happened longer than three months ago is still relevant to the story, there’s a sort of compulsive attitude in both forms of storytelling that leads to a truly comprehensive form of fandom. And I’ve always been drawn to comprehensive fandoms.

And yet, I am, in fact, embarrassed of how easily I was tricked. I operated under this sort of half-measured belief in professional wrestling’s veracity. I knew it wasn’t real, but I also sort of believed it was.

Several months after I started watching wrestling, Owen Hart (real name Owen Hart, son of wrestling legend Stu Hart and brother to Bret Hart) died in the ring. Owen Hart’s safety catch broke while he descended from the ceiling during
a pay per view and he fell sixty feet from the rafters into the ring. He died dressed as the Blue Blazer, a character he had played in Japan and Mexico and who he had been playing, as kayfabe character Owen Hart, off and on in the WWF. Footage of it has been respectfully scrubbed from WWE programming and the pay per view wasn’t released for home viewing until the WWE created the comprehensive database called the Network in 2014. But if you look, you can still find it on YouTube and DailyMotion, taken from VCR recorded copies and camcorders. For some reason, the typically litigious WWE can’t seem to keep Owen Hart’s death off the internet. The only footage that made it to air happened during a worked interview with Mick Foley character Mankind. He’s backstage talking about the feud between Shane and Vince McMahon. There’s the sound of a crash and Mankind stops midsentence, becomes Mick Foley. He and the interview crew and the other wrestlers who accompanied him to this interview all run to the door and the camera cuts. Commentator Jim Ross breaks kayfabe. He’s calm and collected, a real pro. He tells us that the Blue Blazer, and then he clarifies and calls him Owen Hart, has fallen. He tells us that EMTs are working with him, that the situation’s serious. Later, it’s revealed that he died instantly, though he was pronounced deceased at a hospital nearby, outside of the arena. Perhaps JR, as he’s called, didn’t know, and perhaps he did. But JR, like any good commentator, is a storyteller, and even here, a battle is described, but the decision has already been made. And the show continues. The Union, composed of wrestlers Mankind, Test, Big Show, and Ken Shamrock, fight the Corporate Ministry, Viscera, Big Bossman, Bradshaw, and Farooq. The Undertaker wins the WWF Championship. And the Hart family sues the company, settling out of court for 18 million dollars.

A year and a half before, “The Loose Cannon” Brian Pillman, real name Brian Pillman, trained by Stu Hart, had died of an unforeseen heart condition. Brian Pillman operated under the guidelines of the “worked shoot”. A worked shoot exists in the middle ground between the two extremes. It was reality reformatted into fiction. It’s metatextuality. He introduced the shoot to the casual fan while wrestling for WCW, calling booker Kevin Sullivan “booker man” and then getting himself fired, quite literally, as part of a deal with the owner of the company to create interest in the product by playing around with behind the scenes terminology. The plan was to hire him back after a short period. Instead, Pillman spent time in ECW, a rising Philadelphia organization at the time, where he perfected his “loose cannon” character by badmouthing real people and events in the WCW. Then, when the time came for Pillman to come back to the company, to put the work into the worked shoot, he decamped for WWF without warning. The worked shoot became the shoot.

Owen, on the other hand, was a company man. His family were longtime members of the old school. They believed wholeheartedly in kayfabe. When the rest of his family left for more money and respect in the WCW, he stayed in the WWF, which is how he became a character playing a character playing another character. Which is how he found himself dressed in a mask and cape, his safety latch broken, falling sixty feet into the ring at a pay per view called Over the Edge.

Owen’s very real brother Bret left the WWF after the 1997 Survivor Series and an event that has come to be known as the “Montreal Screwjob.” When McMahon asked then champion Hart to take a larger contract at WCW due to the WWF’s financial difficulties, Hart had to drop the belt before he left. This was in response to a growing tra-
dition of dissatisfied workers taking their championship titles to rival companies. Shane Douglas kick started ECW by throwing the NWA belt on the ground and declaring it dead. Mick Foley spit on the WCW tag team championship belts at an ECW taping. In December of 1995, only a couple years before the Screwjob, WWF Women's Champion Alundra Blayze (real name Debra Miceli) famously brought the title belt over to WCW and threw it in the garbage. McMahon's fear was that, if Hart didn't agree to lose the company's top honors, he'd take it over to WCW.

What happened next is murky. Some say that Hart refused to lose the belt to real life and kayfabe rival Shawn Michaels (real name Michael Shawn Hickenbottom) under any circumstances and that it would have to go to an interim title holder, who would then drop the belt to Michaels. Others say that he would have dropped the title after Survivor Series, but that he didn't want to lose in his native Canada. The reports of what happened change over time, as the participants get older and more honest or more self-serving.

What we know is that an exchange was planned where Shawn Michaels would put Hart in a submission hold and Hart would reverse it into his own Sharpshooter hold. When Shawn Michaels put Hart into the first hold, Vince McMahon, then known primarily as a commentator and announcer, ran to the ring and yelled for the timekeeper to "ring the fucking bell". Shawn Michaels was declared the winner.

There are two sources of footage of the event. One is the documentary Wrestling with Shadows, a documentary filmed on Bret Hart during the period that just so happened to catch the implosion. The other is the Survivor Series broadcast itself. Both have been analyzed to death by wrestling fans. They're wrestling's own Zappruder film.

And yet, what's trying to be proven is not that a conspiracy existed. That's known. That's the shoot. That's what we were told the next night on television. We watch the Screwjob, we watch Montreal explode, we watch Hart spit on McMahon from the ring, hitting him directly in the center of the face, we watch Hart gesture the letters W-C-W, we watch backstage as McMahon goes into Hart's dressing room and leaves it with a black eye, we watch it all looking for the work. Those who believe that the Screwjob was a worked shoot are the conspiracy theorists, those who believe that the only conspiracy was on the audience, to convince them that wrestling is real, to drag them back to the carnival days.

The event turned Vince McMahon, owner of the WWF, into the character of Vince McMahon, owner of the WWF. He could no longer hide in plain sight. And when the now WWE goes back to Montreal, even twenty years later, that character is still pelted with chants of "You Screwed Bret." If the Screwjob was a work, was a long con, it was perhaps the most financially and creatively successful in wrestling's history. But Occam's Razor tells us that, in truth, the Screwjob was a peek behind the curtains. An opportunity for the fan to see what happens at the end of a partnership, as frustration and anger and miscommunication break through the curtain.

Wrestling clings to the words "shoot" and "work", because they don't mean "real" and "fake". Wrestling has consistently accused of being fake by people outside of the industry, largely because it is scripted. In the aforementioned Wrestling with Shadows, Bret Hart laments that when he throws a punch, he's derided as a fake, not applauded as an actor. That he isn't applauded as an actor is largely due to the industry itself. The WWE has long been accused of exploitative business prac-
tices with regards to their wrestlers. Wrestlers are hired as independent contractors. They don't have health insurance and they rarely have guaranteed contracts. And they don't have unions. Here's why: while wrestlers are considered to be “entertainers” in order to avoid sports commission regulation, WWE programming is considered to be “sports programming.” Therefore, wrestlers don't qualify for Screen Actors Guild cards for their appearances on WWE television. This is seemingly McMahon's larger design. And the Screen Actors Guild seems to have little compulsion to reach out to wrestlers, perhaps because of the nebulous space that wrestlers inhabit. They're not actors because they're athletes. They're not notathletes because they're actors. Their work is scripted but apparently not scripted enough. And once wrestlers admit that they are, in fact, stuntmen and actors, there is no more work, no more shoot, no more kayfabe.

And yet, WWE Executive Vice President Triple H (which stands for Hunter Hearst Helmsley, real name Paul Levesque) admitted to “Stone Cold” Steve Austin (birth name Steve Anderson) on Austin's podcast that kayfabe is indeed dead. That the audience is too knowledgeable about the backstage politics and processes involved in wrestling for the industry to pretend to be any different than it is. And so kayfabe is propped up as an excuse, a means of keeping workers in line, despite one of the principle figures in the industry recognizing, publicly, its obsolescence.

The concept of kayfabe can be difficult for people who don't watch wrestling to understand and for people who do to explain. It's written, but it isn't entirely fictional. Steve Austin describes his character, Steve Austin, as an exaggerated version of himself. As does Duane “The Rock” Johnson. As does Mick Foley. As does Triple H. The regular use of kayfabe names contributes to this idea. Both Steve Austin and the Ultimate Warrior changed their names, to Steve Austin and Warrior, respectively. Despite being an Executive Vice President, Levesque goes by Hunter, and is called Hunter, by people who talk about him in shoot interviews. Johnson shed his name, but seemingly only because he wanted to pursue acting. He's still called the Rock whenever he's mentioned in regards to wrestling.

In a shoot interview with fellow wrestler Colt Cabana, CM Punk, whose real name is Phil Brooks, expressed disdain for people who called him by his real name in public. He said it exhibited a form of familiarity that he found uncomfortable. Even though he had left professional wrestling as a whole months before, he still identifies himself as CM Punk and in the interview, Colt, his longtime friend and colleague, calls him that as well. When he's asked whether or not he'll be going by his real name when he goes to UFC to fight, or when he releases a comic book he's written, he wavers. He says that it'll be alright, he supposes, if they use his real name, but CM Punk is probably a better selling point. He displays an attachment to his alter ego and what his alter ego represents, and there's a sense that, even if he never wrestles again, he'll never want anybody to call him Phil. It's kayfabe, but it isn't fiction. Whether the wrestlers come to inhabit to roles that they've been placed within, or whether they are simply playing heightened versions of themselves to fit within this heightened reality, a good wrestler comes to embody their character in a way that transcends acting. Whether they're good on the microphone or good in the ring is often irrelevant. Even though kayfabe is dead, a wrestler lives life as an aspect of their character. For, perhaps, the rest of their lives, wrestlers will have to clarify whether what they say is a shoot or a work.
Here’s the story of how Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son, or at least as close an approximation as I can make. This is not changing the subject. This is the subject. Chris Benoit as a topic is interesting because it represents the end sum of any number of conversations about wrestling. When people discuss the greatest technical wrestlers of all time, Chris Benoit appears, though his name is always prefaced by an acknowledgment of the fact that he murdered his wife and son. When people talk about tragedies in wrestling, Chris Benoit has surpassed figures like Owen Hart, Eddie Guerrero, or even the seemingly cursed Texas Von Erich dynasty. When people discuss steroids or concussions or the greatest Royal Rumble winners of all time, Chris Benoit appears. And when people talk about wrestling’s complicated history with reality, Chris Benoit is there.

Chris Benoit murdered his wife, Nancy Benoit, a former wrestling valet in WCW under the name of Woman, on Friday, June 22, 2007 by tying her down, putting a knee to her back, and strangling her with a length of cord. He placed a Bible by her body. The two of them met during Benoit’s time in WCW, while she was married to aforementioned wrestler/booker and on again off again Satanist Kevin Sullivan. There was an angle, that is, a storyline, in which Nancy left Sullivan to be with Benoit. Sullivan, a big believer in the importance of kayfabe, insisted that the two travel together in order to keep up appearances. This led to Nancy leaving Sullivan for Benoit in 1997. They married in 2000. In 2003, Nancy filed for divorce, citing cruelty and irreconcilable differences. She dropped the suit soon after.

Over the course of two days, Benoit is absent from WWE television. He calls friends and tells them that he and his son and his wife were all sick, vomiting blood, and they have to go to the hospital.

At some point over those two days, Benoit killed his seven year old son Daniel by suffocating him. The wounds are said to have been consistent with a rear naked choke hold, known in wrestling as a sleeper hold, although, at the time, rumors abounded that Daniel had been killed by Benoit’s finishing maneuver, a brutal looking submission move called the Crippler Crossface. In the Crippler Crossface, Benoit would trap his opponents arm in a leg scissor hold, then grip his hands in front of the opponent’s face and execute a neck crank by pulling backwards. Despite the Crossface being the appropriate name for variations on this move, the term has been said sparingly in the WWE since the truth about Benoit’s final days came out. Even when wrestler Daniel Bryan executes his Yes Lock, a Crossface maneuver very similar to Benoit’s, the comparison is never made. This has as much to do with erasing Benoit from the product as it does with the visual image of the move itself, and when I watch a series of Benoit matches as research for this piece, I shudder every time the hold is applied.

A butcher knife is found under Daniel’s bed, though its purpose is unknown. After Daniel is dead, Benoit places another Bible next to him.

Benoit then goes to his workout room, lays a Bible on the weight machine, and hangs himself with the machine’s cord. A suicide note is later found written into a Bible that had been sent to Benoit’s first wife. It reads “I am preparing to leave this Earth.”

The other wrestling move that made me shudder when I was researching for this piece is a Diving Headbutt. Benoit would climb to the top of the turnbuckle, leap off in a splash position, his
body perfectly parallel to the ground, and land on his opponent face first. Benoit would also take unprotected chair shots to the back of the head, something that was incredibly rare among wrestlers due to its potential for brain damage. When an autopsy was performed, doctors stated that Chris Benoit had the brain of an 85 year old Alzheimer’s patient.

Wrestling fans, myself included, speak with a certain degree of pride when we talk about the men and women who give their bodies to the sport. This supposedly honorable compulsion is a huge part of the mythos. We love wrestlers who love wrestling, and the purest way to show us that a wrestler loves wrestling is for them to break themselves in its name. We don’t cheer on real injuries, shoot injuries, but we certainly speak more fondly of those who suffered them and returned to the sport.

When news broke out of Benoit’s suicide, but before his murder of his family was revealed, the WWE cancelled their Monday night show, Raw, and replaced it with a long tribute to Benoit. Vince McMahon came out to introduce the show, mentioning and then dismissing an angle that had just begun wherein McMahon the character had been killed. This particular storyline was never mentioned again. Throughout the show, alongside airings of classic matches and excerpts from a recent WWE DVD about Benoit, wrestlers spoke openly and candidly about their friendships with him, for his love of the business and his professionalism. He was a quiet man, they said, but he was personable and kind and an easy man to like. Younger wrestlers spoke about how much they admired him as both a performer and a person.

The next night, Vince McMahon recorded a statement wherein he apologized for the tribute show and stated that, from now on, the WWE would no longer mention Benoit. And, for the most part, they’ve stuck to it. He was scrubbed from DVDs and replays. His name was stripped from broadcasts. He would appear only once until 2014, in an Encyclopedia of WWE wrestlers. His death is not mentioned in his entry.

Now, because the WWE Network is so comprehensive, it’s possible to find every televised match Chris Benoit wrestled not only for the company, but also for the WCW and ECW. But it’s difficult to find them. His name does not appear in the descriptions or the match results. His matches do not appear in the bookmarked milestones that appear in the broadcasts. The only way to find out when a Benoit match took place is to look for the long stretches of the timeline bar absent markings. Look for the empty space. You can find Chris Benoit in the void. These blank spots are very often main events.

It’s difficult to watch Benoit matches now. When he was alive, a large part of his charisma was in his appearance. He was billed as being 5’11”, but with his wide, stocky, muscular body, he looked much shorter. He was triangular in shape, with a constant beard and a short, do it yourself, haircut. He was missing teeth, and every time he smiled it came out mangled and menacing. It lent credence to his Diving Headbutt. He looked beaten up, like he had seen things and done things to people that we could only imagine. His nickname was “The Rabid Wolverine”, and finding a more visually appropriate nomenclature is impossible. He looked like a violent ball of incoherent rage. And we loved him for it, in large part because he felt like he could really snap. And when he wrestled, he wrestled like he wanted to hurt his opponent, really hurt them, hurt them in ways that existed only in his mind. He was ravenous, but he was also precise. Animalistic but intelligent. He was
so talented that he was regularly positioned as a face, a good guy, despite his frightening appearance and glowering persona. Chris Benoit, we told ourselves and each other, is as close to a shoot that a work can get.

The videogame WWE 2k15 has a feature that allows players to create wrestlers, then post them online for other players to download. After its release, players were banned, and presumably continue to get banned, for posting crude facsimiles of Chris Benoit. This was not trolling. These were not angry teens using Benoit to shock. These were, and are, wrestling fans. When Benoit died, I had become inured to wrestler deaths. After all, my entrance into fandom was marked by Owen Hart’s fall. Between when I started watching it and when Benoit killed his wife and son and then himself, in that eight year period, wrestlers who I had watched and liked and who ultimately died untimely deaths included Rick Rude (heart failure), “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig (acute cocaine intoxication and, supposedly, a mixture of steroids and painkillers), Crash Holly (overdose), Road Warrior Hawk (heart attack), Macho Man Randy Savage’s valet Miss Elizabeth (overdose) (Savage would die in 2011), Davey Boy Smith (heart attack), The Big Bossman (heart attack), both members of Public Enemy: Rocco Rock (heart attack) and Johnny Grunge (sleep apnea complications), Chris Candido (pneumonia caused by complications from leg surgery), John Tenta (cancer), Bam Bam Bigelow (overdose), Eddie Guerrero (heart failure), Mike Awesome (suicide), Yokozuna (pulmonary edema), and another Randy Savage valet “Sensational” Sherri Martel (overdose). Of these performers, the oldest were Rocco Rock and Sherri Martel at 49. And when, the next day, I found out how Benoit had died, what he had done, I didn’t believe it. Not in the sense of shock, but in genuine disbelief. For an instant, a brief moment, I thought it was a work.

And maybe that’s why there’s such a disconnect in the way that we view Chris Benoit as fans. Because this isn’t an actor killing his family and then himself, and it’s not a character killing his family and then himself. It’s both. The Benoit who murdered his wife and murdered his son is more similar to the ruthless Benoit who put his opponents in the Crippler Crossface than to the kind professional we are told lived behind the scenes. We have become accustomed to splitting the performer from their deeds. When the Undertaker hurled Mankind off the top of a steel cage, or when Triple H smashed his opponents with a sledgehammer, or when the Dudley Boys put powerbombed women through wooden tables, or when Hulk Hogan turned his back on all the little Hulkamaniacs and turned heel, we didn’t hate the performer. We hated the character. Ric Flair, one of the most beloved wrestlers of all time, was a bad guy for decades, but he was amazing in the ring and he cut great promos, and so we’d boo Ric Flair while respecting him as an athlete and entertainer. We’ve been trained to think this way. The very existence of kayfabe insinuates that there’s a life behind kayfabe, just as the existence of a curtain reveals that there’s a backstage. We could hate a performer in the ring, and then that performer punched a clock and moved on to the next town, and we accepted that. And this is the way it’s always been, ever since the days of carnies and circuses. It’s always been an open secret that wrestling was worked, and, though kayfabe turned the act of a performer hiding their identity into a sort of complicated gamesmanship, there was never really a period where people thought wrestling was real. In fact, the opposite is more often true. When we are told that some of the aspects
of wrestling are worked, we're inclined to believe that it's all worked, and we look at each new development sideways, whether it's a retirement or a fight backstage or a firing or even, from time to time, a death. We have a deep, abiding affection for a form of entertainment that is constantly trying to confound us, and so we don't trust it. And so, perhaps there's a part in the back of our mind, a small part, an irrational part, that perhaps doesn't believe that Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son. At least not Christ Benoit the person. After all, an event so outsized and horrifying fits neatly alongside cults and dead bosses and women kidnapped and hidden in boiler rooms. And besides, a key part of enjoying professional wrestling is to both believe and not believe everything you see.

And that's what people who don't watch wrestling seem to miss. To love an actor is to love a person and a talent, to love a variety of roles, and so, when somebody like Mel Gibson or Woody Allen or Bill Cosby crosses an uncrossable line, it's easier to write them off. Even the best actor is a collection of roles held together by a human being. But Chris Benoit was perhaps the last wrestler who was his role and only his role. Just as the WWE banned chair shots to the head, just as they instituted strict rules regarding concussions, just as they responded to Benoit's death by cracking down on dangerous behavior, they also opened up wrestling's world. They protected themselves by revealing all. Wrestlers shoot on podcasts on the WWE Network now. They take part in backstage interviews on the company's DVD releases. The supposedly monstrous Ryback comes out on stage to talk about not only his past, but his reliance on The Secret. Wrestlers blame the internet for killing kayfabe, for educating marks, for showing us the world behind the world. But, perhaps, it's Chris Benoit who killed kayfabe. Who necessitated us seeing what happens behind everything, who necessitated us entering into a level of trust with the industry. We had to know that Chris Benoit was a man who did a terrible thing, not a heel, not a character. And for those of us who grew up with professional wrestling, it's a lesson we have a hard time accepting. And, perhaps, it's a lesson we'll never truly accept. Because kayfabe never really dies. It just changes shape.

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I love you. I’m telling you because everyone in my life should know someone does. You know I was close with my dad. He was always good, but didn’t need to tell us kids, we just knew because he protected. He was a man of the Lord, & we lived on a farm so he determined what we saw or heard & he protected so it wasn’t anything except one time when a worker told me a naughty story, but I didn’t get it because my father protected his girls. Maybe he made me naïve or stupid. A little farm girl me. When I was sixteen everyone thought I was eight, that little. When I got sick I asked the Lord to surround me with love & before He did I realized that I’m supposed to give love too. That’s what I’m doing now. & I think I’m getting shorter.
FEELING

Eleventh hour is your time to help the family,
well, you already do with respite

but it’s different when the patient dies
& it’s different for every family member

some get angry will need you

gone, some will hug you read the room
but don’t cry, that’s personal & you are not

personal to them you are hired

***

I feel connected to M. Tell her & she smiles. I’m afraid, she says, dying is out of my hands. Yours too. It’s God. I know it’s out of my hands, but I’m afraid it will happen when my daughters go shopping. I can be alone, but I don’t know what the body can do after hours. I break her confession into fragments, an effort to solve, ask where her daughters shop, if she wants me to come over when they go. Everything sits in the same spot it did when I got there. Seemed strange. Her shrug, anyway, how are things at the U?

***
Is there a way to know how you will react to someone's death?

I assume every
time feels like
the first five
stages of grief
won't you map
a predictable
creature me
worried if I am
all personal all I am
is a volunteer
complex what
if I memorize
you make you
my mantra
each time as if
it matters how I am
when she dies

At this point, M, her daughter & I have our routine. Her daughter goes shopping on Fridays, leaves the front door unlocked so I can enter on my own. I do so, yell “hello” so she knows it’s me, comfort grandson, hug M hello. That’s why I was surprised when M’s door was locked. I rang the doorbell. Both of her daughters answered. One I’ve never met grabbed my elbow, “Come on in.”

I turn the corner toward the room where M sits. That was the first time she wasn’t there. Uncomfortable, I avoid questioning & look at them. The daughter I’ve met asks how I’m doing & turns to her sister, “Go get Mom up.”

“She's asleep?” I felt my spine straighten. I knew my job at that moment was to look big. They need to know it was fine that she was asleep, that even if she wasn’t just sleeping it would all be fine. That empty loveseat.

“Oh yeah is she sleeping,” her daughter replied, “She’s been asleep since Tuesday.”
Jean Valentine: “Yesterday, in the afternoon, more than a year since you died, / some words came into the air. / I looked away a second, / and they were gone, six lines, / just passing through.”

Dear L,

Each time it’s goodbye
your fingers bend toward wrist

we hug, as we hug
I scoot a dish

from table edge. The one leaving
could be either of us

depends on the day
the door

chips each time
I open it
a reminder

of the two of us
I’m the only one

opening it. Quick
as to not let the cats out.

M’S DREAM POEM [LIKE LISTENING]

Laying toes up on a wood bench my son
thumbs a tractor through my hair

a tunnel he says pretend pigs drive

instead I imagine people
the size of baby-teeth gardening

their garden how little water
THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERS

I am asked to pay
close attention
to decline
seems silly
I'm not even sure
what it looks like
apologies
have since stopped
Medicare money
potentially revoked
because this time she expected me
I understand the need
for a record
reassurance of my
professionalism
& her symptoms
but I am not a professional
they tell me
volunteers are the only
people from hospice
that spend quality
time with patients
it took me four months
to realize it's the office
that needs me
her sometimes
regression in
my summary like
I knocked
she walked
to the door without
her walker
said hi

cue
the importance of body
language L's leg
twitch meant she fell
asleep I
could keep
talking I do
stop taking
notes these words
elastic not
mine suddenly
there's ethics there's dirt
in her water cup
WHAT I UNDERSTAND, IF HEAVEN IS LIKE BOBBING FOR APPLES

the sink smells of bleach I bleach it
spout & knob & tin & this

the scent of hell in the morning

flames wake in shifts stretch
up & out like rested arms how wonderful
to wake with the sun

ON BEING HUMAN 1

The head social worker asked me how many patients of mine already died. When I said none she told me when it happens I should call her.

M tries crossing her legs while sitting in her wheelchair. They fall & I place her feet on my thighs, how’s that? Imagine watching this from a distance. Birds’ eye. It reminds me of elementary school sleepovers, heads on bellies on shoulders on legs until our bodies create the laughing knot. I’m sorry you have to see me like this. The first time I saw M unable to move independently. She looked the same she always did & for some reason it surprised me. This is the part of our friendship I signed up for.

Hospice is not a place & that’s hard to explain. Hospice is a philosophy of care, i.e. you can receive hospice while living in a nursing home or assisted living. Usually there is not hospice building to walk into. I’m terrible at telling people this information & when my boyfriend asks what I did today I say I went to hospice. Detail. You could probably also opt for hospice in hospitals. On a documentary a doctor said he “always” keeps patients alive as long as possible. I guess it depends on the doctor, the potential of your living your life being chosen for you. I guess I’d rather give the decision to a doctor over my mother & that scares me.
Depend is a tough word. Before starting hospice the patient must choose an advocate. This person makes all medical decisions when patients cannot speak for themselves. The hospice I work for recommends having a social worker to get decisions in writing. Even if written, the advocate does not need to carry out the dying's requests. The hospice hands me a binder about how different religions approach death. The binder said Hindu patients will, more than likely, have their oldest son be their advocate.

Dog barks at me outside typing. I say hey dog, stop that barking, can't you see I'm writing I'm finally writing this poem I've been thinking of this poem for a week so stop. But really I say, love you. Those ears.

To write these poems I intend to remain myself. These stories are not mine, can't be. Truly, I want to give these women a friend. They gave me friendship back & all this information. Testimonies about dying by the people in it, they & I don't know if it matters so here. If anything my poems are nothing. Still, I reason through the not-so-science of death. Experience moments the way any friend could. Here, I'm writing about my friends.

I get in the habit of telling people about volunteering for hospice. Some talk about future sainthood. Some ask if I only work with seniors & when I say yes I wish that I could work with kids then I scream because why would anyone ever wish this on kids don't ever. A friend once said he loves talking to me about babies, how happy I get. My longest visit with M, two & a half hours, broke the time limit rule. At the end, she interrupted her own story by nodding off. Her daughter noticed. M woke up when wheeled into her bedroom, started crying. All I could hear was it's rude to get rolled away from her, she drives all this way for ten minutes together. Only now am I realizing the speed of her hours.

I continued reading the binder. It told me that it's rare to have Buddhist patients because their religion knows life to be sacred. It also said that some people, people of any religion or no religion may think that stopping curative treatment is a type of suicide. That you are ending your life early. Breaking the sacred. Then the binder said do not give Buddhist patients medication & I won't because I'm a volunteer & why would I prescribe anyone medicine? It continued: “if Buddhist patients show any negativity when they die, they must be resuscitated.” I don't know how to do that either.

Information provided about how Catholic, Christian, and Jewish people handle death was brief and similar. Catholic and Christian family members will often encourage each other to stay in the room with the dying patient. From what I can tell, Jewish individuals do the same, unless they are orthodox, in which case, they would prefer to die in a healthcare facility. Traditionally, when someone of the Orthodox Jewish faith dies, his/her arms & fingers must be lengthened out, by their sides. Additionally, any sheets with blood on them should be buried with the dead. More often than not, when I think of this I think of smell. Then I think of Jehovah's Witnesses, how they believe if the soul dies & doesn't go to heaven, it disappears. The lack of hell.
I knew nothing about hospice before volunteering. Dead family members have either passed in a car accident or in their beds. I’ve only seen one of them die. My grandfather’s uncle. His name was Frank. He was Catholic, wore pants to his chest, had a purple heart. I was seventeen & he looked like he was sleeping. My dad said to stay & I did. After, I don’t know what I was expecting, it was quiet.

DEB GRAVINA smiles often, drinks coffee, and writes poems. She has done this, most recently, in Manhattan and Tucson. She wants to avoid sounding like an Oscar recipient, but also wants to appear thankful. So, briefly, she thanks her family and friends for their support because she feels so lucky to have them. Moreover, she is a graduate of the University of Arizona’s MFA program, previous poetry editor for Sonora Review, and a teacher of high school English. You can read her work in Forklift, Ohio and forthcoming in Harvard Review.
His papa told him everything there was to know. Which springs still had clean water. Which of the outposts gave line of sight to the access road. Where to find blackberries, even after first snow. How to keep deer from getting skittish and running off. The trick is to breathe without moving your chest. You must remember to load the chamber before the target enters the clearing. Always collect the casings, otherwise you’re leaving a trail. Casings can be refilled or melted down to make ball bearings for jumping jacks. Jumping jacks—so the spooks wouldn’t get to them. There’s always a right way, even when there isn’t. This was his papa’s motto and so it was Kid’s motto.

They were lucky to have land that gave them so much. When they first arrived, Kid had been a baby, just a fat little face sticking out of his papa’s pack. They had been humping north, away from the drowned cities of the gulf. His papa told him how lucky they were to find trees with green leaves, lakes that still had fish, rabbits and deer free of choler. Even luckier was the lodge and its working generator. This was the land the woman had spoken of, a place where they could wait while the outside continued to unmake itself.

In the early days things weren’t so steady, but now there were only two reasons to leave: cans and medicine. Every time the moon disappeared, his papa packed a tin of jerky and the remainder of his medicine, four needles worth, and left Kid to stick to protocol. From Outpost Delta, Kid watched his papa hump off into the chokegrass and past the perimeter, each step a slow, deliberate movement. Kid waited and waited. Through the sight of his rifle, he watched the wall of green and gray, making sure that no spooks had backtracked his papa’s trail. Only when it was dark did he return to the lodge where he would monitor the prick until sunrise.
Over the next few days he would keep the fire as low as possible, living on cold cans and jugs of purified water. He only left the lodge to check the outposts, a hundred breaths at each, careful to brush his tracks as he moved between them. At night he’d recite the book, silently of course, taking comfort in its promise of utmost protocol. Like his papa, the book told him how the world worked. About the forces of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste. About the nuclear weapons rotting in their vaults somewhere. About the Chinese communist agent and her highly discolored garbage.

But for all the book told him, it couldn’t promise his papa would come home safe. All he knew was that there was a friendly in town, a friendly called Mister Win who gave his papa medicine. They’d spit on it. The cans came from a big lodge, one that glowed at night like a second moon. But all Kid had was his one moon and he had never met a friendly before, so he had to trust that they had their own protocol to follow. Their own kids to keep safe from the harms of the world.

At noon on the fourth day his papa would return, beard a little longer, smelling of peppers and mint, pack heavy with supplies. Cans, flints, smokes. Sometimes his papa would have a bottle of tiger piss, and if Kid swore he followed protocol, he’d get to have a sip. It tasted like the oldest jug water, but he didn’t let his papa know he thought so. Instead he patted his belly and waited until his papa was full of medicine and had gone to visit the sandman. Only then did Kid check his balls to see if the tiger had left him any hair. It never did, but he didn’t worry. It would eventually, his papa told him so.

He stayed up and listened to the easy sawing sound of his papa’s breath. The surest sound in the world, but also the scarcest. Listening like this was not part of protocol, but it didn’t break it either. He knew what happened to those who broke protocol. They fell, or worse, they turned. But Kid would not be like them. His papa was a survivor and so Kid would be a survivor.
AN EXCERPT FROM HARDCORE, A NOVELLA

She had liked the idea of snorting, how its vector pointed straight at the brain. She saw it as a thumb popping bubble wrap, leaving each cell wrinkled and blown out. Her first time was in the bathroom of 234 Union, and it was nothing like what she’d imagined. Like ice dusted in baby powder, she couldn’t stop it from sliding down her throat.

She’d been hanging around Jason’s cousin again, waiting around to see what might happen. He’d ignore her all night, making a big deal of flattening empty Olympias under his boots, or boggarting the guitar for hours at a time, only to catch her eyes from across the circle and mouth something intimate or fucked up or just plain nonsense. You’re a fucking heavy pearl, you know that?

He saw her like everyone else did, a mystery to solve, a question mark asking to be made a period. Was she a good girl from St. John’s who’d only raided her daddy’s liquor cabinet a few times? A runaway who’d been sucking dick since she was thirteen? Tomorrow’s needle freak, tomorrow’s patient, wrapped in white robes, baby bird fallen from its nest and tucked in a shoebox? She let them linger on the possibilities, all the while wishing none of them were true. I just want to be me, she kept telling herself, whoever that is.

Cigarettes still made her cough, but they also gave her power, a boundary she controlled. They said, no one touches me unless I want them to. She practiced holding them just so, saying fuck off to her bedroom mirror, only to lose her cool when Jason’s cousin put his hand on the back of her corduroy jacket and led her to the bathroom, really a utility closet with a low sink for rinsing out mops. When they left he gave her a stick of gum, and hours later, after she’d worked it into a hard, gray pellet and then worked it some more, he took it back, balancing it on the tip of his tongue like this was all part of the plan. See, he said, a pearl.
I have dedicated much of my time to determining what lies outside the city. The locals are not particularly helpful. They're always talking about weekend road trips to the lost beaches up the coast, or maybe catching a monorail to the vineyards for a day trip, but when I ask how it was they tell me you had to be there.

Maps are deceptive. Go far enough in any one direction you'll discover the same streets you've already passed: Klein, August, Roman, Tonnetz—names of cartographers who once drew our peninsula as an island, but this is not a mistake. The natives grow restless with themselves. No matter how a gecko thrashes about, there's always another to mimic it, so that they might tile this bathroom floor.

I board the monorail only to find it is actually a centrifuge, separating ourselves from ourselves. The boy sitting next to me is taking his ant farm to school for show and tell, and suddenly it's obvious why humans can lift so many times their own weight. The monorail keeps accelerating and the ants are now proving the existence of exotic particles that appear to them as wobbling discs. The city's most prominent writer, a poet who once quit god and found drinking, learns of this discovery and renounces all renouncements. The ants build and raze statues in likeness of the boy who has since become a manifold.

Even if we did exist in higher dimensions, we wouldn't. Instead we all share the same memory of a tired woman, crying quietly into her teacup. Her papers stacked under a paperweight—everything in its place, but therein lies the problem. Snow comes to rest on a palm frond, until it doesn't anymore.

There are days when I stop and accept the pink sadness of it all. Often it's one of those unassuming Tuesdays when mercury is in retrograde and everyone knows to ditch work and lay in the grass. But more likely, it's something closer—a hummingbird hovering for a moment, or the fog makes me think of giftwrap instead of gauze. Today, it was an open window, a woman singing to herself as she went about her morning. She was older, I could tell by the long grooves in her voice, and so was the song. I recognized it, could even sing along, and yet, I couldn't tell you it's name. Nor did I care to, and this relinquishing was what let me know.

I walk south, then north, then south again. I leave change in coffee cups and smile at strangers as if they are not. Window shopping is quite appealing, this casual freedom of seeing myself both inside and out. I am a regular at this establishment, but also the surprise guest, a chance encounter. A group of attractive young somethings passes by with a basket full of charcuterie, wildflower honey and levain, something brushed in truffle oil. Is that a backgammon set? They're off to the beach. They invite me to join, and I do.

We drink white wine out of paper cups, though we never get drunk. It takes a half-hour to roll the joint, but no one minds; this is part of the texture. Did you know, someone asks. Have you read, another says. The fog crinkles away and there is our gift—the sun, bright and dumb as a fresh tennis ball. We forget to play backgammon. We forget each others' names. The fog returns as if it had never left, but not before the sun melts into the water, warming us each with its almond light. We must do this again, everyone agrees, though even
if we do, this will never come again, not like this.

Was this day one I lived, or was it a future memory, an object to be placed in a cigar box until it is perfectly bittersweet? Did I manage to break through the panes that circumscribe each one of us? Surely not, but I was no longer an algorithm, or perhaps, I lost track of what I was. Maybe I am packed away in a hexagon, but at least there is honey in a hive. Tomorrow we will wake different, or the same. This glass you hold will still be the glass that holds you. I will try to make peace with the great ellipsis, and I will fail, I will.
“Thunderbird,” an essay

The Ojibwa call it Animikii. The Tlingit call it Shangukeidí. The Kwakwaka’wakw call it Kwankwanxwalige’, for the way it makes thunder (kəwənxwə) lightweight (kəwəs) by pounding (ləka). No matter the tribe, its description is the same: a bird so large it creates thunder when it beats its wings. Diné myth claims that thunderbirds live on a floating mountain Tse-an’-iska’ (“A Tall Rock Standing”). They named the thunderbird Tse-nah-ale after the fashion in which they carry men to the top of the mountain and let them fall against it: tse (“rock”) + nah (“guide”) + ajei (“heart”). The hero Nayenezgami (“slayer of alien gods”) killed the thunderbird that preyed in their lands with an arrow made of lightning. As the bird fell off its mountain, smaller birds, what we now call bald eagles, flew from its wound.

Cryptozoologists were quick to connect these myths to reports of a massive bird: a wingspan up to 5.5 meters, indigenous to the more remote forests of North America, commonly encountered during storms. The most compelling and widely circulated hypothesis is that thunderbirds are the nearly extinct descendants of Teratornis (Greek, “monster bird”) merriami, thus explaining recurring reports of young children snatched from sandboxes. Fossilized “thunderbird” skeletons found in La Brea and Woodburn often circumscribe the skeletons of lesser animals, juvenile primates being most common.

In my only encounter with a thunderbird, I was the object of such predation. I spent my childhood summers up at my family’s Sierra Nevada country house, mostly unattended while my parents hosted cocktail parties. I passed the time playing make-believe with the many pinecones and pillbugs that littered the property. During a particularly long, rainy afternoon, a great crescent shadow appeared overhead and chased me into the safety of the house’s mud room. When I was sure the bird was gone, I inched out of the doorway armed with a ski pole to discover a feather as big as my arm stuck in the sap of a tree stump. I took the feather straight to my secret hideout beneath the staircase where I kept all such treasures: in a cigar box: baseball cards, invisible ink, flint arrowheads, contraband candy, a butterfly knife, a photograph of a camp girlfriend never kissed and later, tear-outs from an old Playboy, quartz and pyrite stolen from Truckee Trinkets, and finally Cannabis, sativa (Latin, “sown”) and indica (Latin, “Indian”) both.

The only other time I got close to a thunderbird was in Klukwan, Alaska, population 139 on the days Shakey wasn’t off in Sitka or Juneau, dealing smoked salmon to gourmet export companies. I was there for a summer community service trip, a punishment of sorts, for drinking half of my parent’s liquor cabinet and lying about it. Among my many jobs—babysitting kids just old enough to not need babysitting; renetting the rustbitten basketball hoops; cutting down the summer brush, vertiginous weeds like great willowherb (Chamerion angustifolium) and skunk cabbage (Lysichiton americanus), all so bears couldn’t sneak up on the 40 or so houses that comprised the town—my favorite was fishing. If I managed to wake up at sunrise, around 4 in the morning at that latitude, I could go out on the water with Shakey and help him pull in barbell-anchored nets that glittered with salmon, their eyes alive and dumb, continuously surprised. He showed me how to kill them: either a hook through the skull or a baseball bat to the same. His was a hammerheaded aluminum bat, the same used for T-ball. I was surprised by how easy it was, to kill, but even this surprise was expected somehow. There are long histories to these motions.
Shakey kept hootch in a military-style canteen that he sipped from throughout the day, always patting the equator of his gut afterwards. By day three, I was allowed to have a sip when he did. He showed me his own treasures: the wallet full of photographs. Kids with bowl cuts and missing baby teeth, no one I'd seen among the 139. I asked if he'd ever seen a thunderbird and he shrugged. The next day after unloading the day's haul into the smokehouse, he extracted an iodine-colored bottle from his backpack. Thunderbird, "The American Classic," 375 mL, 17.5% ABV, bottled in Modesto, CA, not so far from my home. Its $1.99 label was half scratched off. Thunderbird is a blind, fighting drunk I'll come to know well in the basements of old frat houses where others like me put on their facepaint and tell stories about the mythic beasts they've slain. 'No,' I said, taking the bottle anyway. 'I meant the bird. The monster.' I flapped my arms in a gesture that was sadly helpful. Shakey nodded and later that night he took me to the place where he and his brothers gathered. From my readings I knew it to be a widden, a special Native American landfill, the oldest of which sometimes contain fossils. I could almost make out bone beneath cigarette butts, candy wrappers, a pen knife, and the remains of countless Thunderbirds, once intact but since smashed onto the heap by Shakey and the town's other alcoholics, now congregating around my unopened bottle just like the vultures I make them into.

After Nayenezgami killed Tse-nah-ale he found the creature's children, roosting in a nest thatched from dead saguaros. He commanded that they sit before him and he prepared a smoke from the herbs he kept in his headdress. He puffed smoke on his fingers and drew the residues over the birds in a cross. He told them to forget their father and that his spirit would not enter them again. "The tribe called Diné shall use your feathers. In case of famine we will eat you for meat. Whatever you say will have a double meaning: it can be taken for a lie or for the truth."

Older now, I see why Nayenezgami killed his thunderbird with lightning. When 18th century Russian explorer Yevgeni Namag moored his boat on the shore of what he would later name Baranof Island, he didn't expect one and then two rowboats of his well-armed men to disappear into the island's tall coniferous forests. Instead of muskets the men on the third rowboat carried jugs of vodka and thereafter Namag found safe passage up and down the Alaskan coast. His logbook describes the natives who greeted him as red-faced men, as if this were their morphology, something to be taxonomized. But he, like all alien gods, couldn't see it was he who was alien. It was he who made their faces red, who sent them tumbling from their perches, generations of lesser beings born from their wounds. This is the double meaning of the cryptid. We are animals both sacred and profane. A god is as easily a monster.

I am in my hideout now. I prepare a smoke and rummage through my old cigar box, its treasures intact, but changed. My thunderbird feather, once so massive, is now as small as my index finger. Hidden, it has been allowed to be special, a fetish, but revealed to the world, it loses its magic. I dip the feather in ink, no longer invisible, and bring it to the knotty pine I can only see with the flame of my Bic. There I write this, my double meaning. Should scholars later find this writing, they will mistake it for a faithful record of events, a logbook or a confession, and they will be content to know what they know. Others will recognize it as myth, but will be drunk on the wisdom this promises. And here I am: alien and red-faced, still telling stories of an animal I search for in the wilderness. Hearing thunder in the beating of a single feather.
MEGAHEX

I keep figurines in a glass chest elaborately fragile toys you love to pick out and inspect like stray cat hairs caught napping in my sweater no way of knowing they are all witches I once flew with

White rabbit— we licked toads until the moon was super enough to forget our phones do not have our best interests in mind

Porcelain ballerina— we made like silhouettes against a silver screen until the sun returned and made the warmth of our bodies obsolete as the hardware they are

Voodoo doll— found at the acupuncture clinic where we were being treated to the same blue dreams we came to be treated for

Origami swan, black widow, plastic venus— an entire zodiac of them waiting for me to fall asleep so they can come back to life as the opposite of the lily they thought I needed them to be

Until then they will sit patiently in their notches on top of the busted VCR they always said I reminded them of their favorite tape stuck inside tinsel guts wound into whatever little machines make the big machine work

Let me spoil the ending for you the menu screen loops until we too are content to decorate the apartment with spells of romance gone up in green smoke while outside the monorail silently circles the city like a shark in a tank of bloodless water
At this altitude smokefall is long and literal. The clouds a county fair, ferrous and dirty pink. The sun slips over the horizon like a cockroach down a drain, and finally the sky can be ancient again. All night the ghost sounds of trains fill the valley with copper to mine and make into semiconductors. Obese trucks leave oil slicks that evaporate before they have a chance to be mirage.

The people who live in the park pray to this obsolescence. They carry crystals into which they hoard their wish to be forgotten, their memories mercifully burnt on the inside of a soda can. They are unable to recognize their fathers’ faces on the sides of bus stops and their one guitar can only play sunkissed ballads from dead decades, the same songs that chirp earnestly from their former homes up in the foothills.

The worried mother fills her solarium with turquoise, mesquite, and other gift-shop fetishes. She once read that these slow the apocalypse, but of course it precesses from these very foxholes. It does not arrive in storms of sand and locusts, but in the moment we thought to draw ourselves into heaven.

Here it is, our land to waste as we see fit. College kids leave empty thunderbirds in the planetarium. Poets lament how easy it is to sublime in so much heat. If there are retired spooks limping among us, only they know what they know. And here I am, weeping for the roadkill coyote, wishing he would laugh at the sacredness I grant him.
“THAT FEELING WHEN,” A SHORT STORY

Meet up at the community college parking lot, blaze, and drive off. Try to keep up with your buddy’s glowing blue car as it scribbles through the hills along the lake. It’s not a lake, it’s a reservoir, someone in back says, that fucking guy who always finds a way to tag along. He’s talking like it’s one of those nights you’ll talk about as back then when you’re old enough to have a back then. Drown him out by blasting the saddest song that can be screamed by teenagers from a town that’s a replica of your own a thousand miles away. The kind of music that fits your mood when nothing else does, which is always. Park right up against the dunes. Grip the ice plants so you don’t slip during the steep part. Some people are here already, but not her. There’s that one guy with the almost dreadlocks, but hey at least there’s weed. Pink bangs sticking out from a boyfriend’s hoodie. Two girls you don’t know but want to are sitting on a quilt whispering, ew not that one—and you know you’re that one. Pass to the left. Watch the fire and make sad little mountains in the sand. Tell yourself how sad they are because then they’re the sad ones. Why is your DD being so obvious about his soda? Don’t play your own stuff when the acoustic guitar comes around, not until she’s here. She rode with him but in a group. She who posts poetry online and you’re pretty sure it’s about sex. He invites her to check out the waves and she says yes. He who is unconscionably good at lacrosse and everything else but is chill too, even your buddy says so. They’re gone too long because one second is too long, and a version of this line is in every song you know by heart. When they return her hair will be different and you’ll see that as him and not the stupid wind. Everything is so fucked up, right? That fucking guy is talking again and you fantasize about punching him, and suddenly you’re a hero and she’s giving you a handjob. Your DD can tell how stoned you are and tries to spook you by moving his mouth like he’s talking even though he’s not. Keep cool. He’s not judging, he just wishes he could be there with you. The drinks are all girl drinks but you kinda like them better. Her nose ring catches all sorts of light and now she’s sitting next to you like it’s nothing. Say a variant of hey, and she won’t respond at first, sending you into a deep panic. Tell her you like her industrial. Tell her you’re thinking of getting a tattoo too. Of what, she’ll ask, but you haven’t decided yet, and still haven’t. Your buddy says he heard she gave head to a guy from the public school. Tell her you think her middle name is cool. Don’t tell her how you know her middle name. Actually, don’t tell her anything, and eventually she’ll say something, ask you about your music or whatever, and the curl of her voice will make you lovesick through the internet for months. Download low bitrate rips of songs she quotes in her away messages. Learn it’s possible, preferable, to masturbate to the way hair obscures a face. Write a song with metaphors as terrible and convoluted as this whole thing. A line from her next poem: this cul-de-sac / is a noose / but at least you’re here too. You wish you were you. By the next beach party you’ll be back in the same positions, and this time you’ll be no less ready, so why not just tell her you like her writing, her voice, her. Years later, at reunion, that fucking guy will lower his voice to tell you her fiancée fell asleep at the wheel and suddenly you’re back there. Back then. You’d almost forgotten the cling of wet smoke, mermaid purses, promises fogging a parked station wagon. How you made honest shapes to-
gether, sand trapped in shoes still on. Those fattongued shoes you wore because you thought you could skate. Don’t kick them off. You will never be able to shake their loose crunch. Her middle name was Iris, same as that shitty, sentimental song you find yourself listening to now, raw to something you thought you’d packed away.

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Δ0

Where it begins for them, for her, is with the dolphins. Begins with Grey waking to an empty bedroom. In the distance, her dog Harrier is pronouncing his syllable against the ocean. Blinds pulled shut even though she left the open in the night. The well-worn pathway between the house and the ocean takes ten minutes to walk but she is quicker in her run. Wondering all the way why Harrier won’t quiet down, if Caspian is with him, why the necessary words aren’t being spoken. Holes in the canopy of the redwoods reveal some lights lingering shallower in the sky than stars. Grey can’t tell if they’re moving or if it’s just perspective. Her breathing fights the way. The dunes are coming; she can feel the change in the dirt beneath her feet.

As she reaches the shoreline Grey can see how the bundles of light rise out from the middle of the bay. Harrier pronounces his syllable against every new wave as though they and the dying are connected. As though his barking is universally understood. Grey can see dolphins surfacing and becoming these figures of light, which look small enough they might fit inside her palms, before rising up to the height of treetops, disappearing. She is waiting for ash falling, carried on the coastward wind, but the morning sky becomes full of refrains, an entrance to an entropy. Everything has changed. It dizzies, it does.

Caspian calls to her from within the ocean. Only his feet are in the surf but his shirt is darkened by seawater and it clings to his chest.

Something is happening, he says.

I’m afraid, Caspian.

I’m trying to get one of the dolphins out of the ocean, he says. The others are disappearing.

Where.

Just there, Caspian says, trying to point. I don’t know. Out there. I need you to help me.

You know I hate to swim, Grey says.

Unless you want me to drown, Caspian says, and takes to the ocean again, long legs dragging
their way. He dives into a wave, comes up some
time later. Now that his shape is in the water Grey
has perspective; the floating body of the dolphin a
hundred feet out comes into focus. She walks out
after him. Dives in as he did, feels seaweed drag
against her unpainted toenails.

Out along the midway she tires but Harrier’s
protests from the transom urge her on. She be-
gins a list: what she can’t leave behind. Caspian’s
splashing becomes her guidance. His breathing
becomes her own. If he goes down, so will she.
She reaches out her hand and finds it touching a
silky body, skin unlike any other skin she has ever
touched, although she has only touched a dozen
other creatures’ actual skins. When Caspian asks
her to kick, she does, follows the pattern of the
dolphin’s breathing. More lights are rising out of
the water and taking to the sky, as light, but this
one stays with them, and Grey would like to ask
the necessary questions, the why and how, but a
stretch of saltwater enters her mouth, slides in,
takes refuge among her, marking her.

When the dolphin’s belly graces the sand they
begin the action of pulling: Caspian by the tail and
Grey by the dorsal fin, gentle as she can manage.
They bring it beyond the highest tideline. They es-
cape it from the ocean.

Water. It needs water, Caspian says.

They have no tools but their hands, which car-
ry meager palmfuls from the ocean. The dolphin
continues breathing but its skin has changed col-
or, a different kind of exposure. It tries flexing the
length of its body, eyes the ocean like it has be-
come a foreign land. With each new handful of
water Grey punctuates another part of the impos-
ible question she has arrived to first: What is hap-
pening to your friends. She doesn’t know if they
have done a good or terrible thing, saving this one
from being turned into light, and she doesn’t want
to know the answer. She gives it a name she can’t
repeat, assumes it is female like herself: the pro-
nouns have always mattered to her. The dolphin
speaks in the only way she knows, still. Grey de-

...
dragging the dolphin to the house and into the basement, people were banging on the windows of the clinic, begging to be let inside, where the technicians barricaded themselves. Even with a crowd outside in the parking lot they meet in the breakroom. All the technicians have brought in their own animals, and the room hums with all their little hearts. Smallest of all is the ferret, which slinks through the room’s smallest openings before someone scoops it up by the midsection—everyone stares like its two halves will stretch apart like a slinky. A heart unable to circulate a hill’s half-cup of good blood.

I heard all the birds in Paris turned into marble and dropped onto the streets, like little statues from the Louvre, someone is saying.

The blue whales can’t stop singing, or screaming, another says. All the ships’ sonars are worthless.

Is Caspian not coming, a technician asks.
I don’t know, Grey says.
He should be here.
I know, Grey says, and when she goes to turn on the lights a technician stands to turn them back off. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t think anyone does. What never changes is that we are here to offer comfort and eliminate pain. We will continue to do those things until something stops us.

What are we supposed to tell them, someone asks.
That we are still working toward a diagnosis.
I don’t like lying to people, yet another says.

If there is a condition there is a diagnosis. We can make assessments and make conclusions, which means we can find the differential. For the individuals, and the whole, Grey says. I won’t accept doubt about that. Okay? It seems like only some animals are affected right now, at least with the dogs and cats. And ferrets. We need to be able to differentiate between those that are critical and those that just have worried parents.

We should keep everyone outside the clinic until we can figure out whether we should or can look at them, Cayo says. He is Grey’s favorite technician, the ex-military man who wears combat boots daily and a hunting knife on his belt, except for during his shift. The one who sits cross-legged on the floor and lets the dogs place their paws on his shoulders.

Good idea.
I’ll play the bouncer, he says. I can triage and hand them off to the others inside as needed.
Grey puts her hand on Cayo’s shoulder, a gesture that feels false. She says, If something is different, you come and get me right away. That goes for all of you. Good?
Her assembly nods its various heads.
Remember how it sometimes takes a long time to figure out a diagnosis. This is the first day. We’ll work our way there.

Her assembly scatters out of the room and into others. In the quiet that follows she looks out the breakroom window, where there is a girl and her dog both looking toward the forest beyond the rear parking lot, where Grey’s car is parked and not Caspian’s. She sends him a message:

GREY, 09:48:42: How is Harrier doing?
GREY, 09:48:58: Where are you?

The ferret slinks around her shoe, tries to climb onto her leg, falls onto its back. Grey considers its half-cup quantity of blood, how long it has kept the thing alive until this very moment. The cosmoslike consistency of living still stuns her every day. Her phone chimes the response.
Grey wonders if this other language is making better progress. Notices how Caspian doesn’t bother to answer the second question. He had been shifting away for months but had never made it so clear. What he had said last was that they both needed to be more independent, that symbiosis was not a healthy stasis. Reliance, a weakness. The ferret has been circling the table and chair legs all the while, and now scuttles off for the darkness behind a bookshelf to get stuck behind.

Grey could take away the possibility of pain, she knows. There are medicines for quiet. She could take a pinch of skin and slide in a needle, and soon the ferret would close its eyes, get lost from that little heartbeat. Grey can’t be sure whether, on a day like today, a killing is a kindness. If she should work to settle the promise of future pain. But she doesn’t know the answer now and never will. A knocking on the window asks Grey to look away from her phone. The girl is still out there with her dog, but now she is pointing to the woods. Grey opens the window to hear the cawing of ravens. The girl seems to be saying something, but the cawing becomes screaming, and then settles into a long quiet.

Today Grey’s medicine becomes rudimentary: she has time only to prescribe antibiotics, to request radiographs, to prescribe medicines that ease pain. The third is the most requested and she feels the government agents that monitor the usage of these often-abused substances will ease their restrictions for a tekn. Grey finds comfort in a hairless cat named Rigby, who has come with an infection of its eye. There is something comfortable the process of easing her way toward this diagnosis.

As Grey prepares the slide she will press into the cat’s open eye, will later peer into via microscope in search of mycoplasma haemofelis or chlamydophila felis, its parent speaks of the world beyond. He says, I heard that in some rainforest, all the frogs lost their color, all those little bright green and orange treefrogs. Without being able to see each other, they just started croaking and calling and wouldn’t stop, not even in the nighttime, like they normally do. And so the predators came out and swallowed them all up, still croaking on their ways down. All while they just wanted to find their friend, or their lovers. It’s not quite the same, as other things, but it’s still sad.

When Grey plants the slide Rigby cries, the skin on his back shifting. Bristling would-be hairs if only he had been born better.

I guess I’m just saying that we forget how much soul there is, the man is saying.

Outside there is a commotion and a knocking on the examination room door: Grey steps into the lobby to find a man holding a poodle and a woman trailing just behind; he leaves a trail of blood that she smears with every footstep. Grey believes this is her first of the changed animals, and a sliver of her hopes that to be true, she craves the challenge of an impossible thing, but the man says it ran out in front of their car—the woman had been driving, hadn’t been able to stop, that a collision was inevitable. There is guilt in finding this a simple emergency. Nonetheless Grey knows straightaway the signs of hypovolemic shock, can
ascertain an internal bleeding. The technicians receive her orders: deliver an IV of bolus fluids, 500mL in the right cephalic vein; ready the ultrasound; ready the radiograph room; take the TPR, read the numbers; prep. There is blood on her nitrile gloves but her skin itself feels wet. When taking radiographs, Grey doesn’t bother with the lead vest: everything feels a little less permanent now. She wouldn’t mind taking a little of the pain herself. She wouldn’t mind knowing what is also most deep inside her, if there is a name for it, a before to make sense of the now.

The poodle is sedated on the table, breathing slow enough that when the exhale comes back around again the woman is surprised to remember it is still alive. Grey watches from the other side of the door, through the small window: she can see the man pointing at red-winged blackbirds thick in the pussywillows outside like they are something rare; she can see the woman crying for obvious reasons but smiling for less clear ones. Grey thinks the two must be lovers from her observations on the other side, but they are not and never will be: it is too convenient, too story-like, to bond over disaster. The door is what holds back truth. But everyone shares in wondering about the hollowness of a bone.

When Grey enters, they turn to her, receive her truth. She says, The ultrasound and the radiographs both confirm that he’s heavily bleeding internally. There’s a significant amount of fluid surrounding his lungs, which is affecting his ability to breathe. That’s why we started up the oxygen. Surgery is an option, but I tested a pain reflex on his hindlimbs and got no response, which suggests there has also been damage to his spinal cord. It would be a painful life if he survived.

Grey holds back other truths. She believes pain is unlike matter or energy: it can be created and it can be destroyed: if she destroys then she is making better the whole universe. She is afraid to perform surgery without Caspian watching over her. She is afraid this will be her last usual patient. She feels unmoored. She is asking the universe to please help her make smaller the pool of pain.

The man and the woman have their hands on this happenstance child. He keeps looking down like the dog is something new and hollow; she is eying the ceiling like she waits for a ghost to occupy a corner. This dog, its pelage is forgetting. If you think euthanasia is best, that’s what we’ll do, the woman says.

It seems cruel to keep something around after all this, the man says.

Grey realizes she had forgotten to mention the word itself but is grateful they met her more than halfway.
We'd like to stay, the woman says, preempting the discussion Grey was about to begin. It's our responsibility, to wish it well.

It'll be quick, Grey says. It'll end the pain.

At day's end she will have to shuffle this body into the incinerator: there, dead learns the act of flying. Ash, bone, remnant, smoke. Other clinics would freeze their dead until a truck came by to take them in bulk, but there is no one like that around here. She is made to do the work. Even Caspian refuses. When it's done, she will collect so much into a gray plastic bag. Using her hands to keep it cinched she will wonder where the ashes belong. Who will remember. The smoke will already be yearning for water upon which to linger, make the most filamentary of clouds.

For now, Grey pushes a syringe into the IV. This feels like the end of a simple thing.

For now, the woman is leaning down to kiss the poodle's forehead.

For now, the man speaks: Maybe this is best, considering. Maybe this will be okay.

Somewhere far away, the pool ripples—maybe an addition, maybe a subtraction. It glimmers in the limelight of a supernova.

Grey steps outside through the back door and Caspian is there. Two simple cars huddle among the concrete: they have been driving to work separately for longer than this one day. In the distance, a beetle tries to assert itself against sunlight.

Nothing to do with people yet, Grey asks.

Nothing at all.

How is Harrier?

Made a hell of a racket when I left him alone in the house.

Grey is watching the same redwoods from which the sound of ravens came earlier in the day. Now their high-up tops wave in the normal ways, as though nothing has happened at all. Grey wonders about whether trees can see, whether they can sense, what they know, if they remember. If they are regretting their different kinds of biology. She turns to Caspian, wonders many of the same questions. Whether they drive home together is still a question worth asking. Grey is holding her breath.

You can't really still be thinking about leaving after this, Grey asks.

You say that like I have no emotions.

You never showed today, not until justnow.

What kind of message do you think that sends, on the one day I needed you more than any other day?

We saw them turn into light, Caspian says.

There's no way you could open your own clinic, not now.

You're asking the wrong question, Grey.

She goes back inside; as soon as the door closes behind her it opens again, Caspian in pursuit, like they can only move through the world by ones, apart. Six dozen different words linger in the space between her pace and his, of all flavors, multisyllabic and utterances, the spectrum between acroleplasma and yes. There is a window in the treatment room that usually stays closed, but someone left it open. Grey happens a look and sees a flock of flamingos coming out from between the redwoods, their pink fluorescent against the blue-green backdrop. She will say a few dozen, he will say a hundred. They are not native here, and their legs are many stories tall, bodies the usual size, bodies hinging dangerously on stilts. A wind comes from the ocean: Grey can feel against her hair just as it unsettles the flamingos, sends them all toppling toward the road. Their bodies colliding heavy, breaking.

The clinic is empty and the poodle is dead: if any time has been good to test the slippage between them, it's now. Grey wants to know the dis-
tance, the vector. She needs to examine if she can map the differential. She kisses him once so they fuck on the examination table where she made a killing hours ago: her breathing during, she makes it slow. It’s how she passes the time. A car drives across the road, across the flamingo legs, treating them to the sound of snapping twigs. Together, later, they will walk out onto the road, use a pair of bone shears to take a flamingo’s body and a portion of leg. They will push the poodle into the incinerator. She will taste ash on her tongue and wish it were chocolate.

Somewhere else there is a woman whose parrot becomes a thing of two dimensions, flat as paper, and must have slipped out the cage rungs on the eddy of air from the air conditioner, because when she opens the front door to receive her son and the neighborhood boys and girls with their grass-skinned knees chatting wild about the gallos blancos and still juggling their football the parrot wafts out gentle but determined like a well-crafted paper airplane, out the door and down the street as the television behind her drones on about the day’s horror, these things she would have to soon explain to the still-ignorant children who give chase as she hollers in the bird’s direction, begging it come back, it belonged to her mother after all, it is her only real memory.

Her son’s cries start as panic but turn to laughter, or maybe it is the other way around. The woman watches as the parrot takes a fetch of wind above the rooftops and drives south, toward the equator, maybe. She prepares a speech in two separate languages as she picks up the cage and places it next to the nearest window, which she props open with a bottle of orange soda, and then considers—the open cage door is not necessary—but leaves it all there anyway, just in case it wants to come back, or can, if the wind becomes kind for once.

NAME: Unknown
SEX: male/intact
SPECIES: Canine
BREED: Poodle
COLOR: Black
WEIGHT: 53.2lbs.
D.O.B.: Unknown

SUBJECTIVE: Presenting problem: victim of car accident; Hx: At approximately 10am on Δ1 the patient was struck by a moving vehicle; driver estimates speeds of 30mph, not a direct strike but by the corner of the bumper on the passenger’s side. Passenger claims the patient was thrown twenty feet down the road and to the right, and then attempted to stand to move further toward the shoulder, but collapsed again. Upon arrival the patient was breathing erratically and had his eyes closed; when opened the third eyelids were very raised. A small amount of blood was visible from both the mouth and nose.

CRX: unknown
Diet: unknown
Vaccine history: unknown
Outside travel: unknown
Past illnesses: unknown
Past surgeries: unknown
HW preventative: unknown
Flea/tick preventative: unknown

OBJECTIVE: lethargic, calm; pain score 9/10; body condition: 7/9; hydration: adequate; EENT: ears clear, eyes bloodshot, nasal discharge in the form of blood, no ocular discharge; mucus membranes: pale, dry; capillary refill time: 3 seconds; oral: mild dental disease; heart/lungs: elevated heart rate but normal rhythm, lung auscultation revealed possibility of liquid around the lungs, weak and thready pulse; peripheral lymph nodes: soft and symmetric; abdomen: hard on palpation, seemingly non-painful, no signs of organomegaly; musculo-
skeletal: symmetric musculature, evidence of fractures of right side of body; integument: soft but clammy, multiple abrasions and lacerations from car strike and subsequent movement across the roadway; neuro: lower than normal mentation.

TPR: resp = pant / weight = 53.2lbs. / pulse = 170bpm / temp = 100.4°

ASSESSMENT: Shock bolus fluids (500mL 0.9% NaCl) given through 20g catheter in right cephalic vein. 3.62mg hydromorphone delivered as sedative IM. Performed an abdominal ballottement test and found signs of significant fluid wave. Ultrasound revealed significant evidence of internal hemorrhage due to crush. Radiography revealed significant accumulation of fluid around the lungs.

Prognosis: poor; required extensive emergency surgery

PLAN: Euthanasia recommended to those who struck and brought the dog in despite not being the owners; they ceded to my opinion that there was an extremely poor chance of meaningful recovery without significant degradation to following quality of life. Euthanasia performed at roughly 12:15pm; injection of 20% pentobarbitone solution 120mg/kg IV through 20g catheter in right cephalic vein. 60 seconds later no signs of respiration, blink reflex was lost.

~GRN

We value the health of your pet above all else.

隔离

Grey is following Caspian’s taillights down all these unillumned roads. Trees go knocking against each other in strange ways: even the wind is different. Off in the distance, moths take to flame, wingspans into combustion. She admires them the way she admires stars: like she could touch them anyway. For a moment the node of Caspian’s taillights disappear and Grey is distracted; when she returns her eyes to the road, a deer is standing ahead of her, eyes illumined by her headlights. It is shocked static. Brakes are applied but the effort is useless: a collision is inevitable. In the moment before the impact, Grey, she sees it—the deer turns into water, into a molecule in the shape of a deer, a casting that at-once loses its structure, that begins to fall. That splashes her windshield with its running clarity. She has to turn on her windshield wipers: once, twice. Convinces herself she won’t tell Caspian about this, but that she will come back later in the night, try to find the pond left behind. She will try to taste the remainder of a thing. The leftovers—wild things should be left wild, until they die, that is, but the ocean will be just as hard to keep between her simple landlocked fingers. She pushes on the accelerator, trying to reconvene. The moon goes on watching with its great cratered eyes. Trees hiss their leaves. Tires whisper. Wind keeps saying its name.

Δ 2

On the second day the clinic is no less busy; many of those who showed up on the first day have come back again hoping their animals will be seen. The man with the infected-eye sphynx returns to continue the treatment that went forgotten after the poodle’s arrival, its sudden quieting. Earlier in the morning Grey peered into images of the slide and found an assembly of white blood cells, purple-stained mycoplasma cells in their barrages. There is something kind to her in the simplicity of this diagnosis. She nods to some-
where that might be watching. When she steps into the room Rigby jumps onto her shoulder. His tail curls around her neck. A purr behind her ear. Grey tries to busy herself with laying out the medicines in an orderly line.

She says, We'll start with the doxycycline, which you'll give twice a day. Zero-point-three milliliters, which you can see right here, on the pipette. Just the smallest bit. This is the easy one. Would you mind holding him? Thank you. A little more on his back. You can do this yourself, if you cradle him with one arm. Just like that. Just slip the pipette into the corner of his mouth and squeeze. He won't like it, but it'll get down. The tetracycline is where you'll get some more resistance. It's not difficult to apply, but it's right into the eye, which no one likes. You don't even need to open the eye really, or maybe just a little. Come on, Rigby. Just another minute. Just squirt a tiny amount in there. His blinking will help spread it out. It doesn't hurt, just uncomfortable for a moment. He'll complain some, but he'll forgive you.

Rigby doesn't complain.

You have the touch, the man says.

Three times a day for this one, spaced out best you can. If we're dealing with a bacterial infection, it should clear up in a few days. If not, give us a call.

Okay, thank you, the man says. Hey, I'm sorry about the dog.

It's okay. It happens.

I can see that weighing on a mind.

The man reaches over and Grey thinks he is moving for Rigby, but he moves past and instead touches her. The width of his hand across the her wrist, not quite a rest, not quite a hold. And for the first real time she looks at him, and he is old, and weary-looking, but he has shirt that is unbuttoned perhaps too far, and a graying beard, and his jaw quivers.

I know, he says. It's okay to be afraid.

When he takes his hand away Grey feels untethered, and when the sphynx jumps down from its perch she feels unweighted. She could float away, through a window, get taken on a breeze going toward the ocean. And maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

Again Grey hears a commotion from outside the examination room, and with the door closed behind her she sees cats rampaging through the clinic wild-eyed and howling. Six of them coiled up in the corner, bleeding onto each other, and when Grey reaches down to peel them apart with her still-gloved hands she comes to understand: their fur has turned solid, has pierced their own skin as they try to move. Has pierced each other. Parents accumulate on the other side of the room, palms over their mouths, and someone is saying this is all too much, too much. They wonder about the sanctity of their own bodies. They hurl obscenities into bookshelves. They hold up pamphlets about having a cat's teeth cleaned regularly and demand dental disease instead. One man leaves without a word, and out in the parking lot, he begins to bang his head against the hood of someone's car.

Behind her, a door creaking open, the man holding Rigby peeping out into the commotion. Grey hurries him out through the back rooms, which are empty, the technicians are too busy, Caspian is again not present. In the back lot the man holds Rigby in one arm and tries to cradle the medicines in the other hand. He hands her his keys and waits as she brings his car around. She helps him hide Rigby inside his carrier, layer over the blankets so that no one else might know. Tells the man to keep the cat secret: no one can tell how long anything will last any more. Back in the lobby, Grey offers an apology to the room as though
she is at fault. A man sits in the corner and holds his hand in front of his dog's eyes, but Grey can see. She praises him from afar. Good boy, good boy, you're learning so well, this trick of pretending that everything can still be okay.

GREY, 14:58:12: This this too difficult, Caspian.
GREY, 14:58:24: I don't know if I can do this alone much longer.
CASPIAN, 13:02:47: im still not ready
GREY, 13:03:03: All you're proving is that I still need you around.
CASPIAN, 13:03:53: maybe youre looking at the wrong problem
GREY, 13:04:33: How would you know?
GREY, 13:05:01: You haven't seen what I've seen.
CASPIAN, 13:10:23: harrier is taking it hard, you being gone all the time
CASPIAN, 13:11:34: even he seems to understand that the ocean is worth being watched
GREY, 13:11:34: Are you even reading what I'm saying?
GREY, 13:11:52: Are you even listening?
CASPIAN, 13:12:46: have you thought that maybe im not the one you should be listening to
CASPIAN, 13:12:46: this is bigger than me wanting to practice on my own

After all the cats have been separated and moved into the freezer for later incineration, a rusted-out pickup with an age-humbled engine rolls into the parking lot. A teenage girl—thirteen, Grey guesses, as best she knows youth—hops out and strides in through the front door dressed up in a white button-up shirt that fits her in an unfashionable way and jeans that don't in a fashionable one. She looks Grey over and passes her by, favoring two parents who continue lingering long after their cats have died; after a moment of quiet conversation, they hand over their cat carriers. They hand over collars, ones with the smallest of bells, which the girl pockets before approaching Grey.

You look like you're in charge, the girl says.
I think so.
That's the spirit.
What can I do for you?
Do you have anything that you don't need any more? Or that anyone else doesn't need before? The girl points at the objects hinged on her hip. I mean, things having to do with animals.
I don't, Grey says.
I get it. You're still believing.
I'm still practicing. Why do you want it, anyway?
I collect junk, things people don't need any more. The girl shifts her weight like Grey is the one who is busying her time. Like Grey is the inconvenience.

From people who just lost their pets, parts of their family?
Yeah. That's the point.
Somewhere near, a person is crying.
Well, I'll be back, the girl says. Soon enough you'll be thanking me for taking everything off your hands.

The girl winks and then makes to leave. Pauses for a moment near the door to hook the cat's collars onto her belt like they are prizes. Outside, she tosses the carriers into the bed of her truck and runs the engine, backs away, lingers. Grey is nearer the window and she can see clear now that the truck's bed is full of other remnants of domestic-
ity: dog crates, bird cages, beds, scratching posts. A small boneyard of bowls with paw-print impressions. A stockpile of empty pill bottles glowing yellow in the sunlight. She doesn’t know what to think of this girl who collects junk. Soon, fog does swallow the taillights. The people who gave up their collars are looking at the glass like it is something that can and might let light and time go backward again.

Caspian has his eyes pinned out the bedroom window. Grey watches him and sees how, beyond the glass, sparrows are lighting between branches of the nearby canopy, darting for the birdfeeder he hung from the eave. She has a story about goldfinches that she doesn’t tell him—she is starting to catalog the things she doesn’t speak, or doesn’t know how. She is already losing count. She touches Caspian on the shoulder, which might be taken as a signal of forgiveness, which it isn’t.

I can’t stop thinking about the dolphins, Caspian says.

It was awful.

Where do you think they went?

Grey understands the fundamental laws about energy, that it cannot be destroyed or created, only altered, but still. She says, I think they just disappeared. Light, a little bit of heat.

I don’t know if I can believe that, Caspian says.

Grey is thinking about how much heat a human body would make in the world if it fell apart. If anyone else would notice. It seems like a question worth asking now. She says, The best we can do is try to understand what’s going on with what we can examine with our hands or our tools. What we can delta.

Caspian shifts: maybe it is him shaking his head. He says, What I want to understand is feeling.

The feeling is pain, Cas. That’s why we need to work against it.

Why do you think we’re exempt? Humans. What have we gained, or what did we lose?

That’s not the right question.

Harrier begins to kick from his place atop the bed. Grey wonders if the contents of his dreams have changed now: are the rabbits he chases burdened with four-foot ears, are the songbirds made with leadened bones ready for his taking. He snarls, and his third eyelid shows, and she imagines it growing like an envelope to swallow him whole.

I don’t know how many ways I can say that I need you every day, Grey says.

I don’t think about the clinic the way you do.

The clinic is who we are, though.

Caspian rolls over in bed to face away from the window, away from her. You’re you, and I’m me. There’s a boundary there.

Grey stays silent. She lacks the words necessary to make herself clear, or to understand him. She wishes for something more fundamental. A string of physics, a constant on which to hinge. The regularity of the stars, even now. She leans across the bed and kisses him on the temple; she can see the trace of her touch as she goes. As she leaves the room Harrier wakes to follow her, heeling and wagging the stub of his tail. Outside her car is nose-to-nose with Caspian’s: she wishes he would grant her that intimacy, to look straight into his eyes. An airplane soars overhead, leaving her to believe the universe is still okay with some kinds of seemingly impossible victories. Harrier play bows with a stick in his mouth. Grey asks for him to drop, throws it into the woods, and isn’t sure if she would like him to come back or if she would like for him to be swallowed into a forgetting and forgiving darkness.
NAME: Daisy

SEX: FS
SPECIES: Feline
BREED: Domestic Long Hair
COLOR: Calico
WEIGHT: 10.2lbs.
D.O.B.: 11/21/2022

SUBJECTIVE: Presenting problem: fur hardened into solid, static points; Hx: At 1:24pm I stepped out into the clinic lobby to observe a number of felines that had been changed—each of them had experienced a rapid onset hardening and straightening of their fur. They were distressed, howling and moving about the space frantically. A few of the patients collided, causing deep puncture wounds to each other, mostly fatal. Daisy experienced puncture wounds as well, although it is not conclusive if CoD is a fatal wound from another or a self-inflicted puncture. Should be noted that Rigby, a hairless sphynx I was treating at the time for conjunctivitis, was unaffected by this transformation.

Crx: 0.1 mg meloxicam daily
Diet: 1/4c dry kibble in morning, 1 can FestiveFeast in evening
Vaccine history: FPV, FCV, FHV, rabies due 2024
Outside travel: born outside state
Past illnesses: degenerative joint disease in left and right hips
Past surgeries: dental 04/2018
HW preventative: Revolution
Flea/tick preventative: Revolution

OBJECTIVE: appeared calm before incident, panicked during; pain score: n/a; body condition: 7/9; hydration: adequate; EENT: ears clear, eyes normal, no nasal discharge, no ocular discharge; mucus membranes: normal; capillary refill time: n/a; oral: minor dental disease; heart/lungs: n/a; peripheral lymph nodes: not possible to palpate; abdomen: not possible to palpate; musculoskeletal: symmetric musculature, within normal limits; integument: dry and pale on appearance, marked with multiple puncture wounds centralized around the left lumbar region; neuro: seemingly OK before incident.

TPR: resp = n/a / weight = 11.01lbs. / pulse = n/a / temp = n/a

ASSESSMENT: No medical testing or treatment performed; patient was already deceased when examination began. A portion of hair was shortened with bone saws and then removed with pliers; following ultrasound examination revealed significant internal hemorrhage due to what appears to be the puncture of the adrenolumbar artery. Unclear whether self-inflicted or by another party. Multiple puncture wounds are present in the region, but none appear large enough to cause the degree of injury.

Prognosis: poor, even with immediate emergency aid

PLAN: How do we plan for something like this? How do we understand what makes something happen, so that we might know when it will happen again? How do we know it will happen again? How do we know what it means to cure something we don’t understand? How do we plan? There are no answers here, not yet, so the patient will be moved to the freezer until there is answer, or until a complete necropsy seems necessary.

~GRN

We value the health of your pet above all else.
Harrier is always the first to know. When she walks him down the path toward the ocean he pulls the leash out of her hand and throws howls toward the beach. Sprints in the direction, disappears behind the dunes. It’s all not unlike two nights ago. In the distance, another sound: it could be an echo of Harrier’s own bark, or it could be another still-surviving dog calling in response, or it could be something else from the distant forest. Vocal toad down by the outflow.

When Grey catches up to Harrier and touches his back he snarls at her before realizing who she is. He lets roll his tongue, wags his tail. A little happy, a little nervous, or so she thinks. There is still a sound coming from the ocean, one that reminds Grey of the dolphins. She has been seeing printed-out news articles about the disappearance of dolphins around the house, between her half-empty mugs of cold coffee, the dunes of textbooks she has pulled from bookshelves so that she might find any precedent. Any fulcrum on which to bend, to make better.

Harrier licks Grey’s face, just once, as if apologizing for a world that makes even less sense to her.

An armada of crabs wide as Grey is tall emerge from the breaks. Hardback bodies chattering along their expanded joints. She wonders whether they left behind a many-dozen smaller molted bodies in the ocean behind them. Where their eyes are, still. The patterns on their backs look like maps to Grey but she is still too far away to read them. Their chelea are long as her arms and she thinks about being clipped in half. Her hand is on Harrier’s collar to keep him calm. Maybe some of them number toward her but most seem ambitious for the land beyond the dunes; even then it is only a matter of moments before the crabs begin to creak, to hiss, to experience their shells cracking open. Another few breaths and they have become a field of dead, their shells turned some deep blue like dead-engined pickups.

The ocean changes its tune. Almost like the whole world is whimpering.

This is an excerpt from a novel.

Joel Hans is the managing editor of Fairy Tale Review and has an MFA in fiction from the University of Arizona. His fiction has been published in Caketrain, West Branch, Redivider, Yemassee, New South, and others, and he also helps edit Cartridge Lit, an online literary magazine devoted to literature inspired by video games. He is currently working on a novel, What Stills Never Survives, which follows a veterinarian through an era of animals undergoing bizarre and haunting transformations, and examines human-animal relationships through lenses of pain, language, and our shared genetic histories. Fire, Flood, Forgetting, a collection of short stories currently under submission, examines various manifestations of extinction: of animals, of light, of language, of color, of family, of stars, of memories.
I met a man in a restaurant in Damascus, Virginia, whose eyes pointed in almost opposite directions. “I ate bad turkey,” he said. “I woke up the day after Thanksgiving and my eyes were like this.” I couldn’t tell if he was eyeing me or my lunch as we spoke. “Friends ask me if there is anything useful from my eyes looking at two things at the same time. Hell no it’s not useful!” As the man contemplated the utility of binocular vision untethered, I contemplated whether he had washed the bad turkey down with some rubbing alcohol on the rocks. “One thing, though. I check ID’s at a guardhouse for work. While people are waiting I can look at their ID’s and write their names on a list at the same time. So I guess that’s useful.”

I don’t know if the man from Damascus ever had the opportunity or inclination to look through a microscope and record the things he saw. If he had, he may have noticed that he could put one eye to an ocular and the other would stay pointed at his notebook. Without moving or lifting his gaze from the wild organisms stalking each other across the face of a glass slide—those little beasties so hard to relocate once you’ve turned your attention away for a moment—the man from Damascus would have been able to observe tiny life and draw what he saw at a scale visible to the naked human eye. That might have been useful, too.

In my twenties I studied marine invertebrates, the swimmy-drifties of the ocean, through the oculars of dissecting microscopes. I would turn aside to write in a notebook, then hunch over the scope again, a constant shifting the man from Damascus might have avoided. I watched minute organisms swim, fight, eat, reproduce, die. They built cities of their bodies. Their forms became the hills and defined the valleys upon which still other microscopic lives played out. In a turbid marine world hostile to most plant life, animals took on the roles of flora and fauna alike. They cemented themselves in place and grew arborescent, branching and budding, while drawing food to mouths and brooding young inside their bodies.
In college I looked for marine invertebrates on blades of seagrass from the shallows of Long Island estuary. Storms, or more frequently boat propellers, tore seagrass blades up and set them adrift with their small invertebrate communities. I collected and examined hundreds of drifting seagrass blades, floating each one in sea water a few millimeters deep in a dish under my microscope's lenses. Mostly I saw two species of colonial tunicates—star ascidians and red sheath tunicates. I knew them by their scientific names, *Botryllus schlosseri* and *Botrylloides violaceus*. They appeared to the naked eye as rubbery sheaths encasing whatever they landed on in tumorous mats of orange, yellow, purple. They felt rubbery too. Magnified, the tunicates transformed into swirling patterns of circles and teardrops, smooth little flower blossoms gleaming in the light. If I took a break and forgot to turn off the scope lights, the tunicates responded to the light and heat by reproducing. Tiny tunicate larvae would fill the dish by the time I came back, swimming in circles, seeking an unoccupied surface upon which to settle in the sunlight I'd created.

I looked for floating hitchhikers on various surfaces and in various locations—Long Island Sound, San Francisco Bay, the Gulf of Alaska, the Mediterranean Sea—for several years before I retired from marine biology at age 23. By then, I was well-placed for a career studying marine invertebrates. After interning at the Marine Invasions Research Lab in California, I received a job offer from the United States Geological Survey; a rare opportunity for a scientist without a graduate degree, let alone one not yet old enough to rent a car at the going rate. But I felt increasingly guilty about my work. After counting marine invertebrates that had settled on PVC plates hung far out in San Francisco Bay for the purpose of bioinvasion surveys, I dunked them in either ethanol or formalin. Killing so many little animals wore on me, and I suspected the formalin fumes of making me mildly dyslexic. “It’s a question of sentience,” my college mentor, the brilliant man who patiently showed me my first tunicates budding on my first seagrass blade, told me. For me, it became a question of faith. As a Hindu, how far was I supposed to take the vegetarian part?

What does a budding blob know about anything? What does it sense, and how? I kept track of where I was on PVC plates during surveys by the placement of the tip of a probe held gently between my fingertips. The caprellid amphipods, centimeter-long shrimp relatives with a hunched resemblance to southwestern Kokopellis, seemed to grow territorial. They waived their various mitt-like appendages at the probe; or so I thought. I watched their brood pouches in their boneless bodies expand and contract like rib cages, tiny eggs clustered inside them. When you see a drawing of a caprellid, it’s hard to tell which way is supposed to go up. But over time, the segmenty little suckers seemed more and more human. I thought when I looked down at them, they reared back and gestured in the direction of the lights, the lens. Me. Possibly another side effect of the formalin. But still a horrifying sensation—to see scale unveiled when you thought you were watching and dunking in secret.

Through a dissecting scope I gazed down upon a concealed world, a rich accumulation of life at a scale otherwise barred to me. I entered a world where I did not belong. Eventually, caprellids aside, I wondered what business I had being there. Plus, I was 23. I was getting impatient with wet labs and motorboats. I wanted to explore wilderness at a scale my whole body could sense, not just my eyes. I stammered my thanks for the USGS job
offer. I moved to the Puerto Rican rainforest and started measuring trees.

As I learned from marine biology, life has a way of clinging, not least of all to the imagination. In the spring of 2012, pieces of Japan began washing up in western North America. A toothbrush. A Harley. A house. The debris was flotsam from the tsunami that washed over Japan after the 3/11 earthquake. On March 11, 2011, a 9.03-magnitude earthquake moved Honshu, Japan’s main island, eight inches to the east. Almost 16,000 people died because of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami; a year later, almost 3,000 still were missing.

In early June 2012, beachgoers at Agate Beach, Oregon, reported a dock floating not far from the coastline. The next day, what turned out to be a chunk of a Japanese dock, weighing approximately 165 tons, came to rest at the high tide line. Twelve 2001 Nissan Sentras like the one I drive could have been parked on the dock without touching. The dock measured 66 feet long, 19 feet wide, seven feet tall. After breaking away from land during the Japan earthquake, the dock took 15 months to make land in North America. While the dock floated at sea, the Syrian uprising descended into a brutal civil war. Occupy Wall Street occupied America’s youth. England’s Prince William married Catherine Middleton. A major volcano erupted in Chile. And still the dock drifted in open water.

For those 15 months, the dock functioned as a raft. “100 Tons of Species Wash up With Japanese Dock,” one science news website proclaimed. A blanket of salty wet life swathed the dock. While dock denizens included some species from the high seas, there appeared to be, according to an Oregon State University press release, “an intact subtidal community of Asian species present on the majority of the structure.” Some individuals—the hardened limpets, the muscular sea stars—held on all the way to North America. Other lives—such as protozoans and roundworms—made landfall generations after departing from Japan. And colonial organisms such as tunicates budded. They added onto, rather than simply replacing, previous generations. More than 90 species had been identified on the dock by July 2012.

So much life.

By 2012, when the flotsam of Japan brushed up against the beaches of Oregon, I was almost a decade away from marine biology. But I still thought about the worlds I’d seen cut out in circles, the strange creatures swimming in and out of the curved edges of my field of vision. Could beings so small, so alien, know an island was receding, or a continent drawing close? I imagined joining the researchers whom I knew would be gathering to document every square inch of life, of life upon life, growing there.

There were species on board the dock well-known for their ability to flourish in new coastal habitats. Wakame, seaweed from the coastal waters of Japan and Korea traditionally consumed in seaweed salad, already grew thick in San Francisco Bay; now it bumped up against Oregon. Marine managers worried about how wakame and other dock-riding species might fundamentally affect the ecosystems of the pacific Northwest.

While also taking time to commemorate the tragedy in Japan by contemplating the dock in silence, marine biologists in Oregon resolved to scrape the living organisms off. Bury them eight feet deep in the sand. Torch the dock all around to kill any remnants. Demolish it with saws. Truck the steel and Styrofoam away from the sea.
While the erstwhile raft was drifting from Japan to Oregon, United States Mars rover Curiosity launched from Earth toward the red planet. Curiosity traveled for approximately eight months before landing, compared to the Japanese dock’s 15-month voyage. As of this writing, Curiosity remains on Mars, sending back images that are in part to help in the search for extraplanetary life.

NASA’s Office of Planetary Protection focuses on “protecting solar system bodies (i.e., planets, moons, comets, and asteroids) from contamination by Earth life, and protecting Earth from possible life forms that may be returned from other solar system bodies.” To keep it sterile in transit to Mars, the Office of Planetary Protection fitted a drill bit on Curiosity with a case. To protect the safety of the bit, NASA employees chose not to use the case. The age-old battle between conservationists and engineers went galactic. “They shouldn’t have done it without telling me,” a Planetary Protection Officer, Catharine Conley, told the Los Angeles Times. “It is not responsible for us not to follow our own rules.” Rules or no rules, there is a possibility that Curiosity carried life from Earth with it. According to NASA, Earth-born microbes exist that might survive an unprotected trip through space. If microbes survived a voyage to Mars, they would do the obvious: wherever and whenever possible, life begets life. This could complicate the search for life on the red planet; humans might discover on Mars life that humans put there. Curiosity: A speck of nothing in space. A research vessel. A raft.

“You have beady little eyes,” a senior biologist said during a research expedition to Kodiak, Alaska, when I couldn’t squeeze a microscope’s eye pieces close enough together for the two circles I saw to coalesce into one image. I laughed, stood up from the metal stool where I had perched all morning, and stretched. Research scientists had gathered in Kodiak from across the globe to sort and identify marine organisms collected in Alaska’s coastal waters, wondering how far north the many marine species riding daily into San Francisco Bay on container ships would spread. A burbling water tank near the wall held the largest king crabs I’d ever seen, ghostly spiderlike shapes that settled in corners in casual crustacean piles. In another room a small octopus bobbed in cold saltwater. She was wild-caught, and, like all octopus, very intelligent. When her caretaker fed her, the octopus would reach out of her tank and wrap her arms around the woman and pull, hard. The laboratory had a policy against re-releasing animals back into the wild, in case they had picked up pathogens in captivity. The octopus was in for life.

What does an octopus know about anything? What did she sense, and how? She wasn’t a species that came from open water. I imagined releasing her in the sea, in a place where the unknowable depth of the Pacific would immediately render her small, the inky blue a backdrop against which her two feet of length meant nothing at all. I wondered whether she would have a sense of discombobulation, of disorientation, of astonishment—if she would recognize how, when surrounded by fathomless ocean, she became a grain of sand.

I still love microscopes, for the same reason I love telescopes, mild vertigo, good literature. In high school, I pulled the red paperback translation of the Mahabharata from my parents’ bookshelf: Now the wonderful world is born, in an instant it dies, in a breath it is renewed. From the slowness of
our eyes, and the quickness of God’s hand, we believe in the world. I know that in biology, a consideration of scale matters for ecological research, for understanding evolution, for decision-making in conservation. But at heart, the most basic reason I love microscopes is this: Microscopes explode my universe. Through a microscope, my eyes speed up. I glimpse, if just for a moment, the quickness of God’s hand.

Microscopes release me from the arbitrary scale at which my thoughts most comfortably reside. Leaning into the oculars of a microscope, getting circles printed around my eye sockets that won’t disappear for hours, I remember how when I call something a species, an island, a lifetime, it’s due more to the limitations of my perceptions than to any fundamental truth about nature or life. Microscopes remind me to consider scale; they remind me how that pebble could be a mountain, this decade could be a quick pause, the planet where I live could be a rotifer spinning in a petri dish.

A version of this essay won the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) 2013 graduate student creative writing paper award.

Maya L. Kapoor holds an MFA in creative writing and an MS in biology. Maya was founding president of Many Voices, a University of Arizona student club that supports creative writing students of color. Maya lives in Arizona where she works in science communications and in fostering intersections between the arts and environmental research. Maya is writing an essay collection about nature in the urbanizing West. Her writing is published or forthcoming in An Essay Daily Reader (Coffee House Press); The Sonoran Desert: A Literary Field Guide (University of Arizona Press); ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment; Edible Baja Arizona; Terrain.org and High Country News. Maya will be the winter 2017 Aldo and Estella Leopold Mi Casita Artist-in-Resident.
At dawn they woke her and passed her from mother to mother. She was washed with the dishes, dusted off like her dress. They braided her hair down her back so tightly that her scalp stings. They give no explanation, but she doesn’t need one. What else could this mean?

Pleated and pressed, the girl sits in the wagon and watches the landscape rattle past. If she twists her neck she can still see the mountains they crossed a month ago: dark, the color of slate, capped with snow that creeps lower whenever she checks. Always there, a shadow at her shoulder, demanding acknowledgement. The girl will cross the Rockies twice more, but this first journey is sufficient to fix them in her memory. Tightly-packed trees, avalanches of small stones, fog she could cup in her hands. The cold. How hard the earth was, how deep the men dug.

The land underfoot lately is different: evergreens clustered on the slopes as the forest gives way, great outcroppings of stone the same tired color as the ground. Yellow prairie grass peters out into sand and scrub, and the sky is wisped with white. Today she can see tumbledown houses in the valley in distance, a zigzag of muddy paths. All this she will absorb as part of another place: there are always mountains and trees, ramshackle houses too small to stand up in, a weary brigade of bearded men on the verge of drunk. One of them rides up now.

His horse is black and his clothes are dark and he wears a black hat. He has one hand on the reins and the other tucked in his pocket and his vest is open and flapping in the wind. He trots right past where she sits watching him to the wagon master, who is in charge. Somehow he can tell. The men always can, even the Indians. Their horses nicker at each other and the wagon master removes his hat. The other man does not. They exchange words, and then the man turns around and looks at the girl. Their eyes meet, and then he looks away.

When he is finished he trots over to the side of her wagon. He is up high on his horse, stark
against the sun. She sits up straight and tilts her head back to try to see him, but he does not meet her eyes again. He is looking at Irene, the wagon master's wife, in whose wagon she is sitting. Her husband was killed and the wagon master's first wife drowned so they were married three months ago. Every night she brushes her hair one hundred strokes. The girl lies awake listening to the crackle like lightning, pretends the wagon master's snoring is the thunder.

Thank you, the man says, and Irene ducks her head.

She would have done the same for any of mine.

Irene has no children yet but it is still true. She places her hand on the girl's head and the girl winces. Her braid is too tight. Her neck hurts from craning upward so she squares her shoulders and looks at the man's open vest. There's a missing button, a stain down the front of his shirt.

How old are you? he asks.

I'm eight. I can carry two buckets of water at the same time. One in each hand.

He laughs.

And I am learning to ride a horse.

He nods.

Did she suffer?

The girl blinks. Irene makes a strange sound.

And this is the only time they will speak of it, though they will both carry a lock of her hair for the rest of their lives. Irene's fingers press into the girl's shoulder, nails stabbing like pins. She says: In her last words, your wife bestowed the child to my care, and conveyed her love for you both.

This statement is poorly rehearsed. She died screaming in the mud and they all know it. There is a long silence in which the generosity of the lie overwhelms them all, and then Irene releases her grip on the girl's shoulder.

Go with your father, she says. He will look after you now. Be good. Your mama would wish it. Her voice is dry with dust, and she swallows, then adds, She is with the angels watching you even now.

He scoops her up under the armpits, and settles her on the horse in front of him. His hands are big, the nails caked with dirt, one black and soon to fall off. He secures her with his left arm. The girl cannot remember ever having been held like this by a man. Always, she and her mother were women alone. She leans back against the broadness of his chest and fists her fingers in the horse's mane. It whinnies, flanks like a bellows expanding beneath her legs, and out of the corner of her eye the girl can see the other mothers and their children, peeking out of their wagons at the scene: the orphan girl, astride on a black horse, like something out of a bedtime story. Then the man who is her father clicks his tongue and the horse advances; they ride off, away from the trail, his one hand on the reins, the other around her waist.

We don't believe in angels, he says, when they are out of earshot. Your mama's gone.

They ride for an hour, the houses disappearing behind the hills, before the horse scrambles over a ridge with a view of the valley, then descends toward the tiny town perched on its slopes. Rising with the wind and the birds is a cacophony of grinding gears, screeching steel cables, men shouting. From her vantage atop the horse the girl fights the impulse to fling her arms wide like the wings of the hawk overhead, to make her desire so plain. Instead she turns her bird's eye imagination toward town: a dozen houses lining a long dirt road, smaller shacks scattered amid the hills, the dark mouths of the mines. Men the size of matchsticks shuffle into the maw, past rattling ore chutes, carts piled with stones, mules hitched and
waiting. She imagines their tails limply swatting at flies in this September heat, can see that the miners wear suspenders and heavy boots, like her father and the wagon master. She misses the wagon master already: the way he taught her to tell the hour by the sun, his hand on her wrist, guiding her fingers along an invisible arc.

Unprompted, the horse stops on a ridge overlooking the courthouse: a lonely brick building a story taller than any other structure in town, but empty, untrafficked, its stone steps bare. Far less sturdy are the miners’ shacks, to which the horse makes it slow, plodding way, down the hill and past a general store. These tiny houses are already weather-beaten beyond repair, cedar planks stripped raw and ragged. In one doorway sits a woman in a cotton dress, her bare feet bookending a bucket into which she is snapping green beans. She squints into the sun, up at the horse, and says, You never told me you had a kid.

The girl’s father does not respond, only slips from the saddle and ties the horse to a faded wood post in front of a shack with a single crooked window covered in oilcloth. He turns to reach for his daughter. His hands are around her waist when he pauses, lifts his chin.

You are learning to ride?
She nods.
See yourself down then.
The girl swings a leg over the side of the horse, and considers the drop to the ground. Carefully, she slides down the saddle, lands hard on both boots, metal soles ringing on the rock. She smiles, but her skirt is caught on the stirrup; he tugs it loose before it can rip, and she straightens her expression, blinks in the dust.
Thank you, she says.
He disappears into the house.
Down here, the girl can see that though he seemed tall on his horse, her father is not a tall man. He does not have to duck to squeeze into the shack that has half-collapsed into the hill.

He does not call for her, or indicate in any way that she should follow, and for a moment the girl stands awkwardly outside, hawk still overhead, horse breathing loudly but peaceably. She glances over her shoulder; the woman is watching her, crunching on a raw green bean, head tilted in curiosity. The girl takes a deep breath, and enters.

Inside there is a bunk bed and two cots, a trunk at the foot of one of them. To the girl’s left, against the wall nearest the door, is a slumped chest of drawers, and across the room sits a stove with its pipe stuck out a hole in the roof. There are crooked shelves on the walls gathering dust, and a kerosene lantern hanging from a hook overhead. The girl walks softly to the bed, then lowers herself carefully onto the bottom bunk, sets her satchel on the floor, and watches as her father opens drawers and removes shirts, coveralls, balled-up wool socks, a heavy coat set aside for winter, and gathers hardware and housewares scattered around the dark room: a coffee pot, a tinderbox, a hammer. He amasses it all on the cot, sorts the kitchen items from the tools, then begins to fold the few articles of clothing. He has nearly finished when a man appears at the door, and must duck his head to enter.

This her?
Her father grunts his assent.
What’s your name, sweetheart?
The girl looks to her father first. He nods.
Ava, she says.
Well, ain’t it a pleasure to meet you, Ava, says the man. He extends a hand; she must reach up to shake it. His palm is moist, fingers rough and un-washed. She waits to wipe her hand on her stockings until he has turned to pull a three-legged
stool out from under one of the cots. Once seated, he begins to clean his fingernails with a knife. Ava watches with interest.

Can't abide dirt under my nails, he says finally. Can't be helped, says Ava's father, dragging the trunk over to the bed.

Can't abide it, the man repeats. The Lord sets great stock in cleanliness, my mama always said so. Carefully, the man carves out the rind from under a fingernail and flicks it to the floor. She was a godly woman, my mama. Your daddy don't work Saturdays, you know that?

Ava shakes her head. Yessir. I'm the proprietor of that store yonder, and the first time I tried to send him out on a Saturday, well! But he keeps his Sabbath, and if that ain't the mark of a respectable man I don't know what is. First to fry up bacon, can't help the drinking—but then a man needs his nourishment. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath. The man punctuates each phrase with a wag of his knife, then adds, So long as he honors the Lord in his own right and proper way is what I'm saying. Like me, you see? With these here fingernails.

He waggles the fingers of his left hand and flashes Ava a grin. She giggles. You keep your fingernails clean, Ava?

She nods. Look at them cheekbones. Eli, you best be careful where you're headed.

They both turn to look at her father. He has packed the few things from the cot into the trunk, is folding the remaining the items with care. The last of these he spreads wide between his arms, and Ava straightens suddenly. He's holding a prayer shawl. Blue-striped, the white linen is worn thin with use, the tassels threadbare, threatening to unravel. Her father refolds it carefully along the creases, then lays it at the top of the trunk. Without thinking, Ava reaches to touch, and her father closes the lid.

Where I'm headed nobody talks for miles and little girls do as they're told, he says, and feels around under the bed. He pulls out a glass bottle full of amber liquid, takes a swig, and swallows. His eyes are bright as he gathers himself off his knees and walks to the door. His companion sheathes the knife, stands to join him.

There's supper in the cupboard, her father says. The bottom bunk is ours. We leave at first light.
out. She considers the dirt under her nails—how, when she was so carefully washed this very morn-
ing? Finally, holding her breath, she lifts the lid.

The last time Ava saw such a prayer shawl was around her uncle’s shoulders, as he prayed for her and her mother’s safe journey. He wore tefillin strapped to his head and left arm and rocked back and forth, lips moving so fast she could not follow his muttered words. She was mesmerized, watching him through the hole in the lavatory wall, so much closer than at shul, where the women and girls sat in the second-floor gallery behind screens. Over supper, their very last supper to-gether, she stared at the red marks left behind on his arm by the black bands, the thick dark hairs flattened with sweat, and wondered what it might be like to make a request of God, to be permitted even to try. All she had been allowed were good-byes: to the schoolteachers, the neighbors, her cousins.

She reaches now for the tallis. It is thin be-tween the pads of her fingers, but rougher than she expected. Carefully, bending over the trunk, she lowers one cheek to the fabric and inhales. Salt, she decides. Schmaltz. Onions. Horseradish. She can taste her tears before she notices that she is crying. In truth she can smell nothing at all, nothing of her mother, who must have packed this shawl into this trunk many years ago; whose own trunk, smaller but finer, was abandoned on the same dark peak where she was buried. She will never smell her mother again, never press her face into an apron thick with flour, never fall asleep to the lingering scent of yeast and honey on the sheet. Her father smells sour—stale drink and sweat—and his tallis does too.

Even so, Ava unravels it from the trunk, tassels swinging free as she unfolds the fabric as widely as her arms allow. She is small for her age, and the tallis is meant to be worn across a grown man’s shoulders; draped around her body, the cloth is more shroud than shawl. It covers her from head to toe, edges hanging like a hood around her face, the rest trailing down her back before pooling on the floor like the train of some extravagant gown. Emboldened, Ava clutches the four corners closer, tangling her fingers in the tassels and the strings of the tzistzis, covering her face with the cloth. The linen is so thin she can see through it to the room around her, can see the fabric flutter in time with her breath. There are the rafters; there is the door; there is the bunk bed; there is the trunk, lid lying open on the cot: all of it rendered filmy, unreal, through the white linen. She turns in a circle, eyes on her feet, tightening the clutch of the cloth, and then slowly, awkwardly, hampered by the shawl, she bows, once then twice, forehead dipping deeply toward the floor, mimicking her father’s posture, her uncle’s. Then she screams.

Nothing happens. Nobody comes. The linen billows forth and she can feel the sound, high and shrill as a hawk’s cry, tight in her chest and her ears. Her throat is already dry from dust, and she shrieks until she chokes on it, the final rasp turning to tears that drip from her face onto the fabric as she collapses onto her hands and knees and curls into a ball, heedless of the dirt. She closes her eyes. The shawl traps tight the sound of her sobs and the smell of her father’s sweat, and she rolls onto her side, lets one corner of the cloth fall from her face, and glances up at the ceiling and the lantern hanging overhead like the ones that swung from the bows of the wagons in which she rode on her journey west. She runs her fingers without realizing through the tzistzis, as she might have combed a doll’s hair had she ever owned a doll, and whispers the words that she learned from her mother’s own lips, said a hundred times in
remembrance of the man, long thought dead, in whose shawl she is shrouded—words she struggled but failed to mine from the dark pit of memory on that blue-black night in the Rockies: y’heish’lama raba min sh’maya v’chayim aleinu v’al kol yis’ra’el v’im’ru, amein.

It is late when her father returns and finds her asleep on the floor. The door creaks and she stirs, a child’s waking, so slight that she falls back asleep as soon as he has lifted her from the floor to the bed. She dreams wildly, flinging her arms across the mattress, knocking one hand on the bunk, then presses herself dizzily against the warmth of her mother’s body for comfort. In the morning she wakes to find her hair freed from its braid and her father lying beside her, waiting patiently for her to wake. There is a blanket wrapped around her shoulders; the tallis is neatly folded on top of the trunk. It is just after dawn, she can tell by the light, and together, wordlessly, they rise. She lifts the lid of the trunk and very carefully smoothes the tallis flat, then folds and tucks the blanket from the bunk around it for protection. Her father hands her the satchel that she has carried all this way west. His face is tight, yellow shadows under his eyes, but he moves quickly, with the strained efficiency of a man accustomed to hard labor even as his head pounds. They lace their boots and begin their journey north.

Later, Ava learns that if she can catch him before dark he will keep from drinking those nights before they go. They will pack together, then sit in their house stripped bare of belongings while she accounts for it all: two neatly-folded quilts, spare dress and good dress, an apron, two handkerchiefs, washed-out long underwear, scarves and cracked leather gloves; one rug, one tablecloth, greasy Dutch oven, the coffee pot and frying pan, the water pail, its tin dipper, wash tub and board, tinderbox and three tin cups, two plates, two forks, two silver spoons, three knives; shovel and rocker and shotgun. Books, at the bottom, and the candlesticks, somewhere down there too, never unpacked, and the tallis, wrapped always in a blanket for safekeeping, secure at the top of the trunk. Only the kerosene lamp stays out, set on the floor by their feet and shining off the metal on their boots, the whites of their eyes. To the side are the things that they will find again in the next town: the table and the chairs they sit on and the stove and the curtains taken down and folded neatly on the bed, trundle tucked tightly underneath. Flowers hanging on the wall. After the litany they sit silently by the stacks of what will stay and what will go. Sometimes her father will hum.

Each time, even when she is small, she will wonder if, sober, he notices the sounds seeping through the thin walls: young men, flush with gold, pistols slung low on their skinny hips as they caterwaul through the streets, hands up somebody or other’s skirts, as alive as they can be in case tomorrow they are not. Three times Ava has heard women weep en masse, the power and pitch of it like a storm, rising until it becomes something seen and not heard. Wives, whores, the women in between—everyone cries when the bodies come back bruised and broken, and worse when the bodies don’t come back at all. A dynamiter whose uncle taught him poorly brought down the wrong side of a mountain in Washington when she was eleven, buried the houses on the western hill in an instant. The only exits were through the mine-shafts, and those went too. The town stood and listened to the shouts from the tunnels, then the groaning as air ran out, then nothing, and Ava set to packing, cinching belts and buckles so tightly that a mule moaned and she slapped it. That was
the first time she left things behind: no need for
the proverbed pillow from Mrs. Baker, not when
Mrs. Baker was somewhere under the rubble.
Better to leave before the grief settled in with the
dust.

One thing she always keeps, though, are the
maps. The Xs and Os promising gold here, no
there; the smudges of pencil lead marking new
trails. In the years to come it no longer matters
which hills held houses, which saloonkeepers
were honest, where she lived when she learned
to shoot a gun and tie up a horse and pluck a
chicken, how many women with wrung-out fac-
es died giving birth to babies who died too, but
the gold stays with her. The weight of it in her
palm even when there is very little, how big the
flakes seem next to her fingernails. The men lack
proper scales, but swear on their own graves, half-
dug already, gaps and holes littering the hillsides,
that this nug weighs so many grams, is worth so
much in flour, tobacco, salt. They let Ava handle
the bigger nuggets, turn them this way and that in
her small hands, catching the light, the sparkle of
the streams. It gives them pleasure to see the Jew
peddler and his little daughter together, to hear
the mule’s harness jingling to signal their arrival.
Only once does a miner pull her father aside to
say to him, These hills ain’t no place for little girls.
She has only just handed him half a pound of ba-
con and a gallon jug of kerosene, is clambering
back into the wagon to head to the next claim.

So I ask you, where should I keep her? her fa-
ther replies. Ava can read his anger in the veins
of his wrists, rising blue ropes as he tightens the
harness on the mule. Her mother dead these three
years, and I knowing no man west of the Missis-
sippi but myself?

The man puffs on his pipe, eyes Ava peering
over the edge of the wagon bed. No harm meant,
Eli, he says. Only that she might be safer in a
school or somewhich.

Her father swings himself back into his seat,
does not give the man so much as a second glance.
No, he says. My daughter stays with me.

It gives her a fierce pride, to hear those words.
Pride, too, when he lets her barter with the few
women in the camps, standing ankle-deep in the
wagon bed among sacks and crates, arguing the
worth of their wares. When it is just the two of
them, traveling from claim to claim, he has her do
sums out loud, refuses her a slate—she must learn
to reckon in her head, he says, though he pre-
tends not to see while she counts on her fingers.
And that night, the night that the man told him
to send her away, he sits with her by the fire and
sounds out letters, shapes words, from books that
still smell of salt from the ship: beyz, reysh, alef,
pey. By the time she is ten she can read in Yiddish,
Hebrew and a little Russian; she can sew her own
clothes and cook supper over an open fire; she
can hitch a mule, pitch a tent, fill a peddler’s pack
so nothing will break or spill. The rhythm of her
girlhood, this exchange of goods for gold, these
quiet nights on the open trail with just a blanket
between her and the stars, is interrupted only by
the days when her father stops to try his hand at
the pursuit himself, standing ankle-deep in the
cold rushing creeks, taking swigs of liquor be-
tween shakes of the pan, squatting on the claims
of absent men who return to chase them off, spitting
and cursing and calling them words she tries
to forget.

English comes later, since whenever they ar-
rive somewhere the streets are without names
or destinations. It is in Idaho that she sees for
the first time a post erected where the day before
there was none, at the junction of two muddy al-
leyways, and marked with careful, white-painted
letters. This other alphabet bubbles back from the time she spent in school, in the year before she and her mother crossed the continent: A through Z in faded red paint around the perimeter of a crowded room of dirty children. Now she stands in muddy shoes with a heavy bucket banging against her shins and sounds out Water Street, Water Street, again and again, because she knows the water is that way. (So different from the cobblestone streets she knew briefly before: Orchard, Mulberry, Canal, where no such things stood.) The same thing happens in Washington, and again in the Dakota, and though she can read better by then, those moments, when names are affixed to what were once dirt paths, coincidences that became streetcorners, never fail to make her feel dizzy, unmoored. It is a relief when they leave each place behind.

As soon as the trail gives way to mountain or prairie the openness, its emptiness, fills her like a flood. On the road, it is only ever Ava and her father; he has never been one for company, can count on one hand the people he calls friend. They sit side by side on the wagon seat and take turns driving the mules. When she takes the reins, her father pulls down his hat, leans back against the frame, closes his eyes, and falls asleep at once. The only thing that’s ever woken him is a hailstorm. Clouds roll in so fast it catches them both in the face: his right temple, her left cheek as she turns to tell him. Go, he says, and jerks his head at the wagon, and she climbs inside and stands under the dimness of the canvas cover, packed deep with sacks, baskets, boxes, struck, as always, by the sensation of the wagon rumbling under her feet, not unlike the roll of a ship. Then a chunk of hail tears through the top, leaving a jagged hole in the canvas the size of a cabbage. It tumbles past her feet. She is still looking at it when her father asks, in the tone that says he has asked more than once, for blankets.

Through the front flap she sees him standing with his hands interlocked above his head to shield himself while he waits. She lifts the blankets: they are heavy Indian blankets from Nevada, caked on one side with the dirt of dozens of hillsides where they have laid them out to sleep, rolled up tight during the day. She staggers under their weight, but holds the roll steady under one arm, a hand securing each end, one wrist twisted back in a way that almost hurts. The wind howls and hail batters the wagon, the storm as much inside as out, so she is surprised by how unprepared she is to emerge. Dust whirls up into her mouth and eyes, whips her braid into her face. Even squinting she sees that she cannot reach far enough. Her father is standing between the two mules, at flank distance; she will have to climb out to him. He stays still, says nothing, as he watches her wrench a leg in its long skirt over the lip of the wagon, trying not to topple under the extra weight of the blankets, which pulls her sideways in the force of the wind. He is taking hailstones to the back and neck. The mules shift uneasily and moan. She lifts a foot onto the buckboard and almost has some leverage, the tip of her boot hooked on the wood, when the strongest wind yet balloons her skirt and then blows past, tangling the fabric thickly at her knees. She nearly topples, must reach out again to catch her balance, but it is far enough now. He takes the blankets from her, and says: Inside.

The hail hits her hard twice more as she crawls back in, while he wraps each mule in a blanket, carefully tucking the ends into their bridles, pinning the heavy material down with the buckles. He takes three or four more hailstones to the face.
as he walks around one beast and then the other, but, once covered, the animals stand stock-still, ungrateful. The bruises her father wears after that storm last for weeks, fading from green to purple, the skin growing softer in the same way as a plum. He drives while they heal, but has her sit beside him in her bloomers and camisole shortening her dress and sewing shot into the hem. The weight of the shot will be her weapon against the wind.

Often they walk, to lighten the load on the mules, especially when there are clouds. Those days the sun glints strangely behind the gray, green like an old penny, only hinting at heat, and the prairie is serene: two mules and two walkers and one wagon slipping through grass so tall sometimes that even her father seems to disappear into it. Other times it is hip-height, her hips, so she can graze her palms along the tops. In Idaho a woman kept black-eyed susans, brought from her garden back in Springfield; when they left she gave Ava a pouch full of seeds as a present. This keepsake she kept because she had no intention of doing so for long; all along the walk to Washington she let the seeds fall through her fingers, and hoped that they would grow. They came back that way on their way to the Dakota and sometimes she coax-es herself to sleep at night with the sight of that one hill: a thousand sunny yellow faces battered by the wind, black seeds scattering of their own accord, upstart flowers that she flung across the prairie which will always say that she was there.

They live in the Dakota the longest. Before that it was Washington and Idaho, and before that Nevada and Colorado, where the wagon train had brought her, all of those less than a year. They always arrive too late, must move on to catch the next opportunity. But to the Dakota they came fresh, the pinewood on the frames still yellow, the roads slick with mud; and something about it reminded her of the stories her mother told her of home. Petrikov, a place as tarnished as its name, but covered, like this place, in newfallen snow and trees. She liked the Dakota, she thought, because she could imagine her mother happy there. And she was eleven years old, still young enough to be asked to run real quick, and she could be quick if she wanted to be, though the camp was hardly a challenge to run end-to-end, at the beginning. By the end of the first week she knew everyone. When they leave they have lived there five years— for Ava, forever. If she were to twist her neck over her shoulder, search for some acknowledgement of their passing through, she would see the grass as tall as her father already blown back into place: no road, no trail, not even the flattened stretch that a wagon train would leave behind. Not a trace, that they have been here; not even flowers.

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DOROTHEA & THE BABY

When the hostess seats Dorothea, the baby is standing. There is a narrow ledge at the base of the baby’s booth, and when the baby stands on it her head is as high as those of the grown women around her. It is not surprising that Dorothea has at first mistaken her for a woman. She is a tall baby. She is practically bald—the blond wisps of hair are translucent—and she wears around her crown a pink headband with a large bow. Her dress has a simple pattern of orderly, muted squares. Her head sways calmly amid the heads of her companions.

Dorothea is on vacation, a brief getaway one town over, and this hotel she has chosen is a historic one. It was a treat to herself, booking this hotel. When she booked it, and as she moved through the dark lobby, up the curving staircase, and around the small, wood-paneled hotel room, she saw herself from a kind of distance, as a sophisticated woman with an enjoyable life, adaptable to ever-changing states of being. A person accustomed to service. A traveler. An epicure.

A young woman appears before Dorothea’s table. She wears a yellow, puffed-sleeve blouse tucked into high black pants. Around her waist is a black apron. Her lipstick is a brave and striking maroon.

“Coffee?”
“Please,” Dorothea says. Though she tries not to look directly at any one thing, her gaze keeps landing on the baby. She wonders which of the three women the baby belongs to. The women are all smiling at one another in a friendly manner, and nobody is paying additional attention to the baby, who is happily self-possessed, who braces against the table with her inordinately—no, not inordinately, for she is a baby—tiny hands. The baby looks generally around the dining room of the hotel restaurant.

The waitress returns and rights Dorothea’s
coffee cup on her saucer. She pours coffee from a shiny carafe larger than her head, or the head of anyone Dorothea has ever met, into a coffee cup the size of a child’s hand. It gives Dorothea pleasure to be served by this pretty woman in this ostentatious way, and she recalls something said to her long ago by a man she knows. He told her that he felt guilty looking at a certain woman, because she was so beautiful. She was so beautiful that it seemed wrong to look at her. He'd looked deeply into Dorothea’s eyes as he said this.

“What would you like?” the waitress asks. Dorothea holds up her menu. She pretends to read from it. “I’ll have the lox bagel,” she says. The waitress looks at her as though expecting further elaboration, but Dorothea has finished speaking. She looks again to the table near hers, where the baby's head is now lower than the heads of the women. It is lower because she is sitting, on the plush seat of the booth. Earlier Dorothea had bought a newspaper in the kiosk of the hotel lobby, and she unfolds it. Again she has a vision of herself: a person reading a newspaper in a classic hotel restaurant; a cup of warm coffee within arm’s reach. She takes a sip of her coffee without removing her eyes from the paper. The language of this article is very scientific.

As she reads she imagines the baby watching her, interested. The women in the baby’s booth have food in front of them, but they are more absorbed in their conversation than in their partially eaten meals. The baby, too, has a partially eaten meal in front of her—in fact it is similar, in texture and in arrangement, to the plates of food of the grown women. And the baby seems no more interested in her plate of food than her companions are in theirs. The baby is interested in standing on the ledge and sitting on the booth. During these careful maneuvers—up and down the edge of the booth—the baby places a hand flatly on the surface of the table and slides her long body against the edge of her seat. Her tongue juts out deliberately. It seems a very complex transition, for a baby. One of the women at the booth smiles at the baby in an offhand way as she slides up into the booth, and the baby looks back into her eyes. The baby blinks and the woman blinks and they each look away from the other.

What is strange about the baby, Dorothea realizes, turning back to her paper, isn't only that her legs are long, but that nobody is treating her like she is a baby. This baby is more like a bald, well-mannered young lady than like a baby, except that she isn't a lady. She is a baby. Her legs are long, but her checkered dress goes down only to her pelvis, and it puffs out to accommodate a fat diaper beneath. The eyes are big; the nose and mouth lack definition. But she is different from other babies: she is not commanding the attention babies typically command. The women around the baby are free to discuss whatever adult topics they would like. Likely they are talking about a play they saw at the old theater house, just down the road, the baby undoubtedly in calm attendance.

She’ll be a tall little girl and a poised young woman, Dorothea decides. For now she is simply doing an exceptional job of being a baby.

Dorothea tries to move on to the second paragraph of the newspaper article, but the clatter of the restaurant continually distracts her. There are more than just the baby and her companions around Dorothea. There is a table with a young man and young woman who are clearly on a date—Dorothea thinks it is a first date, because they are impeccably dressed and hardly speaking. There is a table of young women—younger than Dorothea—in see-through netted tops; they wear
sunglasses on their heads; there is no baby in their company. The baby is the only baby in this hotel restaurant. And Dorothea is the only person eating breakfast alone.

The waitress arrives with Dorothea’s meal high in one hand and the shiny carafe in the other. For Dorothea, who cares deeply about food, this is something wonderful to see. She touches the rim of her coffee cup. She admires her plate: the salmon arranged in a neat, budding flower; the pile of pale scrambled eggs, piled tinily so as to look precious. There are dry greens, undressed, and a steel bowl of as much cream cheese as a person could possibly need. The bagel sits atop this presentation almost as an afterthought.

“Thank you,” says Dorothea, trying to keep her tone even and free of delight. She pours a touch of cream into her coffee and presses her spoon delicately through its surface.

She takes a bite of her bagel—a masterpiece of her own assemblage—and looks again at the baby, who is being handed a tiny wooden block that, in the baby’s smaller hands, is revealed to be a large wooden cow. Unlike a cruder baby, this baby does not place the cow in her mouth, but instead holds it, shakes it a bit—its loose, wooden udders rattle—or, no, those are legs—and places it beside her on the booth. Dorothea smiles. The baby has placed the block on the booth just as Dorothea has computed the savory perfection of her lox bagel, so Dorothea’s smile is especially dopey and dreamy. She realizes with alarm that her smile is being met by one of the women at the baby’s table. The woman smiles in a way that suggests it is appropriate for Dorothea to be smiling so perversely in their direction. It is a smile of encouragement.

Quickly, she turns back to her lox bagel. She takes another bite and hardly notices how delicious it is. She thinks of her friend, the man, who felt guilty looking at beautiful women. It occurs to Dorothea that she has implicit permission to look at a baby in the way an older, balding man like her friend does not have permission to look at a beautiful woman (and even when the beautiful woman is speaking to him, feels he does not). Women look at babies, Dorothea realizes, because it would be barbaric not to.

Maybe, Dorothea thinks, the women at that table think she wants a baby of her own. Maybe everyone in the restaurant thinks it, without Dorothea having to look at anything at all. There could be no baby present in the restaurant and they might think this. This bothers her. She wipes cream cheese from her mouth with barely contained outrage.

She drains her coffee and immediately feels sick to her stomach.

There is something disgusting, she decides, in that dark-haired woman acting as intermediary between herself and the baby. The baby would probably be unhappy to think that her mother (or whoever that woman is) was approving of Dorothea before the baby had the opportunity to judge Dorothea for herself.

The waitress appears. “More coffee?” she asks. Dorothea nods but this time takes no pleasure in it.

After the coffee is poured, the waitress moves on to the baby’s booth. The waitress speaks to the three women, who smile fiercely and encouragingly back at her. As though responding to this encouragement the waitress reaches out the hand that is free from the carafe and extends it to the baby’s bald, beribboned head. She glides it an inch from the baby’s crown, at a respectful distance from her flesh.

The baby frowns up at the waitress’s hand. She slides away from it, not to the ledge this time but
to the actual floor. She lands neatly on her feet and walks away from the booth, under the interested gaze of the waitress and her own dark-haired companions.

The baby walks right up to Dorothea's table, right up to Dorothea, and places her small, warm hand on Dorothea's thigh—the thigh looks wide beneath the baby's pink hand. It is a plentiful thigh. Impressive, Dorothea thinks. The baby does not smile at Dorothea; she hardly looks at her. Instead she stands very still, staring blankly into the distance, considering. She removes her hand and walks to the chair across from Dorothea's. She pulls herself up into the chair, and it is not until she is standing on this that she meets Dorothea's gaze.

The baby has made a decision. She will enjoy the remainder of her meal in Dorothea's company. Her previous companions are delighted.

“She likes you! She wants to sit with you!” they exclaim, as though Dorothea has won some kind of contest. It is a contest she never would have entered! This does not stop her from feeling pleased. “Would you like a little breakfast companion?” they coo.

“That would be fine,” says Dorothea.

The baby's plate of partially eaten food, her raveled napkin and silverware, and her glass of watery apple juice are transported to Dorothea's table by the waitress in two quick transfers. The waitress disappears. The baby's former companions, seeing the baby comfortably installed elsewhere, continue with their conversation.

Dorothea takes a bite of her lox bagel, surveying her breakfast companion. She swallows. How does a person talk to a baby? she wonders. Probably not like one ought to talk to this baby.

“I'm glad you decided to join me,” she says finally. The baby's eyes are, predictably, big and blue. She smacks her hand on the table beside her plate and the smack, though vigorous, is so light that nothing on the table shakes.

“I like your bow,” she says. She pauses. She leans forward, speaking confidentially. “I like how you transcend expectations.”

The baby does not return the compliment—she cannot speak, she is only a baby—but Dorothea knows there is a reason the baby has chosen her. She does not know what this reason is, but it makes her feel superior. At the very least the baby likes her ivory shirt with the navy collar and pearl buttons. She is certainly staring at this shirt, which in certain lights becomes sheer. For a third time, Dorothea thinks of her anxious male friend—his undoubted guilt when glancing at the chests of women. Dorothea thinks of the times she has looked away from him mid-conversation only to imagine him witnessing the line of her profile, sneaking a glance at the curve of her chest. There are times she looks away from him and into a clear and flattering vision of her own self.

Now she pictures the blue and ivory of her shirt. She pictures the pretty pearl buttons. The baby is certainly attracted by Dorothea's pretty pearl buttons; she must take such innocent delight in them. But that is neither here nor there. As a baby, she has implicit permission to look at anything she likes.

“It's not much different,” Dorothea says to her, “when you grow up to be a woman. No one has ever told me not to look.” She wonders, after she says it, if this is true. “I kind of feel,” Dorothea confesses, “that we might have something in common.”

The baby continues looking at her shirt.

One of the shirt's middle buttons has popped open, revealing a rounded, flesh-colored bra. The
bra, overlarge and stretched out, protrudes beyond the weighty, oblique downslope of Dorothea’s flesh. Its upper ridges curl flimsily outward. Dorothea hurriedly snaps the button closed, looking embarrassedly at the baby, who licks her lips with a sharp, jutting tongue.

“Are you hungry?” Dorothea asks. She feels instinctively that the baby must be hungry. She gestures with her cream cheese knife at the baby’s partially eaten plate of food. The baby reaches out for the knife, or perhaps for something just beyond the knife.

“Eat,” Dorothea insists, shaking it at the baby’s plate. The table of women near to her—the three dark-haired women—frown concernedly at Dorothea and the baby, though none rise to intervene. Dorothea ignores them. She picks up a stray, leafy green from her plate and dangles it in the air above her head. She puts it in her mouth. She picks up another and, leaning over the table, brushes it against the baby’s rosy lips.


The baby recoils. She turns her head stubbornly, and Dorothea is confronted with the enormity of her pink bow. It is not actually such a nice bow, and it doesn’t come close at all to matching the tones of her dress’s checks, the autumnal oranges, plums, and browns.

Dorothea tosses the leaf back onto her plate. “If you’re not going to eat, what are you doing in this restaurant?” she demands. The baby’s affronted gaze slides down Dorothea’s shirt. Dorothea covers herself with her arms. “No,” she says firmly. At this gesture, which it must understand well, the baby wails. She reaches greedily for Dorothea, and in doing so her hand lands in the middle of her plate of food, in the center of what looks like sautéed spinach and melted gruyere.

Around the restaurant chairs scoot and heads turn. All of the inaudible murmurs in the place suddenly seem directed toward Dorothea’s table. The pretty young women in the netted tops laugh nastily; the couple on the date stare blankly. When Dorothea came in alone the thought had crossed her mind that she might be mistaken for a food journalist, a woman of taste and importance, with a clear purpose in this historic hotel restaurant. Traveler. Epicure. No one is looking at her now because they think she might be a woman of taste and importance. They are looking at her because they think she is a bad mother.

The dark-haired women are looking at her in especial annoyance, whether because Dorothea has proven an unfit babysitter to their child or unfit friend to their companion, she does not know. One pulls her napkin from her lap and rises partially, halfheartedly.

“You’re embarrassing me,” Dorothea hisses at the baby, her arms still tight against her chest. The baby, with both hands now in the plate of food, begins squashing the colorful combinations arranged so appetizingly in the kitchen of this prestigious place. She begins to gurgle. The partially risen woman, apparently reassured, resumes her seat.

“Titties, titties, titties,” Dorothea imagines the baby chanting with every squish of her hands against the softened meal. All along the dumb thing was only looking for a breast to put her mouth on. Dorothea looks down at her own plate, disgusted, but there is really nothing there to feel queasy about. The food is all gone. Again the sickness is located in her stomach, and she touches this, glaring at the baby, as though it is the baby’s fault she ate so much, and so quickly.

“Dumb thing,” she mutters.

The waitress arrives.

“You and your baby are disturbing the other patrons.”
“She’s not *my* baby,” Dorothea reminds her.

“Right. My mistake,” says the waitress, who is bored. It isn’t her special dream to be talking to strangers all day. “I guess she looks like you.”

“What are you talking about? She doesn’t look like anything yet.”

The waitress pulls out her pad from her apron. She turns her head in the direction of the dessert case, six levels spinning within a tall glass cylinder, impossible to miss upon entrance. Pastel-frosted cakes glide among hard, black tartlets. Billowy creams dip and rise in suggestion of rumpled duvets, waves in which to sink one’s face, unroll one’s tongue.

Turning back to Dorothea, she clicks her pen.

“What was there something else you wanted?”
By the end of things, I don’t look at all the same.

I look a lot like a photograph on his social media page: him and his ex-girlfriend at a sporting event. I look like her and he mostly still looks like him. It’s not even a very good picture of her.

Here is how it all begins: one night, he and I stay up late watching a foreign film, and when we go to bed he goes in first and I come behind. I set our water on my bedside table. I untie my hair. “Come here, Margot,” he beckons me. That is my name. I crawl in bed and kiss him on the mouth. Then I leave him again to use the bathroom, and when I come back he is the same, the water is still there, but he calls me Margaret. Margaret is his ex-girlfriend’s name. (Margaret = a more uptight, less whimsical version of Margot, so of course I know the difference; I know my own name).

He’s no idiot, and he’s a decent guy. Instead of becoming angry, I notice the changes in my body: bigger boobs (just what I’ve always wanted); lengthier legs; what happened to my flat, perfect stomach? I run to the bathroom. I look two years older in the mirror, which is how many years older Margaret is than me. Now my hair is dark, not blond. My bone structure is fierce, verging on manly. And my new skin—oh, beautiful skin!—is clear, as it has never been before. If I were to weigh the cost-benefits, I’d say all in all it was a fairly balanced trade.

When I return to the bedroom he acts as though nothing has changed. He snuggles up against me in his trendy underwear. He clings tightly, the same way as always—the way that makes me think a little more air would be a little more pleasant. I give him a kiss and he goes a mile. As usual he wants to have sex. The only difference between this time and the last is he calls out: Mar-ga-ret, oh, Mar-ga-ret!

Since becoming Margaret, I’ve heard everything about Margot, and I also know what I’m supposed to be now, as Margaret: I’m supposed to be uptight; I’m meant to have a poor sense of humor. Margot had an amazing sense of humor (I know this for a fact) but he never brings that up to me now. Nor does he tell me now: you are uptight; you have a poor sense of humor, Margaret. But he certainly told me those things about Margaret.
back when I was Margot, and Margaret was who
knows where.

According to him, Margot is some kind of
monster. She acted all cute (his words), but wor-
ried all the time about what people thought of her.
She was self-destructive; she enjoyed implosion.

Wow, what an insecure piece of crap, I say to
all this.

Because Margaret isn't supposed to have a
sense of humor, because she is incapable of sar-
casm, he takes this seriously:

You've always been hard on other women,
Margaret, he says.

I'm just saying, I say. It's a good thing you got
out of that one. I tilt my head. I lean forward. How
did you get out of it?

He runs his hand over my newly-dark hair.
Let's not discuss that. You're the jealous type,
sweetie, he says.

Noted.

Normally I don't care about things with him—
ask anyone. Normally I care about friendships.
I have lots of wonderful friendships, and he is
just the man I've been sleeping with three nights
a week for the past year. We want nothing from
each other besides what we are already giving,
which is great, except now I have the additional
(unfulfilled) desire not to be Margaret.

It's getting on my nerves: him tiptoeing around
me like I'm uptight, constantly calling me Mar-
garet, not seeing me for who I really am—under-
neath this brown hair, this ample bosom! Frankly,
it's putting me a bit on edge. Poor, woman-hating
Margaret—I can see what she went through.

One night when he isn't over, I call the real
Margaret—finding her number is the simplest
thing—and my voice answers the phone. Or, it's
my voice before the change, before it became deep
and flat and humorless.

Would you like to get a drink, Mar-go-ret? I
ask, not sure which word to use.

Who is this?
I miss you, I coo. I miss your whimsy.
I miss nothing, she says. I'm fully intact, come
see for yourself.
I call him up and I tell him that he'd better get
over here right now.
I'm busy, he says. Call one of your friends.
Don't you have any?
So it's the beginning of the end, with him. And
my friends wouldn't know me if they saw me. But
I do remember this one girl who I'd see Marga-
ret with around town after Margot-me started
dating him. This girl was Margaret's replacement
squeeze. Margaret and this friend would glare at
Margot-me from barstools as I pranced around,
fresh in love.

I call up this girl, whose name is Ann.
This is Margaret, I say. Let's go out.
Where should we go? she asks.
I name a place.
Ew, she says. Really? she says.
So I name the place where I've already seen
her, glaring with Margaret at Margot.
I love that place! Ann says.
The time comes around for Ann and me to
meet, and we sit together at the bar. By now even
more has happened with my relationship with
him. It is no longer the beginning of the end, but
the actual end.

Things are over, I tell Ann.
Thank God, she says. You never called.
My friendships are very important to me, I say.
He was just some guy, I say. Ask anyone.
Yeah, OK, she says. How about I ask your dia-
ry? She signals the bartender. Want one? she asks.
I tell the bartender: I'll have what she's having.
Then the bar door opens, and Ann and I turn to see her walk in—with him! My fresh-ex! He is unmistakable. And she is so familiar. She is: blonde, for the most part.

My head spins.

Quick, Ann! I say. I grab her arm. What’s my name? What would you call me?

You know I always call you Boobly, she says. Because of your big Booblys.

Oh Ann, I say. I put both arms around her. I love you so much.

Meanwhile, they are coming our direction, unaware. We glare from our barstools. Mar-go-ret. She spots us, and there is no more prancing. She clings to him like a scared puppy. She rubs her pimple face into his coat sleeve.

What’s up, my darling? he says quietly—but I can hear everything. Are you feeling whimsical? Do you need to dance? Would you like to paint a picture of a rainbow or whisper into my ear in your made-up, faux-French dialect?

He kneads with one hand her shoulder, her neck, her shoulder, her neck.

Oh, Margot, would you like to turn in circles until you implode?

A few weeks later (I’m pretty sure I’m over it) I get a call. I pick up and someone is breathing into the receiver.

Ann? I say. Is that you?


I miss you, Margaret, a familiar voice says. I miss your rabid scheduling, and your order, and you are so discerning.

This better not be Margot, I say. Or Margaret, for that matter. (I don’t know what she’s going by these days). Something else occurs to me. If it’s him, I tell myself, I won’t go through all that again.

Who is this? I demand.

I don’t know, the voice says. Without you I don’t know who I am.

Yes you do. You’re your own person, I say. I don’t mean to sound inspirational, only severe, but my tone is often misunderstood.

Get a grip, I clarify.

I miss you, the voice repeats.

Yeah? Well I miss nothing, I say. I tell myself this is true. I have Ann now, easily the most important person in my life. And when I’m not with Ann I have all this time now, to do my own thing. I declare myself fully intact.

But before I hang up, I pause. I loop my finger through the curly phone cord. I suggest that maybe this person, whomever they are, should come here and see this for themself.

Spiritual identity theft—both deliberate and accidental—is common between the characters in my fiction. Personalities blend, minds are read, hoped for companions appear out of nowhere—and yet, real connection eludes these characters. Instead, desperate for intimacy, they cough up pigeons for company, attempt adult conversations with babies over brunch, and take to the streets in search of friendship.

Morgan Miller’s work in the University of Arizona’s MFA program earned her a Foundation Award for her story “Shotgun Double” and culminated in the collection The Sophie Room & Other Stories. She grew up in the American South, Düsseldorf, Germany, and Tokyo, Japan. She spent time in Miami and New Orleans before moving to Tucson, where she writes fiction and works in an independent bookshop.
Sound the word “milk.” Sound the word “leather.” Milk. Leather.
I’ve been recording myself saying these two words until my voice
is spent. There’s “ransom in a voice.”

A little rent in space. I think of how sound arrives in our ears, how lyric
seeps into the cartilage, bells the cochlear,
rings the teacup until it registers a tiny seashell.

A morsel of sand seeps into the oyster
and a pearl is its destination, its offering.

What begins when the dust settles is a halving, an account of sediment whispering.

If I could be remembered like this—captured,
arrested into a timbre,
or, like, no one has called it before,
a thunderhead above dusk.

I’m privy to identifying sound,
after all, isn’t that how one receives sound—by interpreting, translating?
Claiming it as one’s own.
Applying our own habit and drafting a pleasant shape and color of it.

But the arch in the horses’ hoof ding lucky, like, that of a fingernail, or, of a canyon,

loud, at first, then, spiraling into some calligraphy into the clay.
Whatever I want to voice assumes a form

whether it be practical or not. Mostly it is not.

_____

In *The Sound of Music*, Julie Andrews as Maria sings, “Cream-colored ponies
and crisp apple strudel / doorbells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles.”

Much like Maria, I too, like to speak of my favorite things with perfect finesse.
It’s the sounds plump with consonants that remain with me. Like how the words “cream”

and “doorbell” both seize the mouth with how thick they are.
When, in those utterances, the sun trickles through the mountains like powdered milk

and a wolf, a wolf drops
constellations from its eyes.

_____

Karoliina tells me about Monte,

the hired hand she’s been following around on horseback.

*Lining Up the Horses* divvies so much silent labor, silent light blue labor.

Labor requires vibration that breaks one apart. Labor requires
a discipline in proficiency that is rooted in revolution.

Yet I sound the word “sweat” easily, in one push.
There is a refrain in the workers’ hands, the weight,

the collapse,
the pitch in their leavings like the cloudy skins of garlic.

So often can sound queue one into past experiences, settling the present into a moment, like, “the shot heard around the world” which eventually manifests, according to Ariana Reines, in modern-day Haiti.

Sound, then, is always en route, busy, with no forecast of arrival or containment.

Ben Sáenz writes: “What of the voice on the radio / That tells me the name of the song I just listened to? What of / The voice of my mother, who is trying to speak above the quiet / Of her deafness? I’m wondering about hearing aids.

I am wondering / What words sound like when they are filtered through a device.”

I often wonder about the moment sound misses my parent’s ears—both having lost their hearing at a young age.

I’ve always wanted to ask them what was the last sound they could remember.

Thinking, maybe, sound would carry over and twin itself into every note, so that it becomes

a perpetual repetition of noise like oranges falling from the kitchen table. Brief, portly, without heraldry.

What is the sound when a gardenia blooms, is it a sigh, like, into an empty room? Is it a tattletale? When I imagine myself trying to wake in an early summer morning, after the cicada’s noise, all I can think of is submitting to sleep’s drowsiness. To be consumed
and taken by the dusty yellows of aged linens
and lost, if only momentarily, somewhere between dream, dream, and dream.

I admit I’m a bit reluctant to pursue sound as my foregrounded interrogation.

With so many poets riffing and scribbling on sound,
it’s impossible to map a new trail.

But whichever, and whatever, the sound—I am tempted to mimic a trompe l’œil,
spilling out of my lines into the white space,
past fact. But I do not.

Is it because I’m much more invested in the ricochet

of a cricket’s chirp,
or, of a cotton ball’s twang, almost metallic.

Shkolovsky comes to mind, “A poetic image” he writes,
“is one of the means by which a poet delivers his greatest impact.”

Perhaps this is why I desire to chuck dates across an oil-slicked pond. For its vertigo,
its image.

And even if the rippling is only temporary, that moment when the brackish waters
gracefully recede,

you can see slivers of yourself in its subtraction.


When I think of my father asleep—his snoring slowly
intensifying his constitution—I realize, as I listen, that what I hear in his moans is an answer.

Who else hears the words he stutters? Sees the buoyant saliva?
Is my father aware of the breath that treks from his lungs
through the aquiline nose we both share?

We often tell ourselves that we should listen more carefully,
to orchestrate our bodies, and our manners, with effortless precision.

But maybe I’m wasting time doting on the elusive and novel. Maybe we tend to want new all the time, but sometimes forget how each second is something new, that to even recall a thought, can also be new.

The honeybee in the root beer’s cream longs to be heard and I try to listen, closely, to the tinker, to the silky whistle of attempted flight.

But the whistle comes as métier.

The whistle whittles away at the air, fast then slow, as the momentum weakens, like, the sedated hiss one receives when turning down the gas stove—so aloof, but fine.

The sound is sophisticated, calcified, something of a familiar relic to treasure and pinch, and still, the honeybee rusts, food for the ants.

A dandelion collapses into sequence, a dandelion, despite the scrawl, somehow lulls itself into a discernible shape.

You are a shape. I am a shape. I’ve heard from some “pear-shaped.”
I find the smog from El Paso and Juárez soothes the shapes of midday traffic. In a sense, the smog situates us into an ombré, takes the edge off, and eases us into reality.

In Kevin Francis Gray’s *Temporal Sitter*, Gray sculpts a veiled subject from Carrara marble. The subject, though clearly silent, suggests a kind of Jesus narrative that becomes more evident, retrospectively.

Resurrection, in part, somehow always surfaces within our dialogues. And that, needless to say, has been an underlying and robust hum in the dark.

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The electronic hearing aid was invented in the twentieth century. However, our need to remedy hearing loss manifests much earlier than that. Created in the seventeenth century, a device called the ear trumpet becomes the go-to.

Images of this device illustrate a grossly obscene, but comical, design. Imagine, for a second, relying on a simple, or ornate, cone wedged in your ear. Imagine the weighty feel in your hand, your clammy hands, the lump in your pocket, the nuisance, the polite, or impolite, stares, and from all these things, a hurried, but savory, amplified sound.

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They say a cloud, on average, weighs about a million pounds and a thundercloud, well over a hundred million pounds. These figures both dazzle and dizzy me. The word “carburetor” kicks up a memory. I’m aware I understand this word differently than most. When I was younger, my father made it a hobby of his to buy and fix salvaged vehicles.

His favorite was the ’73 Ford F250.

In a balmy summer light he’d ask me to listen to the carburetor for anything unusual.
Of course I had no idea what to listen for, what to reel in,
so ultimately, my father knew this was a gamble.

What this taught me at a very young age was the depth of any racket, to queue sound, for the service of work. The more he would rev up the truck, the more I listened. When he'd look out from the window—

all I could offer was a thumbs up,
just a thumbs up.

To say the word “love” in sign language is to, literally, hug oneself. This gesture, for me, indicates the notion of loving oneself in order to return love.

The more one understands and embraces their own body, their past, their actions—the freer one feels to love and to receive love.

In an interview with the soprano Maria Callas, Mike Wallace asks,

“Are you a lonely person?”

With a wrinkle in her brow, her voice opens, wispy at first,

“Uh, not really. We have to be alone. I, I feel the necessity to be alone, frequently.

It's our work.”

Is this true? Am I so alone with my words? Do I regard certain words over others?
To seek this isolation is, for Callas, work. But for me, this crescent of silence is, well, too revealing.

Here, in the desert, sand burrs nick the foot.

It is one of many small tortures to endure. And, you see, here

in the desert,
time moves within the strum of a guitar’s gauntlet.

While driving through New Mexico, both of my deaf sisters, Vanessa and Betsy,
remark on how much they enjoy this one song on the radio.

It is too loud in the car, I think.

The bass drops and unfolds into a steady and pronounced gallop
as if each stride were forged into a careful interlude.

Somewhere out the window,
a coyote, rich in story, howls,

and an owl,
fat with gossip, hoots.

Eventually, I croon to the song,
cautious of fumbling over the lyrics,

my sisters do not.

MIGUEL ANGEL RAMIREZ was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. His work can be found in Denver Quarterly and Pleiades.
TANGLED PLASTER

Put yourself in the wall's shoes
past the switch plates and circuits,
beyond the furnace with cable-knit teeth.

Listen to the lariats of cords swaying their ohms.

Different cords, living
rooms. Surge protectors
dangle, dens juggle

fluorescence,
their ecobulbs
like maypoles to lumens.

An entertainment center
disburses lacquer,

snakes eel-ends of televisions
through adaptors breathing LED.
Jumper cables bundle chords from clusters of pitch. The glimmer of peasants in Bartok’s *Second Violin Concerto* clamors a nucleus of apiaries and coral.

Bartok’s leukemia fleshes the toil.

What I know of warranties would fill a flashlight’s marrow.

Ask me about kilowatts and my guess is gasoline but if you look past the alkaline and coils you’d see joules diamonding the curtain, atoms throwing bouquets,

1. A fourteen-year-old seducing who I’ll be on a bed at age six in the spring of ’84, our old house, the guest a friend of my brother, flannel rolling across his skinny body, bowl cut eliding his face, *Star Wars* fanatics during their eighth grade alliance. Tagalong in apogee, I’m open to roles, reenactments for the window to see. Open to impersonating a princess, action figures switched one life after another, thumb running down and up a vinyl cape, Empire converging on twin sheets. It’s a conference day:

early dismissal, my father at work inspecting postal collection boxes. This was the year he found a pipe bomb at the corner of Portage and Alcott, a heroin needle in outgoing. Mother – the two-for-one scheduling of sons, art teacher impressed with the older’s pointillist sketching of a shoe, caretaking of me. Leia I’ll be in this carbon-freezing
scene lensed through a chest kiss,  
flannel where the horizon cued,  

teenager who became a paralegal  
coaxing a suckle over sinewless,  

ransoming the breath that ages  
the mouth, metamorphosis  
smoldering the royalty  
out of me.  

2. Yesterday: browsing for costumes I glide  
through doors indifferent to making do.  
Contamination fears and I’m not touching  
that Jedi. That one either. Culpability: the  
family that blames together blurs together.  
Agoraphobia: schadenfreude on a full stom-  
ach. Worries, all other: gird a tourniquet for  
your Loch Ness. The penalty for synthesis  
rendered moot. Autobiographical  

Salmonella Olfactory  
Recall: His name was Mike.  
He smelled like the cape at BoRics.  

VALENCE  

Amateur musicians talk upstate escapees  
and was that a tick I washed down the drain  
after coffee with the pediatrician who brought  
her cello from Quebec to Camp Quartet?  
I told her about the clinic incident over  
paella and cheese – rubella needle  
unlocking the wrong nerve – cartilage  
released from its skin duties years before  
my parents’ litigious streak, jeans hiding  
the gully where my upper-right leg should be.  
Second in a somnambulist family, bonding  
meant my father taught me to sleepwalk,  
his socks a cough medicine green.  

I’m Generation Milk Carton, from a time  
when telecenters flashed 800 and if I had  
a dime for every capture-the-bad-guy tip,  
the reward money went to my brother building  
a rink out of party store ice, our basement  
a barber stool, colander, and cubemelt,  
his speed-skating promise Zambonis out  
of reach. His jail stint required no break  
but I had the bedroom to myself for a week.  

My brother’s legs won pissing contests  
versus me, pyrite footnote on a gem show  
cheat sheet, motion verbs stunting my lap,  
felons lamming the airport’s CNN, every shot  
glass a gift shop in the gate. Airborne, the thought  
occurs to me—lavatory, the more claustrophobic,  
the more beautiful a word. Stenographers,  
do they love fugitive’s multivalent G, that tick,  
should I report my garbage disposal to the CDC?
If you saw my leg, you’d compliment its kneecap chic. Stare long enough and barcodes resemble the drying off point in a Lilliputian carwash. Give my time capsule legroom enough and you’d be eavesdropping on the layer that taught me to pervade.

I love you I loom you, I say at the diner.

The waitress’s charm bracelet trickles onto imitation sunflowers, talismans dust syrup.

I think about our sutured future, my hands on a maple-sated menu,

cuticles like covered wagons, the hostess a mix of bellwether and bouffant.

You sweep where I munition the gin. You love me. Intercession looms.

I think about suturing our future – a lovers’ sphere is more than decanters and velour.

Nicotine dissolves in an omelet’s eaves. What I’d undo to funnel through your maroon shirt.
THE CIRCUMSTANCE FACTORY

*Friday, December 21, 2012, was believed by some to be the end of the world.*

—Good Morning America

Doomsday I took off from work to close my credit union account, nothing wealthy or panic. Holiday decals peeling, Top 40 vocoder in the background echoing a Rubik's larynx. My teller is the one who amasses the most shamrocks, hearts, Hallmark what-have-yous, his vigilance better than an exploding dye pack, his assistance welcomed when my agoraphobia fidgets and detaches: Johnny Flamingo, named for the way I piss in truck-stop stalls, leg guarding the door, graffiti given a peek. I varied this ritual at a urinal once and was bashed.

So my teller, Captain Tenspot, he snaps Johnny into submission. Nothing schism in a nowhere somatic, I amble and un-ratchet, General Nickel rectifying more than any relative or reuptake.

I've consumed three generations of home.

Camouflage your phobia and people assume it's nerves or habit. YouTubable eccentric at his warning label worst. I must tell you about white-knuckling through the circumstance factory:

the avian uremic, behind-stall solstice, omens furled as a combatant.

SPEAKING IN CALENDARS

If birthstones were blind we'd climb the chapel, groom its zenith, jeans and a staircase making barber poles of afternoon.

If sapphire were altimeters and a root beer stand we'd take September and blink – once for malted, twice for gray. Turquoise, that Bible store, discipleship inlaid.

If, lifeline of barrette, if jade were gratis we'd dabble in barometers, divvy the vinaigrette. Tanzanite for you, Fahrenheit for me like clemency granting teeth or the crocus sunned most on antelope fingertips wondering whether carnelian stammers, if amethyst rues the month you died.

If one man's January is another's brusque think necklace and clasp. Stagger peridot and crumble zeal, its February your phenyl star, April, the agate taken to lunch. If speaking in calendars moor opal to empirical and clay-mate the cot. Foist the chimes of your change-ringling days like inventoried glass.
If challis, valance.
Talismans then tinnitus,
December a steamer trunk of hematite
the same as Stetson is a brim
or bramble of bluff calling ether’s garnet,
forgiving anything save tourmaline and June.

CLOTS

A mannequin gives birth to a jack-in-the-box,
says to the harlequin, “he has your thighs.”

The harlequin lathers his mandible,
asks hemophilia how a shadow bleeds.

Her son born with polka dots ajar,
the mannequin sells teeth online,
posts ivories to inboxes.

Platelets tailgate the harlequin’s stubble,
venerate a towel that proclaims him
Ashtray Salesman of the Year.

His wares clang like church bells
in suitcases, some the shape of heartthrobs:
idol menthol, Marlboro scrim.

He crowns a tourniquet, damps his chin.

The mannequin sends her son for repairs:
ten hours to a neck, sinew inclined. The boy
crouches, weasel smock and facile smirk.

You’d never know he started as twine.

She retires, ministers to the mouthless.
The harlequin expires. Parliaments twinge.

The kid asks about Pop.

She pauses, breath like formaldehyde
on the morning drive. “Son,” she says,

“Your father was filtered, drummed the cigarillo realms.
Yes, once upon a Nicorette, humanity swirled.
Companionship loomed. Lineage bruised.
The things he accomplished with ash.”

Tom died today in the glass eye factory.
Collapsed near the hazels,
the murmur in his heart surrounded by all that mimicry.
Blurring the sclera field, we call it.

I’m nearsighted so it’s funny when I hold the hazels,
detail the artificial veins. Browns are easiest.
Sweetening the clay field’s soul, we call it.
Tom and I ate at this restaurant,
overhead lights reflected in a pool of olive oil,
artificial flavors in my 7 Up, Tom’s soda easily the brown
of an orb I’d sculpted earlier that day.
We were debating whether the eyeless grow lashes, if the body
pools its follicles over the head, orders the sebaceous:
“less oil around the lids.”
I planned on leaving my wife for Tom,
debated whether he’d grow to love me,
the embodiment of someone
who surrounds himself with mimicry
til it murmurs sight.
My wife sells dishes in a department store,
plans on replacing the table leaves next week.
Tom bought glassware the day he died.
DIABLO TABLEAU

I overheard your credit report at the restaurant and thought about Ron, the reason you can’t get a car and then my breadsticks came just as your infant’s pacifier fell into the salad, and your brother, I assume that’s who he was, the collateral resemblance, his minestrone posed as if this were a movie where the tumorous lover says, “you are my last, best firing squad,” to which the enamored replies, “that’s what accelerates a legacy, ‘specially when your daddy’s in the electric chair business,” so swipe all the silverware you want, there’s no X-ray in the Olive Garden and it’s crayon that’s smeared over the Pesco Diablo liner notes, credo no Crayola though we found Grandma’s Bible in the freezer under the Gorton’s fisherman trawling a Freon crisp.

I’m dining on my mother’s last good gift certificate, tonight’s concern starring me wondering how I’ll avoid the germs sure to come with the change, but then I’d be showing you my hand and what I want, more than anything besides a fifth breadstick, is to leave you with the guarantee I’m normal and hopefully your credit isn’t as bad as the coffee, the carafe it arrived on looking like background kitchenware in that documentary about the daughter whose father patented sodium pentothal. That’s truth serum and I’d tarnish if we drew names from a hat.

The waiter brought espresso and in my snobbier days I’d have corrected him when he pronounced it with an -ex, like Bake Sale Beth, my last, first foray into girldating. Even then, I knew you said it ‘zod’ instead of Sche-her-a-zade, but Beth was stick shift and a popcorn platoon to go with her beverage armada, so when she turned to me in that Midwestern movie theatre saying “my hand is cold” in a whisper louder than Velcro and I said, “then put down your Coke,” I knew the Sno-Caps wouldn’t last. That was prequel and I’m about a third of the way finished with humility training. I might pass. Good news since I stopped using the words ‘soul’ and ‘unwavering,’ replacing them with ‘lumen’ and ‘ingrained.’

I clench my teeth when the maître d’ appears, his pinkie lineated in paper cuts. If I could, I’d rewind the hand of Beth and repot the disembodied poinsettia—those berries, how they weaponized the linoleum. To the Rons and reasons you can’t undo, though we’re trying.

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I met the carpoolers the same morning the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Rochester announced its nominees for the annual Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award. I don’t want to sound like I’ve gotten too big for myself, but I wasn’t particularly surprised my name had made it onto the shortlist. This is the third year running I’ve been nominated, and I distinctly remember thinking this would be the year I finally snagged the award. Business had never been better.

Most of the other female members of the association own hair and nail salons, yoga studios, bakeries, real estate agencies—the expected endeavors. Not that there’s anything wrong with these pursuits—I don’t mean any disrespect, really, I don’t—but you have to admit: not exactly innovative. If I had to guess, I’d say that’s why I’m the only woman who’s ever been nominated for the award. People admire my ingenuity.

So I was feeling pretty pleased with myself as I pulled the Drive-By Bus into the parking lot outside the community pool at Roberts Wesleyan College for what I thought then would be your typical, run-of-the-mill drive-bys. I had booked four passengers for the two days: three women and one man. Male carpoolers were a bit of a rare commodity in my line of work, but this was most likely a failure on my part in regards to marketing. Other than the listing in the Yellow Pages, I had a line of business cards, nothing flashy, just a black matte finish with Carrie’s Carpool Drive-By written in a pink, curly script and my contact information on the reverse side. I left these cards where I thought they’d be most inconspicuous, namely sorority houses and the aforementioned salons, yoga studios, and bakeries. I had yet to establish a strong Web presence for the business. It was a balancing act, you know, trying to juggle the anonymity and surreptitiousness that were essential for a successful drive-by with my desire to get the word out. I hadn’t had a chance yet to sit down and do a thorough cost-benefit analysis, so until then I was holding off. No reason to act rashly. Still, every once in a while a man would grace the
Drive-By Bus, and when that happened, it was always an experience, an affirmation, perhaps, that men could be just as neurotic as women when it came to affairs of the heart. Often more so.

The Bus could seat up to nine people, myself included, but I usually tried to max out at five passengers per carpool. Too many destinations diminished the impact of the individual drive-bys. Over the course of the two days, we’d start small and build up. Day One was devoted to what I considered Low Risk Drive-Bys: destinations where the former lover in question no longer resides. On Day Two, we upped the ante to current residences. I found this progression produced the optimal level of anticipation without overwhelming my passengers, and thus facilitated the most rewarding rides for all involved. It also allowed the carpoolers a chance to get to know one another, to bond, and to foster an atmosphere of sisterhood. And yes, even the men got to be sisters for the day.

I always arranged to meet my passengers at a public place. Somewhere they could leave their cars, at the mall on Ridge Road or a Wegmans parking lot; somewhere that would give no indication of my place of residence or theirs. That morning, I had chosen the pool at Roberts Wesleyan because school was still out for the summer, which meant the parking lot would be full of mini-vans and station wagons hauling from the surrounding suburbs. Public chaos was the perfect cover for a drive-by pick-up, and what’s more chaotic than a bunch of nannies and stay-at-home parents, pushed to their limits, as they try to wrangle their little brats out of their cars and into the pool?

I parked the Drive-By Bus and descended the steps to wait for the passengers to arrive. Down the way, some poor young soul was attempting to extract two children from the backseat of her car amidst torrents of high-pitched protestations, while a third child stood behind her, striking her repeatedly on the back with a neon green foam noodle. I congratulated myself for my shrewdness in selecting the day’s pick-up destination.

For the sake of professionalism, I made it a point to learn as little as possible about my passengers’ personal lives, including their last names and occupations. It was the closest I’d come to developing an insurance policy against liability. For the same reason, I provided the carpoolers a list in advance of banned language that was under no circumstances to be used in my presence—loaded terms like stalking or restraining order. To do so would earn the carpooler-in-question a swift expulsion from the Drive-By Bus and a forfeiting of her deposit. It was all outlined in the signed contracts and non-disclosure agreements. That way, should my services toe the line of what could be considered legal, I could rightfully claim plausible deniability. (I’m sure that sounds damaging given what has happened, but I make no apologies for knowing my rights.)

Anonymity can be tricky in regards to payment, of course. Initially, I only accepted cash money; however, I recognized that my services did not come cheap, so under certain circumstances I would accept a personal check, but I almost always requested that the passenger redact her last name from the drawer in the upper left-hand corner first. In four years of operation, I’ve only had one check bounce, and let’s just say I was only too happy to be rid of any connection to that particular carpooler. All that aside, I did ask the carpoolers to submit a photograph prior to our first pick-up so at the very least I knew who to look for.

Farrah was the first to arrive. She whirled into the parking lot, earning a few mean glances from
the adults who were struggling to keep their children in tow, and stepped from her red Camaro across the way from where I’d parked the Drive-By Bus. I recognized her immediately.

By now, you’ve met Farrah for yourself, so you understand what I mean when I say she lives up to the name. Hers is a beauty that would probably go unnoticed in Los Angeles or Miami, but which, in our less-than-glamorous city in upstate New York, cannot help but draw attention to itself. Had the demographics of the adults in the pool parking lot been weighted more heavily in regards to the non-fairer sex, I might have been worried, but despite what people say about our culture having entered a new epoch in which men and women share in the responsibilities of childcare equally, it appeared—at least on that day—not to be the case. If you look hard enough, there is an upside to everything, I guess.

Farrah crossed the parking lot like it was a beach in Acapulco, clad in loose white linen that rippled in the wind, sporting a pair of lightly tinted sunglasses. I’ll admit, when I received her photograph, a professional-level headshot, I thought it was a scam—the blue eyes, the blonde hair, that perfect sun-kissed skin that said here was a woman who’d never known the struggle of trying to find the correct shade of foundation. I didn’t know then that Farrah was a photographer, and figured it was ripped off of some stock images website, the kind pernicious online daters use to bait potential mates and then show up slightly overweight and with acne ravaging their faces. But no, Farrah was the real deal, the professional quality of her photograph just a perk of working in the trade.

You must be Carrie, she said as she took my hand in both of hers in that way West Coasters have of conveying genuine interest. I immediately suspected her of being a transplant from California or Oregon, but I was wrong again—turns out Farrah’s just sincere. Yes, I said, attempting to extract my hand to no avail. And you must be Farrah, it’s so nice to meet you. If you’d like to board the bus while we wait for the other carpoolers, the AC is running. Get comfortable. You’re welcome to help yourself to a bottle of water in the fridge. Wonderful, she said, patting my hand before returning it to me. I’m so happy to be here. I was relieved when she stepped onto the bus. I usually become distrustful when faced with sincerity.

As I said, I considered myself a professional, but I was still human and often could not help but to make certain snap judgments concerning my passengers based on appearances. I’d like to say that these initial judgments were typically inaccurate, and though they most certainly were incomplete, inaccurate they often were not. People aren’t nearly as complex as we give them credit for being, so usually, even before everyone was buckled in and I’d turned over the engine, I had a pretty good idea of who I was dealing with. I tell you this because when Jane arrived next, emerging somewhere from the far end of the parking lot, my first thoughts, I admit, were unkind.

In all fairness, it was unfortunate that Jane arrived moments after Farrah boarded the bus. Had she arrived before Farrah, or say after Jessica, I probably would have been more generous in my assessment, but sadly for her, this was not the case. You see, if Farrah managed an air of grace and beauty seemingly without trying, Jane looked like maybe she could have tried a little bit harder. The before picture. We all have our priorities, of course, but appearances didn’t seem to be up there on Jane’s list. Short black hair cut in a bob and glasses; two bushy eyebrows arched just above the frames; clothing that would kindly have been described as nondescript.
Carrie? she said in a monotone, tipping her chin toward me. I’m Jane. I must have still been caught on Farrah and the stark contrast between the two, because I dropped the ball on my reply—I just stood there a bit dazed. It’s possible I said, I’m sorry? I am in the right place, aren’t I? Jane said. You’re the bus driver, right? I mailed in my deposit last week. Yes, yes, I said. Had I not totally fumbled the initial interaction, I might have taken issue with the bus driver. I’d like to think the services I provided went above and beyond that. No harm, though. Nice to meet you, Jane, I said. We’re just waiting for two more if you’d like to take a seat on the bus. You’re the boss, she said. That’s right, I thought. I am.

Shortly after, Daniel eased into the parking spot next to Farrah’s Camaro. There was a tenderness in the way he maneuvered his SUV in between those two yellow lines. As the owner of a larger vehicle myself, I appreciate individuals who are conscientious of their size, who don’t commandeer the road as if they own it simply because their automobile is the size of a boat. Daniel jogged over to me, calling out a cheerfully accented Hello, hello, hello, and it was as if a Greek god, Adonis perhaps, had descended from above. His black shirt was tight, and his dark jeans were tight, and his body was, well, you must have noticed for yourself: tight. He winked at me. Thanks for waiting, Gorgeous, he said as he mounted the steps of the Drive-By Bus. As he did, I got a good look at his backend and I tell you I was not disappointed. Like I said—still human.

It was another ten minutes before Jessica arrived, and though I don’t want to sound petty, I can’t help but feel this contributed to us getting off on the wrong foot: I do not deal well with lateness. However, eventually, she came cantering through the parking lot, not without some difficulty on account of her five-inch, red fuck-me pumps, which you may or may not have noticed depending on how distracted you were by the fishnet stockings and the super short, hot pink skirt she was wearing, one which sported a massive pink bow at the back. If you had asked me then to speculate as to Jess’s line of work, let’s just say, had I been feeling more gracious, I might have pegged her for one of those women in the long white coats, slinging cosmetics from behind the makeup counter at Macy’s.

To be clear, I’m trying to paint you a picture of my frame of mind at the time I met the carpoolers. Obviously, since then, much has changed. Jessica, for example, is a testament to that much beloved platitude about books and their covers. And of course, my first impressions of Daniel and Jane proved—well, I’ll get to that, I guess, all in good time. I curtly introduced myself to Jessica (she insisted on hugging me) and then followed her up the steps as she clambered onto the bus, everyone present and accounted for. I took to the driver’s seat, pulled the lever, and closed the bus doors. There was a moment then, I remember, when I looked up to see my own face and the faces of the carpoolers framed in the large rearview mirror that spans the front of the bus, and thought to myself, This is what a picture of me with my friends would look like. If I had friends. Welcome to Carrie’s Carpool Drive-By, I said. Buckle up.

Let me pause here for a minute and tell you a little bit about the Drive-By Bus, because yes, I know I’m the mama so I’m biased, and some would say it’s just a prettied-up party bus, but in my opinion it is a beautiful example of vehicular design and engineering. It’s also a big part of the whole carpool experience, and what can I say? I love it.

The Drive-By Bus is painted biscuit, a shade of off-white not dissimilar to the color of cus-
tard. Most of my passengers expected something a little more stealth, I think. Jet black with tinted windows, perhaps. However, a recent study conducted by the American Association for Pedestrian Surveillance showed that large vehicles, such as vans and mobile holding cells, that look somewhat out of place but are otherwise unremarkable are twelve times more likely to go unnoticed by the intended targets of their surveillance than those that are deliberately attempting to blend in. The bus itself was relatively inexpensive; it was the gutting and remodeling that sucked dry the majority of my start-up capital. Go big or go home, I always say. The driver’s seat was the only part of the original interior that stayed, and even it had to be reupholstered. I decided to paint the inside a neutral beige and had the floor lined with durable, yet tasteful, gray carpeting. I also had the partition that separated the driver’s seat from the rest of the bus removed so that I could more easily interact with my passengers. My engineer cut the two benches that ran the length of the bus in half, which freed up the back section but still allowed for four people to sit comfortably on each side. We then replaced the black fabric of the benches and the driver’s seat with real pink leather. Very upscale.

The back of the bus I left for customized accommodations. I had a small water closet installed on the left side to make bathroom breaks a nonissue. The carpools could run a long time as it was, depending on the day’s destinations. On the right side, we built a lofted bunk, where passengers could lie down, close the curtain, and cry in privacy if a drive-by got too emotional. Below the bunk, we added a small, wood-paneled refrigerator and a drawer where I kept a selection of men’s sweaters, cashmere cotton blends, each sprayed with a popular brand of men’s cologne. The purpose of the sweaters was twofold. For one, I like to think the girls found it comforting to climb into the bunk, press their faces into the soft fabric of the sweaters, and breathe in a manly scent they could attribute to whomever was occupying their thoughts and desires at that moment. More importantly, the Drive-By Bus is small and the sweaters helped muffle the sobs. I should note that I had not yet invested in a selection of women’s sweaters sprayed with equally provocative, floral perfumes for my male riders. In my experience, men on the bus didn’t cry. They got mad. I did sometimes debate removing the water closet and putting in its place a punching bag, but until my male clientele picked up, it seemed like it’d be a frivolous investment.

In the small refrigerator below the bunk, next to the drawer of sweaters, I kept several bottles of water, a selection of premium vodkas, a bottle of dry vermouth, and one or two bottles of white wine, sweet or dry, depending on what I could get for a good price from my vendors. I never permitted my passengers to get sloppy, but I had found it useful to have alcohol on hand to help break the ice and set some of the more anxious carpools at ease. It was a nice touch, I think. Plus, a cocktail or two could be just what the doctor ordered when trapped in a confined space with four other women for two days, no matter how nicely decorated said space may be. One thing I learned in my years of doing this: Not all carpoolers are created equal.

I pulled the Drive-By Bus out of the pool parking lot and headed east toward Chili, the suburb where my sister and I grew up. It was a familiar route—a straight shot down Westside Drive, then a right onto Pixley Road. Less than a half-mile on the left was Virginia Lane, the destination of the day’s first drive-by.
The current model for the drive-bys was the result of years of trial and error. Initially, Carrie’s Carpool Drive-By only dealt in Real or Authentic Drive-Bys—drive-bys that constituted some actual degree of risk. It didn’t take long to discover, though, that the emotional effects on the passengers was, more often than not, detrimental. Two days of driving by the current homes of past lovers, old flames, ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands, former one-night stands, got intense pretty quickly, and I’d have three or four girls fighting over the bunk, ripping the sweaters from each other’s hands, mascara running, and another locked in the water closet bemoaning, Whose car was that in his driveway? There was no opportunity for the carpoolers to build a rapport with one another; they were too busy fighting over the oxygen in the bus. Hence the development of the Day One / Day Two model: Low Risk Drive-Bys first, then we moved on to the big leagues.

I grabbed the mouthpiece for the Drive-By Bus’s PA system and pressed the button with my thumb. All right, ladies—and Daniel, I said, my voice coming in clear through the bus’s interior speakers. That yellow bungalow, the cute little one with the blue shutters coming up on the right? Welcome to the former home of Randy Kohlmeyer: my first crush.

As we headed down the street, passing the house, I told the carpoolers that one summer when I was little, my mom would drop my sister Sasha and me off at the Kohlmeyer’s house every day on her way to work. Mrs. Kohlmeyer would watch us and Randy and Randy’s two older brothers until my dad picked us up in the afternoon after his shift ended at the Genesee Brewery. For the most part, we were restricted to playing out in the yard, I told them. I was young, seven years old, but I could still remember one day in particular, one very clear, very distinct memory of that summer and of Randy Kohlmeyer’s mouth.

I was standing on the front step of the Kohlmeyer’s house in my blue one-piece bathing suit, with my hair pulled back into a wet ponytail, listening to the screen door close behind me. Inside, Mrs. Kohlmeyer sat on the sofa in the living room, watching her soaps and smoking Chesterfield cigarettes. Each time I went in to use the bathroom, the smoke settled on me like cheesecloth, and I emerged from it a rank smell. Outside the grass was slick, the water from the sprinkler twinkling like diamonds on the lawn. My fingers were ten small prunes. I pictured it like a scene in a movie.

Randy ran up to meet me, grabbing my hand, and said, Come on. Fingers threaded together, we joined Sasha and his brothers as they ran through the sprinkler. We jumped over the simple machine as it tilted back and forth, again and again. We’d been out there for hours, and though it was summertime, it was unseasonably cold that day. I noticed that Randy’s lips had turned a shade of purple. Not quite blue. And I remember wanting to press my mouth against his mouth. It wasn’t sexual, I told the girls. More tender and forbidden and exciting. Of course, I didn’t do it—I knew better. Instead, I allowed Randy to lead me back and forth as we continued to vault over the yellow plastic sprinkler. At some point Randy’s brothers and my sister disappeared to the backyard, delighting in some game of their own.

The sun continued its journey across the sky, and soon enough we heard the faint and repeating ding! of the Skippy Truck, rounding the corner of Virginia Lane. Mrs. Kohlmeyer heard the bell as well and came to the door to ration out quarters for snow cones and ice cream sandwiches. The five of us went and stood at the edge of the lawn, waiting. The Skippy Truck stopped and
a lady with sun-bleached hair and overly tanned skin stepped out of the cab. I recognized her as the woman who drove our school bus during the year. We lined up—the older kids first, Randy and I in back—and made our selections from the pictures of frozen treats plastered on the door of the cooler that sat on the bed of the truck. The woman opened the door, reached in, and produced each in exchange for our quarters. Randy and I pooled our quarters together and picked out a tri-flavored popsicle, layered red, white, and blue, called The Rocket. What were the flavors? we asked the woman. Blue raspberry, maybe? Cherry, and something else? She shrugged. We bought it just the same.

Back on the front step, Randy unwrapped The Rocket and handed it to me, but I pushed his hand away. You first, I said, and watched as Randy wrapped his mouth around the red tip of The Rocket. The red dye stained his lips and his teeth, his gums and his tongue, almost immediately, and when he offered it to me again, he smiled to a frightful effect. I took The Rocket from his hand and licked the places where his lips had been. My teeth chattered; it was too cold for ice cream. But secretly I was pleased with how close I’d come—the closest I would ever come—to Randy Kohlmeyer’s mouth. I narrated all this for the carpoolers through the PA system as we drove down the cul-de-sac, circled around, and headed back toward Pixley Road. It was one of my favorite carpool fictions.

Not all of it was made up, of course. Randy Kohlmeyer was a real person and he did in fact live in this quaint little house on Virginia Lane before his father moved the family to Tennessee in the third grade. We rode the same bus to school. And if you switched out the players and the setting and the circumstances, the scene would resemble something from my childhood—the sprinkler in the front yard, the Skippy Truck. Randy Kohlmeyer could easily have been Malcolm, who lived on the second floor of the house where I grew up, in an apartment my grandmother rented out to Malcolm’s mom, Elaine. He had two brothers, too, twins, but they were younger. They lived above us until the year Malcolm and I graduated high school.

And sometimes I would move things around, change the narrative a bit. Sometimes Randy and I were older; we were the ones sneaking out back, while his younger brothers played in the front yard, to share one of Mrs. Kohlmeyers’ cigarettes instead of the Rocket. Sasha was nowhere to be found in that version of the story. Sometimes Randy’s mother was sick, emphysema or leukemia. She would be tucked away in her bedroom and the woman sitting on the couch in the living room would be a nurse. From the front step I would hear her turning the pages of the magazine on her lap. She might ask me if I’d like a glass of lemonade. The important thing was to pick the right details, the right information, to make the fiction believable.

Still, as we passed by the Kohlmeyers’ old house, a woman in a long white nightgown, with curls in her hair and a cigarette between her lips, stepped out the screen door to retrieve her paper. Mrs. Kohlmeyer! Jessica screamed from the back of the bus with such urgency that I found myself convinced of my own narrative for a minute and ducked behind the wheel. Behind me, I heard the sound of something large hitting the deck, and when I peered into the rearview mirror, I saw Jane, Farrah, and Daniel crouching down in their seats, covering their mouths and staring at Jess, who had face-planted onto the floor of the bus, looking for cover. I stopped at the sign at the
end of the street, put the bus in park, and turned around in my seat. I'd caught a huge hit of adrenaline, so much so that a smile had spread across my face, something profound beaming out from inside me. It was more than I could have hoped for, the exact charge a genuine drive-by should bring out in a carpooler. From the looks on their faces, I could tell the carpoolers were convinced. I had provided them a perfect model for the day, regardless of its veracity.

Everyone all right back there? I asked. Jessica was still on the floor. Daniel reached over and slapped her ass and said, It's O.K., Jessica. The coast is clear. And the girls—Jessica included, Daniel included—burst into laughter. What a rush! Jessica said. The first drive-by of the day was complete.

This is an excerpt of a novella.

BENJAMIN SCHAEFER studied literature and creative writing at Bard College and the University of Arizona’s MFA program. He is the prose editor at Fairy Tale Review and has fiction forthcoming in Guernica. He was also a finalist in American Short Fiction’s 2015 Short(er) Fiction Contest. Benjamin is currently revising a collection of short stories and a novella, the latter of which is excerpted here.
Patient Name: Maureen Campbell

Age: 52 Height: 5’4” Weight: 97 pounds

- **What are the problem(s) for which you are seeking help?** I haven’t been sleeping well.

- **Please describe any current stressful event in your life.** My daughter thinks she’s in love with a woman.

- **What are your current symptoms?** How has your life been impaired by these symptoms? I told you, I’m haven’t been sleeping.

- **What do you consider your personal strengths?** I am an extremely moral person.

- **Have you ever been worried about how you are thinking, feeling, or acting?** I worry a lot about my daughter, about how she’ll never be able to be happy as long as she’s making such terrible decisions. As long as she’s throwing away her life.

- **Has anyone ever expressed concerns about how you were thinking, feeling, or acting?** No, would say I’m considered a pillar of moral fortitude in my community.

- **Have you ever harmed yourself or thought about harming yourself?** Don’t be ridiculous.

- **List ALL current prescription medications and how often you take them:** It is my firmly held belief that people who require regular prescription medications are weak.

- **Has anyone in your family been diagnosed with or treated for:** Bipolar disorder, Schizophrenia, Depression, Post-traumatic stress, Anxiety, Substance abuse? I know talking about your feelings is all the rage these days, but I have to say, when I think about my friends who have regular appointments with “therapists” I’m always struck by how they seem so much battier now than they did before they started. Something to think about.
• Have you ever had any problem related to your use of alcohol or other drugs? I suppose that depends on your definition of “problem.” A certain amount of drinking is required of a corporate wife. But no, I’ve always kept a very close hold on myself. I wouldn’t call it a problem.

• Has a relative, friend, doctor, or other health worker been concerned about your drinking or other drug use or suggested cutting down? My doctor always tells me, Maureen, those mai tais are going to be the death of you. But that’s just the way he talks.

• Have you ever said to another person, “No, I don’t have an alcohol or drug problem,” when around the same time you questioned yourself and felt, maybe I do have a problem? I’m not really in the business of questioning myself. Another attribute of the weak.

• Do you smoke? I used to, when it was fashionable.

• Where did you grow up? In a fashionable suburb in Northern Virginia

• Describe your father and your relationship with him: He kept himself to himself, as is appropriate for fathers. He didn’t concern himself with the family. That was my mother’s job. It drives me bananas to see these fathers today, out there pushing strollers, making undignified faces and their snot-nosed children.

• Describe your mother and your relationship with her: She taught me how to be a woman.

• When your mother was pregnant with you, were there any complications during the pregnancy or birth? Not that I’m aware of.

• Did you have friends as a child? Of course. Everyone has friends as a child.

• Do you have friends currently? I have a few. I can’t say I really trust them, but I suspect that’s normal.

• Are you currently married? If so, for how long? Yes, I’ve been married to my husband for thirty-one glorious years.

• Where do you live? In the Catalina Foothills outside of Tucson Arizona. I am clarifying because there are some less than choice parts of Tucson.

• Who lives with you? Who lives with me? Just my husband of course.

• How far did you go in school/highest level of education? I went to college to get my MRS degree. HA HA.

• What is your current job/occupation? I make a mean martini.

• What jobs have you had in the past? I raised a daughter. Slaved to give her everything she ever could have wanted. It’s anyone’s guess how she could have turned out the way she did.

• Describe your relationship with your spouse: Oh we get along fine, I suppose. We don’t have a lot in common and I can’t say we talk all that much, but that’s bound to happen after several decades of marriage, wouldn’t you say?
• Do you have children? Yes, I’ve already told you. I have one petulant, ungrateful daughter, intent on ruining my life.

• Describe your relationship with your children: It would be a lot better if she didn’t insist on debasing herself.

• Do you belong to a particular religion or spiritual group? Do you find your involvement helpful during this illness, or does the involvement make things more difficult or stressful for you? Illness? That’s a little presumptuous, don’t you think? I’m just having trouble sleeping. But yes, I attend Vista de la Montaña United Methodist Church every Sunday.

• Have you ever been in a relationship where your partner has pushed or slapped you? Only when I’ve deserved it.

• Before you were 13, was there any time when you were punched, kicked, choked, or received a more serious physical punishment from a parent or other adult? I am a firm believer in spanking. Is that what you mean?

• Before you were 13, did anyone ever touch you in a sexual way or make you touch them? There was an incident when I was five with a friend of my parents. It was during one of their dinner parties. Well, you know how men get when they’ve had a few too many. But it’s not something I ever think about. And I’m sure it has nothing to do with my current problem.

• Describe what hunger feels like to you: I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.

• What did you eat today? One half grapefruit, one quarter chicken breast, boiled, with five baby carrots. And some vodka.

• What did you avoid eating today? Apple pie, bacon, caramel, donuts, Entenmann's sheet cake, fondue, grape jelly, hot chocolate, ice cream, jelly donuts, Keebler fudge cookies, Lemon bars, macaroni and cheese, Nougat, oatmeal raisin cookies, pancakes, quiche, raspberry pinwheels, steak, toffee, Upside down cake, vanilla wafers, whipped cream, xmas cookies, Yorkshire pudding, zucchini muffins. Did you like that list? I came up with it myself. “X” was particularly difficult.

• What promises you have made to yourself and kept? No vodka today. Well it is only ten I the morning. HA. HA.

• What promises have you made to yourself but not kept? No vodka yesterday. The rest is a little blurry.

• What promises have you made to others? When my daughter was born, I promised her I would always do my best to give her a good life.

• What regrets do you have about your life? That my daughter chose to reject the gift of a good life that I gave her.

• What has frightened you today? Things that frightened me today. The windows. I think they’re letting someone in. I mean the air, at least, I can feel it breathing on my neck when I’m sitting on the sofa. I can feel the fingers, stroking, scratching, tightening. I know what I know. I’m not stupid. People underestimate sweet little Maureen Campbell. They always have.

What do you consider the best times of day for drinking? If I’m being honest my favorite time is after a dinner party when everyone has gone home and my husband has gone up to bed the kitchen is still a mess and I pour myself a glass of vodka, over ice, so cold, just like water, just like forgetting, and the water from the tap is wet and hot and my hands are red and in the distance there is a dark cave just waiting to swallow me and I walk towards it and everything is obliterated.

What do you know about your mother? An upright woman, impeccable wife, regular church attendee, dependable cook. Mother of thirteen, duty first, wives submit to your husbands as to the lord. Light of my life, taught me always to be good, no matter the personal cost. Forgot me once, Sunday School classroom, waiting in my frilly socks and patent leather shoes, came back for me hours later, after the roast potatoes had all been eaten. She had a lot of children to mind, all perfectly understandable. Didn’t need to tell me that she loved me because of course I already knew.

What do you assume about your father? Wooed my mother in the most romantic fashion. Liked and respected by colleagues. Unimpeachable. A real charmer when he cared to be. Unflappably devoted to his family. Never unfaithful to my mother. Used to ride horses bareback, having grown up on a farm. Cried at a movie exactly once.

What flowers are appropriate for mother’s day? Express your appreciation to your mother for her years of hard labor with carnations, roses, lily of the valley, and other tropical flowers. If she doesn’t enjoy flowers, vodka is a welcome alternative. Should you find yourself needing to mark the occasion of death, opt for an all-white arrangement of gladiolas, carnations, daisies, and Stargazer lilies.


What are your secret sexual fantasies? I don’t feel comfortable discussing these. Secrets are secrets for a reason.

What will you refrain from eating this month? Anything that makes me feel good. Looking to food for pleasure is a weakness.

Have you ever thought about escaping your life? Yes: through the bathroom window, on the husband and I’s first date. Off the hotel balcony, when I was pregnant with Rose. Down the drain pipe, my wedding day. Don’t be alarmed, every woman contains such thoughts.

Describe your favorite moments of existential darkness: My wedding day. The birth of my daughter. The end of every bottle. HA. HA.

What behaviors mortify you? Visible bra straps. The passing of gas, even when alone. Loud voices, except on men celebrating an accomplishment. Public urination. Nude swimming with one’s husband’s business partner after one’s husband has gone to bed.
• How should your daughter improve herself? Stand up straighter. Be more polite. Call her mother. Settle down and marry a nice man already, it’s not like she’s fat anymore, what’s the issue. Smile. She’d look so lovely with a smile.


• What fills you with pleasure? The way the liquor turns from cold to warm as it slides down the inside of one’s chest. The sound of a pool party, from a distance. High heels on concrete. A dinner party where the conversation was kept in the tasteful range.


• What smells do you mistrust? Grass, wet leaves, sweat, a baby’s head.

• What morbid things are best avoided? Self-pity, self-evaluation beyond the visual, regrets, evaluation of life choices, too much vodka, alone, late at night, self-pleasure of any kind, considering whether my daughter loves me, considering why my daughter is no longer speaking to me, considering my body, naked, in the mirror.

• What floods your chest with sadness? Christmas, laughter, the memory of my daughter’s voice on the phone, the sound of my husband’s car in the driveway.

• Which behaviors exude grace? Long necks, turned to one side, looking out a window. A small sip from a clear glass. Foxtrot danced with the correct posture. Keeping one’s mouth shut.

• How do you spark conversation with complete strangers? Ask them about themselves. Nobody wants to hear about your problems.

• How do you make a good impression on someone you’re trying to impress? It’s all in the eyes. The trick is to make a second of eye contact before demurely lowering your eyes to your lap or shoes, depending on position. Then, to really drive the charm home, meet their gaze once more, letting a delicate hint of smile play across your lips. Careful dress and appropriate fragrance also imperative.

• Describe why happiness is impossible, unless you are stupid: I suppose I fail to see how happiness could possibly be the point. If it were, wouldn’t everyone be less miserable?

• Why should a woman never allow herself to become overweight? What woman wants to die alone with no man or child to love them? Also, extra weight implies a slovenly attitude.

• Why did you marry your husband? He was the first to ask.

• What causes a man to be handsome and strong? Careful grooming, but not too careful. He mustn’t appear flitty. A good man won’t worry you with questions of money or problems from the office problems. He speaks in a low, commanding voice. He is firm, makes commands not suggestions, reminds you of your place. It helps if he smells like salt, driftwood, rocks cov-
ered with seaweed, old leather suitcases. Clearly I am not talking about my own husband here.

- **What causes a woman to be lovely and soft?** She keeps her eyes turned down. Her dress reveals neither too much nor too little. She uses a quiet, suggestive tone of voice. Her manner is receptive, cheerful. Her finger nails are always well attended to. She drinks, but never to excess. She always follows her husband’s lead in this and other respects.

- **What hair colors are appropriate for a woman?** I always find blonds give the impression of being rather cheap, flighty at the least, don’t you? Brunettes are more demure, but when you get into black or red, you get into the territory of the exotic, which is best avoided.

- **Describe the way the light comes through the blinds:** Early evening, thick and sticky, enveloping my sadness. Dawn, high, tight and sweetly promising a chance for reinvention. I have nothing good to say about light in the mid-afternoon.

- **Elaborate on the subject of hostess etiquette:** As your guests arrive introduce them and put them at ease. For late-comers, lead them to one group or another and see them established so that they will not feel embarrassed or ill at ease. A good hostess will remain vigilant against impregnable conversations forming in corners. She will drift casually into different groups in turn, drawing some together and breaking up others. When the guests leave, she will collapse into her bed with the blinds closed and not get out for several days.

- **Describe a time you made a necessary sacrifice:** Once I had a dream where I was recruited into a cult. They held a lottery and I was selected as their ritual human sacrifice. I can still, if I think about it, remember the way that fear peeled off my skin with its white light. I often pull out the memory of this dream and stroke it, almost lovingly. Sometimes, late at night, after a standard glass or two of vodka, I find myself researching sacrificial cults on the World Wide Web. But I’m sure that’s normal, isn’t it?

- **What makes a good person?** Doing what is expected of one.

- **What makes a good woman?** Knowing the precise right time to take your clothes off. HA HA.

- **What qualities are desirable in a man?** Simply put, a good guy is more talk and less action. Everywhere he goes, he leaves a smirk. Cocky at all costs. Goes after what he wants without even the presence of self-doubt. Not afraid to approach women. Deeply interested in the sound of his own voice. Follows the rule that 75% of the time he should be talking vs. listening. When it comes to punishing the girl of his dreams, he knows the little things count the most. Fights and conquers. Says what he says, and means what he means.

- **What makes you feel that all is right with the world?** Sometimes, I lie in bed with my husband asleep beside me and imagine squeezing droplets of Visine into his coffee. A quick web search reveals the side effects of Visine ingestion to be: hypothermia, blurred vision, nausea and vomiting, difficulty in breathing or even a complete halt in breathing, elevating then dropping blood pressure, seizures and tremors, possible coma.
Describe a time you felt happy: As I’ve already told you, the pursuit of happiness has always to me felt a bit beside the point.


Responsibilities mothers have to their daughters? Be vigilant about her bathroom habits. Tell her why she is difficult to love, and coach her so that she will have an easy time finding a good man. I think we can both agree you’ve been taking in a few more calories than you need. You don’t have a fever, you’re just trying to get out of school. Why don’t you ever call your poor mother.

What should mothers teach daughters about fathers? He will judge you by the way you look. Keep that in mind as you pick your outfit in the morning. Compare every single boy you ever meet to your daddy. Nobody will love you like he does. Stop being ridiculous. If you don’t stop that, I’m going to leave you by the side of the road.

What are appropriate uses for knives? Carve a piece of flesh from your neck using a small knife made out of flint. Use the flesh to capture a brightly colored bird. Tie the knife to the bird’s leg using a golden thread and let it fly out the window.

How should a woman prepare herself to be ready to serve food? Strip yourself naked and wrap yourself in saran wrap. Or bubble wrap. I can never remember which. Whichever you have on hand, I suppose.

What cocktails should be served to people your husband is trying to impress? In summer, on the porch, upon arrival, Greyhounds, couldn’t be simpler, salt the rim and it’s a salty dog, the early evening light divided by the trees just so, the cut of the dress, the stocking shimmering, his hand, sweating, the glass, a grain of salt removed from lips by a corner of tongue.

Which desserts sure to impress? You know what I like to do? Sneak downstairs in the middle of the night, turning on as few lights as possible, walking on the balls of my feet, and dig a teaspoon into the butter, then into the sugar bag, before plunging it into my mouth.

Which parties do you wish you’d attended? The sweet sixteen Daddy threw for me. My junior and senior proms. That surprise twenty-first birthday party thrown by my sorority sisters. Kennedy’s inaugural ball. Bill and I’s wedding reception. My daughter’s ninth, tenth, sixteenth, and eighteenth birthdays. I suppose by eighteen she didn’t want me around anymore. No more use for poor old Maureen. Just use her up and throw her away. It’s alright. She doesn’t mind.

Why do you dislike your husband? None, my husband is wonderful, I couldn’t be happier if I tried.

Why do you dislike animals and children? The smell and the mess, of course, both stemming from the fact that neither has learned the proper
way to behave. It’s the lack of self control I can’t stand. If I’m being honest, animals are for eating, and children should be sent off to an island somewhere to be trained and returned to us sensible adults. Good god, my Rose was a terror. It’s a wonder I have any hair left at all.

- **What rules should be followed when decorating the interior of a house?** Make absolutely sure no one can tell you are living here. The bedspread, curtains, even the soap should be of the forget-tably pleasant flavor encountered in hotels.

- **What colors please you?** I used to love waking up at first light on some Virginia winter morning after a freeze when the cars sidewalks treetips cristalize and nothing moves and everything is safe.

- **What colors are inappropriate?** Every time I see a woman in a red dress I get the strongest feeling of nausea.

- **What creatures have achieved some semblance of nobility in spite of themselves?** Minks, Marmots, Malbecs.

- **What embarrassing things to do in church?** Last week I found myself deconstructing into sever-al versions of myself past, present, and hopeful, sitting side by side in the pew.

- **What are your skin care strategies?** Do you think that rumor about semen being a magical anti-wrinkle cream is true? I’ve always wondered about that.

- **For example, how is it possible to cry and remain lovely?** In the bathroom, door locked, lights off.

- **How should a woman behave?** A young woman should begin in her teens learning the things that keep a home running smoothly. She can watch how her mother cooks and bakes. There are also many opportunities for a daughter to observe how Mother handles Dad when he’s had a tough day at work.

- **Which fears are appropriate?** Amy Vanderbilt says: Social conventions can do very little to protect a girl really bent on getting into diffi-culties. In this case, a girl not out of her teens would do better to avoid dinner with a man unless others, considerably more mature than she, are present. A career girl, from her twenties onward, can accept such an invitation but should not stay beyond ten or ten-thirty. An old rule and a good one is “Avoid the appearance of evil.”

- **What things appear lovely but are not?** Weddings. Birthday parties. Little girl children.

- **How has your daughter ruined your life?** She refuses to accept the life I have given her. The life of a woman with a husband and children.

- **How do you view your place in the world?** The American housewife! Who has a more im-portant or more responsible occupation? Wife, mother, laundress, counselor, maid, chef, pur-chasing agent. All of these are her duties at one time or another.

- **What are your aspirations?** Mrs. Dale Carnegie says: If you have a job or career of your own, would you be willing to give it up if it would advance your husband’s interests? If not, you are more interested in promoting yourself than promoting your husband. Helping a man attain
success is a full-time career in itself. You can’t hope to do it unless it is important enough to claim all your attention.

- Who are you? I’m feeling quite tired now. Would you mind if I laid down for a while?

LeLa Scott MacNeil was born in Los Alamos, NM, same as the atomic bomb. She is the Sales Manager at the University of Arizona Press and teaches creative writing at the Writers Studio. Her work has been published in *Gertrude* and alongside Dennis Lehane in the Springsteen inspired noir anthology *Trouble in the Heartland.*
Fred, my landlord, needs my help installing a new alarm system. I got robbed the week before and he feels just awful about it. Just awful. He’s wearing black cargo shorts. He always does. That’s what he likes about Tucson. Always good for shorts. He owns the house next door too. His family owns half the block I live on. Been there for ages. His granddad founded the first bus line that would go south of the tracks. So there’s a few bus stations named after him.

I nod, not really listening, even though I like him. It’s a copper-bright morning, and I’m staring through the open window at a pomegranate that died last fall. I only get a few each year, and the birds knock most of them down, or they fall and get crushed into the dry sand. This one’s lingered on the tree since October. The birds split it open, but it never fell. They plucked and pierced the seeds, beaks stained ruby, and left the exterior to harden itself, to make itself firm, a little jagged near the edge.

I hold the alarm sensors in place and Fred marks where he needs to cut through the dull metal frame to make room. The sensors are plastic, cheap. One goes off. The tinny arrhythmic chirping is less vigorous crime deterrent and more a small-town doctor from ’97 just got a page that he will ignore until he finishes his lunch.

Are you still single? Yeah, I say. Guess I just haven’t met the right woman yet.

I don’t tell him about all the guys. There was Jesus, 40 pounds lighter than me, who asked, half-tears and half-rage, flat on his back, when I was mid-thrust if he was too fat for me. I shook my head.

Or Alex, who left his black mid-calf socks and his scapular on. Our Miniature Lady of Guadalupe decked out in sage green, staring dolefully down, away from me of course, eyes politely averted with her hands pressed together at her chest. She stuck to his sweaty back as he bucked and buckled in turn. She had darkened to jade by the time we were done.
Or Mark, from San Francisco. He took his socks off.

Or the one who asked if I had any food when we were done and so I warmed a slice of extra cheese extra sauce pepperoni. He soaked up the orange oil from the blue plate with his chewy crust and ate it all but he still wouldn't tell me his name.

Fred marks the frame, takes it down, and sets in with his hacksaw. He cuts a two-inch flap into the frame and bends it back, scattering a thimbleful of cobalt dust on the sill. It's a neat, tight hole that the alarm will occupy, barely noticeable from the outside.

I'm out to most people but I still get the occasion to lie about it once every 4 days or so. A friend from high school wants me to go on a “beer-and-senoritas” trip to Panama. A coworker asks which customers I think are hot. A stray cousin wants to know how my dating life is. My grandmother pulls me aside and wants to know, and she's not upset, she would never be upset, but she wants to know if she has a chance of great-grandchildren before she dies. Closets on closets on closets. That's what nobody tells you. It's closets all the way down.

Around guy number 11 a friend starts to call me the King of Non-monogamy, but that's a bit off. A-monogamy is more like it. Non- means refusal, a choice. A- means an absence, an inability, an impossibility. We knew that these were only ever intimacies abridged; 1-3 hours max, please, after supper, but early enough to still leave time for Netflixing alone before bed. Clean up after yourself and make sure to say thank you when you're done.

We rounded off our own corners. We bent ourselves back and made sure our spaces were easy to fit into.

Fred slides the screen frame back into place. Well, you know, some cute girls are moving into the place next door. He smiles—impish, well-meaning, and vicarious. Oh yeah, I say, how old are they?

I'll make it more than a week someday, maybe.

“Small Spaces” was originally published in Cutbank's “All Accounts and Mixture” series.
Gordon Hirabayashi, a citizen of the United States of America, was hitchhiking near Las Vegas when he stopped sleeping in highway ditches and instead began seeking out benches and awnings for cover. It wasn't the elements that got to him. He had slept in the open for about the first 1,000 miles of his 1,600-mile hitchhiking journey. He was en route from Seattle to Tucson, where, with the permission of the district attorney, he would voluntarily enroll himself in a federal prison camp.

He had been fine from Spokane to Pendleton to Boise to Salt Lake. Passing trucks would blast by him at 3am and he'd wake up, knees clacking together, teeth chattering, and he'd remember that he was lying prone in a wet ditch in Umatilla, Oregon, before drifting back to sleep.

He could handle the harassment. He was often stopped by police while hitchhiking, due to his race, and once had to beg a county sheriff for two hours not to arrest him. Drivers would pull over to offer him a ride, make some small-talk, and ask what part of China his family was from. Gordon would clarify that he was Japanese-American, not Chinese-American, and they'd spit or curse before kicking him out and driving off.

But the snakes? The snakes were too much. He had never lived in the desert. None of his family had ever lived in the desert. His parents had immigrated to the Pacific Northwest from their ancestral village in Nagano Prefecture, a tiny set of rice paddies in a perpetually wet forest at the base of the Japanese Alps. Gordon Hirabayashi was the first of his lineage to encounter desert reptiles, and he was too frequently surprised by them in the night to sleep well. The snakes were the first thing to come to his mind even as late as 1999—56 years after his 1943 cross-country trip—when he was interviewed by Cherstin Lyon, a University of Arizona historian, an oral history of Japanese-American internment camps.

Gordon Hirabayashi was a citizen of Japanese descent, and thus considered a wartime risk to the United States. Military leadership argued that Japanese-Americans posed a security threat to the United States. The concern was that they might rise up en masse, or engage in sabotage, or convey military secrets through coded letters, or...
damage morale, or somehow otherwise injure the
war effort. Wartime Executive Order 9066, signed
by President Roosevelt on February 19th, 1942, au-
thorized the containment and forcible relocation
to internment camps of all Americans of Japanese
ancestry or descent living on the West Coast. The
preferred government description of this process
was “evacuation”.

Ken Yoshida consistently balked at the term
“evacuee”—he felt it was inaccurate, an easy pro-
pagandizing gloss on the true nature of the camps.
He also balked at the word “internment” for the
same reasons. In his later years he spitefully insist-
ed that the relocation centers be called concentra-
tion camps.

Ken Yoshida was relocated to the Topaz War
Relocation Center in central Utah at the age of 18.
He recalled in a 1999 interview that the “evacu-
ee” housing in the Topaz camp was built entire-
ly from 2x4 posts and tar paper. The War Relo-
cation Authority poured a concrete foundation,
stuck wooden posts into it, ran enough boards
between each post for tar paper to cling to, and
called the resulting semi-open air construction a
barracks. The tar paper reflected a little bit of heat
and offered some shade. But it did nothing to offer
shelter from the sandstorms. Situated about 4,580
feet above sea level, the Topaz camp experienced
severe arid winds during most of the year. These
fronts would often gather dirt and sand with them
as they blasted across the desert landscape. A clear
sky in the camp could become the canvas for a
spawling tempest of whistling airborne sand and
rolling clouds of dull choking yellow dust over the
course of only a few hours. The tar paper did lit-
tle-to-nothing to offer shelter from these storms.
Yoshida was unable to see more than a few inches
in front of him during the storms, and he noticed
no difference between being inside the barracks
and outside of it in terms of shelter. The only op-
tion they had in the Topaz camp was to wait for
the storms to pass and the air to clear so that they
could breathe easily again.

The camps also featured stone watch towers,
barbed wire fences, and a complex postal address
system. The tar paper barracks were sectioned off
into apartments (each generally holding a sin-
gle family unit). Each apartment was assigned
an imaginary street name, block, and address,
giving the impression on paper that these Japa-
nese-American citizens were living in an ordinary
town rather than a collection of hastily-assem-
bled wind-battered shanties. Records from the
Japanese American Veterans Association about
the Topaz camp indicate that over the course of
the war detainees—using their own savings—im-
ported about 7,500 non-native trees and 10,000
non-native shrubs, in an effort to beautify their
surroundings and provide some shelter from
the harsh winds. These efforts didn’t work. The
non-native plants couldn’t handle the tempera-
ture extremes and alkaline soil, and very few of
them survived.

Food in the internment camps was rough and
often poorly-prepared. Camps dedicated to hold-
ing detainees considered to be a national security
risk due to reasons of race were low on the ration
priority list. Yoshida and other internees recall
that while they had the supplies to make good
bread their protein generally came from beef liv-
er, tongue, heart, horse meat, and salted herring.
The cooks—whether WRA staff or camp volun-
teer—were not well-trained, and often struggled
to render the tough, sinewy, metallic-tasting offal
into something even remotely palatable. Because
of this many internees supplemented their diet
with pickled vegetables, which they fermented on
their own in earthenware crocks and jars stowed away in their tar paper housing.

Armed guards patrolled the Topaz camp both night and day, and often fired warning shots at detainees who wandered too close to the camp perimeter. On April 11, 1943 James Wakasa was shot and killed by a guard. The military policemen insisted that Wakasa had been trying to escape the camp, but a later autopsy revealed that he was shot in the chest while facing the guard tower. The guard would be acquitted during a military investigation, and the War Relocation Authority would censor this news from the Topaz camp public announcements in order to prevent rioting.

When the draft registration board came for the young Japanese-American men in the camps Ken Yoshida refused, making himself one of the “no-no boys”. He would eventually be tried for draft evasion, convicted, sentenced, and shipped off to the same prison camp Gordon was en route to.

Ed was a smiling, perennially mustachioed anthropologist working in the Sonoran Desert of Mexico at the outbreak of the war. Spicer was in his late-30s, and his career was on the upswing. He had taught at the University of Chicago but relocated to the southwest in the late 30s—a way of easing his lifelong battle with tuberculosis, which had left him with a constant cough and a propensity for secondary infections. The recipient of a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, Spicer worked with his wife among the Yaqui people of Sonora, content to live with his subjects and publish writings on a population that had previously been ignored.

But global war wreaked havoc on the international academy. East Asia had been dangerous and unstable for years. Imperial Japan had been on the march since ’31 and foreigners who stayed in China, Manchuria, and Mongolia risked becoming a faceless body in one of many civilian massacres. The European university system was paralyzed as the Nazis worked westward, and where it was left functional it was reduced to a hollow puppet for racial ideology. Even researchers in relatively safe areas—like Mexico—faced difficulties as the US entered the war. Research funds either disappeared or were frozen until the end of the war. Visas in some places were revoked, and malingering foreigners were looked on with intense suspicion. Ed and his wife were forced to return to the US before finishing their research. Without any other options he took up a position with the War Relocation Authority as a Community Analyst at the Poston Relocation Center. He had no particular knowledge or expertise with regards to either the sociological process of relocation or with regards to the Japanese-American community. But the War Relocation Authority was desperate for help, and Ed was desperate for a job. He lived and worked at Poston during the war. Afterwards, he took a position with the University of Arizona.

While Gordon Hirabayashi was hitchhiking to Tucson Ed Spicer was settling in to his new job as a community analyst—a sociology attaché of sorts—at the Poston Relocation Center in western Arizona. His chief responsibility was to report on the material, social, and cultural conditions the internees faced, so that the government might better handle the relocation process. The Poston camp was one of the largest built by the War Relocation Authority, coming in at 71,000 acres (the biggest in terms of physical space) and 17,000 residents (the third most populous camp, and also the third largest settlement in the state of Arizona at the time). Del Webb, a Jewish-American contractor and co-owner of the New York Yankees, needed only a little over a month to build the camp. Del would later go on to apply the techniques he learned from the Poston job to a variety of Arizona developments, including the retirement community of Sun City.
and donated his collected wartime papers to the university archives.

In 1970 Ed Spicer would publish, through the University of Arizona Press, an anthropological excoriating of the internment process entitled *Impounded People*. *Impounded People* details the struggles the Japanese-American community faced and the way they, as a group, responded to the dangers of internment. It does not, however, use the word “*I*” in reference to the internment staff anywhere in the text. Ed Spicer preferred his condemnations to remain indirect, lingering behind a veil of scientific neutrality.

**Although Gordon deliberately evaded relocation by hiding out for most of 1942 at a YMCA in Seattle, his family 20 miles south of the city was relocated to a large detainment center in Fresno, California.** The site had previously been a racetrack with a set of stables. When his family arrived they found a vast city of tents. Row after row of surplus military-grade tents were lodged into square plots of fresh black asphalt, each large enough to hold at most a small family. Gordon recalled receiving numerous letters from his mother complaining about the heat—temperatures peaked around 120 degrees in the tent city. This rendered the asphalt soft, messy, and pliable; cots sank into it and shoes often stuck to it. When the heat was particularly bad Gordon's mother would line the cot's frame with wet newspaper, slide into the tiny cramped space underneath it, and suck in what damp air she could before the blistering heat of central California turned the wet newspaper back into dry crinkles of text.

Gordon's mother cried when the relocation order first came. She told her family that it was wrong, that it was unjust, that it was part of a long tradition of vicious racism, and that it wasn't fair that they were denied due process and the rights of citizenship—but that it was unavoidable. She had pleaded Gordon to come with them and to obey the relocation order because she was terrified that if he didn't she would never see him again. She broke down in tears and begged her son to reconsider his decision to resist. She wanted to keep the family together, and she wanted to keep Gordon alive. There was no immediate precedent for how authorities would interpret his refusal to obey the relocation order. Depending on what jurisdiction it fell under and how vigorous the assigned prosecutor was he could have been charged with anything from disturbing the peace to treason—which, at the time, could have landed him in front of a firing squad or in an electric chair. Both Gordon and his mother knew this very well, but he was firm in his commitment. Gordon Hirabayashi absolutely would not obey the relocation order, no matter the risks.

He was remarkably tenacious in his resistance. When the relocation order came he spent several weeks hiding out in a YMCA room with a few conscientious objectors. Escaping police detection was relatively easy; after the Japanese-American population was forcibly relocated the local authorities mostly assumed that any remaining Asian-Americans were of Chinese descent. However, Gordon became increasingly concerned that he would expose the Y to possible treason charges if he were apprehended, and so he resolved to turn himself into the FBI, as a form of passive resistance:

*When it becomes a certain deadline when all the Japanese are gone, well, what am I doing around? So, if I stayed at the University YMCA dorm, beyond that point, the day after, the Y could be accused of harboring a law violator, or described in a most sinister way as a potential spy or whatever they wanted to say, and I didn't want the Y to be accused of that. They had nothing to*
do with it. And rather than have them be embarrassed like that, I talked with my Quaker legal advisor, a lawyer. We agreed that the best thing to do was to go to the FBI and turn myself in, saying, I can’t abide by your regulation. I don’t think it’s fair, and I am of Japanese ancestry, but ancestry is not a crime. And if you want to accuse me of something, go ahead, and I will try to defend myself.

Gordon was jailed in Seattle and tried in a district court. He faced two charges: violating curfew orders (which had preceded the internment orders) and violating military zone exclusion orders (how the internment orders were phrased in court proceedings—not as being detained, but as being “excluded” from a protected military zone which now encompassed the entire West Coast). The prosecutor subpoenaed both his mother and father to testify as to Gordon’s Japanese ancestry. As witnesses, they were held in the same jail where Gordon was imprisoned. Gordon was outraged—he wrote furious letters to the authorities demanding that his parents be held in a hotel or in the house of a deputized civilian. They had committed no crimes—they had voluntarily complied with the relocation order and they had voluntarily complied with the subpoena to testify against him. There was no reason for them to be held in a jail. But the district attorney refused to make other accommodations, and Gordon’s parents remained in the jail for the duration of the trial.

The trial was straightforward: Gordon’s lawyers argued that the racially-motivated restrictions were unconstitutional, and the prosecution argued that they weren’t. Judge Lloyd L. Black gave clear instructions to the jury:

You can forget all the talk about the Constitution by the defense. What is relevant here is the public proclamation issued by the Western Defense Command. You are to determine this: is the defendant a person of Japanese ancestry? If so, has he complied with the military curfew and exclusion orders, which are valid and enforceable laws? It is your duty to accept the laws as stated by the Court, despite any opinion of your own that the law should be different. If it is so, you are instructed to return a finding of guilty, and if you will not, you are violating your oath.

Gordon was convicted.

He appealed this decision all the way to the Supreme Court, arguing that racially-based relocation orders were inherently unconstitutional. In the same session the court also heard the case of *Yasui v. United States*, an appeal brought by Minoru Yasui, another wartime relocation resister. Yasui’s legal strategy was more conservative than Hirabayashi’s; his lawyers didn’t use race as the basis for appeal but instead citizenship. If the Supreme Court agreed, then it would mean the relocation orders were unconstitutional when applied to United States citizens such as Yasui and Hirabayashi—but not unconstitutional when applied to people like Hirabayashi’s parents, who despite being permanent residents were legally barred from applying for citizenship.

The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the relocation orders in both cases. The rulings were released on the same day: June 21, 1943. The decisions were both unanimous on the part of the Supreme Court. The majority decisions were authored by Chief Justice Harlan F. Stone, although several justices wrote their own concurring opinions. After the war Harlan F. Stone did not express regret for these decisions. He was, however, highly critical of the Nuremberg trials, and felt that those proceedings constituted an unjust act of jurisprudential fraudulence.

Gordon’s conviction posed a unique problem for the Seattle district attorney: what to do with this one delinquent Japanese-American? The dis-
trict attorney considered letting Gordon languish in a small prison cell in Seattle, but Gordon persuaded him to let him go to a detention or work camp in exchange for serving a longer sentence. But all the other Japanese-American residents of the state had been relocated to the camps already, and the district attorney was adamant that there was no money in the travel budget for the reloca-
tion of a single Japanese-American citizen.

And so they arrived at a compromise: the dis-
trict attorney would give Gordon a letter detailing the situation, and Gordon would peacefully hitch-
 hike to a prison camp for wartime objectors in the Catalina Mountains, about 30 miles north of Tuc-
son, Arizona. The district attorney was particularly pleased with this arrangement, largely because it absolved his office of all logistical and financial responsibility. As Gordon recalled the DA’s words:

Oh, if you want to go on your own, I’ll even write a letter for you, so if somebody interferes, you can show them the letter that I’m on an au-
 thorized mission to get to the prison camp.

This was how Gordon found himself in a ditch outside Umatilla, Oregon. A certain Quaker sense of honesty and responsibility had settled in Gor-
don Hirabayashi during his teenage years. Even late in his life he would recall, with a mixture of amusement and respect, the unwavering honesty of his father Shungo. It is common for farm-
ers to place their best produce—the brightest, the greenest, the most lush—on top of the package and their worst produce—the brown, the mis-
shapen, the underride—at the very bottom, where purchasers couldn’t see it. Shungo Hirabayashi found this practice abominable. He insisted that his lettuce be packed such that each package was of the same quality all the way down. This did not improve his sales. Gordon had a phrase for it—ba-
ka-shojiki, honest to a ridiculous extent. He used it to describe himself as well, like when he noted that his decision to hitchhike through the inter-
mountain West during a period of gas rationing, all to enroll himself in a prison camp as a form of non-violent resistance, took “a certain stupidity.”

Gordon remembered the night spent in the ditch outside Umatilla as the most challenging of his life. Unable to sleep, he began to meditate, and begged the Big Dipper for aid: “Dear star, will you always keep me close to the real values of life? Keep me strong so that I may live in spite of con-
temporary lack of understanding? Bring me the charm that will bring understanding to others, the understanding of the beauties and fullness of real living?”

This essay is excerpted from Ancestry Is Not A Crime, a book of narrative nonfiction which reconstructs the historical experiences of Japanese-Americans who resisted internment during WWII.

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plores the intersections of identity and author-
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torical intersections of queer sexualities, social authority, and religion. Will currently serves as the Managing Editor of Essay Daily, and has previously served as the Editor-in-Chief of Sonora Review and on the editorial staff of Fairy Tale Review. He tweets on occasion: @ wjaslattery.
I buy the ice cream cone because I want a cold treat, but by the time I hit the underpass on my way west out of town the heat has cracked off the chocolate dip, folding it into my mouth, and what’s left underneath is a white phallus, tongue-slicked into perfect shape. I grin. And deep-throat it. The way I do. The way I always have, since I first did by accident on the train out of Chicago some time in middle school, heading back to the suburbs, sitting next to my suited father in the ill green light of the Metra. I slid the long cone of cream deep into my soft mouth and drew it slowly out. I licked around and around and around its sides, plunged it back in. Then my father leaned over to hiss at me, “Stop, the businessmen are staring.”

“What,” I said. And I meant it, for an instant. Then I felt the color draw into my cheeks. And looked around. What I was tasting was so sweet.

West out of town means the Tucson Mountains, parabolas of dust and cliff. Out here, the warm pavement crumbles to gravel. The car bends through the last dusty strip malls and pops up over a ridge of saguaro cacti. White ice cream drips down my hands; I lick my fingers. I lick at the soft bow of flesh between my fingers, I lick my sticky palm.

This is what happens when I’ve just had sex for the first time in a while: I get lit. My body will not shut up, wants more. I’ve come to the desert to concentrate, to read a book I needed to finish weeks ago. I’ve got to get out of the house, because we know what happens when a girl stays in the house.

What always has.

What always has since I became friends with Lexi Alexander in the sixth grade, since we spent summer nights in the air conditioned cold of her parents’ basement office signed into AOL chat rooms. She taught me to “cyber,” to type dirty things, to give dirty and get dirty in return, whoever it was out there, who they said they were, or maybe not.

A/S/L? we said. Age, sex, location? Were these really men with pants at their knees, or were they middle school boys like we were middle school boys...
girls, tittering, crossing our legs?

It was my favorite thing. The gutteral clicking and grinding sound of the modem, as it struggled to connect. The way we pretended to be just pretending. There was a language I was learning there. Once my parents got a second landline and I had my own AOL account, Aryn sent me a picture of six, seven middle-aged men, their faces red, their dicks out, and one slender woman lying beneath all those hard cocks. Cocks in her hands and mouth and cunt. And after I’d looked and looked and looked, I went downstairs to one of the poles that held up the basement ceiling, and I held myself up by the crossbar and slid myself along the pole until I got that feeling. Pumping, my legs wrapped around the concrete.

It was a wildness in me, the way I needed this, the way I went back again and again. There was a magnet in my body that drew pleasure towards it.

But listen, I’ve lied, this did not start then. There is no start. I’ve been humping things as long as I’ve been conscious.

YESTERDAY I FUCKED a married man. Have I graduated? He is a military intelligence officer.

AT MY FAVORITE TRAILHEAD, the mountains round and swoop like a woman lying on her side. Cliffs drop off her back. The only sound is the high-pitched worrying of gambel’s quail in the brush.

I ditch my car, the only one in the lot, and follow the dry wash a few curves into the canyon. There’s a shelf in the rock about six feet up that I clamber to, taking out a dewy water bottle. For hours, I read, heat radiating up into my belly through the rock. A few people pass with their dogs, paws crashing into the sand. The light shifts, goes warm against the cliff walls. Then the light goes down.

At some point, I text the man I have just fucked, who is on a training base two hours away. Yesterday, you could not have told me to drive an hour or two for sex. It is the end of the school year, when papers are due and my grading stack piles up, and I’m leaving the country in a week. Yesterday, I would have said I was busy. Now, I am texting the offer to drive halfway, saying we could get a hotel room or fuck somewhere in public. I take a deep breath, put the phone away.

In the dark, the owls hoot at each other from opposite sides of the canyon. I can see one settle onto the crown of a saguaro, then swoop, big wings outstretched, to the next. A black whoosh. A bulk of a shadow. Backlit by the moon, I can see how she leans forward to hoot, flipping her tail feathers down for balance. Her body rocks when she hoots, hoo-HOO. My phone buzzes. The Military Intelligence Officer’s wife isn’t sure right now, he says. She is in Georgia, the last place they were stationed. She thinks she doesn’t want him to have sex with anyone again until she can. I feel myself slump in disappointment, or maybe desperation. Not about him in particular but for the sex, this brief burst of pleasure. The day before, I’d made him cum too quickly by bucking.

These hips don’t lie, etc.

He sends me a picture of his penis, draped flaccid onto his eased-down athletic shorts: a consolation prize.

“Enjoy that while it’s out for me,” I tell him.

THE THING ABOUT THIS MAN IS, I don’t really even like him. At lunch the day before, at a downtown restaurant where we sat by the long glass windows and slowly ate salads, I actually thought I might kill him. He was one of those people who had to be right. He talked a lot. He had a funny half-smile he used when he said inflammatory things, as though his being cute, being gap-toothed, could
take me off my intellectual guard. Everything I said he needed to tweak, to correct. The bizarre opinions he held are not of importance here. I became blank and drank a lot of water. I tried to determine whether or not, once he shut up, the sex would be good.

I did not invent the Hate Fuck, which makes me feel better about this.

At that point, it had been just over two months since I’d had sex. This was not the worst sex drought I’ve experienced. Not by far. Still, I admit an edge of desperation. There is a kind of madness that sweeps over me when I have been celibate between six and eight weeks, an irritating, distracting hunger, a skin need. It becomes nearly impossible to get my work done. I sometimes pay for a massage, just to feel someone’s hands on my body. If the buildup reaches five months, I begin to make terrible decisions.

So while a younger, more romantic version of myself might have walked out, I waited. Online, our exchange had been marked by clear communication, the directness I prefer. It seemed entirely possible the sex itself would be good, and that was the point. Not lunch. One’s lunch-conversation skills do not appear to be particularly correlated with one’s skills in the sack.

Besides, this is how it goes now. The single men my age are picked over. The ones on the websites whom I meet for a drink are disagreeable, unattractive. I wonder if this is how I am viewed, too, on the cusp of thirty. I joke with my friends that I won’t get to date seriously again until the first round of divorces.

In the meantime, I seem to be star pickings for married men. The ones who’ve been with their partners ten years or more, who stopped sleeping with each other, or who almost broke up out of infidelity. For these couples—working out their definitions of openness, cracking their relationships to accommodate sex in new ways—I am something of a unicorn. Willing to sleep with men with wives. Willing to step into these secret arrangements, intended to infuse new energy into old patterns. Willing to replace, for all of us, what has quietly slipped away.

Some of my friends give me horrified looks when I say the word “married.”

This particular married man, monitored by no less than the United States government, gave me a fake name online, used a fake town. His picture, though certainly him, looked like a different him. Mildly irritating, but I understood. “If the military finds out you’re having extramarital relations, you lose your job,” he told me.

“Even consensual?” I said.

“Yeah, they consider everything an affair,” he said.

“Like a Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell for straight people,” I said.

Which is to say that my friends are not the only ones who conceive of marriage as an immutable thing. An immutably monogamous thing.

Some of them shake their heads, saying, “I could never.” Meaning they could never do what I am doing. Others narrow their eyes and ask how I know, definitively, that the second person in the marriage has really consented to the arrangement. Often, the wife’s accompanying profile on OkCupid provides reassurance. Sometimes it’s the way a man answers these questions—the specificity of his answers.

With the anonymity of the internet, though, it’s frankly more likely a married man simply wouldn’t tell me he’s married. So in some way, I tell my friends, the fact that he even brings up his wife is a tally in his favor.

Which is all beside the point. What makes people more nervous, I think (even with the wife’s consent squared away), is the foundation of such
a relationship. To sleep with men already com-
mitted to someone else is to affirm our right to
sexual pleasure. There can be no other rationale.
To fuck a man who cannot vow his emotional
support, who will not meet one's family, who may
not even be a friend, nods to the primacy of the
body. To the body's set of needs beyond our sys-
tems of morality. The needs exist whether we are
married or not, although I think many of us like
to believe that exchanging “I do’s” will somehow
shift this essential nature. It does not. And if I am
not encountering men I want to commit to—if
the men before me are simply not those who echo
back the life I am building, and if I believe that as
a body I need and deserve sex—a married man is
no different from any other.

What I did like was his thighs, stocked with
muscle, and the light hair barely visible beneath
the collar of his shirt. What I liked was that gap in
his teeth. He paid the check. And after that, when
he caught my hand in a public park on the way
back to our cars, when he leaned over and gently
kissed me, when he asked me where I would like
to go, tilting his head, something trembled inside
me. I took him to my house.

Back in the wash, night settles. Owls. The flutish,
descending song of canyon wrens. Stars brighten-
ing. The rock ledge, radiating heat. Bats flutter
over the wash. Some bird makes a kind of vibrat-
ing sound, high-pitched, almost electronic. Then
my phone buzzes. It is a picture of his erect cock.

There are two stories here, one in which I get
wet in a canyon and lie down on the warm rock
and slip my fingers into my swollen self, or one in
which I watch the owls. Both stories are true, al-
though perhaps both can be exaggerations, too—
stories I tell to characterize myself for different
audiences. For between those afternoons in Lexi’s
finished basement and this buzzing cellphone, I
have been many different people.

The owls, in some way, represent the life I
wanted as a young woman, a sort of quiet exis-
tence, romantic and velvet-dark, in which sex was
a component of love. In which sex was making
love, unfurling quietly and slowly, with meaning,
on thin air mattresses beneath the stars.

How does one go from this sweetness to the
woman who fucks married men she does not
much like? I can only say that first, it went the
other way. How did the cybering girl become so
sweet, locked down? Culture had its way with me.
The girl who loved cybersex did not go anywhere
but inside, hidden behind heavy layers. For years,
I could sense sex moving inside me, giant and hot,
pulsing against the gates, and I did my best to put
it away—through judgment, through restriction,
using No as my measure of success. This, I know,
is an old story. But what is buried sears its way
through. If I go back to the beginning, none of
this is surprising.

We assume these things do not go together, the
owls and the fingers wandering south, but as Sallie
Tisdale writes, “the planet itself is laden with sex,
marbled with my physical and psychic responses
to its parts, made out of my relationship with its
skin.” She says, “How we are rooted to the earth
through our bodies determines how we see oth-
er bodies, and ultimately the earth itself.” What I
think Tisdale means is that the romantic pleasure
I take from this dusk—the depth of my presence,
the sharpness of the details I take in—is not at all
different from the way I enjoy my own body, the
bodies of others. Which is to say, I am no less ro-
mantic than I used to be—only more openly other
things, too.

On the hike out, I walk with my headlamp off,
fumbling by starlight. Even with my bad knee I
can pick my way through the sand over the rock. In the side pocket of my hiking pack, my phone buzzes. He came.

I was not raised by swingers or prostitutes, but by midwestern Methodists sincere in the idea that sex is appropriate only in the context of marriage—or at the very least love. To be fair, my parents, married for more than thirty years, are the kind of couple who make this seem easy. Growing up, my parents kissed in front of us. They spoke gently. They laughed. They compromised, each of their lives fashioned in balance with the other’s. As a teenager, a friend of mine—whose parents fought bitterly—confessed that my parents alone were her model for a healthy love.

Still, I have begun to wonder whether my parents’ devotion to the sincerity of sex was perhaps just what they believed to be the correct parenting line. No doubt it was an ethics supposed to prevent my own pain and confusion. Perhaps like any good parents, they hoped to usher their daughters, three of them in total, through young adulthood without the kind of mess that sex can inspire—a stew of self-esteem concerns, infection, and potential pregnancy. For this, I cannot fault them.

But as a grownup I’ve begun to hear stories, and I’m realizing that even my parents likely diverged from love-based sex at some point. Why, then, steer me so intensely toward the idea of abstinence until marriage? Were their own sexual experiences outside wedlock negative? Have they, afterwards, categorized them negatively because they feel like they’re supposed to, while attending to the memories privately with nostalgia or a wry amusement? I wonder how many of us are pretending we fit, holding publicly to different moral standard, while pursuing (or stumbling into) our true interests. As Christopher Ryan and Calcida Jetha discuss in *Sex At Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships*, if we all pretend we don’t have—or want—sex outside the common narrative, the common narrative remains: as a thick, muscled force that makes people question their desires, their “normalcy.” How damaging this is depends on the way someone experiences such secret desires, the way they judge their own ability (or inability) to deny such cravings. Years ago, I carried a toxic shame, spitting hot judgment at others, out of my anger towards myself. While of course there are those who truly want what’s considered “normal,” those people are not me. And so it is critical to me that I honor these desires, that I fumble my way towards them. I learn how this works; I find my way into strange spaces with strange men. I set my own boundaries, I check my intuition. And in the end, I get myself quite happily fucked.

The wife changes her mind. We meet halfway, at the Shell Station beside the main junction of a tiny town. When I pull up next to his red car, he looks over, grins. We meet in the space between our cars and kiss like we love each other. He taps his pelvis into mine.

“There’s law enforcement all over this town,” he says when he pulls back. “Border Patrol, Sheriffs… could actually be hard to find a spot.”

“We could try for a pullout somewhere,” I said. “These are rural roads.”

“Could,” he says. He shrugs. Then he glances into the back of my car. “Oh, your seat’s even down,” he says. “Your car may be dirty, but it’s got more room. You have a blanket.”

“I do, indeed, have a blanket,” I say. I grabbed it because I had a feeling this would happen.

“Dirty, but with character,” he nods.
We head south in my station wagon, around the bend from the pizza place, through the bulk of the vineyards. The grasslands are shining a sharp white in this dry season, in this late afternoon light. He’s telling me why he’s hungover this time. It seems he’s always hung over. He tells me about all the military guys razzing this one other guy, who’s into Jesus, who’s into monogamy. They were telling him he should find some sluts with them tonight, because there’s things you can do with those sluts that you wouldn’t want to do with your wife because you’d degrade her. They were kidding, he says, they just wanted a rise out of this guy—but I kind of hate him for even joking like this. The words roll a little too easily off his tongue. The Jesus guy, he said, left with two “morbidly obese” women. “Someone’s gonna have a guilt hangover tomorrow,” he sings. I laugh hollowly. I focus on the road.

If I were true to one part of myself, I couldn’t be true to another part. Which is to say, if I want to fuck this man in five minutes, it’s a good idea to be amenable.

We turn onto a few dirt roads, thinking we’ll pull over, but they deliver us to someone’s house. We turn back. We try again. We coast one rise after another, trying to calculate the likelihood of traffic. The car chatters over washboard. The main thing is, we don’t want to get arrested.

He is my first married man, or the first I have actually fucked. The others, professors and post-docs in the earth sciences, caught me at a particularly tender time, when I craved partnership and love too much. We went on long, meandering dates, sometimes awkward, in which I drank Irish coffees late at night and tried to decide whether or not there was chemistry as the men scooted closer to me near the bar. And if there was chemistry, I had to ask myself if I could swallow the fact of the wives. Sometimes I could not.

You understand, to connect to them too much was dangerous. They were married men. I build dikes around the edges of my own desire, to direct the waters: these suitable candidates for love, these not. The ideal was always that someone would be Such A Good Friend, while also containing some disqualifying factor. Something to steady the heart. The ideal was that once the dynamics were established, I wouldn’t have to worry about things growing the wrong direction.

More often, though, I allowed myself to sleep with men for whom I felt just the right level of contempt. Some combination of flaring arousal and disgust. Men with whom I could chat enough, men with whom I could laugh enough. Men about whom I could say, “Of course not!” to my friends, and still fuck the shit out of them.

Contempt is not a word we like. Contempt means disregard for, disrespect for. Contempt finds one beneath consideration. Contempt finds one deserving of scorn.

To act out of contempt initially inspired self-loathing, a warm, sickening rush of shame. Even as someone leaned in to kiss me, I was dismissing them, and this seemed unforgiveable, I think because I bought into the idea that there are only two kinds of relationships in this world: those grounded in a sort of perfect love, and those that are not (that should, accordingly, be disbanded immediately, or hastily cleaned up, atoned for).

Now, I see that even my friendships contain moments of distance. I do not mean to say that the contempt we contain, which flares in us, need always be visible to others or acted upon, but I do know that its existence can be of use. The kind of contempt I am praising is but a sliver, a powerful small thing, which holds a space, preventing inap-
appropriate enmeshment. (Too much contempt, of course, and one simply does not call.)

These men, too, dismiss me. If our relationship is to be just sex, they necessarily must acknowledge what I am not. Contempt is a marker of the kind of situation where such a delicate balance is possible. If not the foggy risk of love, the creeping risk of hate. In a body such as mine—insistent, hungry, clear in its requests—if I am to have sex more than once a year, I will inevitably be confronting one or the other of these potential imbalances.

What is easy to forget is the way bodies grow tenderness. We like to think that humans arrive at a kiss only when tenderness is already present, grown from emotional encounters or situational closeness. But in fact a kiss can grow tenderness, as though from a seed. Do not confuse the presence of contempt with the absence of kindness. With men like this one, especially. The tenderness of the body calms my reactivity toward him. It draws a kind of sweetness out of us, it builds an intimacy from our very tissues. From the touch of mouth to neck, from hand to hip. We lie together afterwards, leg over leg, and laugh about small things, relieved, drawn into mutual sweetness.

We fuck with a tender contempt. Or we fuck tenderly, and contempt mediates.

We climb over a rise, and then, what I want to see: a Forest Service sign. I have a right, like any American, to fuck on public land. I pull the car over. Its front faces a ranch with a big two-story cabin-style house. He seems nervous. I am thrilled.

I’d pictured us making out outside the car in the wind, to build more heat, but he wants to get right into the hatchback. I acquiesce, stepping out of my cowboy boots, spreading the blanket onto the scratchy grey floor of the folded-down seats.

I lean down, to slip open his buttons with both hands and mouth.

He fucks me in the hatchback. It has to be a hundred degrees in there, the sun pouring through the windows. Sweat pools in grey drops on his forehead. Only one falls on me before he brushes them away with the back of his hand. Our bodies slide around on each other. I hold his hips against me. Finally his face clenches. It is over. The windows of the car are fogged. “Like Titanic,” I say, moving like I’ll run my hand down the wet window, and he rolls his eyes.

“If you’d said that during, I’d have killed you.”

We crack the doors. Fresh, cool wind pours over our bodies. We are dry in moments.

“It’s so nice not to have to put in extra effort,” he says as we drive back to town. And I laugh.

“Yes,” I say. He puts his hand on my thigh.

I could have used an orgasm, but I don’t actually care. I’m leaving the country at the end of the week; his training will end and he’ll move to Seattle. I suspect we’ll never see each other again. I love that this does not concern me.

On the way home, I buy jalapeno chips at the Shell Station and crunch loudly on them while I drive. I lick my fingers and absorb the salt. I feel delicious. I feel amazing. The whole valley is coated in perfect desert light, the high rolling hills covered in a white sheen.
Tucson, where she earned her MFA at the University of Arizona. She is at work on two book projects: *Mountains In My Body*, which traces the global supply chain of her implanted cardiac defibrillator, and *Strange Gifts of the Body*, a sexual autobiography. She is a Certified Sexologist, teaching in a narrative medicine pilot at the University of Arizona’s College of Medicine and facilitating intimate creative writing classes that help writers engage experiences of sexuality, illness, and trauma on the page. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and most recently appeared in *The Colorado Review, Fourth Genre, Cutbank, The Indiana Review, Essay Daily,* and *The High Country News.*
I'm thinking. I'm thinking how to write. I'm thinking how to write how to write.

KEEP SAYING THE WORD EMPIRE

It is easy to speak of the politics of body or the body as unconscious or the unconscious as language. The body as geography or text. When the desert monks turned their bodies into books they literally starved. The body is not a house but if it were I’d be an industrial chicken coop. I’m talking sexy time. I haven’t read a novel in over a year. Ha ha. I just remembered novels exist. It’s very simple to say the body is interpellated by power. Outdent downstairs. It’s harder with the history of defeats. It's harder when I'm bored by your mixed drinks. Against book worship. Let’s think of the body as a Venn diagram. Two grassy fields and a crumbled wall. A pile of hangers. A hanging. A history of defeats.
We heard a 500 year squeal from the woods. Aliens did not exist before this moment. The agents fill the walls of the house. Will they forget. Will they touch the walls and speak. The house is one grey beetle. I will close all the doors in my house. Carry through it this grey body. The body conceived as medical apparatus or in its conservation pathological. How absolutely tiny I feel just before I wake and cough from my mouth a beetle. Doors can't be opened. Cops can't be killed. A ringing. All noises emitted ring and then things not emitting they ring. Rocks patter against the window but it's just rain. All night people yelling from nowhere in particular.

The city shivers and I do. A urinal flushing endlessly I videotaped for you.
FROM NOTHING

It was inert and then it moved upward

It was moving upward and then it moved downward

It was moving downward and then it stopped

It was street thin

Limb spread   Rejointed

The trap of organic unity

That feelings are a trap

That words are no object     Words settle

Into empty places in objects

A robbed bank

Nothing at the center of a thing

A failure to overthrow the state and in doing so

The state reveals its weakness

The people are the guide     And already among them

Flowers growing out of bodies

Poetry professors     Learn the injunction

Serve the people
When will you leave your room. They’ve been calling to you. Nevertheless. Life is no organic unity. How are these connected? The birds. The kids. The genetic abnormalities. How have you grown so tall. Your feet. Driving worms up from the soil. This is the next step. Now we can’t be killed. A boy kneeling in a barn. The birds aren’t controlled. It’s the worms. The worms aren’t controlled. It’s the boy. When I said I was pulled from the ground I meant it.

When I am in the air I see all they have. A bar for prying open rooms. Around the mouth the hanging things. The gorgeous mouth of the agents. Oh desire. Biological determinism and cavity of the world. It’s like this: all night outside the blood of a bird pearls the sand. And I like it. Wondering if to taste the thing is why you’re sad.
THROUGH NOTHING

A house with no doors
leading to any room

But I know there
Are many rooms

Non-organic culture
Merely

What is built
Can be destroyed

The future
Is back

A human does
Not change

The world around
Changes, wilds itself

Becomes tree or
Then shadow of tree

The world a partially
Obscured face

Then the human
Changes

It’s like that
Explains Scully

Mulder says you are in
The world even

When you are not
No she says there

Is no comforting
Void behind

The phenomenal
A materialist knows

Only difference and
The difference is the world
The experiment

The agents went into the woods and put Michelle in a hole. They left her there feeling very alive. A discrete beginning and end. Scully said have you ever thought seriously about dying.

It was time for our experiment.

We led many into the forest. The union organizers are safe. The investigative journalists are safe. Very few others.

We brought also rope and stakes and night vision cameras. It was time and circle of what we hoped to catch. Something fine and brittle passed across my lips. I looked up through the flora. We left the mass.

The woods worked for years and, just when we’d forgotten about our experiment, finally pushed something out.

Is this what we are left with. A pile of clothes in the grass. A grain silo, a person. Who gets abducted and who gets returned becomes clearer. The agents say no one is safe. It is not so. They want it to be so. It’s come to this. A pile of each other beside the road. And the light so much later. Punctured the trees. Burning a circle around the agents. Makes real the bridge from which we are lifted. A kid shaking and lifting. His strings like worms. On TV people cry blood and it looks so good. I’m always waiting for it. Drying. I lift my arms in the air. What I leave behind. Red as a mouth.

Liam Swanson is a graduate of the University of Arizona MFA program. His writing and research focuses on pop culture, aesthetic theory, and left politics; his thesis is a collection of poems that function as X-Files fan fiction, with all the generative political and erotic slippages and involutions associated with the genre. Liam’s work has appeared, among elsewhere, in Cabildo Online, Sonora Review, Platypus Review, Cloud Rodeo, New Delta Review, and Cartridge Lit, and he has poems forthcoming in DIAGRAM.
My friend Roshelle’s been building a time machine in her garage for the last eight years. She says that people get into the time travel business for just the one reason, most of the time: they love someone who died. Traditional time machine construction materials: ivory, platinum, cardboard, microwaves. There’s a pattern, she says. The extravagant rare and the exaggeratedly mundane. Because what else would be capable of getting someone from point B to point A?

Roshelle collects uranium glassware. Under ultraviolet light, it glows green. Lots of people think it’s fake. Too on-point, that shade. She knows all about Hiroshima, White Sands, Chernobyl. I asked her, once, if that was what she wanted to go back and see. She said that doing time and space is a different can of worms entirely. Common misconception. One or the other, though — that’s not so outlandish.

Roshelle said, “The passenger compartment isn’t a true cockpit, yet, Annie. I’ll rectify that on the next pass. But for now, that means that the operator has to stay out here.”

And, “Do you really think I’d let anything happen to you?”

And, “Don’t you know how much I envy you?”

And, “This is your chance.”

We’re neighbors. I bought the house when I turned twenty-one. I didn’t know what else to do. I’d just gotten all the settlement money and it seemed like, well, I’m done with college, I can check that off the list — and what’s next, right, on the trajectory? You get married, you have kids, you adopt a dog and you take up beekeeping or whatever. But I’m not so good-looking and I don’t talk much and I live in a red state and most of it just wasn’t going to happen. The house, though, that I could do. It’s got three bedrooms, two baths. It’s got this big airy kitchen, which is what kitchens are supposed to be. And now I know how to do all this other stuff. I can handle the plumbing, I can clean gutters. And there’s this big backyard
with oak trees and boulders and a pond. I got
chickens.
That’s how I finally met Roshelle. The neigh-
bors on the other side kept phoning in noise
complaints, so when Roshelle showed up on my
doorstep I assumed that’s what it was about—like,
do you really need a rooster? But she was actually
after one of the hens. It’d be real humane, she said.
She didn’t want to make the jump all the way up
to cats without at least testing the chicken-waters.
She’d pay me the cost and then some.
We didn’t see each other at all in 2003 or 2006.
I mean that. Usually she’s out on her porch in the
evenings, rain or shine, tobacco smoke curling
up under the eaves, or we’ll wave to each other at
the mailboxes, but there are times when she’s just
not around. And there were times when we didn’t
speak: when I was with Carmen, when I got cable,
when she told me I didn’t have much going on up-
stairs. The rest of the time, though, we saw a lot
of each other. I started bringing her quiches, kale
salads, rosemary rotisseries. Left to her own de-
vices, all she ate was protein shakes, supplements,
bottled water. She’s always been tall and vivid
and thin, and she’s always had these tight brown
curls twisting all the way down to her breasts, but
when I first met her, her hair was falling out. She
couldn’t keep a fingernail going to save her life.
She’s pretty grey now, at the roots, but her hair
stays in. I’ve managed that much.
I said I’d give her the hen for free if I could
come watch. She dropped what I’d later come to
know as her public face and surveyed me again,
from my eyes to my clothes to my hands to my
face. My skin tightened under her gaze. The thin
curls around her ears and forehead were damp. I
could smell her strongly despite the fact that she
was all the way out on the far end of the welcome
mat and I was fully inside my foyer: like sweet
sourdough, like yeast with jasmine. Her jeans
were stiff with sweat and grime. But despite these
things I began to understand that it was I who was
in danger of falling short.

I MIGHT NOT HAVE HAD MUCH GOING ON upstairs,
but I knew enough to know there’s a blueprint
stage before you build.

“It’s about the individual by necessity,” she’d
said once, after a long afternoon of welding. “Too
unstable, if everybody’s doing it. From inception
onwards, you’re on your own.”

Seems like if that’s true, you take it into ac-
count when you’re figuring out what exactly to
put in your cockpit.

The sun had almost set. The remainder of
the light shone sideways through the blackened
trees, reddish, and the shadows were nebulous.
Roshelle was already out there on the porch, un-
moving. There was an inconsistent breeze rustling
the half-naked branches of the oaks, and the free-
way roared faintly somewhere out to the west, but
there was a particular caliber to this silence that I
didn’t want to face head-on.

Arms full, I walked up to the porch and
climbed the steps. Roshelle’s face and hands were
clean. Her ashtray was full. I couldn’t speak first,
but I could draw out this arrival, rattle a few forks,
maybe. I set the casserole on the table—chicken,
rice, cheddar, apple—followed by the pitcher. I lit
a candle. I started to get the dishes out of my bag.

“I haven’t seen much of you today,” said Ro-
shelle.

Maybe this was best, to get it out of the way.

“I’ve been thinking.”

She watched me. I served. I was halfway done
before I realized I should have been doing it more
slowly.

“You’re not going to do this for me. Am I
right?”
And then she said, “So what are you doing with your life, really?”

And then she said, “Do you think there’s anything moral about living the way you do?”

And then she said, “I’m trying to help.”

The thing is, I knew I’d do it. For the past eight years, ever since I’d watched her vaporize my least favorite red hen, the rules had been consistent: I was allowed on the porch, and I was allowed in the garage. But I saw myself through the windows sometimes. Washing dishes in the kitchen. Emptying a dustpan.

I didn’t always know that the woman was me. I used to get jealous. She keeps her hair short, and she’s gotten a bit heavier, probably because she never leaves the house. Most of the time, when I do get a glimpse of her, she’s smiling. Well, not really. But she’s got that kind of face, those particular lines. She smiles all the time, I can tell. Laughs. She waved at me once.

I figured it out about a year ago. I’ve been getting used to the idea, I have. I just didn’t think I’d be the first human guinea pig. I thought I had more time. One day I made a plan, I said to myself, well, it’s October 19th, 2010, it’s three in the afternoon, and Rosshelle’s busy in the garage. I walked next door and stood on the porch, alone. There was a cold breeze and the boards were creaking, which maybe they always do, but which you notice more in October. I thought, I’m gonna remember this day for the rest of my life. I thought, no matter what the rules are, no matter what Rosshelle wants, if that’s me in there, I’m gonna come out on the porch on this date and time. I’m gonna say hello. I’m gonna get this thing confirmed.

And I didn’t do it. Stood myself up.

But at this point I’m wondering if that was supposed to be a message. I’d feel better about the whole thing if I’d gotten to have that conversation, but maybe I don’t want myself to feel better.

On the outside, the time machine looks like a thick pillar of silver and bronze, its side-panels riveted in place. It’s so much taller than I am. On one of its five faces, there’s a broad bank of buttons and a sliver of a screen: just enough for a few letters, acronyms I don’t recognize. On another of the faces, there’s a hatch. Its rough-hewn hinges are bigger than my fists.

On the inside, it’s dark. There’s a medical gurney bolted upright—nothing else. I’ve been strapped in, my arms with Velcro. No glowing buttons, no LED strip lights, which I feel like I’ve been promised. A trembling, through the metal, and a noise which grows in intensity, but maybe it’s not a noise because my ears don’t seem to be involved.

It feels as though I could breathe if I tried. The air thickens. I’m stuck but I’m sinking. Submerged canoe at cross-purposes. Flood.

I called Carmen, which I’d promised her I wouldn’t do. We hadn’t spoken in more than a year. The static on her end sounded different than it did when she lived across town. I told her about the mail, about my painting, about the community garden. My projects, these days. That’s not what I called for, but even as I dialed I was realizing that I’ve got to make these choices on my own. If I asked her to talk it through with me, she’d think I was picking at our scabs. Why do you go over there every—What do you even talk about when—I can—You know so much about her, but she doesn’t—Can’t you—Can’t someone else—

“Annie, you need to move on.”

I’m sitting against the moldy wallpaper in Rosshelle’s guest bedroom. It’ll probably be my room now. I’m lighting matches, dropping them on the
shag carpet. They all fizzle out. Of course nothing happens. I don’t remember a fire.

“Try to remember what it feels like,” Roshelle says as she tightens a strap. There are so many buckles. She says I’ll be able to undo them myself if I need to. She’s moving slowly, almost whispering—I know that this is what she thinks it means to take care of someone. “You’re breaking new ground, after all. You’re a pioneer.”

Half an hour ago, at home, I took a shot of whiskey. I broke my dead mother’s china teapot. I didn’t mean to. I brushed my teeth. Now, here, my heart is beating differently, and it’s as if the bile in the back of my throat is speaking through me. “If you don’t want me to be scared then cut the shit, for God’s sake.”

Roshelle’s silhouetted, so I can’t see her face. “There’s a theory, and I believe it,” she says. “There’s—well. Some say that antimatter is matter, moving backward through time.”

A series of small jerks as she works a hand upwards, tightening straps. She rests it on my shoulder for half a second.

“I don’t know how it will feel,” she says, drawing back. “I’m not sure if you’ll stay conscious, but you’ll make it.” She closes the hatch.

Breaking it down, like Roshelle would, into the essential questions:

Do I believe she’s got my best interests at heart?
Do I believe she’s good at what she does?
But why are those my questions? If I broke it down like Carmen:
What do I want?
Answers never satisfy.

“Don’t hope for too much,” my older self said, easeing herself down onto the foot of my bed. It was late and I had been asleep. The moon was making my white curtains glow but the light didn’t really penetrate. “But it won’t be nothing.”

“Where have you been?” I asked. I reached out, touched my own arm, just to see if I could. I could. And she was cold. I thought there would be sparks or something. She was wearing loose, colorless clothes, and I knew what that meant right away—I’ve never been dainty, but some years are worse than others. Her hair was shorter, too. No jewelry.

“You’ll be fine,” my older self said. “Think about it. You’ve seen me. Things won’t be very different from how they are now.”

Another older self opened the door—much older—and leaned against the frame just like Roshelle does. I couldn’t see her well, because she’d turned on the light in the hall. “They’ll all try to tell you that it has to be done because that’s what we chose. It’s already happened, yada yada. Roshelle’s going to spout a lot of nonsense about the internal consistency of a universe. Here’s the thing though. We talked to three guys before we chose what fencing to use for the backyard, right? Three guys. That’s all I’m saying.”

The woman at the foot of the bed went tense. “I’m not the type to make a promise lightly.”

“I’ve always been a fool,” said the woman at the door.

“She will sometimes seem cold,” said the woman at the foot of the bed, turning back to me, gripping my shins through the covers, “but she chose you for a reason.”

“She chose you because you’re alone,” said the woman at the door. “She chose you because she already knows she can take advantage of you.”

The woman at the foot of the bed began to cry. I felt bad for being disgusted by my own congestion. “Just remember,” she said, snorting back her
snot, “what happened tonight. Because I did. I re-
membered all of this and I’ve done everything I’ve
done and I don’t regret a second of it.”

“You’re so full of shit,” said the woman at the
door.

“Just get out, just, please,” said the woman at
the foot of the bed.

“Doesn’t your future look bright?” said the
woman at the door.

I used to talk so continuously during those
early dinners on Roshelle’s porch. I’d bring guests
over, too, like the couple from down the road, the
postmaster, the oldest cashier from the hardware
store. It’s hard for me to remember what I said
exactly, but I can guess: “Avocados were almost
three dollars apiece down at Niko’s—did you see?
Guacamole’s downright precious these days. But
from where I’m standing it goes with the season!
I’ve been trying this new marinade. No, I’d never
use one of my hens, I’m too sentimental. You don’t
think it’s too sweet? Too much brown sugar?”

It’s hard to imagine a dinner like that, now,
but the funny thing is that I can’t remember how
Roshelle communicated her distaste. I feel like I
could produce a pretty accurate catalog of all the
times she’s criticized me with a particular view
toward changing my behavior. As far as I know,
we’ve never talked about a guest policy, or about
her position on small talk. Maybe it was just that
after a while I paid more attention to learning
what makes her shutters come down.

Roshelle opens the hatch, businesslike. She
shines a light into one of my eyes, then the oth-
er. Starts undoing buckles. She’s not surprised to
see me—she’s so perfunctory as she asks me how
I am and do I remember my name and what’s her
name, and as she does this, so coolly, I’m feeling
everything inside me begin to orbit something
small and hard and dangerous—until I remem-
ber that she’s had a few minutes to adjust, to make
educated guesses about this silver-bronze column
that just materialized in her garage.

She helps me over to a folding chair in the cor-
ner. She gets me a glass of water, watches me drink
it.

“Now, write,” she says, handing me a spi-
ral-bound notebook I recognize, yet to be cof-
This is crucial.”

I try. I’m self-conscious about my handwriting.
I can see hers through the back of the sheet before,
and of course it is what it is—all-caps, straightfor-
w ard. It didn’t hurt, I put down by way of a begin-
ning. I don’t think I fell asleep. It felt tight. My skin
still feels too tight. I paused, tried to think of the
right comparison. It was like realizing I’d always
been five-foot-nine instead of five-foot-six. Because
how would that happen? And why wouldn’t you
know? But it was like realizing I needed to be re-
built, but the pieces weren’t being assembled from
top to bottom or from inside out, they were being
clumped and twisted and—

Roshelle stops me. “Save the poetry for lat-
er,” she says. “It’s too early for abstractions. Start
again.”

I’m sitting in this garage. It smells like it should.
The sun’s coming in through the high, narrow
windows and it looks right. But I am not right.

She watches me for a few minutes and I look
down at the eraser. Then she says she can’t “at-
tend” to me any more at the moment—she needs
to take some measurements before the “vessel”
disappears. She knows the machine will disappear.
She knows that’s how it’ll have been designed. She
just doesn’t know when. So she turns away from
me and gets to work and I sit in my corner with
my notebook and I wonder which way it goes: I wonder if I write or if I do not write.

Apparently, it’s 2008. This won’t be as far back as I go, Roshelle tells me, but I’ll be here for a while. I stand by the sink on this, my second November 8th, 2008, and I think about cockpits and control panels and the context behind that approach to the design. Of course Roshelle built the ship that way. That’s how she saw it, when it came.

I ask her whether she can do things differently this time around and she says, firstly, that this is her first time around, and, secondly, that she wouldn’t know how to build any other kind of ship. This has always been the way this particular vessel gets made. One never changes the past, Roshelle says. Fundamental misunderstanding. Each incarnation of reality must be internally consistent—that is, if one goes backward in time, it’s not a disruption of the plan, it’s what always happened.

I ask her whether I can go for a walk and she tells me she thinks it’d be more prudent to stay inside for now. She’ll leave me to my own devices. She’s got work to do, after all.

“What happened to that hen?” I ask her. I can see part of my backyard from her kitchen window. It’s cold. I can’t see any of the chickens, but I can see the coop, its barn-red walls, its dark gritty shingles. When I had it built, I knew what was expected. “The one I gave you. The one who disappeared.”

“I told you,” Roshelle says.

Roshelle’s smiled less than twenty times since I’ve known her. At least six of those smiles were just for me. Maybe my numbers are wrong. It did take me a while to start counting. Tainted data—results meaningless. But I can’t keep myself from remembering. The time I brought her an elaborately carved elephant tusk I’d found in an antique shop. The time I taught her something she didn’t know about Omega-3s. The time she caught me planting daffodils in her flower beds. Neither of us said anything. The sun was just rising and the porch rails were orange-white. She was wearing a loose gray tank-top, and there was grease in her hair and along her collarbone. She’d been up all night, I could tell. I smiled, and then she smiled. She leaned over the railing to watch me work and she kept smiling until the sun was all the way up. That was the best time.

It’s a bright morning, and I’m sitting in Roshelle’s kitchen, eating leftover meatloaf I know my younger self must have brought over the night before. It’s my family recipe. The cupboards are bare. There are two coffee machines, neither of which seem to work properly. Knowing Roshelle, they probably answer only to some warped ritual: grounds measured out to tenths of an ounce, weights and counterweights, rotation to a particular degree, percentage of direct sunlight. There are bug-husks in all the drawers.

Roshelle comes in—not from upstairs, but from the garage. As she passes me she squeezes my shoulder. There are pills on top of the fridge and opaque gallon jugs within. Three pills, swig. One more pill, swig.

“How do you pay your bills?” I ask.

She doesn’t pause but she doesn’t turn. “ Haven’t we talked about that?”

“A little,” I say. “But I’d like to hear it from you. How’d you afford this house? Why this house? Let’s start there.”

Now she does turn. Leans against the fridge. “It’s important to feel oriented in space-time. You’ve done something truly new, and we can’t be
Sure exactly what that does to a mind. I’ve drawn up some ideas. Different kinds of activities. Let me know if your experience today varies in any way from your typical performance of these tasks.”

I’m chopping my meatloaf into cubes with the side of my fork. “You told me I’d be going farther back,” I say.

Roshelle lowers her outstretched hand, to-do list drooping. “Yes. Eventually. It’s not completely up to—"

“So you’ve done this before,” I say.

“Yes.”

“You’ve had to talk me through this before.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you so bad at it, then?” Mashing one cube, then another. “I knew, well . . . I wasn’t sure, but I thought . . . I mean, no one promised me—”

“Of course no one promised you,” Roshelle says sharply.

“Of course not,” I say, looking up again at last.

I met Carmen at the farmer’s market in 2006. I kept meeting her, over and over again — I kept forgetting her name. She bought my eggs. Every other week, from May until August. We’d talk. And then one day she came late but stayed after, to help me take down my booth.

It was just after noon, fully hot. The broad vacant lot where we held the market was dusty, unpaved, and didn’t have much in the way of shade. Around us, other vendors were packing up or gone: there were gaps in the grid. Older women pushed wire mesh baskets, squinting in the sun, still thoroughly vigilant since closing time brings the best deals. Usually, I felt as though I were one of them, but today, here, I was different. My fingers seemed unusually stiff. I’d already closed up the big umbrella. I was taking my time with the table. I’d worn my hair loose, and although it was damp against my neck I was newly grateful that I’d forgotten a hair tie. I could feel Carmen watching me. She’d packed up my whiteboard and my coolers, and now there was nothing left for her to do but watch.

“Thanks so much,” I said, pressing the last of the table’s folding legs back into place. “For your help.”

“Any time,” Carmen said. “Hey, how are the chicks? The Ameraucanas? And the other ones, the silver ones?”

“The Silver-laced Wyandottes! Yeah, they’re settling in well, thanks for asking. They’ll start laying sometime this winter. And they’re so pretty,” I said, but I looked away at the last second. I didn’t want her to know I was actually talking about all the gold in her eyes, the length of her fingers.

“I bet.”

I’d already asked her about her week, about her dog, about her car trouble. I knew I had to keep talking, and I wanted to keep talking, and I wanted to say something important and meaningful, but instead I said, “It was a good morning.”

“I think so, too.”

“Yeah,” I said, sliding the table into my car until it hit the back of the seats.

“Hey, Annie.”

I looked up, which felt like a risky move.

“Could I take you out to lunch?”

Let’s just say I’d gotten used to the idea that that kind of love would never be a part of my life. I was a realist, after all, and I’d known the score since kindergarten. But I forgot that dating and I were incompatible when we went out for that lunch. Halfway through, as if it were the smallest thing in the world, she took my hand. At first, I experienced that the way I experienced everything else: I was all too aware of the sweat on my palms, of my hot cheeks, of the fact that every second was
another opportunity to fail. But then I realized, or rather discovered, that there was more than one person in this moment with me: her hand was damp, too, and I could feel her heartbeat in her thin wrist, and the table was shaking a little because, beneath it, so was one of her legs.

I got scared before and after every date for the first six months at least—but during? Only rarely after that first time. She made it so easy.

I hear it, from upstairs, when the vessel disappears. I hear it over the sound of the bathtub faucet, which I’ve been running on-and-off for two hours now. It’s going back.

I’m taking a bath instead of a shower because there isn’t a shower curtain. I stare up at the rod. Asking to have been allowed to go back—I couldn’t do it. And why not? Perhaps solving all of this would have been as simple as that. Perhaps that would have ended it. But the rules have changed now, it seems. Roshelle has a particular charge, a strong charge. My energy is no longer compatible.

So it seems, from where I am now, as though there are ways of going back that I can stomach and ways of going back that I cannot. If I were to ask her nicely, if I were to beg—well, I would not be making progress.

The Annie of 2008 is out on a long walk. She’s dog-sitting for the couple from down the road, and their German Shepherd needs lots of exercise. I break into my house. I go into the backyard, to the coop. It’s a cold day. I scatter an extra handful of seed. The Wyandottes are plump and inseparable and glad to see me, in their way. They place their feet carefully. They run their beaks through their plumage, black and white and regal. Over the course of their lives, they have grown, but they have never changed.

I’m pulling out of my own garage when Roshelle leaps in front of the car. I nudge her with the front bumper but she doesn’t waver, her hands pressed against the hood as if she really believes it’ll be enough to stop me. I roll my window down, hoping to bait her around to the side. She doesn’t move.

“What’s the plan?” she asks, panting a little.

“I’m off to the bank,” I say, my past self’s purse prominent on the passenger seat beside me.

“You’re not,” Roshelle says slowly, processing, and her left hand twitches against the hood. “You know this doesn’t happen.”

“It’s my life,” I say, “and it’s my money.”

“It’s not yours now.”

“It’s not yours yet.”

On the other side of the wall, my fridge rattles its way into silence. Dead leaves skitter across the concrete driveway.

“Is that what you think this is?” Roshelle asks, fully shuttered.

“Am I wrong?” I ask.

“You’re wrong.”

Roshelle takes her hands off my hood. She straightens up. She turns and walks back toward her house. Her faith is in her posture: I will back the car into its proper place. I will put these clothes back. I will put the purse back. I will lock the doors and return the spare key to its pot of rosemary and I will go back to her house and I will ask my questions politely and she will answer them if I deserve it.

I pull out across the lawn, leaving tracks in the mud—I let the engine roar—and I have the satisfaction of her seeing her turn, seeing her face in my rear-view mirror, so completely drained of trajectory.

Same old bank—large tinted windows stripping another layer of light from the clouds. There’s a
plate of sugar cookies on the manager’s desk for the children, but the smell of the firm industrial carpet smothers all other scents, like new tires and baby powder. It’s always surprising how well the little booths dampen sound. There are lots of us, here in the lobby, but there's not much to hear. It takes me a few minutes to realize that the woman in front of me in line is the oldest self I’ve seen yet. She's a bit hunched, and her hands are softly shaking. She meets my eyes but doesn't press. I wait for her to speak to me but she doesn’t. I feel as though I should be surprised, or nauseous, or dizzy, but I can’t muster any reaction other than guilt. If she's here—if I’ve come to intercept myself—this must mean I’ve done something wrong.

“Okay,” I say. “Okay. Want to get some coffee?”

We leave the bank and head down the street toward the bistro where I had my first date with Carmen. It's probably not the closest place, but it's a choice I feel my older self will understand, and it'll buy me the opportunity to think. Then I realize that I'm not fooling anybody.

I look at her, as we walk. Despite any promises I might try to make myself, it seems I'll still become the kind of person who'll waste my own time. She keeps her eyes on her feet. Her skin is darker, and worn. Her clothes are unremarkable, gray and navy blue. She's pulled her white hair into a careless low ponytail; I can see flakes of dandruff in the part. There are indistinct bruises twisting up her left wrist. This might not mean anything. I remember being told, a long time ago, that women in my family have always bruised easily. She has a plain silver chain around her neck, which she's tucked into her blouse. I can't see anything that looks like a time machine anywhere nearby. Then again, future models probably look different.

There are five or six reasons why she could be here—I mean, that I know of—I don't have all the data. Or any data, really. Perhaps she's here to warn me, or to tell me that I've always loved someone, or that someone has always loved me. Perhaps the past can be changed after all. Perhaps she's here to teach me how to build my own device, or to give me hers. Perhaps she wants to vent, to tell me that I’ve ruined everything. Perhaps I don't have enough information to make the right kind of guess. A bus roars past and I find myself wishing I'd leapt out in front of it, just to see what would happen to her. But she'd probably just stand there, saying nothing. Probably wouldn't even be sad. She knows how this goes. She's already lived through it.

I stare at her, knowing that the two of us are the only ones responsible for this silence. At least one of us must want this. One of us has chosen. Her posture is patient—she has no intention of speaking—and I realize it's not her job to make the next move. Of the two of us, I have the potential. Of the two of us, I am capable. She is here to react. I stop her, lift the chain from her neck. It's still silent but now we both know why. Only one of us will have to live up to expectations.

This story originally appeared in The Normal School and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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Jarkko couldn’t get back to sleep. His hands and feet were cold. His wife, Lorin, was on her back beside him. Her stillness, her hair and the position of her body made her look like a princess waiting to be rescued. He watched her shrug her shoulders and wondered what she was dreaming. Was she dreaming? She’d been upset earlier. “You’re always late coming home,” she’d said. “You’re exhausted. You don’t talk. You just stare at whatever’s in front of you. It’s like you’re living in a different world.”

That she would confront him like that, that he didn’t quite believe her frustration, concerned him. She’d talked about moving and “starting new” but she never said much, and what she did say, she didn’t seem to believe. It had always sounded more like a game. Wouldn’t it be nice if we lived in Stockholm? Just imagine it. Just imagine. He glanced at the window and caught the reflection of the curtains moving in the windowpane. Remembering another night when he couldn’t sleep, how good it felt, how nice, when he went walking in the cold, he got out of bed and went over to the bureau near the window. The bureau, a marquetry bureau with gold handles like Japanese fans, was a present from Lorin’s parents, probably worth more than the house and store put together. He opened the long middle drawer, put on his work pants, put on a sweater and coat, and stood a moment, thinking about Lorin, looking back at her, so small and arranged even in sleep.

“You stay here,” Jarkko whispered, suddenly unable to keep quiet. “You stay here and sleep. I’ll be back soon.” He could have used the light in the hall but didn’t bother. He made his way down the stairs and slowly shut the door behind him. It was early April and snowing again. The mountains were covered with snow. The trees were covered with snow. The pastures around the house were covered with snow. Even the stairs were covered with snow. He reached for his coat collar, pinched it around his neck and hesitated. There was nothing around, nothing to give direction, or show which way was forward, which backward. He
imagined that every part of Finland was like this, this cold, this remote, and he worried that, if he didn’t start over, save Lorin from this place and become a new man like she wanted, she would leave. He wasn’t sure what exactly “new” would mean. Something about class, he thought, about cultivation, versatility and wanting to move up in the world. Whatever it was, he was sure, it wasn’t out of reach.

Before meeting Lorin, he never thought about leaving home, not once. It was as if there was only one place in the world for him, one place to live and work. When that changed, when exactly, he couldn’t say, but it had. Now he felt the ground moving, this constant shifting under his feet. He dreamt about new places every day. Stockholm, Uppsala. Amsterdam. Even London. He wanted to surprise Lorin and learn to make her dreams his. He knew his family would understand if he said he needed to close their business but, when he thought about leaving his four brothers and two sisters, their children and their children’s children without the store and whether that was right, whether it was best to turn his back on a place so much a part of his life, that he was always devoted to, he lost his nerve. He would try to make up his mind and every time fail because there was so much to consider. There was heritage. There was family history and tradition, and a clear chain, a chain that he used to think of as something physical, linking great-grandfather to grandfather, father to son.

His great-grandfather had emigrated from Russia in 1802, and after seven years working as a farmhand and carpenter, had built a store of his own, where he sold prime meats—beef, pork, lamb, and poultry. His great-grandfather’s four boys continued selling meat and stocked the store with local farmers’ cheeses and canned meats. The oldest of his great-grandfather’s boys, his paternal grandfather, had trained his father, and it was his father who contacted merchants in Helsinki and Vaasa and started importing extra virgin olive oils and flavored vinegars from Italy.

Because joining his father in business was always his dream, because that dream had come true, because he had come to believe in heritage and family tradition, and because the store had become his responsibility when his father died two years ago, he’d become attached to it. The store was never much, a couple of adjoined rooms with three stairs between. Some shelves and furniture that his great-grandfather built specially. Hooks so the meat could hang on display. It was more about the feeling the store gave. Everything in it seemed finer, more vibrant and personal than real life. The nickel-plated cash register with its curled arm lever. The clear jars with gold screw-tops. The designs on can labels. The shine in the furniture, always clean. Jarkko knew his way of thinking about his great-grandfather and grandfather, and the rest was sentimental. That he could open a new specialty store in another country. Stockholm, Uppsala, anywhere he wanted, but he kept thinking, if only his father were alive, if only he could sit and talk with his father about the store, about Lorin and what he was supposed to do.

“Work harder,” his father used to say. “That’s the only secret. Work harder and you’ll find your answers.” But what answers his father had expected him to discover, he didn’t know. Looking out beyond the pastures, into the mountains, he pictured his father, but in the summertime. There was a restaurant with a terrace where they used to go when they needed to talk privately. He imagined his father sitting at one of the tables close to the wall, fanning himself with his woven straw hat—how he would talk, how he would listen
with his ear turned, and, when they were leaving, how his father would turn and look at him in a sad, knowing way to make him understand what needed to be done.

But he couldn't sit and talk with his father. That was impossible. His father was dead and gone and there wasn't any use in wishing for counsel from someone who couldn't give it. He told himself he needed to be practical, that he needed to make a decision and take better care of himself. Thinking about how he would change, he stood taller. The wind was coming now in gusts. He tightened his coat, remembered something and knew where he wanted to go, not for a walk, but to the barn, where he was needed. One of their mares, the youngest, was pregnant.

The path he took, just a path shoveled out, ran through the pastures around their house. Walking quickly, he watched his feet more out of habit than necessity. He told himself he would check on their mare and that he wouldn't be long.

When he was closer, he heard someone calling—his name. Derek, his farmhand and assistant, pushed open the door. He was dressed, wearing a coat and fur hat. “So you’re here,” he said. He always started conversations like that, like you were already talking. “I was about to come looking for you. She’s been pacing.”

Jarkko felt his eyes adjust. The barn, with its stalls mucked the day before, smelled of horses and cold weather. He was surprised to see how dark the walls looked, darker than he remembered, how small and boyish Derek looked with the rafters above him. “You’re as nervous as she is,” Jarkko said.

Derek didn't answer. Reaching for the lantern at his feet, lifting it, he looked so serious, so earnest, that Jarkko couldn't help but wonder how other boys treated him at school. If they made fun of him. If he was learning. If he was making friends. If he was happy. He tried to remember his own childhood and how other boys treated him, but kept thinking about the schoolyard where he played and the friend he used to hide with. He smiled to himself—at his disconnected thoughts—and told Derek, who was waiting, to lead the way.

They went through the tack room and into the stable. The horses one-by-one stuck out their heads to see what was happening. Two bays and four chestnuts. Jarkko rubbed their muzzles as he passed, feeling the smooth place between their nostrils and looking ahead for Viisi Pala. She hadn't stuck out her head like the rest, but he heard her moving in her stall. “What are you doing in there?” he wanted to say. “Be calm” but Derek turned around before he could say a word. “I’ll get your equipment bag,” he said. “Then I’ll hang our coats.”

“Good,” Jarkko said.

He glanced at Derek’s coat without meaning to look too closely and saw that it was pressed and in good condition but made for someone older. The sleeves were rolled and pinned with silver tailor’s tacks because, if they were left loose, they would have come down to his knuckles. He once told Derek that, as soon as the store was doing better and he had made more connections in Italy, he would buy new clothes for him, anything he wanted. New shirts. New pants. A new coat. Everything new and made in Italy. Whatever happened with Lorin, he wanted to do that. He decided he would.

Derek held out the lantern for Jarkko. “Here,” he said. “There’s another I can use.”

Jarkko took the lantern by the curved wire handle and folded his coat over Derek's arm. The light wavered, a moment. He steadied it and leaned in.
“Okay,” he whispered. “You’ll meet me there.”

He walked the rest of the way to Viisi Pala’s stall, one of the larger, corner stalls, without Derek. Viisi Pala seemed to hear him coming and turned, a slow turn from the hips. Somewhere even in so simple a movement was the fear and relief he’d expected, fear because she didn’t know what was happening, relief because he was familiar.

“That’s right,” he said. “I’ve come to see you.” He rested the lantern on a side ledge and looked her over. Her eyes were shining. Her belly was wider than usual but not much. She was dressed in a dark green blanket for the wintertime, and though he didn’t make a habit of distinguishing between animals or choosing favorites among them, he knew he liked her. She seemed to be standing still for his benefit. Talking to her, because he felt like it, he let himself into her stall.

She flicked her ears and moved around as if he wasn’t there until he called her name.

“Viisi Pala,” he said. “My little one.” He showed her where to stand and took his time helping her out of blanket. She did everything right. Her coat, which must have been combed earlier, was smooth and heavy. It was so dark you could almost mistake it for black, but when the light from the lantern caught her neck, a dark brown came through. It was beautiful and just the color of the finest vinegar in all of Italy.

Everything was perfect. Derek opened the stall door, when he came back, and knew without being told not to make much noise. “How’s she doing?” he whispered. “Is she okay?”

“Sure, she is,” Jarkko said. “She’s okay.” He took the equipment bag from Derek and fumbled for a pair of rubber gloves and scissors, the supplies he knew he would need. He slipped on the gloves, loose at the elbows, and handed Derek the scissors.

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Viisi Pala was in constant motion. She was pacing and looking around as if she didn’t expect to find whatever it was. Jarkko wanted to help her out of the moment and, somehow, stay in it longer himself. There was something peaceful about being there with her, so close. There was something good about it. He felt Derek leaning forward, beside him. He tilted his head and looked at Viisi Pala like he was trying to see her in a new way. “Is she scared?” he asked.

Jarkko nodded. That much he knew. “She’s not scared in the same way we get scared, but she is scared.” Thinking that over, he was quiet for a time. He wondered about Viisi Pala’s fear. How could he make it less? What could he do to help? He looked at Derek thoughtfully. Sometimes he felt like watching Derek was as good as watching himself, only himself fourteen years earlier, back when he was Derek’s age. He would start wondering about his own experiences. He would wonder how he had reacted when he first saw a horse giving birth. What had he said? Was his concern apparent? He would ask himself questions, sometimes questions he couldn’t answer, sometimes ones he could answer, though that was never the point.

“Hear that?” he said to Derek. “She’s starting to slow down. Watch her tail. See the sack starting to come out.”

Derek didn’t look away. “It’s so strange,” he said. “It’s so stretched around.” He watched Viisi Pala roll onto her back, then her side. There was hay stuck to her coat.

“It won’t be much longer now,” Jarkko said.

Derek nodded as if to prove he’d heard and looked at the ceiling. He squinted like he saw something, and it occurred to Jarkko, for the first
time, that Derek was probably tired. “I’ll get the lantern,” he said. He turned and, over the stall door, saw Lorin coming from the tack room. She had let her hair down.

“Jarkko,” she said. “Is that you?”

“It’s me,” he said. “Come here.”

Viisi Pala gave a kick. She shook her head, shook her mane as if it had nothing to do with her head, and tried to stand.

“Easy,” Jarkko whispered. “Just take it easy.” He watched Lorin open the stall door and move toward him. “You must be cold,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she said. “But I didn’t know where you were. I thought maybe you were angry.”

“I wasn’t,” he said. He didn’t know what else to say and before he could think of anything, Viisi Pala grunted and started pacing. She rustled her hay and made so much noise. There was a change in Lorin’s expression. “Are you afraid to watch?” he asked. “You can keep the other horses company if you want.”

Lorin smiled. A shadow passed over her face. “No,” she said. “I think I’d like to stay.”

He should have known. Lorin wouldn’t have come if some part of her—that part she refused him access to—hadn’t wanted to see. “Okay,” he said softly. He smiled and tried to make his voice reassuring. “You can watch from where you are. You don’t need to move.”

Jarkko took a step toward Derek, who was waiting, and handed him the lantern. “Hold it over us,” he said. “So I can see.” The light was warm, spread its warm color up and down, and filled the stall that way. Jarkko walked around Viisi Pala, humming under his breath so she would know where he was. Kneeling, watching her, he concentrated on what he needed to do. He moved her tail, took hold of the sack and gently pulled. Viisi Pala scissored her legs. She gasped, a sound like choking, and the foal’s front legs and head slid out of her.

Derek looked worried, but he did everything they’d talked about. He cut the sack, stood and waited, while Jarkko peeled it back. The colt was a deep brown like molasses. He was darker than his mother and so thin, all ribs and bones, that he looked more like he was dying, like he was about to have a heart attack, than like he’d just been born.

Derek came closer. He looked over the colt, then Viisi Pala. It was clear from his expression he was moved. He felt something.

“That’s how I was,” Jarkko wanted to say. “I felt what you’re feeling now, fourteen years ago. Maybe fifteen.” The connection seemed remarkable and of such worth. He wanted to tell Lorin, to explain what he knew and, even what he didn’t know before, because he had his answers now. He would have said, “We need to stay. I know it. It’s going to get better. You’ll find every happiness here.” There was the sound of another horse eating. The clink-clank of a bucket. All the words that he couldn’t find before were coming to him in a rush, but, when he turned to face Lorin, she was looking away. She was pinning her hair distractedly.

“It breaks my heart,” she said in a soft voice. “In this country even the animals look like they belong some place else. Some place better. Don’t you see it? Can’t you see how sad and remote it is here?”

A recent graduate of University of Arizona’s MFA program, Ingrid Wenzler is at work on a collection of short stories unified by theme and concern. She’s especially interested in heritage, in family and religion, in lore and the traditions that do and don’t get passed from one generation to another. Her writing appears in Cleaver Magazine and Fjords Review.
DANCE ROUTINE

My friends dance as bride and groom, wave for their guests to join them.

From my boyfriend’s sunglasses, my reflection smiles back at me,

still in love with the possible world.

He puts his drink down, explains “There are children here.”

“Of course,” I offer.
STRIKING SURFACE

You cleaned out my wallet
whenever it couldn’t fit
into my back pocket,
converted the mess
into neat piles of plastic,
receipts, punch cards.
A matchbook from the coin purse
you waved at me like a lecture.
“You don’t smoke
so what’s the point?”

How to have told you
about the man who offered me
gin and compliments
before slipping the matches
into my pocket, fingers
lingering on my belt?

I thought of them often. Only
resistance excites.

In the grocery store
your hands, too heavy
to hold mine,
gripped the cart.

Earlier versions of these poems originally ap-
peared on the Feminist Wire.

LUCAS WILDNER teaches and hikes in Kent, Wash-
ington. A former secretary and contest coordina-
tor for the Tucson Poetry Festival, he continues
to serve on their advisory board.
THE SECOND ENDING

They cut down all the trees long ago, and the dust followed close behind them. From the drought-eaten soil came the clouds of earth that reached into the air, blocked out the sun, and lingered for days before moving on, coast to coast and further out.

They said, “This could never happen again.”
We said, “It is happening.”
They said, “Alchemists tell only lies.”
We said, “It is here now.”
They said, “We can continue as we always have.”
We said, “We will go into the mountain.”
We said, “We will survive the wasteland.”

Dawn came again ten turns after the last sunset, or so it seemed to bodies that only functioned by the visible coming and going of the sun and the moon. Plants and people and animals started to grow again in the handfuls of earth that had not been swallowed by the great bodies of water or buried under the billowing leagues of the never-resting dust.

In ten more turns the Valley knew the lives of people once again, and the Valley was found a safe and hospitable place. The wasteland on the other side of their mountains harbored only the roughest manifestations of life and death, but farther out—even further than that—lived possibility.
Sonny lived in the heart of Grey Valley, a hilly and vast place surrounded on all sides by high mountains, whose stumpy junipers appeared blue in the early evening light. Every Sixth Day after her temple lessons Sonny would rush home to meet her father at the round pen. He was the only person in Grey Valley who knew how to care for injured horses and sometimes Olsen left a horse with him overnight. If he was done with work when she got home she could brush the horse or ride it if it was well enough. Sonny hoped to find a horse waiting for her.

Her mother would scold her for running in her leather shoes.

The tree-lined road opened to fields of yellow grass, bottle-brush weeds swung lazily in the wind. Her father, lean and hard like a tree, rested against the round pen, her mother in front of him with her arms crossed. Sonny smiled when she walked up to them. Her father reached out and gripped her shoulder, his hand warm and firm.

“…nothing left for him,” he said to her mother.

“What do you mean, where is he thinking of going?” her mother asked.

“Moving over the mountains. He said he’s trading all of the horses. He wants to buy a truck and drive the wasteland roadway.” Sonny’s father ran a hand through his hair with a sigh, a motion made from long days of work and arguing.

“What does he expect us to do? There’s nothing—” she hissed.

“It will be all right. We will find a way.”

“Olsen is leaving?” Sonny’s eyes burned with the threat of tears over the thought that there would be no more horses in the Valley. Olsen owned all of them. He fed his table by lending them out to those who needed a strong back to plow the earth, or a swift ride to the corn fields at the base of the mountains.

“He came and told me this afternoon.”

“I can only take so much work at the Great Hall.” Her mother looked at Sonny’s shoes while she spoke. Her mouth twisted.

“I will talk to the Three Heads tomorrow and see what can be done. I am sure they have heard the news already.”

The danger over the mountains was one of the first things a child of the Valley learned. Even before children were old enough to start their temple lessons, the older children taught them songs like “Over the Mountain and Into the Grave” and “This Is How You Drive A Truck.” The former usually getting someone in trouble.

After every First Day Gathering, Sonny went home with the Aime sisters. They were olden lady twins who wore matching frocks in a color they told her was called bone. They made her stand up straight and put her hair behind her ears. Every First Day she read to them for a few hours while they wove blankets and repaired clothing. Her mother told her that she had to do her part to take care of the olden people of the Valley just like everyone else, but it was hard not to fidget when the sunshine called your name in the trees that needed climbing and the river that needed fishing.

And this First Day, of all First Days, Peddler was coming over the mountain to take Olsen’s horses away. She paused in her reading to look out the window.

“Sonny.” Anita Aime did not look up from her stitching. “Stop swinging your legs in that chair. Stop swinging your legs in that chair. Continue the reading, please.”

Sonny read. The words from her mouth matched the words on the pages in her lap, but
her mind was on other things. She imagined herself stealing a horse to keep in her father's round pen. She would name it Juniper, a sacred name, a name of protection.

**When her time with the Aime sisters was over**, she hurried down the long dirt roads to Olsen's fields. The tree-lined road dappled by the shimmering leaves of towering cottonwoods, the pleasantly familiar stump with terraced mushrooms growing on its side, a tree's branch bent low and winding like a snake: these were the details she lived by, a land memorized.

The road gave way to a homestead in a dusty lot baked by the sun. She stayed against a tree, leaning on the cool skin of its trunk, and squinted at the scene before her. Peddler was there, his great truck parked in front of Olsen's grey house. He stood to the side, coiling a great length of rope. Then she saw her father, his shoulders soft and low, his head tilted as he talked to Olsen near the barn door. Alin, one of the Three Heads, stood talking with them, his blond hair almost white in the sunlight.

She could not hear what they were saying, only the occasional mumble and a shuffle of feet. Olsen wiped sweaty hair from his forehead with the back of his wrist. It looked like Olsen was going to walk away, but then her father stood up straighter, and Alin grabbed Olsen's arm.

“...not right!” Olsen yelled, and pulled back.

Her father grabbed Olsen's other arm, and twisted it behind him. Olsen spat something that Sonny could not understand. She felt her heart start to pound. Her father took Olsen's other wrist from Alin, who then tied Olsen's wrists together. Sonny's throat tightened. She slid down the tree and held tight to the grass. The man across the yard looked like her father, but her father would not have hurt Olsen in the way this man was now.

“Rand!” It was her father's name, the name that everyone but her called him, and it burst from Olsen's mouth like a curse. “...horses, and my land. My choice...”

Her father pushed Olsen forward and walked him to Peddler who had finished coiling the rope and stood rolling a square of cloth in his hands. Peddler put the middle of the cloth into Olsen's mouth and tied it around the back of his head. Then her father forced the struggling Olsen into the open door of the truck's caravan. Peddler tied Olsen's ankles, and slammed the door after him. Sonny jumped and willed herself harder against the tree, further into the ground.

“Farrow!” Alin called toward the barn, his voice deep and commanding.

The barn door opened shortly after and Farrow, a boy she knew from temple lessons and Alin's own son, led out a red mare behind him. Peddler shook Alin's hand and tied the mare to the hitch on the back of his truck. Peddler was the only person who went back and forth over the mountains. She could only imagine where he might be taking Olsen.

Farrow went back into the barn while her father and Alin talked. Sonny sat there frozen in place, shivering even though she was not cold. She did not know what all of this meant, and even though it seemed like the horses were staying she was afraid for Olsen. Her father just stood with crooked shoulders. In another minute Farrow was out of the barn again and pulling himself up onto the back of a dark brown jack-mule. He was only a turn or two older than Sonny, but the muscle in his arms, the tan of his skin from working long hours in the sun, made him seem even older. He listened to his father, then nodded, and spurred the mule away with his heels.

In an instant Farrow was beside her, his light
brown eyes finding her in the tree’s shade.

“Sonny,” he said, surprised.

“Where is Peddler taking Olsen?”

“I do not know.” Farrow said, the mule breathing softly under him.

“And the red mare?”

“Wherever Olsen is going. But the others, the horses, they are staying.”

Sonny curled her lip.

“Does not that make you happy?” he asked.

She thought for a moment. “Yes.”

“Do you want to go home?”

Through the swishing tail of the mule Sonny could still see her father talking to Alin. Before that afternoon her father’s hands had only ever worked to heal horses, braided her hair, or brushed flour from her mother’s face. She nodded at Farrow, and took his outstretched hand to mount the jack-mule.

They took the jack-mule to Farrow’s house and loosed him in a paddock. They walked to her house after that, hand in hand, which was okay because Sonny did not feel like running. The horses were staying, but it felt like some part of her father had left. A little ways before they reached her home she let go of Farrow’s hand and walked ahead. She wanted to cry on her own.

When they got home she climbed the big cottonwood tree beside the barn, not caring if she snagged her First Day frock in the process. She sat on one of the larger branches and leaned her head back onto the tree trunk. She had a perfect view of the mountains. If she looked carefully enough she could make out pieces of the thin road that led out of the Valley and over the mountains—the singular path to the wasteland.

If the horses remained but Olsen was gone, who would take care of them? Who would loan them out for working the fields? What had her father done? The fingers of her right hand worried at a loose thread on the hem of her frock.

She had never even been to the edge of the Valley, never seen the base of the mountains that completely surrounded her world. There had never been a reason for her to go since her family’s work centered on the horses and the Great Hall. She tried to picture all of the trucks on the wasteland roadway, but the only truck she had ever seen was Peddler’s. The people of the Valley did not use the black burning fuel or the fuel made of refined swine flesh. What did the people of the wasteland and the trading stop look like?

The tree shook, breaking the swirl of questions. Her father sat down next to her. She did not look at him. She could not.

“My Father went over the mountains once.”

Her grandfather had died a few turns after she was born and so she did not remember much about him except for his smell. He was always eating black anise root. “But no one has ever …”

“Peddler was young then, younger than I am now. Grandfather talked with him about all sorts of things.”

Sonny was astonished that someone from her own family had been over the mountains and actually came back to the Valley to tell about it. She watched her father for signs that he was lying, that like his hands, his tongue had also changed.

“Your grandma did not want him to go. Back then the Three Heads were even more against the idea of us having anything to do with the wasteland. But your grandfather was stubborn. He said all he wanted was to see the wasteland one time before he died.”

“What did he see?”

“It was the most beautiful thing he had ever
seen. It looked like diamonds, millions of diamonds.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

Sonny had never seen a diamond, but a book she read at temple lessons had talked about them being a stone that looked like a star. “Why did he come back?”

“He was frightened.” Her father looked at her. “He had to walk back. By the time he made it, there were not any soles on his shoes. The leather that was left just hung in rings around his ankles.”

The image gave her goosebumps.

“There were animals there, most skinny like skeletons. Thrown into huge vats over ever-burning fires so their bodies could be refined into fuel. The trucks, the drivers, they carried on like it was all normal.” He rubbed a leaf between his thumb and forefinger. “He said a lot of things when he came back. Most of the time he made no sense. You probably do not remember, but he was always going on and on. It got to the point where we could not let him out.”

It no longer felt like her father was talking to her. His voice had grown quiet and he looked off into the distance. She remembered nothing but the memory of a memory of a smell. She could not remember any stories or the fact that her grandfather had been locked in the house.

“I am not like him, and I am not like Olsen. I am not afraid of the unknown, and I want to know if there’s another way. There has to be a better way.”

Sonny had never heard her father talk like this before. She nestled into the warmth of his side and imagined her grandfather as a young man, hopping into a truck and disappearing on a road that led only to death. I want to see, I want to know, Sonny thought. But she was not sure. She did not long for the grave.

“A better way than Olsen?” She asked.

“Yes,” he said. “A way where people do not have to make those kinds of choices.”

A few days after their conversation in the tree, Farrow came to their house on the back of the brown jack-mule with several horses trotting in front of him. Her father let them all into the round pen and patted Farrow’s knee with a sad smile.

“These are our horses,” her father said into the round pen, while Sonny watched Farrow ride back down the road.

“Sonny, are not you happy?”

“Yes,” she said, and, for the first time in days, reached for her father’s outstretched hand.

Weeks went by punctuated by the same routine of chores, First Day Gatherings, reading to the Aime sisters, and temple lessons. But her father stopped taking her fishing and eventually no longer went to the First Day Gatherings. In town there were whispers, but soon the dispersion of the horses to the various Valley families settled things down. At the First Day Gatherings, Alin would often take her mother aside while Farrow and Sonny went down to the river to throw stones.

“Where is your father?” Farrow asked.

“He is at home.” She felt along the bank for a flat stone.

“Are you happy with your horses?”

“Of course. They are wonderful, but, can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know…” she lowered her voice “where Olsen went?”

Farrow picked up a stone and threw it down river. “He went over the mountain with Peddler.”

“But where?”

“I do not know.” Farrow shrugged. “But he’s not coming back. No one ever comes back.”
“Except Peddler.”
“He’s not like everyone else. You know that.”
Sonny dug a rock from the wet riverbank, mud sliding under her fingernails. “How far have you been from the Valley Center?”
“You should not ask questions like these.” He looked at her from the corner of his eye and then smiled. “But I like you, so I will answer. I have been to the base of the mountain where the road starts to climb.”
Her stomach went cold at his first admonition, but his smile warmed her, gave her courage. “What is it like there? Does Peddler live on the road?”
“I believe he lives somewhere on the mountain, but it is nowhere I have seen. The forest is thicker, and I have been told there are white trees the higher you travel.”
A voice from behind them made Sonny drop the smooth rock from her hand and turn. Farrow took a few steps back up the bank toward his father who stood there looking down at them.
“i said, it is time to head to the temple.” Alin watched as Farrow nodded and walked obediently past him. “Sonny,” Alin said, “tell your father he has been missed.”
“I will.” She nodded. Farrow had the same white-blond hair of his father, but where Alin had eyes blue and far away as the sky, his son’s eyes were a warm light brown like the wings of a sparrow. On Peddler’s visiting day Sonny went to the barn to find her father. It was a tradition for them to visit Peddler together on the one day a month that he set up in the Valley Center.
Sonny knocked on the big door of their barn before swinging it open. He sat at his workbench looking through papers. Off to the side nearest her there was a page with a picture of a strange looking machine.
“Sonny,” he said with a smile as he shuffled the papers back into a single stack.
“What are you reading?”
“Just some nonsense about an old machine.”
The only other machines that Sonny had seen aside from Peddler’s truck were in the underground temple. No one was allowed to touch them, but everyone had seen them. In temple lessons everyone learned that the machines used to be very important to the First Families, that they had kept the Families alive in the temple before the creation of the Valley. Sonny had always found it difficult to imagine how metal boxes with hoses and knobs had ever done anything useful.
“What did it do?” she asked, and reached out to turn the stack of papers toward her.
“This one, on the first page, that’s a radio. People used to use them to talk over great distances.”
“How far?”
“Very far. As far as they needed to.” He smiled and ruffled her hair. “Let’s go see Peddler.”

The caravan of Peddler’s truck opened into a traveling store when he stopped and opened the latches, swung support beams into place. Peddler often carried the same spices, herbs, tools, and animal skins, but sometimes he had new, strange things that Sonny liked to see.
Sonny and her father rode one of their horses, a dapple-grey mare that she had named Juniper, to the Village Center. When they arrived Peddler’s truck was already parked and open. Sonny got down first with the help of her father. The mare left them to graze on the thick grass around the Valley’s well-spring. The Aime sisters sifted through a bin of fabric and thread. Jane and Jack, the twin children of the temple leader’s daughter, pondered over jars of seeds. Farrow explored the various tools of stone, metal, and wood that hung from pegs above one of the shelves. He nodded at
Sonny and she smiled in return, proud that her father was out and about.

“How you holding on, Rand?” Peddler opened his mouth just enough when he spoke so that the weed he was chewing on would not fall out. He smiled even though he was giving condolences.

Sonny felt her father tense next to her, his jaw clenching and his hands balling into fists.

“Sonny, go on and see what you can.”

She started to protest, but he widened his eyes at her and jerked his head in a way that said get lost. It was a rare occurrence that her father ever shooed her away.

“Were you able to find what I asked you for last time?” he asked Peddler as she walked away.

On the other side of the truck she found a curious jar with something floating in foggy liquid. The creature was no bigger than her two fists put together. Its skin was the color of the Aime sisters’ frocks. She leaned closer to look at its eyes, cloudy and black.

“That’s a demon. I bartered it off a stray at the trading stop. He said he got it from a wanderer up north.”

Sonny jumped at the easy drawl of Peddler’s voice and backed away from the jar. Peddler laughed and spit out the weed from between his lips.

“It does not look like a demon.” The only things she knew about Peddler were the stories the others told. They said that he lived in a camp at the top of the mountain. There were rumors that he was not even human. And she knew that he had taken Olsen and the blood red mare.

“Have you seen a demon?” Peddler asked through a toothy grin.

“No…”

Peddler laughed again, “Well, see then? You could ask him yourself, but I do not think he will answer you.”

Sonny tapped on the jar.

“Not very talkative today I guess. Here’s a bag of clementines. Your father already traded. Think you can handle them?”

Sonny scowled. Her father rounded the opposite corner of the truck with a box in his arms.

On the way home Sonny rode the horse while her father walked. She hummed “This is How You Drive a Truck.” It was a strange name for a song that talked nothing about how to drive a truck. She thought then that she might like to have the demon. It seemed lonely in its quiet jar. But Peddler probably wanted something more than they could give, and her mother would surely be repulsed by it.

“What is in the box?”

“Something to pass the time.”

The next morning she went to the First Day Gathering with her mother and then went to the Aime sisters’ house to read. When she walked home alone there were no clouds in the sky. She took off her sweaty leather shoes and found a proper stick to drag in the dirt. At home, her father stood in the yard and looked up at the roof. She squinted against the sun to see a metal rod on the roof that pointed to the sky. On the top of the metal rod, two thinner pieces of metal reached out in each direction, and smaller pieces reached out from them.

“What is that?”

“Something to pass the time.”
The Three Heads said it was obvious that her father had taken one of the horses and gone over the mountains. Alin even claimed that he had seen tracks on the road leading out of the Valley, had asked Peddler to confirm, and he had. Just like that, her father was gone, a name to be forgotten among a handful of other names that had also disappeared into the wasteland and eventually out of thought all together.

Sonny stopped talking to Farrow. She stopped talking to everyone. What did they know? How could a man be there one day and gone the next? How could that man be her father?

A week after he disappeared and all of the search parties had come back empty-handed; they went to the place of burning and lit an empty pyre for her father. In the fading light of the day Sonny stood in her red frock with her arms tight around herself. Farrow, Alin, the other two Heads and their families stood off to the side, their faces unmoving. Her mother trembled, but her face was hard, the arm she put around Sonny’s shoulder unyielding.

In the procession down the hill Farrow caught up to her and her mother. They stopped walking and looked at him.

“He is resting now,” Farrow said.

“Yes, he is resting,” her mother said, and then looked at Sonny when she did not return the traditional condolence phrase.

“He is resting,” Sonny mumbled, and then broke from her mother to walk ahead down the hill.

It was against custom, but Farrow caught up to her. “It hurts now. No matter what they tell us, it always hurts.”

“What would you know?” Sonny asked him, annoyed. He was the son of a Head and should have known better, she thought. He was supposed to have walked behind the family of the dead.

He looked surprised, but then smiled a sad kind of smile. “My mother. She died when I was only five turns, but I remember it. She was there smiling and laughing one day, and gone the next. The healers could not explain it.”

“Forgive me,” Sonny said with a sigh, “I had forgotten.”

At the bottom of the hill he turned to her, “I just wanted you to know that I have felt this hurt before. It gets easier. I promise.”

Before Sonny could respond her mother had joined them, and the rest of the procession was closing in.

“She is resting,” Sonny said quickly, and nodded to Farrow.

Several weeks after the burning her mother threw basket after basket of things into the storage shed. Sonny stood on the porch, pressing her back against the house as she watched. The baskets were full of her father’s things: clothes, drawings, his fishing pole, a glove for the ball game some of the olden men played. Sonny felt sick to her stomach. She still could not believe her father was gone, that he would leave. All of their horses were still in the round pen, all of his things where he had left them until her mother took them.

“Do not just stand there. Help me with this?”

Her mother thrust a bag of her father’s clothes at her. They still smelled like him and Sonny felt warm tears fill her eyes. She pushed off the house and walked toward the wooden shed. At the threshold she listened for her mother to walk back into the house and then she opened the bag. She
lifted it to her face so she could feel the soft fabric and take in the smell of juniper and warm earth.

“Sonny.” Her mother came up behind her.

Tears blurred her vision and threatened to fall. Sonny held her breath.

Her mother ripped the bag from Sonny’s hands and tied it shut again before tossing it into the shed. “Do not ponder over the belongings of the dead, it brings bad luck.”

Sonny looked into the dark shed. “But can I have something, just something small?”

“No,” her mother said in a quiet voice, the red around her eyes betraying her.

She found the radio in the back of the barn’s loft, followed a trail through the dust that led her to the house and ultimately up to the antenna. She covered the cord under dirt and straw, and then covered the radio in an old horse blanket. Earlier that day her mother had removed every trace of him—the only reminder, the thin metal rod on the roof. In the turns to come Sonny looked up at the antenna every time she left the house and walked towards it every time she returned. She liked to hold her father in her mind, imagine him in that space between his life and his disappearance.

Life in Grey Valley wandered forward, accented by visits from Peddler and First Day Gatherings. A turn after her father’s pyre burned, the Aime sisters died, and Sonny no longer had anyone to read to after the Gatherings. Even if she was relieved of her boredom, it saddened her to see them go. Side by side in their sleep they passed away from too many turns, the healers said.

When Jack and Jane, or Alin and Farrow came to check on her and her mother, her mother would feed them juniper cakes and honey wine, the only foods in the house other than dried corn and apples, and only because the wine and cakes were a sacred requirement regardless of circumstance. And though their circumstances were not terrible, they had been made to trade their horses off one by one, even Sonny’s Juniper.

In lieu of reading to the Aime sisters, Sonny spent her First Days in Olsen’s old horse fields. The wooden fences were decaying and the fields all overgrown with thin tan weeds that reached just above Sonny’s knees. She would pick the ones with bottlebrush ends as she walked, and weave them into crowns and necklaces. Every Flowering Season the field erupted in red poppies and Sonny would gather them for her father. Since no ashes had been spread she climbed the tree in her yard and left the flowers on her sitting branch until the wind and the birds carried them all away.

On her fifteenth turning she joined the Flowering Season. A few days later there were juniper cakes and honey wine passed around in the Valley Center to celebrate, and all the people of Grey Valley came out to see her and the few other girls of varying ages. It was Farrow who handed her a fistful of crushed red poppies and a jar of honey wine. She did not want to take them. But it was custom that she would, and so she did, and everyone smiled. After that, Farrow smiled every time he looked at her. He was taller and he wore his hair long and braided. In a turn’s time they would be braided together.

Sonny woke to find that her mother had moved the jar of honey wine and the now dead poppies from the kitchen table to the top of her dresser. From the kitchen came the sound of her mother preparing for work. She climbed from the bed, the wooden floor cold on her bare feet. It was to be her mother’s first day working for Farrow’s family.
After the previous evening’s arrangements, Alin’s family had asked her for help in their garden. The work was a courtesy, even Sonny knew that, but at least it would get her mother out of the house.

Sonny went to the poppies and rubbed the dried petals between her fingers. She changed from her sleeping frock to her work frock and tied the bottom up between her legs. The day before her prickled with possibilities, and before she left her room she went back for the jar of honey wine. She snuck into her mother’s room and took the shed key from the nightstand drawer. All day she played with it in her pocket, anxious to unwrap her turnaday gift to herself.

Sonny visited the horse fields first, where she took a sip of the wine. It was sweet and warmed her chest. She splashed some out onto the dry earth in memory of the horses. She also offered her tree a splash of the wine and a fresh bouquet of poppies. Only then was it time to explore the shed.

The shed was stacked to the roof and at first she amused herself pulling out her baby linens, and old wooden toys. Eventually she found the bag of clothes. She opened it and found one of her father’s shirts inside. She held it to her nose, but it smelled of the shed and not juniper. She pulled the shirt on anyway, over her frock. She was meticulous in putting everything else back in order. She locked up, returned the key to her mother’s nightstand and took the wine out to the barn.

In a drawer, under several tools and empty cartons, Sonny found the papers with the radio information on them. Although stained with mouse urine and spotted with mold, they told her what to do with the radio. It took her three whole days’ worth of time in the barn to get everything working.

On the night that her mother went to the Valley Center to attend the monthly meeting of the Three Heads, Sonny went into the barn. She uncovered the radio and sat before it in a puddle of lamplight. With one flat palm against the cool metal top of the battery and the other around a crank she turned and turned until a green light flickered to life on the battery. It greeted her with static as she sat down under the harsh glow of her wind-up lantern. She was not sure if her father had actually finished installing the antenna or if she would be able to get out at all. She scanned the basic instructions a few times and then turned through the channels until she heard voices.

She depressed the button on the microphone and spoke into the momentary silence “Hello? Is anyone there?”

For a long time there was no reply and then a friendly male voice came across. “Breaker 1-9 this is Big Jonny, what is your handle?”

Sonny was shocked to hear the voice, and was not quite sure what she should do next. She pressed the button. “Hello, Big Jonny. What is a handle?”

There was a quick burst of static before Big Jonny spoke again, “It is your CB name, darling. Like mine’s Big Jonny, J-O-N-N-Y.”

“Oh, my name is Sonny.”

“Sonny, huh? That’s a real nice name sweetheart. You got an O.M., an old man?”

“I do not have an old man,” she said, although she was not entirely certain as to what he was asking.

“Oh, you are just a young lady.” He sounded pleased with himself. “Is this your first time? On the CB?”

“Yes. Where are you?”

“Baby, I am on the wasteland roadway, the grassland roadway, and sometimes the roadway to the moon. Listen, you need a handle. Something
real nice like...like the Sunshine Kid. How does that sound?

“The Sunshine Kid,” she said to herself before pressing the button down again, “I like it.”

“All right Sunshine Kid, how about we switch to channel 16? Just the two of us?”

Every night after that Sonny snuck out to the barn and talked to Big Jonny on the radio. He would tell her all about his adventures on the road, and his baby-blue rig. He described towns so bright that one would swear they were made of light, and when she asked him about horses he said that when he went far enough north, there was this wild herd of them that would always know when he was coming. He said they would run right along the roadway with him until he crossed south into the desert.

Big Jonny would not say much about his past or where he came from. One time Sonny asked him how many turns he had and he laughed and said “Age does not matter on the road; life is not linear out here. People and things just go on forever.” She knew after the first month of talking to him that she wanted a part of that, a part of a place where people and things went on forever.

For a while, Big Jonny’s stories sated her curiosity toward the wasteland roadway. She spent every evening that her mother was away huddled in the barn under an itchy blanket, talking to Big Jonny over the radio. He was at once real and unreal, a disembodied voice from a machine, but a voice that knew her, that gave her a longing for something more.

One evening when she came home from volunteering in the Great Hall, she found her mother sitting in the kitchen with her father’s shirt on the table.

“Where did you get this?” Her mother’s cheeks were red and puffy.

“I...I found it.” Sonny said.

“You found it?” Her mother was staring at the shirt, gripping it with one hand so hard that her knuckles turned white. “You are practically a woman and you are still acting like a child. You live with your head in the clouds just like he did—never seeing what is important, what has to be done.”

“I did not reject Farrow. Is not that enough for you?” Sonny said quietly, but she felt angrier than she ever had in her life.

“Do not talk back to me.” She thrust the shirt at Sonny. “Put this in the fire and then go to your room.”

Sonny held the shirt to her stomach. “no...”

“You will,” she said, “or I will lock you in the shed until your courting begins.”

Sonny clenched her jaw. She stormed from the kitchen and into the living room where a fire burned low in the grate. Sonny felt sick to her stomach. She closed her eyes and threw it into the fire.

The next morning when her mother left, she went to the grate and poked at the cold ashes. It was then that she decided she was going to leave.

“Can I ask you something Big Jonny?”

“Anything.”

She let the radio silence fill the expanse of the barn before depressing the microphone’s button. “Can you come and get me?”

There was a long pause and then a sudden sharp laugh from the speaker. “I cannot go to that Valley of yours, Sunshine.”

She thought of Farrow and her mother, of the horses and the First Day Gatherings, and how in
her sixteenth turn she would join Farrow’s household. She liked Farrow, and her mother was her mother, but she longed for more. A secret part of her thought she might be able to find her father.

“I can meet you at the trade stop.” The words made her mouth turn dry, her heart beat faster.

“All right, if you can get there, I will be there.”

It was much too far for her to walk. But as she thought about her father’s stories and the roadway, Peddler suddenly came to mind. She was sure that she could talk him into giving her a ride. After all, he had helped out her grandfather and been sympathetic to her father’s need to connect to the outside world, had not he? Peddler always came and went from the Valley at the same time every month, so she still had a week to plan her escape. She told Big Jonny about Peddler and they agreed to meet at the rest stop in eight days.

“I cannot wait, Sunshine Kid. I am going to make you the happiest girl in the world. I will even catch you one of those wild horses,” was what he had said.

Sonny spent the week doing her chores and watching every step she took. Her mother seemed pleased and told her that it was about time she had come to her senses. The night before Peddler was going to leave, Sonny packed her half-jar of honey wine, a few other belongings, and then went to find him.

He was parked in his usual spot in the Valley center, working on closing up his truck for the drive back to his camp. He turned and saw Sonny, “Have not seen you in a long time.”

“You were my father’s friend, right?”

Peddler eyed the box she had in her arms and the bag she had slung over her shoulders. “Maybe.”

“My grandfather too.”

He seemed surprised. “I guess so. I only had a few more turns than you when he hitched a ride out of here.”

“So you will take me?”

“What?” He laughed and plucked a weed from his mouth to throw into the dark. “Sonny, no.”

“I brought you this back. Think of it as a payment.” She sat the box down on one of the truck’s displays and opened it up to reveal the radio.

Peddler peered into the box. “Things are different out there. Your grandfa—”

“My grandfather was afraid. He wanted to come back. But I am not afraid, and there’s nothing here for me to come back to.” The lie hurt to tell, but she pressed on. “Besides, I know someone over the mountain.”

“Oh? Do you?” Peddler shook his head. “Sonny, you are awful brave. I will even say you are pretty smart, but over that mountain you need something more than guts and brains.”

“You said that you were around my age when you took my grandfather over the mountain. I f you could do it then, I can too.”

He shook his head. “Things were different. I was different, and so was this Valley.”

Sonny set her bag down on top of the radio box and hopped up onto the display to sit next to it. “But the way things are now, Peddler, they are not right for me.”

“If you leave you will not be able to come back.” Sonny was quiet for a moment, as she considered what Peddler had said. Part of her was scared to think of never coming back. She would miss the horse fields, the familiar faces, and her mother. She would be leaving her entire universe behind. “Will you take me or not?” She asked, before she could think much more about it.

Peddler sighed and looked at the box again. “The antenna’s not here, you are giving me a pretty bum deal.”
“I could not get on the roof.”
Peddler cocked his head to the side like he was listening to something Sonny could not hear. “All right,” he finally said. “Get in the caravan now, before anyone sees you.”

“Thank you Peddler! You are wonderful.” Sonny hopped from the truck and put her arms around him.

“That’s not necessary. Go on. Get some sleep.” Unyielding, he took her shoulders and pushed her back.

Sonny smiled anyway and, shouldering her bag, she stepped into the caravan and moved to sit on the floor in the back, away from the moving parts. Peddler looked at her with an unreadable gaze, and then shut the doors. She held her bag to her chest and settled back. She heard Peddler lock up the caravan, a series of clicks and knocks. When he started the truck everything on the shelves around her shuddered, and then the truck was moving, and she was on her way to the mountains.

When she awoke it was still dark. It felt as though she had only just fallen asleep when Peddler opened the doors and called for her to come out. She crawled forward, and hopped down from the truck. They were in the forest, but the air was much colder than the Valley’s at this time of year and there were white trees with round yellow leaves all around them.

“Where are we?”

“Top of the mountain. My place.” He grinned.

She shouldered her pack and stepped around the outside of the caravan. The locks and levers clicked and groaned behind her. To her right, a clearing opened up to a roaring fire pit, where logs, worked soft for benches, surrounded it. A one-room house made from the white trees stood just outside of the firelight. A horse, the same one she saw leave with Olsen, grazed in a pen that came up against the left side of the house. She almost asked if Olsen was there, but then thought better of it. Even if he had brought her this far, she still wanted to keep her guard up around Peddler.

“This is home, my piece of the world.”

“The white trees, what are they called?”

“Aspens, or birch, I cannot remember.”

“They are beautiful.”

“I guess they are.” He reached for her pack and she flinched. “Just thought you might want to take some weight off your shoulders.”

Sonny let her bag slide off and she handed it to him. “Thank you.”

Next to the fire, Peddler spooned green beans from a heated tin into his mouth. He slurped them between his lips like they were a delicacy. He did not offer her any. She ignored her grumbling stomach and sipped from some water she had warmed.

“Your grandfather,” Peddler shook his head, “He was something else. Told me he wanted to see the roadway. I should not have let him.”

“Why not?”

“He came back crazier than all get out, but I guess you do not remember that.”

“No.” She thought of black anise, and a line of fear drew up her spine.

“I think it was all that empty land. Open space can do that to a person; make them realize how small they are.”

“I did not really know him.”

“You are small too, we all are. Do not forget that. Nope.” He crunched a green bean thoughtfully. “I will not bring you back neither. I did not bring him back. Trouble from the Valley is the last thing I need.”
Sonny drew her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs and squeezed.

“I know,” she said.

In the White House Peddler made her a bed on the floor between two animal skins. When he blew out the lamp, complete darkness settled on her and then faded under the starlight streaming in through the window. The sky seemed brighter up here, the clouds closer.

“If you try to come back I will have to stop you,” Peddler said from his bed in the corner.

They were up with the rising of the sun, the birdsong in the trees. Sonny rolled her animal skins and leaned them in a corner, then took her bag outside with her. Her legs were cold, exposed from her frock. She took a seat by the fire and rubbed her palms up and down her legs to warm them faster. Peddler heated chunks of meat in a thick grease that popped and hissed.

“Here,” Peddler said, handing her a tin of the grease and meat. “Eat it while it is hot.”

Sonny looked at the meat and felt her stomach turn. It smelled like burned hair and black anise. “What is this?”

“Deer heart, anise root, and pig fat.” He thumped his chest, “Fuel!”

She wished she had not asked, but she was very hungry and so she spooned a chunk of heart and some anise-dotted grease from the tin. The meat was chewy but not at all bad, the anise strange and numbing under the grease that coated her mouth and throat. She washed it down with a mug of warm water and used a tuft of pine-needles to scrub the film of fat from her teeth.

On the drive from his home to the bottom of the mountain, Sonny rode in the truck’s cab. She had never been in the front seat of a vehicle before, and found it wonderful. They moved quickly down the winding road. The white trees turned into more pine trees and then those faded to the kind of junipers they had in the Valley. A sign of good luck, Sonny thought. But then the junipers gave way to scraggly low bushes and beige rocks, and the whole expanse of the wasteland opened outside of her window: a vast emptiness of hard-packed earth, the color of bones, which met the pale sky at every inch of the flat horizon.

It was not until they reached the bottom of the mountain that Sonny realized they were at the trade stop. Against the backdrop of the wasteland expanse were tents made from faded scraps of fabric and animal skins. Trucks of all kind were parked in circles or pulling in from the highway in the distance.

“This is it kid.”

She squinted through the window but the further into the mess they drove all she could see through the blowing dust was the suggested shapes of other trucks, the curb of a wooden sidewalk outside of Peddler’s truck. She pulled the scarf she had taken from her mother’s drawer up over her nose and mouth. It smelled like rose oil, like her mother, and she felt a pang of fear. She pulled the dark glasses, that Peddler had given her in exchange for her half-jar of honey wine, over her eyes. She pulled the handle of the passenger door and it swung open with surprising violence from the wasteland wind. Particles of sand buffeted the window and the door paneling with a gritty hiss.

“Careful now, this is it.” Peddler spoke above the wind.

Sonny nodded and smiled, but she felt like crying. He had been nice to her and a part of her did not want to leave the windless haven of his truck.
Questions raced through her mind, doubts that electrified her skin and made her palms sweat. Peddler had said that he would not take her back, but if she never left his truck, could not he sneak her back in? At least over the mountain?

Yet, she had made a promise to Big Jonny and to herself, and she would keep it. She hopped out, stumbling in her effort to keep her frock from blowing up over her head. Peddler scooted her bag to the edge of the bench seat.

“Thank you,” she managed.

“You bought and paid for it, no thanks needed.”

She could hardly hear what he was saying over the noise of the wind roaring in her ears. She shut the truck door. The wind slammed it loud. Peddler waved and disappeared into the dust.

She stepped back and up to stand on the edge of the mismatched wooden beams. The sand blew against her exposed legs, stinging her and making her itch. She did not care though, she loved the way it felt when the wind held her skirt to her thigh and sent the rest flapping beside her like flag.

A much larger truck drove by, this one's cab a dull red that looked like it had been sand blasted from driving in the wasteland for too long. She put the side of her hand against her forehead, trying to block some of the sun so that she could see the incoming traffic. With the roar of each semi-engine coming off of the roadway her stomach tightened.

After a half hour or so, and still no Big Jonny, she finally sat down and did not fight the sun and sand to see every rig that pulled in. The sun slowly lowered itself in the sky and she pulled her knees to her chest. She felt silly and scared. She worried Big Jonny was not going to come. Sonny pressed her face into her knees and started to cry.

She did not hear the rig pull up near the curb, or even the click and creak of the passenger door being swung open.

“Hey, Sonny darling, you look just like I thought.”

It was Big Jonny’s voice that made her look up. At first she thought she was hearing things, but after she dragged the back of her wrist across her teary eyes, she saw a baby blue cab with BIG JONNY written in scrawling script across the side of the hood. She smiled and stood up.

The darkness of the cab loomed above her. The sun was just high enough that it peeked over the top of the truck and made it nearly impossible for her to see inside, where the familiar voice was coming from. She hesitated for a moment and then looked up into the sun, its light burning a glowing circle into the back of her eyelids. Then she looked into the darkness of the cab, put her foot on the step, and reached for the door handle to pull herself inside.
After the Second Ending, the door to the underground temple ached open with a groan that echoed off the walls of Grey Valley. Leather boots touched the earth tentatively. Frozen solid in the grip of the Dying Season, the ground refused to yield to footprints. The three families, the First Families, found themselves moving from one barren space to another. The trees were all bony arms and fingers except for the sporadic evergreens.

The temple is warmer than the biting air outside. The air smells of wet earth. The laminate floor is damp and needs sweeping. These are the details that he notices during temple lessons. These are the details that he thinks of when sleep is a stranger. These are the details that retain the feeling of six cold palms exploring his body.

He is a vessel for receiving.

This is how we imagine the entrance into the Valley, and ever after on the cusp of the Flowering Season, three families are led into the underground temple. When buds cling to branches but do not dare to unfold, that is when the time is right to once again inhabit the temple. The three families are those of the Three Heads, the keepers of the Valley, the Predictors of the Third Ending, and the Preventers. For three days and three nights they live in the underground temple. On the morning of the fourth day, the three families step back into the sunlight, singing.

Our own fields were supposed to be safe. Some of us claimed we saw a shadow earlier that Falling Season—great wings breaching the pool of sky above. Our mountains were only so high, and could only keep so much evil out.

Many whispered of Ruth having lost herself in the mountains for days. Adam said she went searching for blackberries and morels in the thick pine and blue-juniper forest. Ruth never spoke of it. In fact, if we asked she would laugh and smooth her frock, and say that she had never been lost.

A rainy night nine months later brought the twins. Ruth screamed of claws inside her womb. We administered Black and Blue Cohosh, wet satchels of Valerian and Shepherd’s Purse for her forehead. Hallucinations took her over when first one, and then the other twin arrived. She murmured of feathers and the vastness of the wasteland. Adam held her down and spoke gently in her ear. We heard some of his affirmations about mountain tops and rivers, and the stars above. The twins cried in short, sharp bursts, their little mouths opening and opening with want of milk.

At the Borning ceremony, the trees were hung with white linen canopies and lit with pinpoints of candle flame from gently swinging jars. Honey wine and juniper cakes, rivers and mountains, overflowed on the heavy wooden tables brought out from our houses. After the first song and dance, Adam wheeled Ruth and the twins into the center of the gala. Ruth sat in a wooden chair that Adam had attached wheels to and in each arm she carried a bundle. Out of each bundle there peeked a full head of gossamer hair the color of muddy straw. We had never seen any hair like that before, but Adam and Ruth beamed and so we beamed.
too. The midwives took the babies and danced with them, gave them their first taste of honey wine, while their mother chewed juniper cakes in her own mouth before fingerling the mash into theirs.

Four months later one of the twins disappeared.

Ruth said she had only gone inside for the shake of a lamb’s tail. When she came back out, she found only one baby and two baby blankets—a spread of stars behind teddy bears in bubble-helmeted suits. And a dark shadow in the sky. Those of us who were working in higher fields thought we saw something that day, a darkness crossing over the sun.

Everyone mourned the loss of the twin. But like grains of sand through an hourglass, our hands of sympathy turned to clicking tongues of how careless Ruth was to have left the twins on the lawn, and how Adam worked too much, left his wife alone too often.

We questioned all of us:

How big was it? What color was it? Did it have feathers? Did it have scales on its feet? Did it have a blood-red eye?

We questioned Ruth and she said:

All I could do was fall to my knees and hold Eloy and cry and cry. Eloy started to cry too and we cried there together, my knees wet from the grass. I remember holding Eloy out to look at him, look at his round red face and make sure that he was still really there. I looked at him and I saw Roy, only it was not Roy of course, it was Eloy and he had these big round eyes. It was like something in them was missing.

We questioned Adam and he said:

I could do nothing but look up at the empty blue sky and wait for something sinister to appear. But even if it had appeared I would not have known what to do aside from get the wife and Eloy inside. I have no weapons that could harm a creature like that. It was all I could do as a good Believer to keep my mouth shut, with all of that bad-talk you are all doing. How else can I get food on the table if I do not work the Horse-Man’s fields day in and day out?

We questioned Eloy and he said:

My first memory is this internal change. I had this feeling of being grounded, in touch with things, happy I guess you could say, and then a sudden lightness, like the only thing holding me to the earth was my mother’s arms, the weight of my security blanket.

If we had questioned Roy he might have said:

I felt a sudden lightness of being. Removed from the earth. Up and up I saw the whole Valley. All around the edges the weeping yellow of the wasteland. These things, all things I was never supposed to see. And then myself, altered, part of the sky, and my arms became shadows filled with wind.

Sometimes we swore that we saw two shadows in the sky. Sometimes there were noises in the juniper trees like a great raspy breathing. Talk of red eyes in the forest meant no one walked alone at night. We did our best to move on. We tilled our fields, hauled our water, and picked sangre berries only at the forest’s edge.

This is all to explain why, on the first day of every Flowering Season, we take a jar of honey wine and two juniper cakes to Ruth. She sits them in the yard, and in the morning they are gone.
Sara Wolfe Vaughan believes there is a story waiting in everyone and everything. She is currently working on a co-authored series of post-apocalyptic novels, a collection of stories about elevators, and hybrid pieces inspired by great films. In her work she likes to explore the complexity of human relationships, and how they function when all that is familiar is altered or taken away. The stories in this collection are excerpted from her novella with linked characters and settings.
I’ve always struggled with where to start a story. When chatting with friends, I often begin, stop, rewind, and fast forward so many times that my friends just end up confused and lost in the timeline. So this story, the one where I take a horse and a mule and a dog and ride the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, where does it start? The first step from the Mexican border along a two-lane highway south of Columbus, New Mexico? Or when I loaded up my Dodge Ram, moved to Montana, and enrolled in a class on mule packing? (yes, I got college credit for that.) Or when I was 17 at the Martin Luther King Day parade in Austin, Texas and met a man on a pinto horse who told me that he was riding across the country to raise support for legalized marijuana? He said he belonged to the Long Riders’ Guild, an organization of people who’ve ridden a horse or mule over a thousand miles, and I fixed in my head that I too could ride across the country. Or that first riding lesson at age seven on a grandfatherly old thoroughbred named Roman whose lower lip flapped as he walked?

It could have been any trail, but in the end, it had to be the Continental Divide. I wanted mountains, I wanted the West, I wanted wilderness, and I wanted glory. When I was eighteen, I’d started to sketch out a ride across my home state, Texas, but realized that I’d have to ride along roads, even highways, because of the state’s dearth of public land. A national scenic trail seemed like my best bet: an established route, guidebooks to help me along the way, a trail community with online forums and listservs. Most of the Appalachian Trail is off-limits to horses and mules. The Pacific Crest Trail seemed too conventional, too tame, and besides, a few people had already ridden the entire thing. For the Continental Divide, all I could find was a man who’d attempted it north to south and failed. I could be the first to ride the whole trail,
3100 miles from Mexico to Canada through the Rockies and five states, from the Chihuahuan Desert to Glacier National Park.

The Continental Divide is a geographic feature, the dividing line of North America. Rainfall on the western side of the divide, barring evaporation or human interference, will eventually trickle downstream to the Pacific Ocean. On the east side, the Atlantic. (Or Arctic, but that divide is in mostly in Canada and Alaska, beyond the scope of my ride.) The trail often can’t follow the divide itself, because the spine is too steep, too rocky, too dry or, in some cases, not owned by the right people. (A good chunk in New Mexico is on the Jicarilla Apache reservation; a long term trail agreement between the tribe and the United States government is not politically feasible.) So the trail parallels the divide or pops back and forth over it at low points or, occasionally, blatantly deviates to access water or a scenic site or a resupply town.

I say “trail”, but in 2007 the trail was still more of an idea than a reality. There were routes, competing sets of guidebooks, a community, but often the trail itself was simply a set of directions: “Aim north northeast following the contour of the land,” or “At 3.7 miles bushwhack down the left side of the road until you connect with another road.” Only around fifty people a year attempted a through hike, and most of them didn’t make it. The CDT sounded hard, and I wanted hard. I wanted hard so I could conquer it and absorb its power for my own. I was only twenty-one, and much of my short span of adulthood thus far had been spent preparing for this journey. A plan slowly grew, and over a year the idea, the dream of riding across the country that a random person on a pinto horse planted in my head became specific. I arranged resupplies and layovers, accumulated equipment, made maps, and set a date. May 1st. I would take my college finals early, load up my animals, and drive south from Montana to New Mexico, and then we—my horse, mule, dog, and I—will spend the next five months riding home.

THE HORSE

Her first name, at least the first that I know of, was Bodacious, after a PBR bull famous for mauling his riders after he dumped them in the dirt. Slightly ominous, so flush with whimsy and wishful thinking, I renamed her Sage, wise and sweet. But Sage was too good a name for my future human child for me to let a horse keep it. A premature concern perhaps, but my father had shared his name with the family collie for the first four years of his life. Now I call her Rua, Rua Badra, Arabic names meaning visions and full moon. Names for a horse who tugs at your soul in the most cliché of ways. I like to tip my smooth forehead against her furred one, to kiss the white of her blaze and the velvet of her nose. When I am pressed against Rua, I believe we share thoughts, a heartbeat. Woo woo, of course, but it feels real enough.

Rua is small, the color of an old penny but the shine of a new, with a thick copper mane that brushes her shoulders. Rounded rump, slender neck, delicate face, she’s the sorrel version of a Barbie Dream Horse, distractingly pretty. I bought her for her looks, two years before the trip, mostly because I didn’t know how to look for much else. Her old owners had neglected her, let her get dangerously thin, before a young woman saved her and, after a period of fattening-up and gentling, sold her to me. Rua didn’t know much then, just how to be haltered and led, but she was present, engaged with her human, and eager to please.
woman wanted six hundred dollars for her, money she'd spent to bring Rua back from the cusp of starvation, so I saved my tips from drying Subarus and Silverados at the carwash and made three payments, digging through the side pockets of my truck for loose change to make the final one. And then she was mine, and I continued to save those tips to pay for hay. Buying the horse is the cheap part. Then comes feed and board and tack and vet bills and, of course, training. But I wasn't going to pay for training; I'd break her to ride myself.

I didn't really know how to start a horse, but I figured I could make it up as we went along. Many people think of animal training as an assertion of dominance over another being, and that element is there. Horses, like humans, are social animals, and social animals have hierarchies that dictate behavior. But training is also the building of a language, new to both species, a bridge between snorts and smiles, between mutual grooming and verbal praise, between prey behavior and predator. All the human dominance and equine willingness is useless if the horse doesn't understand what the human wants. When I began training Rua, I knew the final language I wanted us to speak together. I knew the leg cues, the voice commands, the rein against her neck, but I didn't know how to teach her the grammar of this language, the building blocks that turn a mess of boots and body weight and bridle into communication.

I was familiar with the general order of things: ground work, longeing, riding in a contained space, riding in a larger space. I started by teaching her to “whoa”; good brakes are always handy. On the lead line, I'd walk forward, say “whoa”, and then stop short. Worried, Rua would stop too, and I'd praise her responsiveness. Then I took that command to the longe line. Rua would be trotting in a circle around me at the end of a long rope, I'd say “whoa”, she'd plant her feet, and I'd praise her. Rua is half-Arabian, a horse breed known for loyalty; she lives for my praise. One origin story of the Arabian horse tells of Muhammad traveling through the desert with his herd of mares. When they neared an oasis, he loosed the mares to drink, but before they reached the water, he blew his horn and summoned them back to him. An absurd test. Five of the mares returned in spite of their thirst, and these five horses founded the breed. Muhammad marked them with his thumb, and Arabian horse owners today still prize these indentations of flesh, these signs of devotion to human whims. Rua has Muhammad's thumbprint tucked into the curve where her neck becomes chest.

Because Rua is Rua, her training came together, mostly. She was patient with my fumblings and frustration as I discovered by trial and error the grammar of our new language: giving to pressure, moving into the open spaces created by body and reins, and a sort of behavioral inertia. (Keep doing that thing until I ask you to do something else.) When I confused her with a command, she would offer a possible response, accept my correction, and wait while I sussed out a new way to ask. It wasn't perfect. Our arena work was wonky—circles more like ellipses, infinity signs instead of figure eights—but she was a dream on the trail. I'd drop the reins, and she'd follow the path at a brisk walk, slowing to navigate logs in the trail or rocky segments all without a single command from me. She's a horse who's happiest when she has responsibility and her rider's trust.

Rua's other half is Morgan, America's first horse breed. In the late 18th century, just as the United States Congress adopted the Bill of Rights, a stallion of debated ancestry appeared in New England. Aficionados of Thoroughbreds, Arabians, Canadian horses, Welsh Cobs, and Friesians all
like to claim that this little stud, Figure, was descended from their breed. The stallion, known as the "Justin Morgan Horse" after his best-known owner, became famous in Vermont for his speed, strength, and spirit. Despite his small size, he outraced New York thoroughbreds, outpulled draught horses, and carried President James Monroe in a parade. From three of his sons, the Morgan breed was founded, and today they’re popular for their unusual combination of hardiness and fancy looks. I know Rua has the flash of her distinguished ancestor, but I’m hoping she also has his toughness and tenacity. She’ll need it to carry me safely three thousand miles through rough country.

THE MULE

The fall before I left, I began my search for a mule in earnest. I wanted steady, reliable, not too tall (height becomes less attractive when you have to hoist 150lbs of gear onto it), and cheap. I found an ad in the Missoulian, “8-year-old john pack mule, 15h, $500”, and drove an hour up to Flathead Lake to check him out. He was medium height, short by Montana standards, a rich bay with little donkey-esque fading on his face, handsome by mule standards, and seemed reasonable enough. He had the short back of his donkey dad, ears as long as a man’s foot, square haunches, a strong, straight neck, and a mane that stood up like a punk rocker’s hair. I don’t remember liking him really, just figuring he’d do. I asked the owner why he was selling, and he pointed at a giant black mule, the largest I’d ever seen.

“That’s Moose,” he said. “That’s my sort of mule. This one is too short, kicks at my hounds, and is hard to shoe.”

“I’ll think about it and get back to you,” I said. Sometimes I describe myself as impulsive, but when I look back at moments like this, I know that’s only true on the surface. It’s more that my decision making process is opaque, resolute but informal, buried beyond the vision of my consciousness. I know how to make a pro/con list or inductively reason my way to an answer, but all that work means little if the answer doesn’t feel right. I wait until I wake up one morning knowing what I want and hope it doesn’t change the next morning. Until that moment of surety, I take no action, preferring to remain still until the way forward is clear. Mulelike, in its way, as anyone who’s tried to coax a mule into an uncertain step will know.

A few days later I woke up knowing I wanted that mule, drove up to the lake, and traded $500 for an animal I barely knew but hoped to depend on for three thousand miles. His name then was Dunham, after a creek in the Bob Marshall Wilderness where he’d first been packed. An okay name, I suppose, but I was determined to have a string of mules named for country singers. Neither Willie nor Waylon suited this guy, so I settled on Yoakum, as in Dwight, the groovy crooner with an Elvis-like swivel to his wrangler-clad hips. Dwight sings the standard country songs about women who done him wrong, but he sounds injured to the pain of the world, going through the motions of heartbreak while already whiskey-bottle numb. Yoakum sounded a bit like Dunham, and this mule seemed like that sort of dude: mellow, stoic, sturdy, and steady in the face of life’s indignities.

The plan was just to pack my equipment on him, but because I can’t resist an animal in need of training, I immediately started breaking Yoakum to ride. At first he seemed simpler than Rua had been, but
mostly he was just slower, lazier. Yoakum doesn’t like to move an inch farther than he must to reach the next blade of grass...or to return to his herd. The first time I slipped a bit between his lips and a bridle over his lengthy ears, he chewed twice at the strange steel on his tongue and stopped. I tugged gently on the right rein; he turned his head to the right. Same thing to the left. So I jumped on him and rode down the driveway. Easy.

Because he’d packed loads, Yoakum knew how to adjust his balance for weight on his back and how to walk evenly down the trail. He’d learned to ignore trailside terrors such as mule-eating rocks, bear-like stumps, and grouse flushed by his hooves. Reining was new, but he lived up to the mulish reputation for intelligence and sorted out the new commands quickly. So a few days later, we went on a trail ride along the train tracks, accompanied by my roommate and my landlord on their own mounts. Yoakum was a gentleman with a low head and relaxed stride; he didn’t even spook at the galloping llamas to whom Rua always gave a skeptical look. So a few days later, we went on another trail ride, alone. Yoakum swayed and swerved as we walked away from his buddies, either inebriated or hopeful of an opportunity to return home, but I urged him forward. At the moment in our two-mile loop that we imperceptibly (to anyone other than a herd-bound mule) curved toward home, Yoakum reared up, lunged into the air, and landed in a gallop.

There are various aphorisms and bits of “common” knowledge about training mules. I met a cowboy once who said he hated working with mules because he didn’t want to ride anything smarter than him. I can respect that. My first summer working as a packer, a coworker warned me to never strike a mule, because the mule would remember and make sure to get me back, even if it took years. I’ve only found this to be true when the mule believes the punishment is unfair; a mule who’s just tried to bite a chunk from your arm knows they deserve a swat. My favorite, the one I have come to learn is almost always true, is this: You have to train a mule the way you should train a horse. Horses evolved for the steppes, wide open country where they could avoid danger simply by bolting away. But mules, mules are only half-horse, and donkeys evolved for steep canyon lands, rugged terrain where they had to hold their ground and fight instead of bolting off the nearest cliff. So the mule has a bit of both, fight and flight, and training shortcuts that often work for horses have little impact on a mule. You can scare a horse into stepping somewhere they would rather not, but a mule will just stare you down. You can make a horse uncomfortable with pressure, and they’ll shift away from it, but the mule will lean their superior weight back into you until you move. They prefer to move through life at a slower, more deliberate pace, and their cooperation must be earned.

So on this day, my first encounter with a full-blown mulish temper tantrum, I pulled one rein until Yoakum turned, walked him back to the point where he began his outburst and started again from there. He immediately tried to take off again, so we returned to that spot again and again and again until he walked away calmly. And then the next time he bolted, we did the same thing. And the next time. And the next time. My quick little ride took four hours, and we both returned home sweaty and grumpy. But I’d found the patience to pass his first test: I didn’t lose my temper, but I didn’t give up control of the ride either. Over the next couple of months, his challenges to my authority became less dramatic, but I am glad that for this journey, he’ll be my pack animal, not my riding animal.
THE DOG

What I said was that I just wanted to go into the shelter to look at the dogs, not to take one home. I would never get a dog on impulse. I was working in southwestern Colorado for the summer at Wit’s End, a dude ranch that turned out to be aptly named. I’m sure the ranch used to be lovely and remote, adjacent to the sparkling Vallecito Lake with the Weminuche Wilderness boundary just yards upslope from the county road. But by the time I arrived for the summer, a subdivision had popped up between the ranch and the lake, and freshly lacquered cabins with green and red roofs filled the little valley. And the ranch itself, struggling under ever-changing management and family squabbles, was in decline. So I didn’t feel any particular loyalty to this employer, at least not enough to prevent me from lying to the Animas County Humane Society and saying that I was allowed to have a dog in employee housing. Not enough to prevent me from giving my friend’s number instead of my boss’s and asking her to confirm my story. Lots of the other employees had dogs. And this, from the moment he launched himself out of the kennel, fighting the leash so hard that he was walking on two legs instead of four, this was love.

They called him Blue at the shelter, though heaven knows why. Blue is a name for a cow dog, a Blue Heeler perhaps, and this pup didn’t have an ounce of cow dog in him. They said he was a German Shepherd cross, probably because of his black and tan coloring, but his long floppy ears and wide forehead give me doubt. And he doesn’t act like a Shepherd; he is flighty and distractable and way too snuggly. My best guess is a mix of husky and some sort of hound, maybe a dash of pointer too. Colorado mushers mix huskies with shorter-coated dogs to produce sled dogs that won’t overheat. He was tall and lean with a broad chest, an agile tail, and salt-and-pepper fur that faded to cream on his belly. He needed a country singer name, but since he already answered to Blue, I went with something that rhymed, LeDoux, as in Chris LeDoux, long and lean rodeo cowboy turned clever songwriter, best known for his humorous songs about rodeo life and earnest odes to the American West, plus a few rock and roll covers. I wasn’t sure the pup could live up to such an illustrious name, but perhaps being named for a western troubadour would be inspirational.

According to the Humane Society folks, LeDoux had been seized by animal control as part of a hoarding case. He was three then and had lived most of his life on a chain with little access to food. He’d been adopted once before, but that person brought him back after a week. I thought having a dog would be easy compared to the two horses I already owned. But you can stick two horses in a pasture together, and as long they have sufficient feed and water, they’re fine, content to just socialize with one another. A dog, generally, lives in your house and craves your attention. LeDoux’s intake form at the pound said he didn’t bark, and that was true. He howled. Every moment alone he mourned my absence, for hours if necessary, to the annoyance of my neighbors. And he’d try to escape whatever confinement prevented him from reaching me. He jumped fences, dug through carpets, broke crates, struggled from harnesses, and ate doors. The only place he could be without me and content (or unsedated) was in or near my truck. So he came with me everywhere. On warmer days I tied him to the truck’s step bar, and LeDoux slept in its shade. In winter I blasted the heat before class and he curled up in the seat with his fluffy husky tail tucked against his bel-
ly for extra warmth. I did my homework in the bark park next to campus while he stole all the other dogs’ tennis balls and buried them in the woods. While we drove from home to school or work he’d alternate resting his head in my lap and pressing his striped nose against vents, inhaling the olfactory delights of a feed store or a strange gas station.

And at night he’d lie in bed next to me, shoulder blades soldered to breastbone, hip to hip, nose against my chin, fingers fused to velvet ears. Le-Doux has a way of sucking in a breath and arching his furred spine further into my belly while I scratch the pale stripe behind his elbow. My friends and I took to calling him “The Substitute Boyfriend” and occasionally a friend will curl up next to him on a couch and just cuddle for a while, enjoying the intimacy of another body that wants nothing more than to be next to yours. I’m making up practical reasons to bring my dog along—hell bark at wildlife and growl at unfriendly strangers and help me find the horses if they wandered off—but these are a front, a justification. I know that in the long days of solitude on the trail Le-Doux will ground me, will comfort me through whatever loneliness might come.

THE SILENT PARTNER

At that dude ranch in Colorado, the summer before my journey, we wore cowboy-cut jeans, palm leaf hats, boots, and denim pearl snap shirts. Fringed chaps wrapped around my thighs, and I enjoyed correcting the guests about the pronunciation of the leather leggings. “Ch-ap is what happens to your ass when you don’t wear sh-aps. It’s related to chapparal, brush country.” Some guests went shopping before their arrival, trying to look the part of a Westerner. Little girls wore pink pointy-toed boots, women tied bandanas glinting with rhinestones around their necks, and men rode with one hand clutching their ill-fitting, ill-shaped straw hats that wouldn’t keep the rain off a pin head.

We repeated the same routine every week. A new batch of dudes arrived on Sunday and filled the rickety bleachers. Lee Greenwood belted out “God Bless the U.S.A” as the wranglers streamed into the arena and performed a choreographed routine of loops and x’s. I rode a svelte bay gelding and carried a Colorado flag that fluttered behind me as we galloped. At the end of the performance, the horses lined up in the center of the arena facing the audience. My gelding stood like a statue while I held my hat over my heart for the National Anthem.

The next morning we heaved the guests onto pre-saddled horses and took them on what we called a trail ride. But the “trail” traveled through one pasture, behind a subdivision of summer homes, across the country road, and around a pond in a second pasture. Nothing remote or impressive if you’re used to Colorado, but our dudes came from Los Angeles, New York City, and Atlanta. The first section of the path abutted another large field full of horses. One bay with an arched neck galloped the fence line, calling to the sedate, dude-bearing mounts. He tossed his head, shook his black mane, and kicked his hind legs in the air.

“Can anyone ride that bronco?” one woman asked.

“That’s the horse they put the bad guests on,” her husband said, shooting a look at his oldest son.

“That’s right,” I said. “Better do everything I tell you to, or we’ll put you on him tomorrow.”

The boy’s mother laughed but scrunched her face in a way that meant I’d worried her. As a
wrangler, my first job was to keep everyone alive and healthy. The ranch horses were used to beginners and tended to be slow-going, but animals are unpredictable and humans are always looking for new ways to find trouble. I gave tips on sitting comfortably in the saddle and barked at children to stop throwing acorns at each other. I watched the dudes to determine who was coordinated (and obedient) enough to go on rides up into the mountains. My second job was entertainment, and I chattered about horses, backcountry, wildlife, and country western dancing.

When we returned to the ranch, the bay gelding was still frolicking. After the guests are safely back on their own two legs, I asked “Do y’all want to see me break that crazy horse to ride?”

The woman said, “No, we don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I can handle him,” I said.

I grabbed a halter and ducked through the wire into the pasture while the dudes gathered near the fenceline. The bay galloped my direction, and I flailed the lead rope towards his face when he neared. He pivoted on his hind end, kicked his heels in the air, and galloped away. When he slowed to an energetic trot, I moved so that I was perpendicular to his shoulder, and he started to circle me, his delicate head lowering. When he slowed to a walk, I dropped my eyes to the ground and stepped backwards. He stopped, and I backed up further. The bay stepped toward me warily. I gave him a moment to settle, and then padded up to his shoulder with quiet heel steps. He shuddered when I patted him firmly on the neck but didn’t move away. I eased the halter over his nose, tied the lead rope into a makeshift rein, and leapt onto his back while the crowd gathered on the other side of the fence gasped. The bay lifted his front feet in a small rear, and I dug my fingers into his mane and pressed my chest into his neck. When he touched down, he shot forward at a full run. I cooed at him until he slowed to a relaxed lope, and laid the rope against the right side of his neck. When the gelding curved his spine and turned to the left, I praised him loudly and directed him toward the watching guests.

I swung off directly in front of them, gave the bay an approving rub, removed the halter, and turned to my onlookers. The bay tried to use my back as a scratching post, so I scolded him.

“Not too bad for the first ride,” I said.

This was a lie, a stunt for the guests’ entertainment. None of them recognized the bay from our drill team event the day before, one of two horses on the ranch that would carry a flag without spooking, and they wouldn’t recognize him when we ran short of kids’ horses on Wednesday and packed a twelve-year-old on him. A horse that I have owned since I was thirteen. A horse that I taught verbal commands such as “up” for rear and “let’s go” for gallop. Our guests came to Colorado for the fir- and aspen-clad mountains, the blue lakes, the clear air, but they came to a dude ranch for the romance of the Wild West. So we gave it to them. Other wranglers told stories about competing in the National Children’s Rodeo (doesn’t exist), a beloved horse waiting for them at home (imaginary), the year they spent living in the wilderness (totally fictitious), a promising bull riding career given up because of injuries (one ill-advised leap onto a bull in a pasture), a childhood on a ranch in South Dakota (born there, but the family moved to Phoenix before the wrangler in question could walk). We never let the truth get in the way of a good story, especially if that story could earn us tips.

At that point I had owned Razi almost half of my life. He was the horse who taught me to ad-
venture. Razi Akil Salim, an Arabic name for another Arabian horse. Another origin story of the Arabian talks of the Angel Jibril visiting Ishmael, son of Ibrahim, after his father had cast him out into the desert because of his stepmother’s jealousy. Jibril transformed a dangerous wind spout into a prancing bay horse, Drinker of the Wind, and gifted it to Ishmael. Arabian horses today keep the energy and seeming fickleness of the wind, and Razi is no exception, except his spirit is balanced with kindness and a sense of humor. I didn’t give him that name; he came with it, and it’ll be on his registration papers as long as the International Arabian Horse Association exists. Razi, my secret. Akil, wise. Salim, safe. My safe and wise secret.

Razi is tall and strong for an Arabian with a dark umber coat that bleaches to a sallow brown in the summer. He’s unfailingly benevolent, even when the person interacting with him deserves less considerate treatment. If he feels his rider start to slip from the saddle, he slows down and moves his body underneath them. My horse trainer picked him out for me when I was thirteen and he was five. We didn’t like each other much then (probably because I was an insufferable teenager), and he spent the first few years of our relationship arranging slow but inevitable collisions between me and the low hanging branches of the mulberry tree in the arena corner, an infuriating habit but not a dangerous one. Over time we became buddies, and from his back I’d pick mulberries off that same tree, and he’d stretch his neck around to lip his half of the haul from my palm. When I moved to Montana for college, he came with me, and we explored the new country together.

The Bedouin used the Arabians as war horses, so they had to be brave but silent. In fierce desert wind storms, the horses were brought into their owners’ personal tents. Egyptian reliefs of Hittite invasions show chariots pulled by dished-faced horses. Later, the Prussians and Russians imported horses from the Arabian Peninsula to use as breeding stock for their own cavalries. These are the lines that Razi comes from, and like a good cavalry horse, he was bold and trusting, even though I tested his limits. Our first stable in Montana backed up to the Bitterroot River, and we tried to swim it with some other girls. But Razi didn’t know how to swim and sank his hind legs down until he could push off of the bottom. I panicked, bailed, and then had to swim out of the fast moving river in jeans and cowboy boots. When I joined him on the bank, Razi just gave me a “really Mom?” look. But he was game to try whatever I asked and eager to explore new trails. We used to trailer to a nearby recreation area and gallop up mountainsides, scramble up road cuts, and jump logs. Occasionally the Arabian flightiness would rear its raucous head, and Razi would scoot sideways away from some terrifying boulder. I’d laugh at his silliness, pat his neck, and tell him not to worry, that rock didn’t eat horses. We built a rapport, a trust, a willingness to explore. We would be mountaineers, together.

Our first summer in Montana, I got a job working for an outfitter in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and they said I could use Razi as my riding horse. We’d lead strings of mules loaded with gear and supplies to a private camp eleven miles deep in the backcountry. Our first day we took a load of hay bales, and our lead mule was a large and lazy sorrel named Buttercup. Every fifty yards or so, Buttercup would drag her inexorable weight against the rope, and I’d strain my shoulder to keep her from yanking me from the saddle. So I wrapped the rope about Razi’s saddle horn, first once, then, when my forearm tired, twice, letting him tow the stubborn mule up the mountain. The
trail ox-bowed as it crossed a small, steep stream. Instead of placing his feet carefully, one at a time in a mulelike fashion, up the slick rocks that separated streambed from packed trail, Razi leapt up the rocks. Buttercup, still on the other side of the ox-bow, chose that moment to throw her weight backwards against the rope and yanked us off the trail and down the mountainside. I don’t know how hard Razi fell, because I slipped from his back, landed on the crown of my cowboy hat, and rolled head over tail between large rocks. When I came to a stop, I couldn’t see Razi, but I could hear him struggling through the shrubby maples. When he emerged on the trail again, his legs were scratched and scraped, but nothing serious. I was bruised and had a little headache, but also nothing serious. We’d survived our first wreck, but this was the first indication that Razi might always be my favorite, my first, but he couldn’t be my mountain horse.

Over the next few weeks, Razi’s front legs became sore from the steep downhills. He never learned not to jump and scramble when the trail got rough, and he was prone to panic when crossing water. Lean and leggy, his center of gravity was too high for him to balance when a heavier mule tugged on us. He liked day trips but became overwrought when he had to spend the night on the trail instead of at home. So as I planned my journey on the CDT, I had to reckon with and accept that I could not ride Razi, that I would have to leave my partner behind. I trailered him back to Texas to the same horse trainer who picked him out for me in the first place, and he will spend the summer there, happy in a pasture with his old buddy, while the rest of us chased my adventure.

THE WOMAN

I’ve always been more of a dreamer than an enactor, someone who likes to spin out elaborate plans for an illustrious future, more plans than one life can hold. I’m good at the ideas, but the follow through is more difficult. I research, I dig for about forty-eight hours until the first blush of enthusiasm fades, and then I have a new idea, a new brilliant future to prepare for. The exceptions to this are rare, a fraction of the schemes I imagine, so I’m often wary to tell others my hopes until I’m sure that I can make good on them, until I’m sure I won’t have to retract my words and see that look of “I told you so.” Three summers earlier I’d told my father that I wasn’t going to college in Montana, that I was riding across Texas instead. He didn’t argue, just stared and waited until that idea dissolved into its own unpreparedness and impracticality. I wanted to avoid a similar embarrassment so much that I decided to use it to my advantage. A year before I started the Continental Divide Trail, I began to tell everyone who would listen that I was going to ride from Mexico to Canada, trapping myself into the trip or else facing the shame of admitting I couldn’t pull it off.

I still procrastinated the most fundamental preparations; there’s always more time tomorrow. Come spring, I had the animals, but no pack saddle and no maps and no places along the way to resupply. A friend I’d met in mule packing class stepped in and offered to make me a pack saddle. The feed store I worked at helped me order other equipment and supplies. I read and reread the guidebooks, highlighting items of note: blue for water source, orange for obstacle, yellow for resupply opportunity, green for possible campsite. I printed and laminated topographic maps, marking my route on them with a Sharpie, and
scouted an early version of Google Maps to find businesses near where the trail crossed public roads. I cold-called those businesses and asked if they knew anyone who could help me, who lived close to the trail. Slowly I built a network of places and people to help me along the way. And slowly I gathered my own gear and readied my life for mobility. I gave notice to my landlords and moved my stuff into a storage unit. I cleaned my basement apartment and straightened fence posts that Yoakum had bent in his pursuit of grass. I did my best to wrap up all my university classes two weeks before finals, though some fell by the wayside. My parents finally realized that this trip was exiting the realm of imagination and shipped me a rented satellite phone, insisting that I call them daily. And now I am loading Rua and Yoakum into the trailer, whistling LeDoux into the truck, and we are off, leaving a snowy sky in Montana for a tiny town in the Chihuahuan Desert, Columbus, New Mexico.

**Erin Zwiener** writes about mules, wildness, the American West, feminism, and women’s history. She received the Monique Wittig Scholarship for innovative feminist writing and was the Pattie Layser Writer-In-Residence at the Murie Center in Grand Teton National Park. Her essay “I Only Feel Weak When I’m Angry” was selected by Roxane Gay for publication in *The Butter.* Erin is currently seeking representation for a book, excerpted here, that searches for the legacy of women in the American West. *Spine* is half memoir about Erin’s muleback journey on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and half inquiry about the historical women whose lives intersected the trail. The book explores the stories of a diverse group of women including: a buffalo soldier, the writer whose journals inspired Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose,* an ornithologist, a Chiricahua warrior, a taxidermist, and Susan B. Anthony.