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The Arizona MFA Look Book is published every two years as a presentation of the best work by our graduating and recently graduated students. This is our 2018 edition. Enjoy. If you'd like to be in contact with any of these writers, email the program and we'll be happy to connect you to them.

Ander Monson, Director
Sharonne Meyerson, Program Assistant

For more information:
engl-cwmfa@email.arizona.edu
http://english.arizona.edu/creative-writing
https://twitter.com/ArizonaMFA

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I have always enjoyed a deceptively simple word problem. When used in this context, the adverb could mean both that the word problem is deceptive in pretending simplicity, but also that it is simple despite its deceptively intimidating appearance. The former iteration is the case, here.

There is a pleasure in satisfying the stipulations, in the growing confidence that one is in possession of if not the most brilliant mind, a mind capable of impressing here and there. A mind capable of answering a word problem or two. As one ages, riddles suddenly reveal hidden contours, crevices one would have never identified let alone anticipated when a mere student. Take the following, for instance:

Two trains leave different cities heading toward each other at different speeds. When and where do they meet?

We have all surely come into contact with such a formulation. This seems safe to say. Take the given details, however:

Train A, traveling 70 miles per hour (mph), leaves station M heading toward station N, 260 miles away. At the same time Train B, traveling 60 mph, leaves N heading toward M. You are sitting upon a particular bench, reading a certain story at the station where they will converge, consulting your watch every half hour, or so. When do the two trains meet? How far from each place of departure do they meet?

To solve this problem, you must use the distance formula:

\[ \text{Distance} = \text{Rate} \times \text{Time} \]

You understand, intuitively, that you can divide distance by rate in order to learn the precise time and divide distance by time in order to learn the rate of speed. You were once a student obligated to learn mathematics, after all. The facts, when di-
vorced from narrative form, are:

- Speed of Train A: 70 mph
- Speed of Train B: 60 mph
- Distance between M & N = 260 miles

After a few moments of relatively mundane arithmetic, you think to combine the speeds, divide the distance by this number, and arrive upon the conclusion that each train will arrive at your station in exactly two hours. You use this partial answer to discover the second partial answer, multiplying 70 by 2, 60 by 2, and so determining the two trains will meet 140 miles from M and 120 miles from N. Never mind that you don’t understand, exactly, why there is no standard rate of speed across all such trains, given that they are presumably operated by the same organization, given that they each seat an equal number of cars and are expected to accommodate an approximately equal number of passengers. You have answered both questions. Congratulations! But do not fret if you have not noticed the following essential details (you are certainly in good company) carefully hidden just out of sight until only now:

Train A contains Z, your fiancé. He is desperate for your reunion, for your company. You have lived together for but three months, with stretches of a few years at either end of this expanse (first school-related, then work-related), having dated intermittently for nearly a decade. In order to refrain from abandoning the relationship during this last separation, he required a promise of marriage. And so you complied. Train B, meanwhile, is heading for the outermost edge of civilization.

Living as you do in this era of relentless consumption divorced from ethical considerations, you begin by adopting a tenet of the field you most despise and evaluate the opportunity cost: on one hand, whereas those of the nineteenth century dreamt of Antarctica and those of the twentieth longed for the moon, historians will note that the inhabitants of the twenty-first century bore no such illusions regarding our ability to achieve true solitude, and so retreated into the self instead (if not, I hope historians ascribe my error to not naivety but only a lack of confidence in humanity’s ability to transgress every possible boundary, if for no better reason than the act of transgression itself).

A generation of hippies had abandoned city life and moved into the woods decades ago, supplied their own heating, consumed an entirely self-sustaining diet with the help of a few chickens, a few plants and herbs, a single rifle and a few rabbits and deer here and there. A generation of children birthed to these hippies have abandoned the life of isolation and moved into the city. You were born to urbanites, and so are sickened by the cosmopolitan life of wage slavery, small talk, and hedonism, whose combination seems to require a regular cocktail of chemical indulgences in order for an individual to persevere. You lack personal experience with the secluded life of meagre living, no talk at all, and hedonism, whose combination seems to require the regular murder of other living creatures (life forms with no more or less inherent value than your own, it should be said) in order for an individual to persevere. And so you are tempted to move into the woods to begin this cycle anew (fully aware that you are not so much beginning a new cycle as continuing the second oldest cycle there is, really, having already been
On the other hand, you have known this fiancé for half of your life and known of him for its entirety. Still, you are young. You think you love him but are aware you might be mistaken. You think you love him but are aware this love might not be enough. It is nothing personal. It is rather simple, really: love itself might not be enough to sustain you. The tedium of the everyday does not lend itself to passionate emotion, and with time comes familiarity, and with familiarity comes resentment. You are concerned you will lose not just him, but yourself. In this way you are hardly alone. It is a common sentiment whose banality should not detract from an understanding of the stakes, should not undermine the importance of your individual response, your answer. Living is banal, after all. 7.5 billion lives are being lived, and some 93 billion lives already have. Nothing could be more so lacking in originality as to be obvious and boring. And yet the consequences have pronounced emotional ramifications, for you and your fiancé at least.

When spotted gazing out the latest window, lost in thought . . . when prompted on how you feel, you offer an inadvertently pained smile, insist you are fine. But, secretly, you are not so sure, and do not feel particularly fine. You used to feel acutely, as those with developing brains and emerging hormones do. But, secretly, you are not so sure you could be called sensitive, not so sure to what extent childhood and circumstance and adapting to the expectations and constraints of modern life has warped your understanding of self. You have been conditioned to prioritize only what life needs from you: a job, a home, a warm smile and willingness to defer to superiors in name only. And so you have forgotten what you need from life, if you ever really knew at all. You have always struggled with projecting yourself far into the future, have always struggled to answer deceptively simple word problems whose scope extends past calculating time and distance and speed. Try as you might, you cannot find a formula for this predicament.

Should you ultimately decide to greet Z on train A, you’re aware that you might part at some point in the future. Whether before the wedding or after. Divorce is not so terrible, you’ve been assured from those with the experience. Should you ultimately decide to greet solitude on train B, you’re aware that you might abandon these woods at some point in the future. Whether to find some other life partner if your older self gradually begins to suspect you might require people more than your younger self has predicted, or to find a sort of compromise between these two alternatives. To live the solitary life you’ve chosen for yourself, but from within the amorphous crowd’s anonymity, perhaps.

So, you’re given this prompt. You’re given a blank sheet of paper on which to write your answer. The risk of failure is more severe than a disreputable grade, and the rewards of success far outstrip a few star stickers, a pat on the back from pleased parents. Perhaps you are not limited to these two hours. Perhaps you have five minutes, perhaps a day, perhaps a week, perhaps a month. Perhaps your fiancé is a woman. Perhaps there exist other minor deviations between your life and the essential details once concealed within the deceptively simple word problem. Nonetheless, you’re given this prompt:

Two trains leave different cities heading toward each other at different speeds, heading
toward you as you sit upon a particular bench reading a certain story consulting your watch every half hour or so. When they meet, who (or what) ought you greet?

Nonetheless, you’re expected to answer in the space provided below:
REPORT
FROM DRESDEN

S A M U E L R A F A E L B A R B E R

There is so much work to be done that Vladimir and I are out of our minds as we sit at the large, square table we have been forced to share on account of the lack of tables suitable for our purposes, here in Dresden. There are newspapers to be read, articles cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. There are books to be read, pages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. But mostly, there are reports to be read, passages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. To say nothing of the many reports to be written after selecting the most vital passages, in our own estimations, to cut and staple and sort and duplicate and mail. It has come to our attention that the city’s table shortage might be coming to end, but Vladimir dares not trust the source of this information, nor do I dare trust the source of this information either.

There are thousands of reports on the table before which Vladimir and I sit, day after day, I taking the occasional break from my diligent work to expel nervous tension with a crossword puzzle, Vladimir choosing to interrupt his nervous tension and diligent work with the periodic snack. Vladimir does not snack like a normal person, however, as he insists on eating an entire meal when most would be satisfied with a banana or something of the sort. He snacks every other hour, or so. Without deviation, Vladimir eats a ham and cheese sandwich and an entire bag of carrots and a pastry injected with some sort of custard during his snack, also taking sporadic sips from his canteen. I am suspicious that in this way he has been smuggling vodka into the workplace, drinking on the job. As far as I can tell, the drinking has yet to affect his work. I have contemplated writing a report on the matter, still, for it is a serious violation of protocol. But I cannot verify this hunch for I am smuggling vodka into the workplace in my canteen, drinking on the job. As far as I can tell, the drinking has yet to affect my work. So the alcohol I smell on his breath may originate from my own. It is hard to know for certain. There is so much work to be done I cannot be sure.
There are at least two thousand four hundred and sixty-three reports on the table. In all likelihood, many more. I counted them, once. I cannot be sure how long ago this would have been. For a time, Vladimir carved a notch into the table when a day passed, and I carved a notch into the table whenever a new report arrived. At first, I would fill in a notch with wood shavings when a report had been read, passages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed. Following two weeks of this patterning and after comparing the rate of reports arriving at the table to the rate of reports departing from the table, I stopped bothering. The markings remain, here, on the large, square table, though they are hidden by the thousands of reports as of yet left unread and uncut and unstapled and unsorted, unduplicated and unmailed. Not that consulting the notches would be of much use. The notches now cover the whole table we are pretty sure, since they covered the table before. The Pile grew and obscured their intent, making it impossible to distinguish Vladimir’s notches from my own. I hope you are paying close attention. This is all crucial.

We did not expect to carve notches into the table for such a lengthy period. It was almost a sort of joke, originally, is the thing. Dresden is a backwater job (as you know) and we each expected to serve at this post for only a brief time, as we continued following the trajectory of our careers. My trajectory being upward, having joined the service four years ago and yet so quickly assigned to Second Chief Directorate followed shortly by the appointment to Directorate S. Superiors appreciating my loyalty and dedication, peers envying my ambition. The best thing about Vladimir, my favorite thing about Vladimir, is that he does not envy my ambition. Vladimir does not envy my ambition because his trajectory is downward, as he is in the twilight of his career. His life has been dedicated to country, but it is almost over, now, and so his career must also end soon. He is awaiting his retirement orders any day now. Just as I am awaiting my promotional re-assignment orders any day now. Perhaps you are aware of the delay. Vladimir opines that the entire intelligence structure is affected, not that I would idly speculate in such a way, for my faith in the state remains unshaken.

It is true, however, that we were told our respective orders would be arriving “any day now” and it is also true that many weeks have passed since then. Vladimir and I began carving notches in the table not long after we first received the good news. Now they say the reports must continue to be read, pages cut and stapled and sorted, duplicated and mailed, in the interim, while we wait. This does not inspire Vladimir and me. In fact, it infuriates us. I know this because Vladimir has taken to muttering filthy things under his breath as he goes about his work, just as I have begun to mutter mild criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency as I go about mine. Unfortunately, our orders arrive disguised within reports as a precautionary measure in the event of attempted sabotage by the West. They even go so far as to adopt the sort of language typically found in the reports, language neutral in tone and devoid of imagination. They expect that our familiarity with reports, after all this time, will help us quickly identify the coded orders embedded within. So it is impossible to immediately distinguish between the reports containing our orders and the reports with demographic information or Western mail-order catalogues or phone installation instructions or any of the other material which, day after day, week and week, Vladimir and I read and cut and staple and sort, duplicate and mail.
For a time, once the table had been covered with notches but before the table became covered in reports, we proposed, discussed, debated, and ultimately voted to only read and cut and staple and sort and duplicate and mail reports pertaining to our orders. But this was a short-lived exercise for the reason provided above, not that you can tell from its permanent placement on the wall to my right and to Vladimir’s left underneath a brief heading that more or less codifies the means by which Vladimir and I will propose, discuss, debate, and vote on future topics and/or avenues of inquiry pertaining to but not strictly limited to orders, reports, treatment of our clerk Skip, and our apartment. This last clause is in dire need of revision, however, since we no longer share an apartment. Not long ago we decided to abandon our official quarters so as to indefinitely reside at our workstation, the large, square table we have been forced to share on account of the lack of tables suitable for our purposes, here in Dresden. We do this so we need not ever stop processing reports. We do this so we need not remain in our stations, here in Dresden, any longer than need be.

The Pile (as we call it, though Skip has tried to take credit for the coinage on more than one occasion, proving beyond any doubt that he is deserving of scorn) makes it very difficult to fill out a crossword in peace, what with its reports sliding around and falling all about, what with its reports perpetually flirting with the edges of the table. The Pile taunts us with the omnipresent threat of spilling its contents upon The Pile of Spilled Reports Awaiting Cleanup on the Floor (as we call it, it pleasing us greatly that Skip has yet to claim credit for this moniker). I understand that The Pile makes eating a ham and cheese sandwich and an entire bag of carrots and a pastry injected with some sort of custard similarly difficult, for Vladimir has offered such a complaint on many occasions. I have tried to empathize with Vladimir’s frustration by explaining my own difficulties in filling out a crossword puzzle under these perverse conditions, but he only insists that I stop whining with a dismissive shake of his head, as he is too busy whining about his own difficulties (eating the snacks that are really meals he chooses to call by another name since Vladimir does not snack like a normal person) to empathize with the likes of me.

I am doing my best to succinctly state my case. It is all such a mess, thousands of unsorted reports not meant for haphazard placement upon a table covered with notches and ink stains and carrot fragments. The natural habitat of a report being a filing cabinet or cardboard box. But there is a scarcity of filing cabinets in Dresden and a scarcity of cardboard boxes in Dresden, too. It has come to our attention that these shortages might be coming to end, but Vladimir dares not trust the source of this information, nor do I dare trust the source of this information either. This promise was made in a report received so long ago that neither Vladimir nor I can offer more than a vague approximation of its postage date. If pressed, one of us might feign certainty using an assertive tone of voice which seeks to convey it quite clearly first came into Skip’s possession several months ago, at the very latest. This promise was made in a report ordering us to “maintain [our] great efficiency” and “continue [our] esteemed lives of service to country by preserving the safety of the motherland through due diligence and perseverance.” Thereafter, we decided to stack the reports methodically. To alphabetize them, even. This amendment to our protocol was proposed by Vladimir, discussed, debated, and ultimately voted on by us both, and written on the
The wall to my left and Vladimir’s right.

In those halcyon days before the carving of notches and the birth of The Pile and the abandonment of our apartment, we were preparing for the eventual arrival of a filing cabinet or cardboard box. Both Vladimir and I were on the same page (metaphorically speaking and not, of course, on the same page of the same report) when it came to the importance of organization within any and all bureaucracy. But the more I reflect, now, the more convinced I become that I was duped, then. The plan was sabotaged from the start, the table deluged with so many new reports (we now refer to this episode as The Great Deluge) by the time we had expended so much time and effort meticulously sorting the original batch of reports into stacks, destroying the order we had imposed, giving rise to The Pile, an entity of almost unimaginable height and girth.

I initially blamed our clerk Skip for this oversight, whom both Vladimir and I detest for he is middle-aged and content, not wanting to leave this place for a promotion as is my goal or leave this place for retirement and death as is Vladimir’s. Skip’s only purpose, so far as Vladimir or I can tell, is to wheel in fresh reports using the little grocery cart he undoubtedly stole from some supermarket he frequents (or used to frequent if he is concerned its employees might suspect him of having stolen a grocery cart for the purpose of wheeling in fresh reports and wheeling out reports to be mailed) for Skip is not an enterprising sort. Skip could never steal a grocery cart with the guile required of a valued asset. I have contemplated writing a report related to Skip’s probable thievery of the grocery cart, but as you surely already see, we are really quite overwhelmed, at the present, with our work. In light of the available evidence, it seems natural to project my feelings of hostility upon Skip, and to consider him a possible culprit in the sabotage of our organizational mission. But I am also beginning to suspect Vladimir.

I am beginning to theorize, if only while muttering mild criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency as I go about my work and Vladimir mutters filthy things under his breath as he goes about his, that Vladimir engineered this entire amendment to our workplace constitution just to spite me. He knows, after all, that I require a sterling report from my time here in Dresden to maintain my rise through the ranks. And having descended through the ranks as quickly as I have ascended through them, Vladimir is under no such stipulation, being sufficiently confident (it would seem) that his mediocrity in this post will only strengthen the case against him and expedite his retirement and death. What a traitor Vladimir just might be. He has mentioned entering politics “to keep busy during that brief time in the life of a civil servant following retirement but before death” and it is true that the requirements of character and conduct, in that sphere, correspond with his declining scruples and sense of hygiene.

Now, I anticipate your skepticism. I anticipate a likely retort. You might find yourself asking, with a tone expressing only the most barely veiled condescension: what sort of behavior would provoke this level of confidence in the deception of a colleague? Well, I might find myself replying in only the most patient manner: a looming suspicion first made its presence known once Vladimir crudely insisted Gogol is surely to be considered a Russian when the master’s categorization as Ukrainian seems obvious. If this affront to good taste is not satisfactorily convincing, let me edify your concerns by briefly explaining the peculiar circumstances which led to our permanent relocation to the large, square table we now call home.
Back when we cohabited in the apartment, back when he violated our television agreement, the ninth amendment to our workplace constitution written on the wall to my right and Vladimir’s left.

We were assigned government housing some months ago. The apartment suited men of our means. Let there be no confusion, I do not mean any disrespect. We each had a separate bed, sharing a toilet and television with two channels. You are familiar with the details of such accommodations, surely. Men strive to be free. Men strive for agency, for power. And so we would often disagree over who had the authority to preside over the television remote. I made the case that since we were of equal rank and since I was assured to be promoted in a short while, I was essentially Vladimir’s superior and thus the natural choice for Governor of the Remote. Vladimir made the case that since we were of equal rank and since he had been demoted on many occasions (demoted more times than I had been promoted, even) he was essentially my superior and thus the natural choice for Governor of the Remote. Since each proposition, discussion, debate, and vote resulted in a 1-1 stalemate, we eventually proposed, discussed, debated, and voted successfully to pass an amendment codifying the impossibility of ever coming to any kind of definitive determination on the matter and forbidding future proposals, discussions, debates, and votes regarding the ultimate television authority since we were pretty sick of it all, by then.

We felt that official closure, of sorts, was needed following the tense days devoted to proposing, discussing, debating, and voting. Days which had swallowed whole all remaining time after the reading and cutting and stapling and sorting, duplicating and mailing. There was no watching of television during this time, only discussion of how we might go about watching television in the future. Discussion of how this precedent would shape how our children go about watching television, how our children’s children go about watching television.

This period of détente was all too brief. In no time at all, we realized that the programs which interested each of us most frequently overlapped in time slot. If our constitution would not save us, we realized another sort of compromise was needed.

Some context: I have never expended much body heat, and so do not sweat or stink unless I experience a prolonged interval between baths. Vladimir, on the other hand, expends an incredible amount of body heat (I have contemplated writing a report on the matter). Vladimir is a sort of space heater of flesh and blood. You can imagine the quantity of sweat, then, and the implications of this sweat. In exchange for Vladimir receiving my allocated bathroom time Monday through Wednesday and Friday through Saturday, I received an additional two and a half hours of weekly television time for use whenever I liked. I did not tell Vladimir this then (though I have since done so out of spite) but I always considered the exchange a lopsided deal in my favor since Vladimir’s increased dedication to personal hygiene improved my life to no small degree, in and of itself.

This excoriation of his bargaining abilities might have been my last articulated message to him, in fact. We are no longer on speaking terms even as we have never been closer together, in some ways, at the large, square table covered with thousands of reports and thousands of notches, his lack of personal hygiene nauseating me, the discharge of vomit from my mouth in response to the nausea nauseating him in turn. Gross, you
might find yourself mumbling in response, and while it certainly remains within your purview to respond in this way, your absolute attention is of the utmost importance, now. Here is my story’s key twist. I am going to ask you to focus intently on what I am about to say, but do not mistake my insistence for an impolite gesture.

You see, Vladimir eventually stopped bathing during my allocated bathing times while simultaneously refusing to let me enjoy my rightfully bargained surplus of television. It seems grossly unfair, in my estimation, that he reneged on our compact without maneuvering through the proper constitutional channels. I have proposed, discussed, debated, and voted on many constitutional amendments wishing to officially designate Vladimir’s refutation of our freely negotiated deal a traitorous act. But no matter the expertise with which I prepare my opening remarks, or the number of times I have forced Skip, our clerk, to revise my closing statement, I am never able to sway Vladimir. Each vote ends in a 1-1 deadlock, though I am optimistic that this might change in the near future. I was a skilled orator in school. It was one of the skills that most impressed my superiors, back before I had even been assigned to the Second Chief Directorate, back when my capacity for verbal fireworks mimicked the articulateness of my written word. I was told this vital aptitude was an important component of the assorted criteria considered for my assignment, here in Dresden. But the very skills so crucial to the work are crippled in their exercise.

Our conditions are not so great, it is true, but times are tough in Dresden, as they are in Moscow, and so we understand. There are “economic externalities” to consider the reports tell us and I tell Vladimir and Vladimir tells me and both of us tell Skip whenever he complains about the stench emanating from this table of ours. And so I hope you will exercise a similar understanding when it comes to my breaking protocol, here, in sending a report outside of the designated channels. I was fearful my other pleas weren’t getting through, you see. This is the seventh time I have explained all this. I would like to think I am improving, refining my technique. This is unknowable. Nor does it matter much, I suppose. We hear that the wall may be falling soon, and it worries us, Vladimir and me. We trust the sources of this information, is the thing. We need reassurance. But most of all, we need Vladimir to be punished.

On that I hope men of our stock can agree, since you have now read my full report. Which you must have done since you are reading these very words right this second. Unless you skipped to the end for some inexplicable reason, deciding that the effort and sacrifice on behalf of the greater good made in the preceding pages wasn’t worth your time, deciding a quick skim could possibly be sufficient when it is always the context that is most crucial. I grow weary of this writing, nervous as I am that it will come to nothing. Little has changed from the reports that have failed to elicit a response from your department on the previous six occasions, in terms of content. But I am sure you have read the whole thing, just as I am sure you will address The Vladimir Problem (as I call it), on this occasion. Perhaps his punishment might be received in the report with the orders he is expecting, the ones allowing him to retire and die. Perhaps my own orders can be included as well, the ones with my promotion and reassignment elsewhere. But if you skipped the majority of my report and are short on time, I kindly ask you to revisit the paragraph prior to this one, at least. All essential facts are contained, there. I eagerly anticipate your report on this matter. Meanwhile,
we wait and the table waits and The Pile waits and Skip waits, after Vladimir and I give him a dirty look and he flees elsewhere with his grocery cart filled with fresh reports, for our orders.

Major Poroshenko
18 of June


Samuel Rafael Barber’s work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *DIAGRAM, Green Mountains Review, Puerto del Sol, Southwest Review,* and *Tammy,* among other journals. A chapbook, *Thousands of Shredded Scraps of Paper Located Across five Landfills, when Pieced Together to form a Message,* is forthcoming from the Cupboard Pamphlet in 2019. An editor-in-chief of *Sonora Review* in 2016-17, he has an MFA from the University of Arizona and an MA in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. He won Brown University’s Weston Award for Report from Dresden and Feldman Prize in Fiction for his story collection. He is at work on *Common Enough,* a novel exploring the collective failure of individuals and institutions to represent marginalized populations, *A Thoroughly Conventional Visitor’s Guide Which no Self-Respecting Citizen of Our City Need Read,* a novel in the form of a tour guide to a fictional Caribbean city, and *There is Always Hope,* a story collection.
You’ve reached the end.

If there were one thing Pierre Casavant, stretched to his full five feet and nine inches as he paces in the hallway outside the lecture hall where he is to perform his senior recital, would want me to tell you, for you to get inside where he is now, it would be that he feels like he has reached the end.

As an audience member, this is your cue. At the end of a performance, you have a few choices, depending on how good or bad it is. Silence, for a rare abomination. The respectable seated clap, for a passable but unexciting cessation. More enthusiastic applause with scattered whoops, for an effortful but altogether pleasant finale. And lastly, the top notch, the coveted standing ovation, to signal to the performer that they have earned your highest praise.

An audience giving a unanimous standing o (and if you do sit while others are giving the standing o, that may be the most pointed critique of all, of both the performer and your vulgar fellow audience members) may also, depending on the level of enthusiasm, shout bravo! or bravissimo! and perhaps also throw a bouquet. Best to play it by ear.

For now it remains unclear to Pierre whether the end will be good or bad, whether he will succeed or fail, but he feels certain that he has arrived at an end, if not the end. But probably the end. The end of his life? No, of course not.

The end of his college career as a tenor and a Vocal Performance Major? The end of certain relationships that will, even he realizes, inevitably be dashed upon the rocks after graduation? The end of his anxiety about this event, the culmination of his senior-year efforts?

Yes; probably; and most definitely, respectively.

Pierre paces, squeezed into an aqua polyester suit selected, at a thinner or more optimistic moment, specifically for this hour on this day, 7:00 PM on May 7th. His black wingtips are shined to perfection and double-knotted. He wears an elegant watch with a black leather band, which he bought at Disneyland a few years back on sum-
mer vacation, and Mickey’s hands are contorted in such a way that tells him to get a move on.

“Toi toi toi,” I say to him, clutching my blue plastic binder of sheet music. Looking over at me and nodding, he hops up and down in place, does a few lip trills up and down a scale to warm up, and walks toward the door that leads into the lecture hall. He has to stop himself from knocking first, absentmindedly.

I look over at Pierre, his visage completely open, even under pressure. He is characteristically unguarded because, unlike me, he doesn’t need to be guarded. He is not a lowly accompanist. He does not have sadly thinning hair or cheap, slip-on black shoes. As a performer, Pierre is open and inviting to watch, to relate to. Unlike myself, he is a natural subject. I, on the other hand, have withdrawn behind so many pits and curtains for anyone to access my story directly. I am more comfortable in a supporting role.

Besides, if there is a goal in performance, it is to tell one’s story in a slant way, not directly. Most of those people in the lecture hall now, sweaty hands curling their programs, whispering in squeaky seats, are waiting for Pierre and me to walk out and tell other people’s stories, not primarily our own. Most of the audience knows that no matter how often during the recital they flip to Pierre’s bio on the program’s last page, no matter how searchingly they gaze at his expressions while he sings, trying to find where the performance ends and his sincerity begins, that they will not be granted access to his own personal history or true feelings.

You don’t attend a performance expecting a confession. But some part of you hopes to get one anyway. Yet as we walk out into the lecture hall, backs straight, smiling, we see familiar faces, those who in fact already know some portion of Pierre’s story. Several people smile back at Pierre now, and continue to smile at him during his performance, in a way that reveals that they know some portion of his story. As Pierre sings and looks at each of them in turn, there passes between them a message that each one of them can peer through a different crack in the repertoire to what underlies it. They are with him at this end.

So. This does not begin as my story. But the careful, smiling audience member will spot the cracks in the repertoire, will see when my accompaniment strays into the spotlight. And to that audience member, as well as to Pierre, I say: Bravissimo!

* Apclause greets Pierre and me as we walk single-file across the front of the room. It’s not quite a stage but in fact a regular lecture hall that undergraduates use for their recitals. I reach the piano bench, Pierre reaches the crook of the piano, and we bow in unison, Pierre smiling broadly. I open my binder to the first piece and smooth the edges down. Pierre gently rests his right hand on the lid of the piano and then takes it off, deciding against that pose. He bows his head not reverently but as in the mindset of an actor getting into character, and I begin.

I hit the first inversion major arpeggio up to the signature melody of the Disney song that, played on a piano stead of steel drums, sounds marginally more classical than in the original recording, but barely.

The theme of tonight’s recital, as per Pierre, is “Under the Sea.” Pierre has picked this song to really hammer the theme home for the audience, to bring them to the depths, oceanic and otherwise, from which he will perform his repertoire. A couple times at the beginning of the semester
I tried to quietly impress on Pierre that in classical recitals, Disney songs, particularly those sung by cartoon crustaceans, are generally sniffed at by the more classically trained noses in the audience. Such sniffing is almost audible in the background now, in fact. Pierre is not generally a fan of this song, he will no doubt insist afterward at the reception, but could not resist such a direct correspondence with the theme of the recital. Especially, I will refrain from saying, since the next piece doesn't fit the theme at all.

In terms of structure, Pierre has put his musical theater material—and he does consider this song musical theater—at the top, to show his good humor and light heart, leaving the heavier, more technical numbers for later in the recital. And showcase a light heart is exactly what the piece does as Pierre reveals (right at the point in the first verse when he sings, “Just look at the world around you”) the stuffed plush crab and flounder he has hidden under the lid of the piano and begins singing to them instead of the audience. In fact he has not yet looked directly at anyone in the audience during this song.

I have the music under my fingers thoroughly enough that, at the point that Pierre retrieves the plush crab and flounder, my mind is busy wrestling with conflicting impulses. My face immediately and ragingly heats up, so of course my first impulse is to avoid looking at anything outside of my sheet music. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see Pierre at the front of the “stage,” contemplatively holding the flounder before him like Hamlet with Yorick’s skull, and my mouth begins twitching. The aqua polyester suit looks mighty snug when he moves his arms or legs, as well, though again he couldn’t help such an appropriate and thematically sound choice.

If you ask a singer, or any other kind of performer, what they think of when they are performing, they may not have a good answer for you. I usually tell whoever’s asking, “You.” Whatever one thinks about, one shouldn’t be thinking about what one’s thinking about. Metacognition isn’t the name of the game in a song recital. Self-reflection can come later, after the performance.

Many good performers not only fully embrace the present moment, but also have done so much preparation and spent so much time with the music and text that they feel possessed, nearly, by the material. The characters in the text and the feel with which the composer has imbued the vocal line dictate a good and healthy singer’s mental state. They are not even thinking their own thoughts. Many good performers, or the ones that I’ve asked, have so mastered the technical aspects of the material that they can execute it unthinkingly, and to perform it is more of a meditation on the subject and sound of what they are conveying to the audience.

Pierre, I know, focuses on not locking his knees. From a scarring and formative experience with performing Carmina Burana in his youth choir with an orchestra and adult choir—during which he and the other children stood terrified by the conductor’s previous instructions to “not even blink,” which Pierre took as literally as one can imagine—Pierre has learned not to lock his knees. Doing so can have disastrous consequences, Pierre found out that night long ago when he had awoken backstage with the children’s choir director irritatedly fanning his face and adamantly not-apologizing. Pierre had vowed that day never again to be in a situation that led to someone else fanning him.

So when Pierre sings now to his stuffed aquatic comrades and recovers from flubbing a lyric (“Even the sturgeon and the ray” he has turned to
“Even the surgeon and the ray”), foremost in his mind is a repeated injunction to flex those calves.

And right on cue, as I look up again, there is Gerald in the last row whispering to his colleague, a fellow voice teacher beside him. Gerald is dressed in a tweed sport coat and cornflower-blue shirt, open one button too many at the collar.

Pierre and I have worked together all semester on the material for this recital under this man’s direction, Gerald, Pierre’s voice teacher. The general theme has indeed been one that mirrored his actions now, one of whispered secrets. I know, and Pierre would know if he would look away from the plush crab, what’s so important to Gerald that he would ignore his student’s singing. It’s easy to figure out what Gerald is urgently explaining. This is because a couple weeks ago, Gerald’s tendency toward lengthy and secret extemporizing had hit its acme.

Twenty minutes into one of Pierre’s final voice lessons of this semester, Gerald had revealed his biggest secret yet. The light outside had been gray and runny. We had spent the first twenty minutes of Pierre’s lesson running the usual gamut of vocal warmups: “A big black bug bit a big brown bear,” “Bumblebee-ee, bumblebee-ee, bumblebee-ee, bumble-bee, bumble-bee,” “Mama makes me wash my M&Ms.” The text of the exercises brought Seussian and preposterous images to my mind. Pierre’s brown corduroy pants were worn at the bottom from snow and salt melt. The piano keys were black and white and grainy under my fingers. Gerald had a habit of barely leaving time, after the extensive warmups and more extensive theorizing, to address and rehearse the repertoire for Pierre’s upcoming recital. And even if I wasn’t in the spotlight like Pierre would be, the success of this recital did affect my reputation.

After that typical beginning, Gerald took a moment and pushed the sleeves of his blue-striped oxford shirt up conspiratorially. Despite the coldness in the room, he was sweating. His gray eyebrows stood at full mast.

“Pierre,” he said, standing up. “Now I don’t tell that many people this.”

Preparing for boredom, I thumbed through my music and made a fake mouth with my tongue and lower lip.

“And I don’t even know if you remember this very well,” Gerald continued, pacing down the length of the room slowly. “But when you came to the university—” Gerald had his back to Pierre now, and was gazing contemplatively at a poster on his office wall of Einstein with his gray tongue out.”—I never asked you your voice type.”

Pierre nodded quickly, sensing the prompt. “It was on the sheet at my audition.”

Gerald looked back over his shoulder with his lips pursed. “Never saw a sheet,” he said quickly. “Forget a sheet, forget the sheet.”

“Mm.”

“That’s not how I knew, Pierre,” Gerald said, turning back around with his hands spread and palms up. “Do you want to know how I knew, how I know each person’s voice type, not even on sound but on sight?” He moved forward onto the balls of his feet, leaning in for a response.

“You can tell a person’s voice type,” Pierre said, frowning, “without hearing their voice?”

It was a puzzling claim. Though we had both had been through, over the course of our time in Gerald’s studio, many of Gerald’s revelations, they were continually surprising, even more so to Pierre than to me. I was more surprised at the temerity of Gerald’s claims. But Pierre was not the kind of person who became jaded or cynical very easily. Pierre was the kind of person who rounded up, when it came to people’s personality traits.
Gerald grinned, rocking back onto his heels. He glanced over at me and then back to Pierre. Dancing eyebrows. “And do you want to know how?” he said expectantly.

Pierre and I nodded.

“Calves,” he said, making a wiping motion and flashing his eyes in the same way you would say, Your name—in lights! Gerald had used the same tone of voice when describing to us his own career before becoming a teacher.

“Calves,” Pierre said, being agreeable.

“The size of their calves, Pierre,” Gerald said, “is directly proportional to their voice type.” Gerald had an armadillo body and little hair on his head, but he had massive forearms, which we could see now that his sleeves were rolled up. I wondered about the size of his calves.

And as if on cue, perhaps sensing that a demonstration was needed, Gerald clapped his hands together once and squatted down. The shiny cul-de-sac of his bald head flashed in the light. Gerald began to roll up his khaki pantlegs. “See this,” he said, pointing generally at his right calf. “See the difference between tensed and at rest?” He was flexing his calf. “Tense. At rest. Tense. At rest. Tense. At rest.”

Pierre nodded solemnly. “I do see the difference.”

I rolled my eyes to myself.

Pierre had told me once that he’d picked Gerald as a voice teacher freshman year because he had seemed the least strict. Gerald’s studio door was emblazoned with yellowing Dilbert comics and joke lists about tenors. The other teachers’ studios featured quotes on the door by Schubert and Beethoven, or in Professor Klef’s case a sign, “THIS IS A NO WHINING ZONE,” or for the strictest, nothing. Gerald had greeted Pierre that first lesson by pointing out a spot on Pierre’s shirt and then flicking his nose when he looked down. “Just call me Gerald,” he’d said.

Pierre had stuck with him all four years.

“My friend, Pierre,” Gerald said now. “I’m sharing this with you, putting trust in you…”

“Thank you,” Pierre said.

“I just feel like this is something you could really benefit from…”

Pierre sometimes said he hadn’t benefited at all from his vocal training and sometimes said he had benefited tremendously. When we had first begun working together, he told me how he’d begun singing in the children’s choir at his church when he was in grade school, probably third or fourth grade. He had been in one opera during his childhood, Amahl and the Night Visitors, as Amahl, which was sort of a rite of passage for young aspiring male opera singers, who started as boy sopranos. The director of the children’s choir at his church—who had told him not to blink—Miss Connie, had been married to the man who directed Amahl each year. He was a high school choir teacher who took the Gian Carlo Menotti opera around to several of the local high schools each Christmas. It was like the opera version of A Christmas Carol.

“Some people incorrectly suppose the larynx…” Gerald was saying now. He was still squatting down on his haunches.

Joining that children’s choir at his church had been big for Pierre, he said. It had been what had gotten him on the singing bandwagon. He had discovered that adults liked his high, lyrical voice, and that he liked performing. That had carried him into his niche in middle school and high school, where he found that in certain, carefully circumscribed zones he was, if not exactly cool, then at least not a loser. That was all he needed to be swept into the life of a performer.
Gerald stood up and went to the whiteboard on the wall and uncapped a dry-erase marker. “Think about it thish way,” he said, mumbling around the cap of the marker that he’d put in his mouth. He drew a stick figure on the whiteboard.

“Maybe we could try it out while practicing the music,” I said quietly from the piano bench.

Pierre and Gerald both turned to look at me, as if they’d forgotten I was there. Then they looked back at the whiteboard. Gerald drew the stick figure lifting weights. “Have you ever lifted weights before?”

“No,” Pierre said.

It occurred to me that I had never heard a voice teacher ask this before.

“Hmm,” Gerald said, “well have you moved before?”

“Yes,” Pierre said.

“OK,” Gerald redrew the stick figure squatting over a box. “So when you’re picking up a heavy box, what does everyone say to use?” Gerald arched one eyebrow in anticipation of Pierre’s answer.

“Your legs,” Pierre said, still confused.

“Your legs. So why, I asked myself,” Gerald said, making crisscrossing arrows all over the drawing of the stick figure lifting weights. “Do we do that?” Dramatic pause. “And I asked someone this, who lifts weights, because it’s the same principle, it really is. I mean, I do my research on this, I’m not just pulling it out of my you-know-what.” Gerald frequently added that line into the explanation portion of his theories, that he wasn’t just pulling it out of his you-know-what.

“Sure.”

“And he said it’s because your back’s not strong enough.”

“Right.”

“Your legs are stronger, so your legs do the work. But then when we breathe for singing,” Gerald said, “where do most teachers tell you to breathe from?”

“Your diaphragm,” Pierre said.

This wasn’t the answer Gerald wanted. “Well, but what’s by your diaphragm?”

“Your back?” Pierre said.

“Exactly,” Gerald said. He stood triumphant in front of the whiteboard, looking at Pierre for understanding, then at me. We both gave him looks of befuddlement. My own befuddlement came from looking at Gerald’s pantlegs, which he’d forgotten to roll back down when he stood up. But Pierre was befuddled by the actual point Gerald was making.

“So how do you tell people’s voice types from that?” Pierre said.

Gerald sighed in a way that said, Well, but at least acknowledge that that was pretty cool.

“I mean your previous point was great,” said Pierre, taking the hint. “I just don’t get how that relates…”

Gerald sighed once more, in the manner of Moses upon descending from Mount Sinai and having to field a follow-up question. “Different notes on the scale require different amounts of breath, do they not?” Gerald said.

“Yes,” Pierre said eagerly, grasping at a point he was familiar with.

“Extreme high notes and low notes require a lot of breath, and notes in the middle range require not as much, right?” Gerald said.

“Yes.”

“And if your legs are at the base of all the breathing, shouldn’t it follow that those singers who sing high notes and low notes will have the more developed calves, while the ones who sing in the middle will have less developed calves?”

“Ah,” Pierre said. His forehead was still creased,
but less so than before.

“Well. As much as I would enjoy discussing the finer points of the theory with you, I do think we should talk about your recital while we still have time left,” Gerald said, looking at the clock above the piano. We now had only ten minutes left in the lesson.

Pierre nodded and got out his binder. I arched my hands over the keyboard, ready to play. “Which piece, Pierre?” I said.

“Oh, not about that part specifically,” Gerald said, gesturing for Pierre to put his binder away. “No, no, I just mean to say, that there are going to be other professors there at your recital, you know, Pierre.”

I put my hands back down in my lap. Pierre nodded.

“And before your recital, well, I just want to say how much I hope you do well,” Gerald said.

“Thank you,” Pierre said, almost a question. “Because it would reflect so well on this studio if the recital went as well as it possibly could.”

“Of course.”

“And if it didn’t, et cetera,” Gerald said, and smiled.

I realized it was time to close my music binder.

Pierre and I clashed in our conceptions of that competition. Pierre, the people person, the extrovert, loved the heat of performance, but hated the act of practicing, which was singing itself. But I could have lived in the practice studio. As an accompanist, I didn’t get the same charge from audience attention. I loved the perfectibility of the music. Our compromise, then, was our weekly meetings in the music library after his lesson, to deal with Gerald and compare notes, before heading our separate ways for the week.

“Jesus,” Pierre said, frowning his phone out on the library table.

I opened my music binder and took out a highlighter. “This is your challenge, my friend. Dealing with Gerald. Looks like you might have to practice on your own.”

“My challenge?” Pierre said, looking dismayed. “You can’t…” he trailed off.

“It’s your recital,” I said, highlighting a measure in the treble clef. “It’s mostly on you.”

He nodded slowly, acknowledging this.

There had been quite a bit of strong subtext in Gerald’s last remarks, Pierre and I both knew. It was a subtext Gerald had been broadcasting to Pierre in particular off and on for the whole semester, especially these last few weeks before his recital. Gerald, we understood, was looking to peddle his latest theory somewhere in fulfillment of the “creative activities” section of his job requirements at the university. He needed some journal publication of an article, some conference recital season, following nervous girls in clouds through the hallways; it was pot smoke clinging to the jazz guitarists; it was spit valves dumped disgustingly on the linoleum; but most pungently it was sweat, straining, striving, the constant tension in the air, some dank pheromones produced in the lust of competition.
to present at, and needed people on his side, was the implication of many remarks. Results from Pierre, his only senior student this year, at a recital would give Gerald the credibility in the other professors’ eyes he needed in order to get this Calves Theory published somewhere, or at least to be able to tell it to someone else important. Like most performers, Gerald thrived on an audience, but unlike most performers, the audience was forced to listen to more theories than performances.

“Yeah,” Pierre said. “But I didn’t know the pressure was going to be this intense. My parents, already, on the phone every day, make us proud, whatever. But this Calves Theory. I don’t know, Austin. You know what Gerald said to me at the beginning of the lesson? Before you came in?”

I said no. I had showed up late today, after colliding with an oboist on a hoverboard outside.

“He leans in to me and goes,” Pierre said, imitating the lean-in over the table between us, his breath smelling expired in my nose. “He goes, ‘Pierre. I’m thinking we’re going to need a standing o on this performance.’ We! Like he’s going to be up there with me, singing.”

“Wow,” I said. “You better start practicing.”

“I need help on this, Austin! You’ve got to help me. You’ve got some time. You’re not graduating until the fall. You know how hard it would be to get a standing o? For me?”

“Oh please,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Anyone can get a standing o these days. You just have to sing a loud note at the end, pretty much, and the audience members’ own narcissism drives them to their feet. It’s like when David Bowie died and yuppie parents were painting lightning bolts over their toddlers’ eyes. The spectacle of an outpouring of feeling: people love it.”

“Bowie? You mean the knife guy?”

“Sure,” I said. “I just mean that a standing o means nothing now.”

“What?” Pierre said. He almost got up out of his chair in the library. The librarian glared at him. Pierre sat back down. “You’ve never even gotten a standing o before, have you?” Pierre said to me.

“That’s not the point,” I snapped. It was true. The few people besides my mom in the audience at my piano recitals had just looked pensively at the stage when I finished. I had never received a standing ovation. But I had been at many a recital where they’d been given out undeservedly.

“You’re right,” Pierre said, sensing a sore subject. “I bet if you got one, though, it would change your mind.”

“The point is,” I said, highlighting my music, “that you might be able to make it happen.”

“How?” Pierre said.

“If you go...to the practice room,” I said. “And practice.”

Pierre nearly gasped. Practice, the phantom of the opera student. If impressing Gerald’s colleagues and doing well on his recital meant Pierre putting in the time practicing, just on his own, then there truly might have been no hope. Pierre hated practicing. Pierre had told me before that most of the reason that he would never be a good and professional opera singer was that he so hated going into the practice room.

Perhaps some of the reason—at least some—that Pierre hated practicing, and why he consequently rarely practiced, was how arduous a task it was just to get himself in the practice room. It was up, up, up on the fifth floor of the music building, taking the stairs all the way. And once he was up there, he couldn’t even start practicing—not that he really wanted to anyway. He had to book a practice room first. There were 15 practice rooms for all of the music students at a large university, who all needed to practice, hours per day. I was up
there at least two hours per day, myself, and then at home on my electric piano in my apartment by myself.

But in Pierre's case, unless he wanted to incur the wrath of his roommate, Stefan, he couldn't do it in the dorm. So the only option was to sign up in advance to do something he could barely force himself to do spontaneously, when he was in a great, ambitious, practicing mood. He had to plan to be inspired. And then once he was in the room, it was just him, the square white-walled room, a music stand, and an upright piano. Pierre would then spend at least the first ten minutes looking out the window, wishing that he weren't up there. I had trouble sympathizing, but this was his explanation.

“You don’t think you have time to help at all?” Pierre said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t get paid for that. And I have my own classes.”

“I get that,” Pierre said. “It’s just such a struggle for me, learning the music.”

It was true. Pierre struggled with learning music to the extent that he did most of his practicing by just finding the song on YouTube, listening to it a couple times, and then winging it in his lesson by ear after having not sung virtually all week (and having drunk on the weekend, most likely, which swelled one’s vocal cords). Following him when he sang the wrong rhythm or text in his lesson had become the game of it for me, like trying to predict where a football will bounce, and I had developed a certain skill in covering Pierre’s mistakes in front of people. That was my talent as an accompanist. Gerald may not have said anything about this improper practicing method, but I could always tell: specific stylistic choices that the singers in the videos had made to be idiosyncratic and interesting just made Pierre look like he was ripping off someone idiosyncratic and interesting—more specifically, that he hadn’t bothered to practice properly.

And now, I could see, Pierre was worried. He needed this recital to go well in order to please his parents and Gerald, and furthermore he needed to pass it in order to graduate. And I knew that as he got up and paced on the orange carpet out of the library, his greatest fear was that he would finally embarrass himself in front of everyone he knew—if they even attended. He had reached a point in his college career where it was seemingly too late to turn back and too late to reform. He had to go ahead as he was and accept the consequences. Any daylight he’d once seen as a performer had been shut out by his own failings. At this point, he wasn’t even worried about whether he would have a career. That was out of the question. He was worried the group of people who knew him best would soon know him even better, know that he was deep down a fraud.

“OK,” I said, capping my highlighter, relenting. “I’m busy this semester enough, but.”

“OK?” Pierre said. He was tentatively hopeful.

“You’re such an incredible musician, you’ll be able to teach me the music, right?”

“I can try,” I said. “A few hours. But you’re going to have to do some work on your own.”

“Of course,” Pierre said, suddenly earnest and diligent in his face. “No problem.”

“And a big part of that will involve convincing Stefan.”

“Right,” Pierre said. “Thank you so much.” He beamed then with such joy that it was difficult to imagine how he could fail. It was my duty as an accompanist to anticipate his mistakes and cover for them, but as I would see, no matter how long I spent in the practice room, even I couldn’t catch everything.
JAMES BUTLER-GRUETT is a writer and a 2018 graduate of the University of Arizona MFA program in fiction. His work has been published in Yes, Poetry magazine and the Sonora Review website. This excerpt is the beginning of his novel, The Standing O, which follows a senior Vocal Performance major and his accompanist in college as they prepare disastrously for a senior recital. Butler-Gruett uses his own experience being raised by two opera singers to color the comedic novel. He is also currently revising The Standing O and working on a collection of short stories, currently untitled. He lives in Tucson and can be found on Twitter @etinarcadia3go.
Put away deliveries. Date the sausage, date the ham, drain the anchovies, place the new milk and buttermilk and cream behind the old, then take a moment. Sniff, breathe. Grab a new half-tray and transfer all of the dairy cartons, wiping with paper towels as you remove them from a tray caked with layers and layers of milk in graduated hues of yellow, a sedimentary record of the time that you’ve been gone. Dump it in the sink, on top of what looks like every dish in the restaurant soaking inside of each other—two hours until the porter comes. Pull the last of the cheesecloth and hang the yogurt, press the ricotta, dump the fancy cheese in the bin and keep it in mind for later, that if you have time on the line after you peel a quart of garlic, chop a nine of parsley, dice and sauté the faro vegies, make the panna cotta, and get the veal stock on, as well as the thousand little replenishments necessary on even a moderate night, you should portion, wrap, and label the fancy cheese. Remember to get a server to walk you through the new fancy cheeses. Stack the ground veal and chicken thighs and full chickens and turkey into the last clean hotel pan, tear apart the egg boxes and FIFO the new flats underneath the old, dump the new beets and red onions and yellow onions and oranges and lemons and shallots on top of the old, because you’ve lost twenty minutes already, and remind yourself to remember to keep in mind that eventually, once you find the time tonight, you should flip the produce bins out because they’re moldy without exception, and pull off your coat and start unbuttoning your shirt as you roll the herbs up into paper towel bundles, and put on talk radio because no one’s here yet and no one will change it, and label and date every one of those herb bundles with heavy strokes that bleed sharpie out in thin lines through the cross-hatch patterning of the paper-towels, like you’re watching on an MRI as radioactive dye spreads through the body. Because, goddamn it, nothing in this kitchen has been dated or labeled or properly unloaded all winter, and after you dump the herbs into their moldy bins, you’re going to go
through the entire walk-in and toss the old, the rotting, the pointless, and you’re going to organize the freezer and chip off all the ice caked around the doors, and you’re going to unload the boxes of canned tomatoes and olive oil and cornstarch and organize the dry storage so that it makes just as much sense as it did when you stopped being a cook in November, and you have 40 minutes until you need to get upstairs and start doing real work. It is March, your old chef has just had a stroke, and you have agreed to pitch in for a while because, though you don’t have the time, you suppose you have the time.

Batch projects, prep, family meal. You are going to disappoint someone, it’s inevitable. Your chefs would tell you:

No. A cook can do all things all the time every day forever.

Matt, your chef, would say it encouragingly, the restaurant group’s chef-de-cuisine adamantly, the chef/owner, Mario, for hours as he wiped down every neglected corner and side and undersurface of the kitchen, looking at you with his smiling face, his dead-shark eyes. So would the line cooks who used to bounce around the group, the young ones anyway—in the farm league for the owner’s East Village fine-dining joint, back when it was ascendant—in their late-twenties and on their third career, or first, determined to do this one. The older ones, on their way back down from haute cuisine, might actually agree with you in their secret hearts, and shot knees, and in the walk-in during service while they sneak whatever it is they keep in Poland Spring bottles. But it was one of the older guys, who at his peak had worked garde at Le Cirque in the 90s, and who opened his interview with your group asking to be paid under the table, that explained the mindset as “Fuck you. You’re deep in the weeds, your pan is scorching in the hot-holder, and you have to haul ass down to the basement to replace it? Fuck you, do it. Clear your board, switch out the pan.”

But when it came to their family meal, they made fried chicken chunks. Red sauce and spaghetti with grilled chicken mixed in. Veggies in broth called minestrone; charcuterie scraps with whatever’s been over-ordered, caked in egg and called frittata; wilted greens with house dressing and fried chicken. Matt would make baked eggs, roast chicken with stuffing, shepherd’s pie and Frito pie and something else casually wonderful. And you, when you were a cook and Matt was off, would plan recipes the night before, pick up groceries on the way in at noon, use most of your time until 4:30 p.m. layering eggplant and pulling pork, and catch up on prep after last call, in the basement for hours after even last-out had left, because the servers and Jane were the only people you sat down with while they ate your food.

Today, you don’t know. You have three hours. Decide in two.

Dig the rondeau out of the sink, scrape and bleach and rinse the sediment out, and dump it on the prep table. Grab two new onions, new rosemary, the 20-quart cambro with the last of the veal stock, and dump the broth into a couple of quart containers. Smell them. Let your nose settle, and smell them again. Can you use them? Make a decision. Grab wine from dry storage and take off your pants. Pull on your chef pants, yours, and grab a jacket, jack up the sleeves, throw on your crocs, tighten your handkerchief and fasten an apron, fuck it, full whites, slip a sharpie and a cake taster into your jacket pocket, and put Raekwon on the speakers. Lay on the crime scene sippin fine wines pullin nines on UFOs takin they fly clothes they eyes close.
Dump the food in the rondeau, and also a butternut squash and a few turnips for the faro, a quart of dry faro and the mirepoix to cook it with, a quart of unpeeled garlic, and a bundle of mint for the yogurt sauce. Dig around in the freezer among the stacked metal half pans for a few minutes until you find a piece of top-round that should have been pulled last night and chuck it at the pot, run back to dry storage to grab a couple boxes of rice, and dump a shitload of shallots on top of it all. Remember your chef defining “A shitload: more than an assload, less than a fuck-ton.” Keep the moment in your mind while you carry the rondeau up the stairs, and then scrub it clean, okay, no more—you don’t have time.

Get on it all. Dice, stir, flip, pivot. Chop, catch your finger, throw on a glove. Cook it until it’s done. “How long do you cook it?” “Until it’s done.” Stop it. Turn down your burners, run downstairs, grab your ipod, run upstairs, put on Action Bronson, crank it, be deadly in the clutch with the precision of a shark bite. Next time you go down, you should wash out your finger and put a band aid on. Dump the faro over the mirepoix and cover with water, dump cornstarch over the shallots you sliced and then in to the deep fryer, pour the stock into a saucepot and crank the heat, empty the rice into the rondeau, stir, coat, deglaze with wine. And then, as you’re stirring the pot in immense corkscrews from the center out, and the whole dark fragrant swamp is spitting up on your arm, maybe you should remember the time Chef taught you how to make risotto: stirring, telling you how he’d been getting burnt out at Flue, but keeping it together for Mario, and Mario offering him a cheffing job here, and I’d never done that before, so I said I guess—. And, suddenly getting frustrated with acting imitable for you, grabbing both handles of the pot and jerking it toward him, forcing forward an oceanic surge of wine-dark rice that, now that you’re thinking of it, wouldn’t do a damn thing to keep it from sticking. Dirtiest chef in the world—it was your job to fight the rot, when you were a cook. Anyway.

David’s here.

“Hi David.”

“Oh, hey. Back, huh?”

David is terrible.

“Yeah, just for now. Filling in.”

“Gotcha, yeah, good thing,” David says as he comes behind the bar to clock-in, reaching his skinny arm tattooed down the length with “Alison.” He’s already in his prep ski-hat, his baggy Jnco prep jeans, ready to do kitchen work at any time, every time, please. “Tom said he’s going to kill Jamal if he has to keep working with him. We got, like, ten people sending back food last night—Tom took him off the line, put me on salads. It was fucking scary, you know? I bet you know all about that.” Tom is the chef-de-cuisine, Jamal your replacement. You hope to see neither this month, until Chef gets better. “I’m coming for you, man,” David says. “I’m coming for your old position.” Remember to clock-in once the risotto’s done.

“There’s fifteen pounds of veal in the walk-in. You think you can stick around tonight and roll meatballs?” Skin the garlic, strip the rosemary, bite the faro. Add broth to the rice, and stir to combine.

“Uh, yeah, yeah. Just let me call my wife. Wait, nah, just yeah. I can do it. We need the money, after all.”

“Great.” Don’t make eye contact, but it doesn’t matter, he comes over anyway and leans against the side of your pass. Flick the pile of chopped mint by his hand into a quart container with your knife. Be thorough, make sure you get all of it.

“Yeah, so at first I was having Tom taste like everything I made, and he was always like, ‘You
forgot the herbs, Stick,’ or ‘wipe the bowl, dummy,’ you know, all those things you have to keep in mind. I bet it was like that for you at first, too, huh?” Chop the rosemary. Grab a mixing bowl, sweep all of the garlic off the cutting board, chop the rosemary. “But by the end, Tom tasted a faro I was sending out, and he was like, ‘Stick, this is a perfect salad,’ you know?”

Say “yeah,” pivot, stir the rice, say “shit,” grab a fish spatula and scrape the bottom of the pot clean. “I always used to forget the garnish.”

“Uh huh. That’s my new nickname, Stick. Tom gave it to me last night. I told Matt this morning on the way in, and he was like, ‘That’s a restaurant-grade nickname.’ He seems good, doesn’t he?”

Say “I haven’t seen him yet.” It’s okay, he isn’t listening. Test the faro, and turn off the burner. It’s done. Pivot back to the pass.

“A lot better’n my aunt after her stroke. She would always get tripped up in the middle of sentences, and she’s still in a wheel chair, and—”

“David, run down and grab me a deep half and a half-perf.”

“Alright,” he says, and opens his mouth again. Stare him down.

“I need it now.”

While he’s gone, chop the rosemary. Spread out, you’ve got the whole cutting board because you planned ahead. Bunch it with your hand and slice against the knuckles as fine as you can. Sound yourself. Is there anything specific that you can take care of? Maybe you have an itch you’ve forgotten about. Or maybe you’ve been holding your neck at a weird angle for hours, and now the muscles have all tightened up. Your risotto’s probably sticking again. The beef needs to be temped, too, and the shallots fished out and thrown away, but keep going over the rosemary for a while longer—gathering it together patting it down, moving north across the pile in tight momentary slices, and then east, north, and east, plowing little millimeter squares. You’re good at this.

When you were a cook, you made $10 an hour for the first forty hours per week, then fifteen dollars for every subsequent hour. This was raised within three months by your chef to $10.50, and when you became a full line-cook it was raised to $11. You have been led to understand that your chef makes between thirty and forty thousand per year, and you know one cook with the group who said he’s been working for ten years in New York trying to make enough money to leave.

The porters are paid eight dollars per hour, twelve for overtime. You do not know how much the servers make on average, but they seem to do okay—they work three to four nights a week, and eat out at one-star restaurants more often than you, at two- and three-star restaurants infrequently, which is much more often than you, at which their industry friends will give them appetizers and alcohol. Your friends at such may shave $40 of truffle onto an order of queso, but they are not able to comp drinks.

Your rent for an apartment forty minutes to an hour away by subway from both the kitchen and your current job is $1,675 per month, of which your wife pays half. Your wife has a real job, and has offered to pitch in more should it ever become necessary, but so far so good. Your utilities cost $200 per month for each of you, a monthly subway pass costs $135, and every few weeks you like to visit your parents in Cambridge, which costs $52 by train each way. It is impossible to eat in New York for less than $15 a meal—this may not be true for everyone, but you have been trained precisely to notice when something has not been cooked or seasoned properly. You may be able to
cook for yourself for less, when you have the time and presence of mind to do so, but you have been trained to notice inferior ingredients. The sole cheap foods available to you here, which you love, are boxed macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, and Tony’s frozen pizza, but after you eat these for dinner too many days in a row your mouth begins to salivate in an uncomfortable manner following the first bite, as if it’s secreting something not saliva but thicker, oilier, to protect your tongue from the familiar flavors.

Every cook you know is broke-rich: Allen Edmond shoes, Redwing boots, Boss coats, Burberry scarves, Misono UX10 knives, vast collections of fitteds, a chaos of tattoos, at least in one case (your chef) a complete bespoke suit. You are no exception, though you are not a cook anymore.

At your new job, it is about the hours. For five hours a day, for twenty-five dollars an hour, you “improve” internal documents for client businesses, which generally involves obscuring the content. There are always documents, there will never not be documents, and at the end of five hours you are not allowed to stay. At your old job it is about the work. In addition to service every day, your menu requires a certain amount of prep for the general number of patrons you get each week. You, and your chef, and sometimes the porter when you trust him, are required to prepare every element of every dish that can be prepared ahead of time for as many people as will order that dish in a night, and not so much that these elements begin to go bad. If you fail to prepare sufficiently, you will have to 86 items during service, and do not 86 items during service. Why not? Do not 86 items during service. As such, there were many activities that not only allowed for but demanded that you extend your hours, until some nights at 4:00 a.m. you found yourself in Chinatown, in a taxi heading for the Manhattan Bridge, finally allowing yourself to feel the current of exhaustion coursing from your eyes through your brain, looking forward to lying on your couch as a Tony’s cooks, remembering that you left the deep fryer on at 350 degrees, considering allowing yourself to be fired. These activities include: rolling fish and potato pâté into thumb-size batons; cleaning an order of hundreds of baby calamari of their guts and beaks and skin and grit; and the four-hour task of portioning and rolling twenty pounds of ground dry-age beef trim and citrus zest into 0.7 ounce balls, during which an incredible amount of emotions cycle through you with no relation to your activity, or the music playing, or your thoughts.

So go downstairs, you have twenty pounds of chicken thighs to clean.

But Jane’s here, and so is Liz, in Jane’s office off of the prep kitchen.

“Louis Jadot,” you hear Liz say to Jane as you peel off your glove caked halfway down the pointer finger with dried blood, “Rhône valley, right? Lots of shale?”

“What else?” Jane asks. The two-hour online course you were required to take to become a New York–Certified Food Handler stated that one should wash one’s hands for thirty seconds following contamination before handling food again. You suppose that’s probably necessary this time.

“Oo, er, it’s old world?”

“Well Jesus, that’s pathetic. Don’t worry, I blame myself—maybe I hold you to too high a standard. You can’t expect from others what you expect from yourself.”

“Fuck you!” Liz says happily. “When have you seen me studying? When have you seen me have time to study?”
Open the first aid cabinet and throw on a finger condom, pass David at the sink pulling and emptying and stacking every dish in the kitchen in silence, maybe he's humming a little, and tell him “David, I need two shallow hotel pans.”

“Yuh,” he says, and from the office you hear “Oh!”

Go in, and say hi to the girls.

“Hey guys.”

“Oh!”

Hug them both, and remember your interview in this office a year and a half ago—it’s okay, it was with Tom. He told you to buy The French Laundry Cookbook, and you did, and now like many other cooks and non-cooks alike you own an unused copy of The French Laundry Cookbook.

“Back, huh?” Liz asks. Jane sits down, and then she does too.

Lean against the wall, pocket your left hand, scratch your eye with the right. “No, not back. I’m not even here right now.”

Liz pouts, and Jane smiles. She was in high finance, Liz, in Hong Kong, and went to the London School of Economics, and you always wondered if pouting works in that world, if it’s a legitimate business tactic, because she would always use it as an act of persuasion—with the customers deciding between wines, or asking you to go out drinking with Jane and the servers, or inviting your then-girlfriend and you to the parties she threw in Murray Hill, blocks away from your restaurant. She would ask, you would defer, she would pout, and that would be it. But perhaps when she was in a suit, and they were high-pressure businessmen with closely shaven faces, and it was a matter of millions, a pout would be enough.

Or maybe it’s another one of Jane’s influences, like going out until 4 every night after service, or working toward her Somm degree, or doing Chinatown with Matt until 7 or 8 or 9 or whenever their memories decayed in everyone’s favorite initiation ritual but yours—because whenever Matt was off, you were closing. That was the whole point of you, after all. Jane gives her a look now, and says “Anyway,” and Liz says, “Yeah, alright. See you up there,” and she closes the door behind her.

“Hey Jane.” You take Liz’s chair. “I heard a rumor about you.”

“Oh yeah?” she says, and turns to her computer, but she doesn’t start typing. “In New York? That’s impossible.”

“Something about wine and Germans.”

“That, yes. Yeah, that’s happening. In about a month.”

“Seems like the right time to leave.” Through the hollow door you can hear David’s humming getting louder, and it’s either free jazz or nothing at all. “I heard Flue lost its star.”

She nods, still not working at the computer. She has her Georgetown hoodie on, which means it’s inventory day. Otherwise it’s 100% dress and heels, even in the snow. “Not a good time for the Mario Federo empire. Paul Butters is leaving too.”

“Uh huh,” you say. You don’t know Paul. “What happened to Eric?” You hear David hit the detergent button to fill one of the sink basins, which means he’s already stacked and organized everything. Slowest prep cook in the world, but when it comes to dishes he knows what he’s doing.

“No call no show. David! Put something on the radio.”

“Mumble,” he says.

“Damn! I loved that kid.” Eric was your protégé when you were a cook, and he was a porter, and you were training him to cook when you both had time. You introduced him to chopped liver.

“Who’s even left anymore?”

“Well,” Jane says, and now she faces you as
“Jack and Diane” begins and you remember how she used to call Matt Peaches, how when he was in a mood she would ask do you want to see my boobs? and he would say yes! But I don’t think that would be professional. “Ken for now, but he’s finally almost done with Med School, so that will be it for him, and Kim, but she’s trying to get her job back at Boloud, and Javier’s training at Craft right now, and Nick’s planning on going back to school soon, and even Tom might be on his way out.” She leans in, and that time she rung in a ticket for herself for an Extra Fancy charcuterie plate, and Matt drew smiley faces on every piece of sausage. “Park Slope’s not doing so well.” This is the location Tom himself bought stock in, his little fiefdom across the river, from which he issued the weekly calendars, seasonal recipes, and David Rivera whenever someone’s porter snapped, stormed out, and threw their keys into the deep fryer. “Everyone’s getting back to what they were doing before, their real stuff. Makes sense. Hot water’s broken, by the way.”

The opening riff of “The Ocean” kicks through the door.

“David!” Jane yells. “Just turn it off if you’re going to listen to classic rock!”

“Mumble mumble,” he says. “Wasn’t anyway.”

The humming starts back up.

“Everyone but you and me,” you say and face her, Jane who always asked if you wanted to pick up shifts serving, even though you were not a server, who taught you to make caramel and cassoulet, who used to be a cook. Jane who gave you a bottle of burgundy after your first night manning the kitchen alone, and who never thought you’d stick around. If this is really what you want to do, she’d always say. Watch your fingers.

“Yeah, maybe I should too. Call my ex, tell him we’re getting divorced again. Move to Puerto Rico, break out my hoochie pants. Germany sounds so adult, doesn’t it? But you’re not staying long, either. It’s nice you’re here, and you’re not staying long.”

“Just until Matt gets better.”

“No. We don’t know. Tom and Mario need a solution, and if you let them, you’re it.”

Say “No.” Feel your lungs begin to vibrate. What is that feeling without a cigarette? What do you do with it?

“Okay then,” she says. “What are we having for family meal?”

“Oh, uh. Caesar salad.”

On the way back up, ask David if, if he has the time, he wouldn’t mind cleaning the chicken too.

“Gotcha,” he says.

Grab a bag of old bread, one of a dozen, run upstairs, toss some pre-marinated chicken chunks in corn starch and then in to the deep fryer, dice bread and in to the oven, pull the beef and temp it, decide 125 degrees is good enough, grab the rondeau and run downstairs, spread the rice in the two shallow hotel pans David has laid out and throw them in the walk-in, grab a bowl and a deep half-pan and the most wilted greens and some balls and ball sauce, and run it all upstairs, balls in to oven, dressing on greens, chicken out of oil, chopped, and into salad, bread out of oven and briefly through your hands in to salad, parm on top, tongs in salad, salad on table, grab a quart container, fill it with water, take a drink. Be careful with the next part, because your knee is fucked. Pop the pass open and check the 9-pans, pop down and check every quart container in the first low-boy underneath the pass, pivot, check the second, pivot, check the third, pop up, pivot, pop down and check the dry storage next to the deep fryer and underneath the sandwich press and the
hot-holder, pop up, shuffle-step, and pop down at the lowboy by the edge of your station, where the bar begins, and where the fancy cheese lives. By now you should have a complete understanding of every element you have for the line, and a comprehensive list of every item you need to bring up from the prep kitchen below. This is your pull list: red onion, maitakes, arugula, frisée, budino, veal stock, anchovies, brown eggs, porkblade, beet riz, pasta, pec, boar, sliced duck, yoghurt, hazel, cherries, shallots, bailey, clothbound, trash half, and a new jacket because you’ve just realized that you’re splattered with wine. Go down, grab a deep hotel pan, throw some c-folds in to mop up the water David missed, and load up. Say “David, can you put that on hold for a minute? I need you to make the yogurt sauce. Have you ever done it?” “No.” “Alright. Family’s on, go eat.” So, okay, it’s 4:40, service starts at 5, you haven’t eaten, and you also need to slice bread.

So, do it. Whisk, pepper, salt, mint, zest, stairs, knife, glove, bowl, eat, and David’s saying “No more direct deposit. Straight up cashed as needed,” and no one else is saying anything—Jane and Liz, and now you. Tell them that French Dip is 86ed because you’re out of veal stock.

“Who’s last-in?” you ask.

“Nick,” Jane says, watching the door.

Say “Oh, great,” and wish you hadn’t, because last-in is in at 4 p.m.

“Spending my money,” David says, “spending the kids’ money. Well, I’m not even going to say a thing.”

“Uh huh,” Jane says.

“She’ll come up to me and be like, there’s no money in the bank account, and I’ll say, weird.”

“Good plan,” Jane says.

“Just that, and I’ll walk away. Not a word more.”

“Cool.”

The door opens, and two older women walk in, dressed for cocktails and laughing. And though the lights are down, the room is empty, the staff is eating, and no one is getting up to extend their hospitality, the women continue forward, slower and more hesitant with each step but still coming, as if they can’t understand this place ever not catering to their needs, like drunken teenagers at a public park. Isn’t this for me?

**Service.** There are two ways of being that you can expect during service, but first you have to take care of the two women who only came in for happy hour wine and mozz balls: so rip the ticket and on to the runner, pop down at the middle low-boy, grab the mozz, in to the fryer, grab your pasta pot and fill it in the sink while you listen for a tiny wet sizzle, and pivot, mozz up and on a sizzle-platter and salt and in the oven, transfer the pot and crank a burner, count to thirty, mozz out and ball pan too, poke the mozz with your poker and test the temp on your lip, lid off ball pan and ball sauce on dish, mozz on dish and shit, you’ve lost your man hands, but parm on balls, parsley on parm, wipe the plate with a towel and on to the pass, “Server!”, ticket down, temp balls, lid back on ball pan and in to oven, wipe down station, run down and grab parsley, run up and strip parsley, chop, grab a nine and brush the new herbs in, FIFO the old, and though you are not a cook it’s okay to feel fly in your whites.

But, the first way: for an hour and a half, no one else comes in. When the two older women leave, after a while, they apologize, and then it’s just Liz at one end of the restaurant by the liquor, and you at the other by the food. She puts Lauryn Hill, or Tracy Chapman, or the *Empire Records Soundtrack*, and polishes silverware, and you try to keep busy too: unwrapping the pass, boiling the
hazelnuts in simple syrup and then frying them, boiling and pouring the panna cotta, peeling garlic, wondering what else you were supposed to do. You end up staring at all the food in front of you, taking bites of parsnip, cherries, walnuts, pickled onion. Of course you think about Matt, but it’s just that: Matt, and a feeling sort of angry, and bottomless if you sound it, and you know where he is, just take the Q. He’s the same as ever, basically. Just. That’s it. Maybe you should get on cleaning out the walk-in, organizing the freezer.

But when you were a cook, and this is rare because you would usually be shucking fava beans, rolling sausage, running and muttering and cycling through all of the jobs that you could get ahead on, first out of panic that you weren’t doing enough and then out of responsibility because they had become yours, but when you finally ended up behind the pass with nothing to do, and the part of the brain you’d been deafened to at night, and pushing through dense books in the morning just to prove it was still there, when you finally had the time and presence of mind, would explain to you very reasonably why this feeling was appropriate.

Well, it would state in a calm and unquestionable voice that sounded a lot like your old pediatrician, you become angry with your girlfriend for things that aren’t her fault. Two of your friends are seriously depressed, and you have not contacted either in some time. You are average, and let your wants win out over your aspirations almost every time. In high school you dated your best friend’s girlfriend. In middle school, it continues, you broke your brother’s Palm Pilot and let him get blamed. And no, you’d say to Jane, or Nick, or Liz, or any of the other servers, you just need coffee, and a cigarette would be great, and you’d love to try that wine they have open. It was only on Matt’s off-days, anyway.

And people would begin to filter in for dinner, and people do begin to filter in, and make their drink selections, and tickets will soon be coming up. But for a while it lingers, moving with you from fridge to oven to stove to pass, until you have to move quicker and you start mining that part of the brain for usable energy. Your grandmother had a stroke, and though he’s not friendly, your grandfather has wheeled and lifted and fed and listened to her when her words come out wrong, and your father pulls over for drunk spin-outs in snow storms. Your wife is lonely. Why don’t you do more?

The second way of being is called a few things—push, the weeds, rush, the shits—and during this time you cook. If when you have 4-5 tickets you are expected to get all the food out in 25-30 minutes, when you are in the weeds and have 12-15 and coming, you are expected to get all of the food out in 30-35 minutes. In a given five minutes, on one level, you are thinking: bread, knife, Taleggio, taste, decide, smear, duck, press, riz in, pasta out, flip, taste, season, plate, wipe, garnish. “Server!”, sandwich out, slice, plate, wipe, slice sausage for five boards, rinse the salt out of your finger, riz out. On another level, with equal presence, you are thinking:

   When I walk up in the piece,
   I ain’t gotta even speak,
   I’m a bad mamajama goddamn it
   motherfucker you ain’t got it like me.

Jamal may come up in this time, and ask you for free food so he won’t have to ask Jane, and point to a girl, and you’ll give it to him, and as he leaves he’ll say “I’m excited to work with you tomorrow!” Nick may show up eventually and wink at you as he starts running plates and say “Yes SIR” when you say the place number, and when it gets slow enough for the servers he’ll disappear down-
stairs with Jane and reappear quieter. And when you were a cook, your then-girlfriend could arrive, wave, eat a whole coursed hooked-up meal, wave, and leave without time for you to get to the sink and fill-up a drink of water. Three hours disappear, and it was your favorite thing about the job.

You swipe the last ticket, slam it on the spike, and look up. Everyone is eating the food you just made. Do they like it? Well, they’re eating it. Later, when you’re washing your pans, you’ll peek in the trashcan and see just how much food they left on their plates. Every bite is personal, even the olives. Nick mimes a cigarette at you. Yes, you nod, though you are not a smoker anymore.

“So what the fuck happened?” you ask, as Nick takes a drag and looks at the ground, turning down his sad blond mustache. There are two Nicks that you remember, Happy Nick and Sad Nick. Sad Nick has a goofy mustache, weird hand-designed tattoos, and wears track suits for service. Happy Nick pulls it off.

“I got picked up, asshole.” He takes another drag. “They got me for public-drinking, and I already had an unpaid citation.” Another one.

You’re in the alley by the prep kitchen door, down in the part of New York between buildings and behind gates, where you keep the trash and broken stools. It has always been the smoking area.

“What was the first citation for?”

He smiles, and blows right in your face. “Public drinking.”

Punch him. It’s that, or bum a cigarette. You’ve been running to distract yourself from quitting, two miles a day for the same head rush. So take a run now, healthy boy. Or just punch Nick.

“Jane reamed me the fuck out, though, Jesus,” Nick says, letting the edges of his mustache perk up a bit.

“Well, you had to expect that.”

“Fuck yeah, I respect everything that woman does,” he says, ashing.

“She can be real passive when she wants to be, though,” Liz says from above. She’s holding the gate open, bridging the gap between you and the outside. “When she wants to fuck with your head, she really can. That must be the best thing about being a gay guy,” she says to Nick, “they seem so direct. You’ve got a ticket,” she says to you. “And Mario’s here.”

“No!” Nick yells up to your backs as you both head in. “The best thing about being gay is having a cock in your mouth.”

The third way to be during service is when Mario is there, and to a lesser extent when Tom’s around, which he is as well. Mario already has his jacket off and his sleeves rolled, and he’s wiping at the stainless steel shelves behind the oven while making what looks like the slowest pasta ever cooked, splayed out limp in a pan with sauce.

Tom looks the most disheveled you’ve ever seen him, which is to say a huge beard, shot eyes, and a beautiful topcoat like always. “Hey,” he says, and grips your shoulder. “Thanks for coming in, it means a lot, and it’s a big help.”

Say “of course,” and keep watching Mario clean your kitchen like it’s your fault.

“I was talking to Matt, you know, and he agrees that, you know, if you’re willing to do this, we must have been doing something right.”

“Thanks.” A new ticket comes up, that sound that used to pull you out of sleep at night, that simple old-fashioned printer sound that every receipt makes everywhere, that sound you could hear deep in the weeds on the far side of the restaurant carrying a hotel pan full of replenishments, board full, that whine, Mario plucks it and walks himself
over to dry storage, finds him a quart of olives and plucks a few down on a plate, adjusts for a few moments to get them just as pretty as he needs, and places them on the pass.

“Server,” he says.

“It’s great how good he’s doing, too, isn’t it?” Tom asks. “When my great aunt had hers…”

Say “yeah,” and then say “Jamal said I was working tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah. He came in tonight? That’s kind of crazy—he’s been on for twelve days straight. You have to respect that. And, well, not that he was the best to begin with, but it’s kind of taking a toll on him, he needed a day. He’s back on tomorrow, but I was hoping you might come in for a few hours and make sure everything’s going okay. David’s on too, so you won’t even have to do prep. Does that work?”

Make a decision, and then look around afterward. Bad dates come to die in your restaurant, you’ve found. “It really sucks,” a nice man says to another at the bar beside you, “but I understand. You’re still invited to my birthday.”

Say “Okay. I get off work at three, so I can be in by four.”

“Hey, Big Boy,” Mario says, and hands you the towel he was using. Tom fades away, and heads toward Jane, and the bar. “Thanks for chipping in now that Matt’s gone.”

“Of course, Chef.”

“So,” he says, and waits until you meet his eyes. Matt called them gentle, and ignored the trap, the hinges. “I want you to look around the kitchen and I want you to notice something.”

“Yes, Chef.”

“I want you to notice that it’s fucking dirty.” But then, Matt saw Jane as his partner.

“Yes, Chef.”

“And I want you to watch me while I clean it, and then I want you to notice how fucking clean it is.” And Mario his mentor, and Tom his best friend.

“Yes, Chef.”

“And you will keep it that clean after I leave, because that is how clean a chef keeps his kitchen.” And he was so sad when you gave notice four months ago that he said, after shots of the fancy in-house whiskey, it’s great, and everything, but still. All that preparation, just, wasted. “I always say, you should get it clean to the point where you seem insane.”

“Yes, Chef,” you say, because if there’s anything you’ve learned here, it’s how to take a talking-to.

“After all, a cook can do everything. Yes?”

“Yes, Chef.”

“Okay,” he says, and indeed he does clean your kitchen, and lazily handles the few tickets that come in, and Tom heads back over with two beers, and tells you about the pipe system he’s redoing in his house in North Carolina, about the market value of his house in Greenpoint, about the baby he wants to make. Take slow sips of the beer he gave you, don’t get sleepy. Maybe there’s another push coming, or Mario’s going to test you. Maybe the health inspector will come, too.

But eventually Mario contents himself with the stainless steel fixtures, and he pulls Tom with him out the doors, back to Flue most likely, the center of his shrinking empire. The patrons start thinning out, and Jane comes to hug you goodbye. “See you tomorrow,” you say, and she nods.

“It’s nice to have you back. You can help with inventory! Especially if Nick gets picked up again.”

Finally, it’s just you and the servers, and a few drunken tables. Tell Nick “last call,” and ask Liz for another beer. Some nights, it seems, every single table decides yes, I want more. Bring me everything on the menu, but hold the sauces. And if you could,
cut it in threes. Tonight, though, is utterly normal, and you're done at quarter-of. Turn off the oven, wash out your pans in cold water, really scrub to get that pale solid grease off, and play the music game with the servers. What will make the atmosphere least welcoming to the stragglers? Free jazz? Country? Hardcore? On its own the customers can withstand any of it, if they're drunk enough, but it's the switching mid-song that will eventually drive them out.

One day last summer, Matt took you to some people he knew in Chinatown to buy an engagement ring. There were always rumors that his family was Chinese Mafia, most by Matt after his third shot of Jameson.

“They’ll grab you off Fifth Avenue during the holiday season. They’ll steal your thumbs and make turtle soup. They’ll throw pollen in your eyeballs and set the bees on you.”

And he’d insisted that, if you ever needed jewelry—“Diamonds, pearls, whatever. If you ever need a pearl necklace from me...”—you had to make sure to ask him first. As soon as you figured out that Tiffany’s engagement rings started at 10K, before the recommended insurance plan, you accepted his offer.

“What’s the difference between jam and jelly?” Matt asked. You were at Jing Fong Dim Sum for brunch, a massive banquet hall filled with hundreds of big round tables and dozens of servers wheeling tall metal carts filled with bamboo steamer baskets stacked 15-high, all directed by ten serious women in pants suits and walkie-talkies. Matt had filled the table with dishes that you should try: taro dumplings, savory custard puffs, braised chicken feet—“think of them as chicken aspic,” he’d said, “with lumps.”

“There’s a difference between jam and jelly?”

“Oh, well, yes, jelly is made from only the fruit juice, and jam is made with the whole fruit pulp. But also, I can’t jelly my cock down your throat. All right.” He pulled his gold money clip out, and unfolded off a few bills. “Let’s go.”

Outside, Chinatown was crowded and smelled like old fish. You’ve noticed that, the longer you live in New York, the more each neighborhood becomes reduced to a single set of attributes. And so everything you know about the West Village, even while you’re there, is that it gets a lot of light and people walk slowly because they don’t know where they’re going; the East Village is full of high school students, it’s always raining, and the cabs race through yellow lights; in Murray Hill the men wear baggy, untucked dress shirts and tip poorly; and on Atlantic in Brooklyn it’s always ninety degrees.

But as you walked past the open-front shops full of barrels that all smell like fish, Matt tells you, “that’s lychee. Try one.”

“It tastes like a grape with seeds.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll keep working on that palette. You take those dried shrimp and grind them up, you can make a great broth in like five minutes. See that?” He pointed to a display of spiky fruits among other displays of spiky fruits. “That’s dura-in. Very trendy right now, and I have no idea why. Smells like ass, tastes like onion. It just has to be sort-of obscure and pricy, you know? Foie gras, guanciale, ramps, short-rib burgers. Bottarga’s going to be in next, I’m calling it now.”

“What’s bottarga?”

“Oh, that’s actually something you should try. It’s cured roe. Here.” He handed you a hundred dollar bill. “Pick up a log from Petrossian on your way in tomorrow, we’ll do something for family meal. Get heirlooms from the farmer’s market, too—I have an idea for a special. Oh!”
“What?”
“Let’s dip in here real quick.” He pointed to a steel door at the bottom of a set of stairs, painted with the symbol for the Red Cross.
“What is it?”
Matt smiled and waggled his eyebrows. “Secret chef bar.”
And down you went, into a gloomy whiskey bar full of cooks sucking through Jameson, cheering Matt’s arrival, telling stories about huge pans of duck confit full-up to the brim with boiling fat, being jostled and knowing the duck’s more valuable than my arms; throwing each other’s stainless-steel cook-spoons in boiling water and putting them back at their station; busting through a five-hour push where the Times reviewer arrives in the middle, and then the handle of a whisk explodes off of sauté and throws sand into everyone’s pass.
And okay, New York, all right. And your first dates with your wife were inside rooms behind rooms, where you could try sea urchin for the first time, when her parents would crumple up “a little money” and slip it into her hand, when you spent days going out to deep Queens to try a Korean spa, to Long Island City for modern art, 143rd Street for Charles’ Country Pan-Fried Chicken.
No one could hit a wall like Matt. On your first day you were warned, separately, by Nick, Jane, and Eric, “He’s a great guy. But he has his moods.” But unlike the stories these day-drinking cooks tell each other about their old chefs—the thrown pans, screaming, obliterating a new raw-cook over a bad oyster, “Did you know it was wrong when you did it?” “Yes.” “Then why the fuck did you do it?”—Matt signaled his exhaustion by sighing, smoking, and telling you, again and again, “I was really thinking about leaving. I was thinking, it’d be fun to teach at Culinary. But then Mario came
and talked to me, and I’d never done management before.”
That never had a wide range of tones. A flat never while showing you how to bread properly. A sarcastic never teaching you how to baste out a steak. A clipped, furious never—Mario had come by, and said his risotto was overcooked—as he demonstrating, for the first time you’d ever seen it, the proper way to dice an onion: halve, trim, slice through the side, slice down the top, chop. “Good?”
“Yeah,” you’d said, amazed.
Then, as the lessons became more elaborate—“come learn how to make fried rice!”—Matt started phasing out the despair. “I saw this way of cooking eggs where you make a whirlpool in boiling water, let’s give it a try.” And once he started trusting you, every night after he hit that wall—“Adventures in deep frying!”—he’d leave, and you’d close. “Think you can handle it?” “Yep.” Five nights a week.
“Pick their brains,” Matt said, gripping two of his friend’s skulls, and went to the bathroom. You didn’t know what to ask, so they talked among themselves until Matt came back and you set back off.
The jewelry store was in an old converted bank building, and the tight circle of glass display cases in the center seemed dwarfed by the 30-foot ceilings. The room was empty when you first arrived, and you wondered, Do we just take a ring?
“Hello Matthew.”
A woman emerged behind the counters, as if through a trap door, dressed in a black jumpsuit and glittering from every dangle. She was pretty in that older-New York-woman way, with tightened skin and frank eyes.
“Auntie!”
“This is the person you called about?”
“Yup, this is my protégé.”

She scanned you from head to toe, and you could feel her searching around your face, your outfit, finding your upper-limit price and tossing it aside, picking through your good intentions, your impulsivity, your bank balance and your credit limits. She reached a final number, and nodded.

“Well, let me pull a few things out.” Then she disappeared again through, yes, a trap door behind the counters. Why would a bank have a trap door?

You looked at Matt, and he shrugged. “When you get rich enough, you follow your whims wherever they go.”

She appeared again, climbing up stairs holding a tray above her head made of black velvet and full of rocks and metal. You felt excited—spending this much on something so small seemed very adult.

“This one’s nice,” the aunt said, holding up a ring with one big diamond surrounded by other smaller diamonds.

“That’s a nice one,” Matt said.

It was nice. You glanced at the others on the tray, and they seemed fake next to what she was holding—they had smaller diamonds, or one diamond, or different kinds of rocks, or their bands weren’t made of gold. “Yeah,” you said, “I like it.” Look at that gesture, your brain commanded, look how good a husband you’re going to be.

“$7000.”

“I really appreciate it,” you said, “I know how much this costs elsewhere, but the most I can possibly spend is $1500.” You felt your scalp flush.

“Ni men zujín zěnméiyáng?” She said to Matt, shaking her head. “Wo hénjiù méi jiàndào ta le.”

“Ta mánhào, mánhàódé,” Matt said in his serious voice, the one he put on for a few minutes whenever you fucked up, to let you know you’d fucked up, before rushing back into himself.

“Baoluo shushu ne, ta hào ma?”

She turned back to you, and you almost jumped. “Eh,” she said, and squinted one eye. “$5000.”

“I really, really appreciate that, but honestly, the very most I can pay is $2000.” You were telling the truth the first time.

“Ta de jiao bútài hào, tángniàobìng yínqì de. Ta zài shāfà shāng táng le yíge xíngqí le,” she said, still staring right at you. Keep making eye contact? Stare at your feet? Play casual? Maybe spit on the ground and walk out—play hard to get? You didn’t know, you didn’t do anything.

“A, zhe tài zào le,” Matt said.

“Shì tài zào le!” she said, and started laughing. She reached into her pocket, and pulled out a ring box. “Ta dàohào, jiù yízhǐ zài kān diànsì, wǒ hài-yáo cíhou tā.” She put the ring inside, and slid it across the counter to you. “$3000. You can pay cash?”

“Yes! Let me just visit a bank.” And outside to Matt, “I have to find an internet café too, to move some money around.”

“All right,” Matt said, “you did good,” and smacks you on the ass. “Good prep. I’ll tell you, most of management is just that—figuring out how much to pay the guy to fix your leaking pipes, or hauling ass down here to find a cheap Panini press replacement because someone dropped the cord in the deep fryer.” He glared at you. You glared at him. You all blamed David. “You know, smoothing it out with the guy next door because you got mice in your basement, and then they got into his basement. I’m glad to see you can handle yourself.”

“Yeah,” you said, and in the dark blue glow of the internet café, as you figured out how much the fee was to transfer from your credit card to checking, and so how much you needed to transfer to cover the fee, and rent, and paying for meals
at an equal rate as her so that it seemed like you hadn’t just spent all your money—so it would stay a surprise—you figured, two months. Give it two months, and then give notice, that’ll leave plenty of time to replace you. And you will have a wife.

PATRICK CLINE was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and worked as a chef in New York before moving to Tucson to pursue his MFA in Fiction at the University of Arizona. His writing has appeared in Zoetrope: All-Story, DIAGRAM, and Essay Daily, and he is currently at work on a novel exploring the aftermath of the Salem Witch Trials in Puritan New England. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and black cat, and is trying to grow mushrooms.
Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly:
“Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain’t. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”
“Oh come, now, you don’t mean to let on that you like it?”
The brush continued to move.
“Like it? Well, I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every
day?”
That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back
and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—
Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he
said:
“Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little.”
Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind:
“No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben.”

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

My mother names me after the son of the
doctor who delivers me. This is the early 90s, and
the doctor wears a very white coat. Everything ap-
pears starched: the nurse’s hair, the spic-and span
quadrant of floor, the doctor’s timbre of voice, his
white, white coat.

Mother has been here before. She sits sweaty
and yet unflappable, her second delivery proceed-
ing in a manner which deters reflection—things
are on their way, my father taking calls in the hall-
way, Clinton sweeping Arkansas then Alabama,
words and news building and subsiding, the good
doctor talking a lot about names. Mother begins to push.

My deliverer has two sons: Tom and Jim. Either would make a fine American name the doctor assures my mother, even though there is not really a metric for such things, and if my mother needs anything, it is a way of weighing contents, of approximating density and speed, of saying this far on this much.

The name Jim already belongs to my mother’s lab director, a man who reads to her as sweet but febrile. Tom, on the other hand, is clean of direct associations and yet rich in assumed cultural significance. My parents are newly aware of Tom & Jerry, and Mr. Tom Selleck from Hawaii, and when they were college students in Hangzhou, they must have read, in Mandarin first edition, of a Midwestern boy named Tāngmŭ Suŏyà who went toe-to-toe with Injun Joe and kissed Becky’s cheek by the wide, gracious Mississippi. It doesn’t seem like much of a choice really. They finish the paperwork, take their second son home to an apartment with too many closets, back into that May heat and the throes of my mother’s dissertation, a body of work she will defend later that summer, standing before Jim and his cronies in a polo shirt and wire frame glasses, chemical formulae parting in uncertain spools from her mouth.

Months before I am born, my parents settle on my Chinese name: two figures inscribing a hodgepodge of names I will spend my life growing in and out of. They call me Nuocheng (诺成), which is an allusion to Knoxville, Tennessee, the city of my birth. Specifically, “Nuo” comes from Nuokeshiweier, Knoxville’s Chinese isomer, and “cheng” comes from Chengdu, a city in China where my mother spent most of her childhood.

For the first two days in the hospital though, I have no name, at least not in the language I claim as my own today. I don’t remember any of this, but the present repetition of facts still stirs something in me, reaching out into a penumbral space I can’t explain, as it is preverbal, as it is preconscious, a story I can hear clearly but garble in the telling. Here we are: My parents holding and pacing. I cry only a little. Here we are: their conversation bathing me, lathering my ears in their speech, the coo of each 諾 and each 成, these blurred, gentle namings. On my wrist, a bright blue tag lists sex and mother’s last name: Boy, Luo.

If you follow poetry news, you probably know that Chinese names were, in 2015 at least, a topic of vigorous op-eding. What was contested is unclear or immaterial to some, but boils down to three Chinese syllables—Yi-Fen Chou—and how these syllables were taken as the nom de plume of a middle-aged white poet from Indiana named Michael Derrick Hudson. Hudson’s poem, “The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve,” was well on its way to literary obscurity when it was picked by Sherman Alexie for the 2015 anthology of The Best American Poetry. Alerted to this coup, Hudson wrote to let Alexie, a prominent writer of Native American descent, know that he had been duped.

As Alexie later wrote in a blog post on The Best American Poetry website: “In the end, I chose each poem in the anthology because I love it. And to deny my love for any of them is to deny my love for all of them.” The poem was published, under Yi-Fen Chou’s imagined authorship, and if you buy the anthology today and flip back to Hudson’s bio, you can read about how “The Bees” was rejected from a slew of publications (Hudson kept “very detailed submission records”) when submitted under Hudson’s legal / white name, before eventually finding a home at Prairie Schooner
(and later BAP) under the aegis (what Hudson would probably term “affirmative action”) of an Asian-looking name. “If indeed this is one of the best American poems of 2015, it took quite a bit of effort to get it into print…” Hudson proclaims in his bio in BAP, pounding the pulpit for all the embattled white men writing under white names in today’s America.

As a writer of Asian descent, it’s hard for me not to take Hudson’s gambit a little personally, or ignore the slew of media responses that have come out since, most of which have denounced Hudson as a tasteless appropriator, but none of which have come out and said what really irks me about this whole matter. Because I have been thinking about this too much, because I am occasionally vindictive and usually self-involved, I have to wonder why Hudson reached instinctively for a Chinese name when the time came to exotify himself. I wonder why it was yellow that revealed itself as the most desirable, or convenient shade: is it so easy Michael, I ask this honestly, to write yourself thus pigmented, to transgress just that far, to play this game because you have (apparently) nothing to lose and much to gain in terms of accolades, and notoriety, and the embarrassment of a liberal literary establishment that has rejected you as who you are, which is to say white and entitled and a poet?

I’ll admit that I am annoyed on many counts with Hudson, and have talked shit about him while eating multiple tacos, spilling salsa down my shirtfronts. And yet I also bear him a grudging respect, or at least recognize something of myself in him and his actions.

Consider: For years I have misplaced or ignored my own Chinese name in the interest of making daily life in America superficially easier. I have never really regretted this. Thomas gets me through the roll call quicker. It is the name on my driver’s license, the sound I answer to in my head. And besides, I don’t need a Chinese-sounding name to inform other Americans of my heritage. Going by Thomas does not prevent people on street corners and in cafes from asking me, head cocked and expectant: But where are you really from?

Consider: Michael Derrick Hudson jettisons his white-sounding name to become Yi-Fen Chou, thus making a poem he wrote about Roman colossi and Christian idolatry more intriguing to diversity-minded editors (Alexie again: “When I first read it, I’d briefly wondered about the life story of a Chinese American poet who would be compelled to write a poem with such overt and affectionate European classical and Christian imagery, and I marveled at how interesting many of us are in our cross-cultural lives…”). The ruse seems to work, even if much editorial hand-wringing must ensue.

Consider: Both these choices, mine and Mr. Hudson’s, reflect a kind of brutal pragmatism, a hankering for results. Both involve a swapping of one name for the potentialities of another. I admire Hudson for his pluck, the ease with which he slips identities, the way he can take on a Chinese name that roughly means a “piece of stink” and still end up in a prestigious literary anthology, the way he is unashamed of this. What emerges is an odd brotherhood, a kinship I discern in the abandonment (in his case, temporary) of birth names and the taking of aliases. It is this happy betrayal that aligns us, that allows me to see him as I see myself—smudged, an incomplete erasure of heritage and color.

A name can be, in the right situations, a catalyst. Said aloud, any name demands a re-
response, sets in motion a series of events that can feel pre-determined, rote. Names are labels, little semantical handles we use to hold on. But handles open doors, and close others in their wake. Names divide hemispheres, cut characters out of history, draw our attention, immediate, fleeting, to the person, the place, the thing. The process of naming can get away from us, until we find ourselves sowing them willy-nilly, marrying them off, splitting and joining and hyphenating ourselves into a kind of chaos. But where are you really from? a stranger at the bar is always asking me, and I never know who to answer for, Thomas or Nuo-cheng? Who do they mean? Which part of me goes with which name?

As my mother knows well, scientists take a different approach. In the months that I grow, embryonic in her womb, my mother stays busy in Jim’s lab, trying to modify a highly stable organic compound called adamantane into a more reactive form. The carbons in adamantane have a chair structure, a molecular shape similar to that of diamond, in which the carbons align in four cyclohexane rings to make a kind of cage. Chemical nomenclature is tied always to such set patterns. Each molecule’s naming denotes a specific number, type, and arrangement of atoms. In trying to alter adamantane’s structure, my mother is in a sense seeking to change its name. She sees it clearly, this molecule, how it looks, swiveling in dreamy, chimeric geometries, its hydrogens coming and going, every name just a temporary dalliance, a label always in the shedding.

For the first few years, my parents call me by a nickname, cheng-cheng, and speak to me only in Mandarin. They are fresh out of grad school and house-shopping and I have an older brother they call nuo-nuo lying next to me in the powdery white crib. I remember the first day of kindergarten as the beginning of my American life, crying and pissing over the toilet, having to speak English all at once. I walk to Bluegrass Elementary hand-in-hand with my nainai, who is dressed in paisley and Payless, her hair still black at the roots. The teacher, Ms. Jackson, calls me “Tommy Day” and over a red bin full of dry rice (apparently, they call these “sensory rice tables”), I make my first friend, who is olive-skinned and ringlet haired, seraphic, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

Back home, in the starter house drawn in color pencil and framed in grass, my mother writes papers about modified adamantane cages and waits for certain names to stick: Carol at the lab; John the dentist; Dan who sold us this house; Tommy and David and Huimin pronounced the American way, like “human.”

Debra, the lab secretary and my mother’s best white friend, starts to send my parents invitations to Sunday services. Some evenings after school, I can hear them downstairs laughing about things I don’t understand. The television shimmers to life, that clarion music bringing Peter Jennings with the nightly news. Tommy-eh, my mother calls from the base of the stairs when the rice is done steaming: Xia lai chi fan!

For a couple of years, we move from place to place. I spend a long summer in an apartment in Oak Ridge with lady bug carcasses all over the sills and a mattress on the ground that my brother pushes me out of at night. One day, playing hide-and-seek with a neighbor girl, I shut myself by accident into the crawlspace at the foot of the stairs and can’t get out. The air inside is stale, rarely breathed, and for a moment I sit in the darkness with the cobwebs, calling for my playmate. Panic seems an option, but I am an oddly patient
child (or so my parents tell me). I hear them, my parents, returning from their daily walk, a rhythm gliding through the dragonfly air, and already the darkness is opening up, the neighbor girl heading on home, the upstairs apartment and its miasmas receding. It is all so obviously temporary, a prelude to the big, airy house in the suburbs, to baseball printed wallpaper and corduroy recliners, my baby sister delivered in shades of pink.

In my new neighborhood, the boys and girls call me flat face, which is fine, because every kid on the school bus carries one stupid nickname or another, and mine seems accurate enough. My best friend at the time is three years older. He’s cool and dauntless and a swimmer on the summer league. Every Sunday, he calls the house wearing an Asian accent and asks if my mother is making fried rice again. I go over to his house. We drink pop in a darkened kitchen as he plays StarCraft and I keep watch.

By high school, I am telling my mother to call me Thomas, not Tommy-eh, and the American Dream is embodied in my new best friend: a blonde boy wearing Hollister flip flops who calls me Chinky. It’s not important who comes up with this name. What’s important is that this boy calls me anything at all, that he forms these syllables and means them for me. Weekend after weekend, the American Dream invites me to sleep over at his mother’s house by the train tracks and a eutrophic lake. We wait until his mother is in bed before sneaking out into the muggy craw of those Tennessee nights, rolls of cheap toilet paper in our backpacks, bodies small in baggy t-shirts, hair flopping across our eyes. We sing songs by an acoustic emo band called the Scene Aesthetic, paper the neighborhoods in shimmering pennants of white, leave each other breathless, running and hiding from each passing car, a conspiracy in every road-side ditch. The songs all say something about how summer never ends.

It is difficult still to consider how easily the American Dream subverts my sense of reality—how he can call me a racist epithet and make me associate that word with a kind of love, a kind of radical acceptance that I now realize was neither radical nor accepting. Yet I should say that I participated, that I loved the gentle lash of my Americana, that I joined a sports team and helped my girlfriends pick out dresses at the West Town Mall, that I tried to not be invisible.

High school passes as it tends to do: flickers of self-recognition mixed with a lot of posturing. I tell myself without any irony that I am more “white-acting” than most Asians, and I do well in all my classes and try not to make a big deal about it. The problem (and the fear) is always the Asian kid down the way with no name and few friends. I dislike this person, disown him before he can do the same to me. I think of him as an alternate American Dream, this boring and contrite desire to please, to excel, to keep faith with tradition and with culture and by dint of this diligence be accepted into the American fold, as an engineer perhaps, or a tax attorney. When senior year rolls around, I am nominated like all the other Asians for “Most Likely to Succeed” but end up winning “Best Dressed” instead, a glamorous change in the program notes that feels like validation.

But before that, the blonde boy who is my American Dream turns sixteen. He throws a party at the house by the train tracks and the algal lake. A few weeks later, I stop talking to him, for reasons I can’t grasp at first. My now ex-best friend tells everyone that I gave him head under the covers on his birthday night, and that he wouldn’t have “let me” had he known I was going to take it so seriously. I’m pissed, but what I let him do
is continue thinking this way, because it's logical and almost correct, because the real shame in this matter is not sexual but lexical and therefore difficult to put into language. The truth is that I have grown to hate this sound, Chinky, which he and his family call me with affection. I can't believe how close I've let the name get, bleeding into my slushy sense of self. *My parents have heard him call me this, I think, cringing. They've seen me perk up like a dog, and run.*

And in the end, what happens? A chemical shift, a change in structure. I move far north for college. The American Dream occasionally drifts into view, but always at a distance. A few years later, at a holiday party near my parents' old Southern campus, I straddle his lap and kiss him against a port-stained futon, but it means nothing—just a name I don't answer to anymore.

**I read once in a Mark Twain story that “fancy is not needed to give variety to the history of a Chinaman’s sojourn in America. Plain fact is amply sufficient.”** The “facts” that Twain relates in this story are typical of the early Chinese immigrant’s experience in our country. The protagonist Ah Song Hi, recently arrived from Shanghai, writes to his friend Ching-Foo of being beaten and kicked by police, mauled by dogs, thrown in prison and extorted for money he did not possess, cursed and scratched by prostitutes, placed on trial but unable to testify on his own behalf, sentenced and put away. This is a litany of miseries that today feels anachronistic, for the facts have most definitely changed, and reading Twain’s story as a Chinese-American today feels like encountering yet another re-imagining of who I am, not a history lesson but a yellow-tinted image on a white, white sheet.

Recently, I met a man at a bar who took me home and mid-undress, asked me to tell him my Chinese name, and though I am wary of this question and the assumptions it makes about my background, this man seemed sweet, and genuinely curious, and so I told him the usual spiel and then spun it out longer. I told him that my name, Nuocheng, combined the sounds of Nuokeshiweier, the American city I was born in, and Chengdu, the large and languorous metropolis in western China where my mother grew up. I told him that my older brother, Nuoou, was named in a similar fashion, with the Nuo coming from Nuokeshiweier and the Ou from a river, the Oujiang, in my father’s hometown, while my sister, Nuohang, was named for Nuokeshiweier and Hangzhou, the Chinese city where my parents met and married. And as the man and I did what we had come to do, little lights started to go off inside me, points on a map I could see clearly now: In naming us, my parents had tracked not just their trajectory but maybe ours as well, telling a story, not of sentences perhaps, but still gravid with meaning and grace and a strange, atheist faith: Nuoou, Nuocheng, Nuohang. Father River, Mother City, an Origin Shared.

**In college, I lived almost exclusively with other Asian-Americans. This was not a choice I consciously made, to pick roommates who had similar backgrounds as I, but it happened, and though I had no intention to racialize myself, to become somehow more Chinese, I gravitated to people whose birth names also went unsaid and who, like me, lived part of their lives in the hybrid tongue we called Chinglish.**

One fall, I biked across Harvard’s campus from the biology labs to the Barker Center, where I was taking a course in Asian-American Literature. The professor was a very chic Korean-American
woman with a Ph.D. in English from Stanford. She wore camel-colored skirt suits and tapered black pumps. Her reading list included the usual suspects (Maxine Hong Kingston, Chang-Rae Lee, Jhumpa Lahiri) but also names I hadn’t seen before (Nam Le, Agha Shahid Ali, Pimone Triplett). Looking around the room the first day, I clocked only one or two non-Asian faces around the table.

Later that season, as a hurricane touched down in New York City, I had lunch with a friend in an empty dining hall. I told her about the class and how predictable I found its demographics, to which she responded that it was difficult for her (white and forcefully erudite) to see herself in what she called “ethnic” literature: “I’m not saying it’s not good, just that it’s geared towards a specific audience.”

I sat on that comment for a long time, trying to remember all the books I had been assigned in high school English courses, that steady diet of Steinbeck, Hemingway, Chopin, Plath, Orwell, and Woolf. I thought of how easy it had been for me (Asian and bookish) to traverse certain imaginary boundaries; to wish myself into white bodies staring at lighthouses and kissing men named Alcee; to watch a lambent bell jar descending and a green light flashing at some pier’s end; to wear those names and wear them well. And then I thought of all the books on Professor Kim’s syllabus, the fact that I could barely think of any Asian authors she had missed. I saw suddenly before me a shallow pool of “ethnic literature” that I was pipetting steadily into my brain, a tiny assemblage of unpronounceable names that stood for the Asian-American experience—which was hyphenated, which was not purely “American”—an experience I was also, perhaps, supposed to write about, to sift and parse and dutifully abandon: It’s a bit too Amy Tan, no?

It strikes me that I don’t know how to write about this still, about my Asian name and what it means. For something so primary, a name can feel, under the least bit of scrutiny, like a person’s most arbitrary identifier. So why not cast it off? Why not think in fickle chemistries and shifting structures? Out of the old names can come, surely, a new cladistics.

When college ended, I won a fellowship to support a year of “purposeful travel.” I went, predictably, to China, where all my family’s many names seemed to point. I went to Wenzhou where the Oujiang runs free, ate lunch on a sunny college campus in Hangzhou, took endless walks through Chengdu, thinking how pleasant it was to be at once this city’s namesake and an anonymous figure strolling its malls and tree-lined canals. For a year, I traveled to these places and many others, and everywhere I went, locals would introduce themselves and ask to know my name. Thomas, I would say, pronouncing it Tou-ma-si. If they were educated, and many of them were, they would often inquire: Thomas? Xiang Tāngmù Suǒyà ma? Dui, I would respond, just like Tom Sawyer.

I think in the end it’s about how easily it came to him, how the white poet simply reached out and took one from the batch. There is something to be said for learning our names as we go, for treating them not as static forms, but as boxes we live in briefly, chemical signatures to be made and remade. It takes work, figuring a name. It’s not something you pluck unformed from the ether, as Hudson did. You have to ease into it, this funny little domicile, and feel your way blind to the base.

According to a U.S. State Department report, Mandarin is one of the hardest languages for native English speakers to learn. Each syllable can be pronounced in many different ways, and can hold
many different meanings. My name’s nuo is not just the nuo of Nuokeshiweier, my cheng not just a callback to the city in China my mother grew up in. Looked at differently, the nuo may imply *nuoy-an*, a phrase which translates to “a promise,” and the cheng may derive from *chenggong*, or “success.” Take my name but say it slow: a hometown, a mother city, a half-baked promise to succeed.

*Tom gave up his brush with reluctance in his face,*  
*but alacrity in his heart.*

**Thomas Dai** is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Brown University. He holds degrees from Harvard and the University of Arizona, and his writing and photography have appeared or are forthcoming in *Guernica, Entropy, Anomaly, Southwest Review,* and *The Offing.* Currently, he is working on a book of essays about traveling bodies, long-distance running, jumping off stuff, family photos, living abroad and other forms of personal motion.
THE PYRAMID

Near the center of Tirana, Albania stands a pyramid. It is still standing, although the windows are broken and the ugly concrete architecture is patchy with spray paint, in the center of a park devoted to peace. The pyramid was built to honor the communist dictator after his death in 1985. It was made into a museum, then a venue for public events, a club called The Mummy, a headquarters for NATO during the Kosovo crisis, a storage space for mini-vans, the location for a broadcasting company, and has now languished in semi-dereliction for over a decade. City officials have threatened since 2010 to tear the thing down, but they met with public resistance and no organized demolition is underway. So the pyramid is still there, presiding over the old Blokk as a strange and charming feature in Tirana’s nightlife.

I climbed the pyramid after dark, following a dinner of eggplant and Tirana’s traditional fërgesë, made from veal in a spicy, tomato-based sauce. I was tagging along with a friend on a portion of his travels that summer, 2016, and a hostel employee recommended the pyramid as the best (free) view of the city. The building was unmistakable as we made our way up the boulevard. Pyramid is something of a misnomer—not a textbook example of geometry, Tirana’s pyramid has slopes in sections that radiate from the central peak like a fan of playing cards under the thumb. A few of these radial sections drop off abruptly into vertical walls, and these were embroidered with razor wire to keep people from falling. The rest of the walls slope all the way to the ground. They’re not tall or steep enough to prevent most people from climbing them, but I am especially terrified of long, flat slopes—the kind where if you begin rolling, nothing will catch you until you hit the bottom. The tiles had some faint texture that offered grip, left over from holding the absent slabs of white marble. I took off my shoes and socks and tied the laces together.

Tirana is a walking city. The streets were packed
at sunset, although not uncomfortably, with promenading couples, elderly men on benches, and kids playing in the many parks and squares. Perhaps this is not as true today as it was in the past when no cars were allowed. Government officials once strove to keep the city walkable as they tightly controlled all of Tirana’s building up and tearing down. In the course of one hundred years, Tirana has been designed and redesigned by imperialism, fascism, communism, and in the past decade, consumerism. The city became a poster child for what each of these ideologies saw as the beating heart of a capital city. Every new age has a plan for Tirana.

Looking up the boulevard, it’s tempting to attribute Tirana’s early twentieth century regimes with a crazed need to make Tirana look bigger, older, and more like somewhere else. Tirana was far from urban in 1920 when the new national government chose it for Albania’s capital. Tirana had a river. Tirana had roads to the coast and roads inland in several directions. This was good enough to begin a makeover. In the first flush of Albanian independence, Tirana grew from a provincial Ottoman town to the image of a Western capital, with its broad square and impressive boulevard designed by Italian architects to echo Rome. Early plans ignored the existing town almost entirely. Tirana’s original centerpiece, its seventeenth century mosque, was awkwardly accommodated in the layout of government buildings, military headquarters, and a palace for the new monarch, King Zog. But Italy annexed Albania in 1939, mid-construction, and after that no one could seem to stay in power long enough to complete their architectural ambitions. King Zog fled the premises.

Fascist town planning in Tirana had predictable aesthetics. Engineers built in stone and straightened the curves out of streets and canals. Apparently annoyed by King Zog’s Baroque square, Italy’s imperial architect built a new square for government buildings at the opposite end of the boulevard. He ornamented it with an imposing Casa del Fascio, an Albanian Fascist Youth Institute, and the Albanian Leisure Time Institution before imperial Italy gave way to Nazi military occupation in 1943. When German forces left Tirana at the end of 1944, Albania’s fledgling communist party consolidated its rising power with a whole new cast of public officials, who renamed the streets yet again.

This was the world of Enver Hoxha, (pronounced Hoja), Albania’s communist dictator and the longest-running non-hereditary reign in the world up to the time of his death. He was “cultured,” according to his contemporaries, well-read, and good-looking. He studied law in Paris and Brussels, losing his scholarship and then his job when the Albanian government discovered his communist organizing activities abroad. When he returned, he helped to overthrow King Zog, but maintained that previous ruler’s tendency to eliminate opposition through the death penalty. Hoxha is perhaps best-remembered for the number of people he executed out of suspicion.

Under communism, Tirana’s city center was redecorated in flat, ugly architecture representing whatever pomp and solemnity the state allowed in its own praise. No commerce was to take place in that sanctum. Much of the existing private commercial space was seized and transformed into public space, creating parks and greens. Up went multistory apartment buildings, one flat for each extended family. The only bit of distinction was within the Blokk, where high-up party officials had simple but private housing for their families. The entire neighborhood west of the boule-
vard was closed to average citizens. What emerged was a communist garden city, which, despite the cramped living conditions and difficulties getting housing, had a decent standard of living, extremely low crime, and a lively social contract in which public spaces were kept up by voluntary—though peer-pressured—maintenance from the people around them.

Along my cross-country bus route through Albania, men and women sold their wares without shops or even stalls: stacks of motor oil containers or bulk salt bags or lamps in rows by the side of the road. Apartment buildings of unfinished, uninsulated, unpainted brick were fitted with door handles and curtained windows, clearly inhabited. The Balkans at the moment have a general feeling of being under construction, as their tender economies grow like young cabbages with pale leaves, tended in the early summer by bent-backed women and horse-drawn blades. The past and future seem equally obscure, but there is a vision for prosperity, banks, international business. The Albania I could see was visibly making decisions about how to move forward, and how to look back.

The pyramid, with its patchwork history and crumbling exterior, forms the strange centerpiece for these decision-making efforts. Bread lines in Tirana had grown long by the time the pyramid opened to the public, a few years after Hoxha’s death in 1985. People were in no mood to appreciate the unique building Hoxha’s daughter and son-in-law designed for the dictator’s museum, however obliquely fitting it was to his Pharaoh complex. The democratic party that took control in 1992 made the pyramid a convention center, and even renamed it for Pjetër Arbnori, who had been tortured and imprisoned under Hoxha’s rule. But Albania in the 1990s was more preoccupied with the pyramid schemes crashing the economy than with the one falling to pieces in Tirana.

The fact is that Tirana has had trouble maintaining its communal spaces in the decades since Hoxha’s death. Edi Rama, Tirana’s mayor from 2001 to 2013, cracked down on unauthorized building by demolishing and hauling away over a hundred thousand tons of concrete in a desperate effort to protect the riverbank from citizen encroachment. In a place haunted by both the ghost of dictatorship and the values of communism, it’s often hard to find the balance of communal decision-making. And in the face of true, grinding poverty, it is sometimes hard to care. “We have to understand that the public space is not a Kleenex that one uses, crumples, and then throws away,” wrote Slavenka Drakulić, contemplating post-communism cities from her home in nearby Croatia. “It’s more like an old-fashioned, fine batiste handkerchief, embroidered at the edges, that one has to wash and iron to be able to use it again.”

The woman working the hostel desk was perhaps in her late 20s, and so had lived her entire life in a struggling democracy. She told us she had grown up in Tirana. She told us, tracing her finger over colored lines on our city map, that the nicest restaurants are all in the area where communist officials once had their homes. Her job was to stand at a desk all day or all night, talking to foreigners about her city, and something in her tone made me suspect this took courage. She was talking about things no one wanted to remember. She could not so much as give directions or recommend a restaurant without running a finger over her parents’ generation’s worst memories. She had no direct experience of the Hoxha dictatorship’s violence and chaos and disintegration, but she lived in its immediate aftermath surrounded by people who knew the possibilities. She was,
perhaps, the future they had survived for. This is a world where you learn to tread lightly.

When American journalist Matthew Brunwasser interviewed Albanians in 2011 about what they thought should happen to the pyramid, he got several different answers. Put money into it, some said—rejuvenate the place and make it "something nice for the young people." Or, alternatively, let the thing be, and don’t let it distract government officials from more pressing tasks. But no one seemed to want the pyramid torn down. "It’s part of our history," an Albanian journalist told Brunwasser. "Have you destroyed everything in your country that brings you bad memories?" Few people seemed to condone the city’s intention to bring down the pyramid, but protecting the structure required making some statement about what it means—dedicating it to the memory of a dictator, or to those who suffered under him, or to the people of a city that had great faith in architecture. Protecting the pyramid would force some articulation of the past. Leaving the building in limbo is a way of treading lightly. It offers a little space, a ruin both painful and attractive, that might mean anything you please.

Each subsequent regime in Tirana has done its best to destroy vestiges of the previous ones. This was especially true for communist restructuring, which obliterated vestiges of the old bazaar and a landmark café. When the practice of religion was outlawed, the Orthodox cathedral was bulldozed to make way for Tirana’s new symbolic city planning. But as Tirana’s city center organizers once more around commerce, the latest powers-that-be have struggled to decide what to do with these vestiges. Albanians are, in many ways, still deciding what the beating heart should be and how to safely memorialize the past. So while city residents and officials quibble over whether or not to tear down the pyramid, and what they might subsequently do with the space, the thing stays uncurated. It falls down bit by bit, and endures half-hearted vandalism. It’s a reminder of the past, and attracts young people who don’t really remember that past. This situation can’t last forever, but might be necessary as a phase in the city’s life. Community petitions to save the pyramid had, essentially, one small but unprecedented message—this time, remaking the city, keep the vestiges. Even if they still ache. Even if it’s difficult to know what they mean.

In 2011, the pyramid crawled with citizens gathering to protest government fraud and corruption. The protestors seem to have chosen the pyramid for its location near the city center, its uniqueness as a landmark and its general acceptance as a public space rather than for any symbolic potential. And it’s hard to say if that choice was supremely appropriate or utterly ironic: this broken-down monument to a leader who turned so much private property into public space, now a community area used to protest the corruption of the people who replaced him. As a city, Tirana’s organic growth has been punctuated by radical, purposeful, symbolic restructurings. And after overcoming initial surprise, initial resistance, Tirana adjusted and resumed the essentially uncontrollable, often unpredictable movements of people living together.

Of course, there is a new plan. An international architecture contest awarded the contract to Stefano Boeri, approved by the city council in January of 2017. The plan encompasses the whole of Tirana and its satellite communities with a twenty-first century vision for a capital city. Bounded by a thick, green forest to prevent sprawl, Tirana will have new, fast rail connections to the airport. Concentric rings of greenery and paths will keep
this a walking city, a garden city, in the best traditions of the communist era. Small text on the public version of the plan declares, “Preservation of 20th century architecture.” It’s unclear what that means for the fate of the pyramid—or, realistically, any other buildings—but Tirana’s newest architect seems to accord his predecessors at least a little respect. Perhaps he knows, then, what happened to the best-laid plans in Tirana, and how to make the most of what’s left.

The city below the pyramid was not well-lit, but it was hatched by headlights and dotted with bright windows. The slope seemed to go on ahead forever in the dark as I put one foot in front of the other, first walking, then bent and climbing, waiting for the final edge to appear. I could see very little, but below me Tirana bustled in and out of the infrequent street lights and the glow of new multinationals, and above were soft voices speaking a language I didn’t know. I looked neither up nor down, and concentrated on my breathing and my own fast-beating heart. On the pyramid I was not thinking ahead or behind. The pyramid is an accident of history, a monument that never meant quite what its builders intended. The anachronism has neither been taken down nor restored to “original” condition. Small groups of teens clamber up to have a smoke and a view, and the view is gradually being closed in by tall buildings. Ambivalence towards the monument is not sustainable, perhaps, but at the moment fills a need, creates a physical place to be uncertain. Albanians have not put up informational signs or taken serious steps towards codifying this particular historical memory. This particular memory is still feral.

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THE BRIDGE

The most beautiful piece of architecture in the world is a bridge. Its lines are elegant and arching; its colors are the insides of a mountain. This bridge over the river Neretva embodies the purity of functionality like few things ever built with human hands. A perennial favorite of painters and photographers, its form has the subtle flair of high art and a confidence borne of fulfilling an eternally useful purpose. Its purpose is to connect two sides of a river. The Old Bridge, the Stari Most, is simple, delicate, and so strong that it required over sixty mortars to destroy.

You will not understand the Balkan wars by staying two nights in Bosnia for a look at Stari Most. Whole lifetimes might be lived in Bosnia without ever fully understanding what led to full-scale war in very recent memory. But the results are visible, from the WE ALL BLEED graffiti on the walls of Mostar to the broken balcony of a cinderblock apartment building, looking just as it did in Wade Davis’s war photography of twenty years ago. In the Davis photo a woman sits smoking behind a railing, which is bent in from a blast. Today the balcony is empty, and the railing is still bent.

You would recognize Stari Most if you saw it—look it up, type it in—or you would feel as though you did. Smooth and pale as eggshell, a mathematically flawless half-circle jointed by sections
of discontinuity. At the time of its building, Stari Most was the widest man-made arch in the world. The architect reputedly skipped town before the public set foot on his unprecedented feat of engineering, because he feared the consequences of failure under a sultan's commission. The peak was off-center by 40 centimeters, but not because the Ottomans constructed anything off-center. The bridge was built with precision by the measure of an arshin. But the bridge spanned a geologic fault line, and it adjusted to a 14-centimeter shift of ground. Earthquakes introduced enough imperfection to be called character. The bridge strained but stood.

The Ottoman empire excelled, among other things, at bridges. Naturally people were drawn to Mostar so they could cross the river. Bridges always attract traffic that way. But this one was set in a panorama of rugged cliffs and little tile-roofed houses, reflected in a deep turquoise current. It was built to be picturesque, as the sultans preferred. Tourism was a feature of life in Mostar from that time forward. Wealth pooled, overflowed, and came roaring down the river with projects that a wooden-bridged village would never have undertaken. Infrastructure meant communication, meant travelers passing through, meant money passing through, meant a rising star of importance. So the people of Mostar were called the bridge-keepers, and the bridge kept them, too.

On light poles, on mailboxes, on what seemed like every available surface along the street I walked in Mostar were death notices—of old age, usually. They were printed on white paper with green borders and crowned by stars and crescents. Their uniformity suggested they were publications of the local mosque. Photos of the deceased gazed from the top left corners—headshots of elderly, unsmiling, gently wrinkled humans. I could not read the announcements but recognized dates, times, and lists of descendants’ names. After Google Translate, with massaging:

We inform our relatives, friends and acquaintances that our mother and grandmother, M—, at 9:05 am, after a short illness, in her 78th year of life, passed on to the hereafter. The funeral prayer will be held on Friday. After prayer at 17:15, the deceased will be taken and buried in Sarica graveyard. She is survived by a daughter, husband, grandchildren, their families, and many other relatives.

Another:

The funeral begins on Wednesday outside the Livac mosque at 17:15h. After the funeral prayer, the deceased will be taken to the Livac cemetery and buried. The Tawhid prayer for the dead will be observed in the house of the deceased at 17:00h. Mourners: son, daughters, spouse, son-in-law, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, sisters-in-law, cousins, their families, and other relatives, acquaintances and friends.

I wondered fleetingly if this was a habit from wartime—putting up notices of the dead and missing. Though maybe it was a much older habit, and simply the most efficient way to get a message out. Memory temporarily spans the gulf between life and death. I saw a similar one much later, pinned to the wall of an American post office: “E— passed away Thursday, she is in heaven dancing with her Roy.”

Though built by a Muslim sultan and situated in a Muslim neighborhood, the bridge was a
source of universal community pride. It did connect a predominantly Muslim side of town to the rest of Mostar, and was a front line of conflict during the Bosnian War of 1992-1995. From the hills above, the Bosnian Croat army shelled the bridge steadily for several days in November of 1993. Shell after shell until it gave way, despite the fact that they had done their best to protect the bridge from Bosnian Serb explosives in earlier phases of the conflict. It is hard to retrace the logic of a siege, but the associations of historic architecture, a literal connector of the community, were not lost on the bombers. The bridge was no accidental casualty. It was a ligament, and it was cut.

Reconstruction has meaning in the Balkans as in few other parts of the world. It means putting the world back together, recreating the skyline you used to know or the touchstone of cultural heritage that never seemed so salient until it was gone. But reconstruction takes money, lots of it, and the efforts to rebuild sometimes took the form of a vast, bureaucratic enterprise to forcibly make this place look the way it looked before, and to forcibly stitch together a population still reeling from the rends.

When the bridge was destroyed, there were many options on the table other than replica. New designs were drawn up for a modern bridge in place of the old one, or a monument of some kind to mark the empty space where the wind now passed through. But the people of Mostar decided: make it the way it was before. Memorials are for the crimes of an outsider, to remember those bastards and what they did. But when a house is divided against itself, all the inhabitants want is to forget this ever happened. Put things back the way they were before the rupture. Monument is for memory; reconstruction is active forgetting.

Mostar’s mayor Safet Oručević refused the one million dollars Turkey pledged to the restoration project. He did not want this project to be construed as uniquely Muslim, or as evidence of Istanbul’s lingering influence. He assembled a more international funding scheme, though he accepted the leadership of a Turkish company specializing in the care and restoration of Ottoman bridges. The Hungarian army was in town, acting as a peacekeeping force, and their divers helped hoist stones from the river, collecting pieces of the old bridge. It was a beautiful project—fun, from a conservation standpoint, despite the charged air of Bosnia. They used Ottoman building techniques, and learned quite a lot about sixteenth century bridge-building. They published papers. So the bridge got built pretty much as it had been before, with cramps, dowels, iron, lead, and lime. On July 23, 2004, in the presence of international dignitaries, Stari Most opened to foot traffic once more.

Reconstruction is everywhere in the broader region. The beautiful Church of St. Panteleimon, for example, overlooking Lake Ohrid in Macedonia, where new-hewn stone comfortably associates with toppled pillars of the Roman empire. The medieval abbey on the island of Lokrum, shelled mercilessly in 1991, but still arching its entryways over young families of tourists or peacocks, who trail their respective mothers. There is comfort in the buildings resting where they always have, although something about them always made me look twice. Something too clean about the stone and mortar, lacking a patina of age and experience that can’t quite be replaced. In that sense, reconstruction is more like time travel than preservation—taking us back to when the building was new, rewinding past the harshest of the intervening years.
At first glance, reconstruction has all the indulgence of peace. Mostar rebuilt its Old Bridge when its apartment buildings are still crumbling, after all. Every city has its abandoned architectures, but Mostar’s are strikingly visible: bombshell-shaped holes in white cinderblock walls, and patches bricked in different reds. Sunlight off sleek, curved windows in a new office complex. Sunlight through yawning holes in a square edifice from another century, and sun in the eyes of crane operators as construction continues apace. Despite the fact that office buildings are far cheaper to rebuild than Ottoman stone bridges—despite the fact that there were other bridges easier to rebuild and there was no pressing infrastructural need for this one—Stari Most topped the priority list. The bridge is a symbol of connection, an international joint effort of historically Christian and Muslim nations, and the physical evidence of a possible future here. Mostar needed to rebuild, but what it needed most urgently was a reason to.

My relatives looked at me in horror when I told them I was going to Bosnia. They had images of the Balkans flashing in their brains that I, so young at the end of the twentieth century, did not. Nothing about the atmosphere of the Balkans felt threatening in 2016—not stable, perhaps, but businesslike. My friend and I found our white-washed hostel tucked behind other buildings on pleasantly confusing residential streets. The hostel was fairly new, and the proprietor hadn’t yet listed himself on major backpacker websites like Hostelworld or AirBnB, but relied successfully on word of mouth. “We are small hostel, with big heart,” he said as he poured me a glass of vivid pink beet juice. He was serving us hurmašica, a traditional syrup-soaked sweet made by his mother in the apartment upstairs. Small speakers on the table discharged a whiplash playlist of elevator jazz, dance music in unrecognizable languages, and Anglophone country and western.

In the Balkans, I thought constantly about peace. It was hard for me to imagine intense, confused violence there. Sometimes war seemed like a disease, and the rest of the world stood back from the suffering, not knowing the causes or cures. Afraid to catch it, and yet somehow still half-believing that these people were just naturally predisposed to this particular horror.

But Susan Sontag famously argued against using war as a metaphor, specifically a metaphor for illness, and against using illness as a metaphor for war. “Only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness,” she wrote. Figure of speech is not just harmless, she argued, but has its own feedback loops. To think about war like an illness inevitably oversimplifies both: “an invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism.” In other words, metaphor is a symptom that can become a cause.

Balkanization entered English (and German, and French) political vocabulary as a term for irredeemable fragmentation. Before 1914, a speaker of English might have said that one country or movement broke into many smaller ones, and after that, the same speaker might say that it Balkanized. The connotation is negative, or at least casts some doubt about whether independence from the whole was a good idea. This beautiful little peninsula experienced the rise and fall of multiple empires and many local disturbances, and the shifts were never bloodless. There is no better illustration of this word than the tiny clip of video, just a minute or two taped by local news media, of the Old Bridge falling into the river. “Balkanized” in English doesn’t mean bravely independent. It means broken.
For war and suffering to become the object of international attention they must represent something more than the local conflict. They must be a metaphor. The Bosnian war, Sontag wrote, represented “the stand of a small, fledgling southern European country wishing to remain multicultural as well as independent against the dominant power of the region and its neo-fascist program of ethnic cleansing.” Through international journalism, the Balkans became a theater for the world’s thinking about violence and responsibility. Politically, it became the type site for a particular kind of unraveling.

Proximally, what the bridge connects are two sides of Mostar’s central tourist warren of gelato and coffee pots. The vast arch has stone rib-steps protruding from the surface, as the original did, to keep pedestrians from slipping. To cross the bridge involves a far more dramatic uphill and downhill than I was expecting, and with the mass of grade-school field-trippers pushing against the rest of the crowd, the stone steps are a relief. The whole structure is made from limestone, fine-grained and locally quarried. Below is the river: a fast, cold, geologically deep division.

The trouble with symbols is that they are malleable, and not always in predictable ways. A bridge is a function of language. A symbol of peace and reconciliation should be followed by the actuality of peace and reconciliation. A symbol of connection should be accompanied by actual reconnection. There is no more literal way to connect people across chasms, as the international community recognized when they rallied to rebuild the Stari Most. Language can and does change the way people think. Symbols can and do kick-start the processes they represent. But the international community set so many hopes on Mostar that it’s difficult to strain out hype and hypocrisy here. The New Old Bridge has many concrete effects: Like its predecessor, it brings tourism to Mostar that might otherwise stay on the coast, and concentrates foreigners in historic quarters along the river among clean tablecloths on shaded terraces. It allows people to cross the river without having to walk quite so far up- or downstream. But no bridge, no matter how faithful to the original, can ever make people forget about war.

I struggle with language as a tool that is inherently symbolic, making it difficult to talk about a bridge as just a bridge. Just the slickness of polished stone under soles, just the climb, descent, and toes meeting the other side. Just walking on air. You see temptation is too great. I bend towards metaphor, and the bridge strains but stands. In truth, I don’t even want to avoid twisting this thing into symbol. It is a perfectly good symbol, just as it is a perfectly serviceable bridge. I would like the symbol to do its part in holding the world together.

In 1938, between wars, Virginia Woolf wrote about standing on a bridge across the Thames and watching men move from their homes to their work in the centers of influence. Her essay asked how we are to prevent war. Preventing war, she decided, depends very much on who crosses that bridge and what happens on the other side in churches, parliaments, and universities. The view from the bridge is the realization that preventing war depends largely on how we organize our peacetime.

Stari Most is not a place where reconciliation takes place in the day-to-day. It is crowded with visitors from both near and far. The shops sell souvenir gas masks and pens made from bullet
casings. To implement the peace agreement, Mostar was divided administratively along roughly the lines the fighters defined, and the city remains politically turbulent. In that sense, the combatants had their way after all, bridge or no bridge or bridge again.

The distance from the crown of the arch to the river below is almost 80 feet, and for the past 400 years, people have been jumping off. This is how locals use the space. I would not be surprised if the tradition of leaping from the peaked arch of Stari Most dates to the moment it opened to foot traffic the first time. At any rate, the Mostar Diving Club touts a long heritage. I stood next to a young woman, teenaged, who busked for the Diving Club and chatted fluently in English about her aspirations. She had been practicing on one of the shorter bridges just downstream. The Neretva runs deep in this section, turquoise darkening to teal. You fall for a long time, she said, and then the river is shockingly cold and swift. Occasionally people die.

I don't want to talk about the river, you know, don't want to call this conflict deep or wild or natural-springing. Peace is both a beautiful and practical thing. I thought constantly about peace as I got on and off busses, as my passport was stamped and my luggage was searched, as I curved down valleys and ate ice cream from the magazine stand. Every day brought a new city in a different nation with yet another unfamiliar language, a refreshed feeling of vulnerability, and overarching amazement. Outside the bus windows people were growing lavender, selling shoes, cutting the weedy grass of a public park with a curved farm blade. The graffitied domes of bunkers rested in fields. People sold mulberries in season alongside dry tobacco out of a plastic sack, young teens smoking and elderly couples resting on park benches. Everywhere I saw the new faces of uninsulated cinderblock buildings with curtains blowing at the window holes. In between, older walls were pitted and gapped. A tree perched on a second story ruin, covering the holes with its leaves. Everywhere I could see the remains and the rebuilt, the New Old Bridge.

Every metaphor has its limits: brokenness, reconciliation, and jumping off half-way. There is a town with residents and tourists and the paths they all take across the river. There is old stone, newly quarried, that holds together despite the shuddering earth. The bridge was never built to connect two sides of a river—the river does not care. People do. People decided to keep the bridge. And it is only a bridge, believe me, I know, but that decision seems significant. Sometimes it's not possible to know what to build or leave empty, or what metaphors count as true symptoms of peace. Who's to say how much the outward expression means: your smile, an upside-down arch, the symbol of a bridge.
THE GARDEN

The story goes that Benedictine monks cursed the island of Lokrum as their feet left it, boarding the boats that would take them away against their will. That story gets repeated often, and maybe was borne out in the later history of the island, which certainly had its share of turbulence. But it’s possible to tell the whole history of Europe as a story of churches getting built and then falling down, and I found myself more interested in the bluebells sprouting up between the cracks. In early summer, the waves tumbling against Lokrum’s stubborn shores were cerulean, sea-color, Adriatic blue. Gravel paths wound around an island of .72 square kilometers, and through such an unexpected variety of scenery that I continually felt lost though I never left the trail.

Whoever wrote the English interpretive posters for Lokrum seized on the mystique of the monk’s curse, attributing Lokrum with a deadly, irresistible magnetism like the island Sindbad barely escaped. The writer declared that Lokrum “bewitched” Maximilian of Habsburg and his wife Charlotte with its beauty, compelling them to buy the place in 1859, long after the Benedictines were forced to leave. Lokrum changed hands many times after that, concluding with a transfer to the country of Yugoslavia in 1925, but as for the island, “his dark allure has never ceased.”

Lokrum is exactly the sort of island that pulls: visible from shore, large and accessible enough to support human life, but with the appeal of its inherent remoteness. From its earliest days, the mainland city of Dubrovnik valued Lokrum for purposes that required both nearness and separation: a lookout point, a quarantine. When I looked out from Dubrovnik, where the seafaring merchants built their free, walled city-state, and laid eyes on Lokrum, I knew the feeling. The feeling was not so different from navigating my inflatable raft over silty shallows to a trashy island sandbar in a reservoir of the Rio Grande. Far enough away to pose a challenge, and too close not to make the attempt.

An island is an imaginable space. An island has boundaries we can understand, shifting but inarguable. So imagine: Two protected docks on rough, rocky shores; stone monastery walls; unfinished sixteenth century quarantine hospital surrounded by a centuries-old olive grove; fortress begun by the French and finished by the Austrians; crowded paths with kitschy appeal like, “The Path of Paradise” and “The Cross of Triton.” And one of the most recent additions, a sixty-year-old botanic garden, without which no paradise would be complete.

The Benedictines had been the first to bring new fruits, flowers, vegetables, and trees to the island. Their community was wealthy and respected, particularly after connecting themselves to a sister church in Padua, and they dined on the products of their labors. They grew greens and herbs, cucumbers, radishes, and celery, if accounts of thirteenth century produce in Dubrovnik’s market are anything to go by. They grew olive
and fruit trees in clusters of five, and cultivated rows of grapes for the all-essential wine. But early accounts also suggest the brothers had gardens for the pleasure of having gardens. The traveling Dominican Filippo Diversi took note of the successful vegetable patches, but also “beautiful gardens,” the same phrase used by another observer, Serafina Razzi, a century and a half later. Diversi mentions that visitors from the mainland often came across the half-mile channel to Lokrum in good weather, “in pursuit of devotion, and repose of body and soul.”

So perhaps the medieval abbey’s pathways bloomed with non-native roses and lilies, as the gardens were filled with foreign crops and trees. This is one way to garden, to bring your beauty and sustenance from elsewhere. But on the northern part of the island and inland, away from the abbey and the harbors, native vegetation persisted. The Mediterranean basin is a spectacularly biodiverse part of the world, supporting 10% of all known higher plants at the crossroads of three continents. The islands of the Adriatic host many of their own unique species. No known species are unique to Lokrum itself, but the island was chosen as a nature reserve in 1963 because it represents “all natural development stages of plant communities in the Mediterranean region of Europe,” from a forest of oak and flowering ash to garrigue to rocky grassland. Island as microcosm.

On a sunny summer afternoon, Lokrum was undeniably beautiful. But it also felt downright bizarre, with the sorrowful wreckage of medieval churches accompanied by cheesy signage, and the free-range peacocks who have been multiplying merrily ever since Maximilian introduced them. Lokrum is much less quiet than in the days of the monks and pilgrims. I sped westward on a path away from the old monastic buildings until I could hear the ocean. But I jumped at the sounds of violent scuffling in the oak leaves, which turned out to be two longhorn beetles locked in furious combat. I watched them until one, gripping its opponent’s leg in its jaws, finally released its hold and marched up a tree as though pretending nothing had happened.

One purpose of tourism is to attempt escape from an inescapable world, and Lokrum is built on this paradox. Come to the garden. Read informative signs in your own foreign language about events located securely in the past. Tread the fallen leaves of Australian eucalypts and swim naked in the impossibly blue water. But Lokrum’s appeal has always been the combination of human landscaping and its absence. Clear management, building and rebuilding, planting and replanting, as well as a sense of the uncontrolled elements. The calls of the nonnative peacocks. The sound of the sea. It’s no wonder the island bears some indecision about what its best self might look like.

The Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences established a 2-hectare botanical garden in 1959 for the express purpose of bringing in plants from far away to see if they would grow in Croatia. The Academy exchanged plants with other botanic gardens in similar Mediterranean climates all over the world: Chile, Australia, the U.S., and South Africa. The garden of Lokrum was once estimated to support the richest diversity of eucalyptus outside Australia and New Zealand. The Academy managed Lokrum’s garden with special attention to economic species—those “of importance to forestry, horticultural, and pharmaceutical uses.” Including, for example, the citrus that had once inspired the name Lokrum, the “bitter fruit,” Latin acrumen. Though citrus, so tightly associated with the Mediterranean, also came there from somewhere else.
Lokrum’s botanic garden was the “life work” of Lav Rajevski. Every source says this, matter-of-factly, with very little variation—“It should be mentioned that this garden represents his life’s achievement (the result of his long-term enthusiastic work).” A garden can be a life work, a source of labor ever-renewing, because a garden is inherently a built space that keeps on needing to be built. In order to maintain its garden separateness from the whims of larger forces, there must be a gardener. The purpose of this garden was to test species of plants that would not be there of their own accord. Other parts of the preserve, such as the olive groves, relied explicitly on human care. “In order to protect diverse plant communities which are not of natural origin, human influence is indispensable for the proper management of the Reserve,” states the English language tourist website for Lokrum. There must be constant attention to a garden. “The meaning of life is maintenance,” an old gardener told me once.

But a gardener might also scoff at my calling a garden inherently managed. Gardens enforce humility and the knowledge that you are working in a world outside your control. You balance your little aspirations against the unknown: small-scale pests, unpredictable weather, your own ignorance of the conditions, and sometimes against larger-scale disaster. Undoubtedly life work. And this garden, after so many years of being created and maintained by human hands, was thrown into disorder by bombs. In 1993, during an attack on Dubrovnik, the uninhabited island endured more than fifty direct mortar hits. The library that maintained the garden’s records was obliterated, and the papers burned.

It would not be quite accurate to say the island was leveled. It was dis-organized, un-gardened. Without the plans and documentation, there was very little opportunity to restore or recreate the place as it had been before. And who, following the war years, had the ambition or resources to continue experimenting with foreign plants? Who would write to the botanic gardens in Sydney, Cape Town, Viña del Mar, and ask them to send new living things to replace the damaged ones? It meant trying again, beginning the experiment from scratch. Rajevski, who had tirelessly continued his work on the island well after his official retirement, does not seem to have been actively involved in its regeneration after the war. He was aging, after all, and passed away in 2003. He lived to see his life work destroyed.

“Disaster,” writes Henry Mitchell in “The Defiance of Gardeners,” “is the normal state of any garden.” A gardener is simply a person who works in defiance of certain, eventual failure. “Wherever humans garden magnificently, there are magnificent heartbreaks.” But Mitchell also seems to believe that part of a garden’s beauty is the knowledge that someone worked very hard for this. “You may see the natural way in any desert, any swamp, any leech-filled laurel hell,” he grumbles. Unnaturalness, the product of tireless human labor to keep plants alive that refuse to stay alive on their own, sometimes defying even our best efforts, is what makes a garden beautiful.

Mitchell writes, “Now the gardener is one who has seen everything ruined so many times that (even as his pain increases with each loss) he comprehends—truly knows—that where there was a garden once, it can be again, or where there never was, there can yet be a garden so that all who see it say, ‘Well, you have favorable conditions here. Everything grows for you.’ Everything grows for everybody. Everything dies for everybody, too.”

Today the gardens at Lokrum are a project of the Croatian Institute for Marine and Coastal
Research. The institution employs one botanist and one gardener. So they began again, but priorities have shifted away from experimenting with worldwide species. “Today, the concept of botanical gardens with the aim of research of the introduction and adaptation of the nonnative plant species is mainly abandoned. Our aim is to cultivate indigenous Mediterranean species, particularly protected, rare and endemic species of the southern Croatian coastline.”

Botanic gardens around the world show a renewed interest in local ecosystems, which is particularly poignant in a place like the Dalmatian coast, pitted by strife. Maybe this is part of larger nationalistic trends, a folding inward in response to global industry, finance, communication, and their associated threats. A fear of losing something—again. But gardening to preserve and showcase local plants might simply be a tender recognition that you have something fragile and worth keeping. In the case of the Dalmatian coast: an incredible source of endemism, plant species found nowhere else in the world. A profusion of bluebells. A flourishing of oaks.

The changing nature of the botanic garden might be a sign that Croatia is interested in marketing localness and authenticity rather than depending on haphazard spectacle and mythic monks’ curses. It might be a sign of renewed interest in the species that grew on island soil because they spread there from the near continent rather than being brought from far ones. But Lokrum is still a place that depends, charmingly, on the appeal of kitsch as well as the appeal of authenticity. They are simply different marketing strategies, and they appear on Lokrum side by side, as though Disneyland procreated with Sequoia National Park.

There are plenty of articles lamenting the way distant parts of the world become ecologically blurred with the spread of new species—blurred on purpose with the introduction of crop plants, or accidentally by bringing stowaway invasives. The Balkans look different than they did fifty years ago when the gardens were established, and different than they did whenbotanist Roberto di Visiani recorded a species list with over 90 non-natives on Lokrum in 1863. But there is no particular effort, currently, to remove the international bits of Lokrum’s landscape. Nikola V. Gučetić, Dubrovnik’s Renaissance philosopher, wrote from his country villa, “In trees and plants there is Love; it is that great and universal lust for good.”

Tourism, at best, is an opportunity to think about how the wider world interacts with the more local one. It’s cliché to observe that the light of unfamiliar places illuminates your own home and self in new ways. But trying to understand how your small place should interact with a big world is the looming task of both the hour and the age. Answering that question is more pressing, more visceral and violent in some places than others. But never a waste of time.

And this is also the perpetual question in gardens, as the symbolic space where people and their environment alternately struggle in conflict and work in harmony to produce something humans find acceptable. Above Lokrum’s cloister entrance was a 17th century inscription in Latin, what the informative sign calls a “timeless piece of wisdom”: “In harmony little things grow, in disharmony even the biggest fall apart.” Good advice for monks living on an island in close quarters and remote circumstances. Disharmony in the church in Rome and on the mainland eventually forced them to leave. But harmony is never a stable element, and what allows for beautiful, flourish-
ing growth in gardens is perpetual readjustment. Some dramatic failures, some wild successes, and in between, the growth of small things.

The nature of the monks’ curse, the poster seemed to imply, was that no subsequent owner would be able to hang onto the island for long. Not the independent city of Dubrovnik, nor Maximilian, nor the parade of various Habsburg royalty who owned it after that, nor the Dominicans who briefly thought it was theirs, nor even the ill-fated state of Yugoslavia. That part of the coast is now Croatia, though Dubrovnik still feels like its own phenomenon. But Lokrum is an island, and though it seems possessable, a package of given size and shape, activity on Lokrum is still a function of nearness and distance, independence and reliance. At night, everyone leaves the shores of Lokrum and ferries back to the mainland. Only the gardens remain.

Abigail R. Dockter spent a few years following field and lab science jobs up and down the Rockies, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona. She has facilitated workshops in both academic and creative writing for the UA Department of English, the Writing Skills Improvement Center, and Borderlands Earth Care Youth Institute. She has written for the UA’s Institute of the Environment and edited Nonfiction for Sonora Review. Her work appears in The OWL literary journal, Essay Daily, and deep in the Mesa Verde National Park website. Her current writing explores connections between history, archaeology, and present-day land management.
Here I am. Where are you?
The red-eyed vireo calls,
 misleading us to relocate,
 following its flight
away from nestlings tight in twigs,
 to get us lost in a bog,
asking all along if we even
know our own locale:

—Heid Erdrich, “DNA Tribes”

I don’t know why, exactly, I wanted to take a DNA test. Even though I was adopted by my grandmother when I was young, I grew up knowing my parents. I grew up knowing my tribes.

I look most like my mother, a Navajo woman, born and raised on the reservation near Window Rock, Arizona. I have my mother’s big ears and skinny wrists and tiny feet; her brown-black eyes and her brown-black hair and her sun-browned skin.

It is harder to see my father in me. I missed out on the family nose. But I do have the small heat blisters that appear on the edges of his/my/our fingers on humid summer days.

The DNA quest started, I guess, with my friend J—. J— is, and may always be, the whitest person I know. I knew this even before he told me his 23andMe results: 99.7% Northern European and .3% uncategorized.

“MAYBE I’M .3% CHEROKEE,” he messaged me, laughing, three years ago.

I groaned.

Growing up on the East Coast, it seemed like everyone I met had a great-, great-grandmother or grandfather with pronounced cheekbones and dark hair, definitive markers of Native American ancestry. This exchange of family lore was meant to disarm me—to bridge our difference with an
imagined shared history. And unfortunately for the Cherokee, theirs was the only tribe anyone seemed to know.

I once read a joke that if everyone who claimed to be Cherokee actually was, there would be more Cherokee than Chinese. I had shared this joke with J—, who liked to pull it out of the bag every now and then. My indianness was an easy and frequent punchline—not only for J—, but for so many of my friends. The Trail of Tears, firewater, spirit animals: stereotypical gems East Coasters couldn’t resist trying out on one of the only Native Americans they had ever met. These jokes were rarely funny and never original, but to belong, I learned how to laugh; to shoulder guilt; to share complicity.

J— bought me a 23andMe test for my birthday in part to see what genetically verifiable degree of Native American I could claim to be.

Direct-to-consumer DNA-testing companies like 23andMe typically offer three types of genealogical tests: Autosomal; X- and Y-DNA; and mtDNA.

Autosomal DNA is DNA inherited from any of the numbered chromosomes, 1 through 22. In 23andMe’s ancestry report, each of these chromosome pairs is painted with bands of color—each band representing an origin, each color standing in for a people bound in place. From my mother, I inherited red and yellow bands—red for “broadly” East Asian and Native American and yellow for Native American. From my father, I inherited shades of blue—“broadly” European, but concentrated in Britain, France, and Germany. The bands of yellow, red, and blue intermix on each chromosome pair—less proof of the rumored Native American ancestry on my father’s side or the colonization of my mother’s than the limits of the test itself. Unless my parents had taken the test, too, 23andMe is unable to differentiate between my mother’s and father’s direct contributions to my genome.

The 23rd chromosome is the sex chromosome, where you find X- or Y-DNA.

mtDNA is something stranger. mtDNA is inherited through the mitochondrion, an organelle that acts like a tiny little heart within our cells. My metaphor doesn’t hold up exactly, but the mitochondrion are a little tricky to explain. According to one popularly held theory, the mitochondrion descended from bacteria that developed a symbiotic relationship with multicellular organisms two billion years ago. Though the mitochondrion are fully integrated into our bodies, it maintains its own independent genome, and all mitochondrial DNA is inherited as a single unit, a haplotype, from the egg. The sperm’s mitochondria that do enter the egg are marked for destruction inside the embryo—a neat trick that allows researchers to study the migrations of maternal lines across hundreds of generations.
I belong to maternal haplogroup C1, one of five mtDNA sub-haplogroups commonly found among Native Americans—the others being A2, B2, D1, and X2a. In the map 23andMe generated for my mtDNA report, a line arcs from central Africa, through the fertile crescent and the Siberian peninsula, and down into the Americas, tracing the lineage of a woman who lived 18,500 years ago—conservatively, 740 generations. Or, 740 mothers, whose names I’ll never know.

As an undergrad, I minored in anthropology for one semester because I thought it would be a fun opportunity to learn about my cultural heritage, even if by secondhand. And though Shippensburg University (the college I attended in central Pennsylvania) offered no classes focused solely on the Navajo people, some of the anthropology professors included units on Southwestern Native Americans in their general course offerings.

I quickly stopped having fun.

In a physical anthropology course, one of my professors spent an entire class period trying to debunk Navajo creation stories—he called these stories “myths”—by citing linguistic and archaeological “facts,” which I would call “interpretations.” He argued the Navajo are descended from the Athabascans, a people indigenous to the subarctic north.

His story aligns with 23andMe’s map and the line that descends along the Californian coast, but according to Diné creation stories, the Navajo people did not travel north to south. The Navajo traveled through four other worlds—the Dark World, the Blue World, the Yellow World, the White world, all inhabited by various beings, all presenting new trials—before they emerged into this world, the Fifth. The place they came to was called Dinétah, nestled within the four sacred mountains.

When I called my mother to tell her what I had learned in class—to ask her if what my professor said was true—she laughed.

“That don’t make any sense. Northern Indians are all tall and beautiful, and us southern Indians are all short and squat!”

Only a year or two later, in 2008, researchers at the University of Illinois conducted a large-scale genetic analysis of the Y-chromosomes from native populations. Among other findings, these researchers offered further confirmation that the Athapaskan migration into the southwest occurred approximately 500 years ago—around the same time Christopher Columbus first landed on American shores.

But of course, of course, of course, there are limits to the story DNA can tell.

As Kim TallBear writes in Native American DNA: “The creation accounts of indigenous peoples are serious business. They are historically, morally, and spiritually (for lack of better words) crucial to peoplehood.”

What my professor did not understand: The Navajo were not the Navajo before they came to the Southwest, whether along the coast or over the mountains or climbing a reed from the Fourth World into the Fifth. The Dene are not the Diné. The Diné were born in Dinétah.

The 23andMe website is full of disclaimers, like: “The accuracy of these predictions varies
from trait to trait” and “These predictions apply best to customers who are of the same ethnicity as the people whose data contributed to the model.” That second disclaimer is the most important. 23andMe uses a process called genotyping, not sequencing, to analyze its customers’ DNA. The reports and statistical models the company generates are made by comparing only portions of your DNA sequences to a reference set, and that reference set is often drawn from European populations.

Still, I can’t help but play.

Behind 23andMe’s curated information and colorful graphs is raw data you can browse by chromosome. You can search for specific genes and markers. You can view your genome in its purest form: sequences of the letters A, for adenine; T, for thymine; G, for guanine; and C, for cytosine, the four bases that form the rungs of DNA’s double helix. And you can waste hours knowing nothing.

I waste hours trying to decipher the ADH variants on my fourth chromosome.

Countless studies have found correlations between ADH variants and increased alcohol consumption or risk of alcoholism—simply search “alcoholism” and “ethanol metabolism” and you will find research spanning decades. Alcohol (or, ethanol, a toxic substance that compromises the function of the human nervous system) is metabolized in the body along two paths: First, ADH (alcohol dehydrogenase) strips the hydrogen atoms off the ethanol molecule, converting it into acetaldehyde in the human liver, and then ALDH (aldehyde dehydrogenase) transforms the acetaldehyde (another toxic substance and carcinogen) into acetic acid. Certain ADH variants—like ADH1B and ADH1C—metabolize alcohol more rapidly, elevating acetaldehyde levels faster than they can be broken down. This makes drinking unpleasant, simultaneously decreasing a person’s likelihood of alcohol dependence.

But browsing the raw data, I quickly find I am unequipped to determine the variants of my ADH genes—only a quarter of their markers have been genotyped.

“You were born an alcoholic,” my Gramma told me when I was young. “You just haven’t had your first drink.”

My mother, my father; my grandmothers and grandfathers; my aunts and uncles and cousins—who in my family isn’t?

My sister started drinking in middle school. I didn’t have my first drink until I was in college. I was too scared—of losing control, of becoming like my parents. I took my first drink to prove I wasn’t what they said I should be.

When people ask if I drink, I say: Not really. To drink is an admission I’m unwilling to make.

My father was in and out of jail when I was a kid, which meant we wrote each other letters when he was away. And then after my grandmother moved us across the country, letter-writing became the pillar of our long distance relationship. In a letter he sent me when I was in fifth grade: “Your mother should read the third story in the back of the A.A. book,” he wrote me, to tell her. “An Indian wrote it.”

It’s funny to imagine how he thought I would get my hands on the Alcoholics Anonymous blue
book then, or that I would even raise the subject with my mother. When I wrote her letters, I talked about my classes and the teachers she would never meet; about my parakeet, Ripple, who loved lettuce; about snow.

I sought out the third edition of the AA book years later, after reading my father’s letter again. The story he referenced was in the back of the book, the personal stories section, and written by the son of Tall Man, American Indian, and member of A.A. for many moons. He wrote about the Maliseet reservation, firewater, and the Great Spirit. He talked like an Old Western indian, cutting every tense into the present, every sentence into fragments: “I find Indian fellow. We talk long time.”

My father had loved my mother, but in his memory, this stilted redface was how he saw her—or, even worse, how he imagined she saw herself.

“I’m sorry,” my mother’s sister told me once, “but your dad is an asshole.”

And then she told the story of the last time my parents visited the reservation. My aunt hopped around the living room, punching at the air as she described it. My father got into an argument with my grandparents, but after he left the house, he returned with a case of beer. My aunt raised her hands above her hand and mimed slamming the beer onto a table. This is all you indians want, he yelled. It’s yours. I’ve paid for your daughter, and now she’s mine.

In 2016, The Washington Post published an article with the title: “Your assumptions about Native Americans and alcohol are wrong.” The study found comparable rates of heavy and binge drinking between white and Native American populations but *also* found that Native Americans are more likely to abstain from alcohol altogether. Teshia Solomon, the director of the University of Arizona’s Native American Research and Training Center, optimistically told the Washington Post that these findings “allow us to get rid of the stereotype of ‘the drunken Indian’ that has persisted for several decades in the media and in general public thought.”

Solomon’s declaration strikes me as hopelessly naïve. Forty years ago, researchers were dispelling myths about racial difference in alcohol tolerance between whites and indians. And for decades, the stereotype persists. Did the 2016 study register in public thought? Did my father read it? Has anything changed?

I recognize the danger of seeking a genetic answer to my family’s alcoholism. I recognize the danger of contributing to the drunken indian myth. So instead, let me give you the blue bands of my father’s chromosome, my “French & German” heritage.

Let me give you: My father’s last name, Geller, derived from the German word “gellen” (to yell). Of Germany I know very little, but I read once that Essen, a German city, paid its unemployed alcoholics in beer to clean its streets.

Let me give you: An image of my homeless father, walking miles every day to collect cans to sell at the junkyard to buy nips of vodka and a jumbo iced tea. And another: my father, calling detox centers in San Jose every two hours to find a bed to break a habit he has ever been able to escape.
I am trying to inhabit difference. I am looking for dualisms, for either/or’s, for the places one variant exerts its dominance over the other—the places I am more my mother, less my father.

But here is what I have to give you: An image of my homeless mother, sleeping in a municipal park full of palm trees and White Ibises, probing the grass with their curved pink bills. She drank heavy and long enough that she died from severe alcohol withdrawal. After the heart attack, she passed away in two days.

According to 23andMe, I am 51% more likely to have "lighter skin;" 49% likely to be "darker." The unaddressed question, of course: in comparison to what, or to whom? You can see from the graphs just how white—how "fair" and "moderately fair"—the company’s customers are, which might lead one to believe I could pass.

23andMe builds its skin pigmentation model on variations in the SLC45A2 and SLC24A5 genes, and like most of its models, these results apply best to people of European or African descent. I inherited one variant copy of SLC24A5 (from my father) and one typical sequence (from my mother), which means the color of my skin depends on the sun. I always look a little sickly when I live in the Northeast, where the rain and clouds trap me indoors.

I can’t help remembering the time I visited my mother in Florida during a summer break. When she held her sun-browned arm next to mine and laughed, “You’re so white.”

In a recently published study, researchers
looked at SLC24A5 in addition to seven other genetic variants—MFSD12, DDB1, TMEM138, OCA2, and HERC2—and found these variants were present in human ancestors even before our species evolved, before there were ethnic categories like the ones on my report: European or East Asian or Native American. Neanderthals, who branched away from Homo sapiens over 600,000 years ago, inherited the same combination of genetic variants affecting skin pigmentation. “The widespread distribution of these genes and their persistence over millennia show that the old color lines are essentially meaningless,” the article reports. One of the researchers claimed the research “dispels a biological concept of race.”

There is no evidence; there is no biological basis for “race.” I think I know this—but even knowing, I laugh. I laugh when I read the title of the New York Times article: “Genes for Skin Color Rebut Dated Notions of Race, Researchers Say.” I laugh, imagining the researchers who believe lines of data can change what we know.

I can’t help remembering the time I visited home from college. When my father and I sat in the living room and watched court TV on my grandmother’s television set, the screen tinted orange and warped with age.

A white female plaintiff and a black male defendant stood in front of the judge, who leaned towards the camera and asked the woman: “When did you know he wasn’t the man for you?”

Before she could answer, my father said: “It should have been the color of his skin.”

I glanced between my father and the TV screen—between my father and the man shrugging uncomfortably in a suit that seemed a little too square or too big. Shrugging under the ridicule of the judge and the audience and, I imagined, my father’s flat, white gaze.

“My skin is the same color as his,” I said.

My father refused to meet my eyes—instead, bounced his feet anxiously and snapped, “Different genes.”

On my twelfth chromosome: ALDH2.

23andMe includes these results in its “Alcohol Flush Reaction” reports.

The variant sequence, an A, is more likely to cause flushing because ALDH2 isn’t able to break down acetaldehyde normally. Acetaldehyde builds up in the body, which causes not only flushing but also nausea, headaches, and sleepiness.

This variant is most common among East Asians but is found across all human populations. And researchers have found in multiple studies that the presence of even a single ALDH2 variant strongly correlates with a lower incidence of alcohol dependence.

I have inherited two copies of the typical sequence, a G. I am unlikely to flush after drinking alcohol or to experience any of the other negative effects.

If only we had been luckier.
Have you heard this joke?

Darwin and Freud walk into a bar. Two alcoholic mice—a mother and her son—sit on two bar stools, lapping gin from two thimbles.

The mother mouse looks up and says, "Hey, geniuses, tell me how my son got into this sorry state."

"Bad inheritance," says Darwin.

"Bad mothering," says Freud.

We can’t get through this essay without talking about nature vs. nurture, without talking about epigenetics—the study of heritable changes in gene expression that do not affect the underlying DNA sequences. Epigenetics is the study of everything that happens above/under/on/over/near/at/before/after a person’s DNA.

Researchers find: epigenetic differences between the offspring of nurturing and neglectful rat mothers.

Researchers find: trans-generational inheritance of trauma, as in: a born fear of the smell of cherry blossoms.

Researchers find: trans-generational inheritance of trauma, as in: altered stress hormones in the descendants of Holocaust survivors.

Researchers look for: answers to heritable fear.

As recently as 2004, the Havasupai sued Arizona State University over misuse of the tribe’s blood samples; samples that had been collected for diabetes research had later been used to study mental disorders and population migrations without the donors’ consent.

Many have criticized the Navajo Nation’s moratorium, arguing the benefits of genetic testing outweigh the risk of abuse, and in late 2017, the Navajo Nation began reevaluating its 2002 decision. What that policy will be, or what effect it will have, remains unclear.

Two alcoholic mice—a mother and her daughter—sit on two bar stools. The mother laps beer from a thimble, while her daughter sits and watches.

The mother looks up from her thimble and says, "Tell me how I got into this sorry state."


The mother stares into her thimble. "Tell me what to do."

The daughter doesn’t know what to say.

The sober son of Tall Man promised good medicine in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: “To Indians, I say: ‘Don’t be afraid to join A.A. I once hear people say only Indians crazy when drunk. If so, A.A. full of Indians. Join the tribe!’"
In the 1980s, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart first described the theory of historical trauma among Native American peoples. Historical trauma, as Brave Heart defines it, is “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences.” Responses to historical trauma include depression, self-destructive behavior, anxiety, anger, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions. Responses may also include substance abuse and an attempt to avoid painful feelings through self-medication.

Brave Heart’s model for treatment seeks to restore an attachment to traditional values; to increase joy; to improve familial relationships; to construct a positive indigenous identity, instead of one defined by shared historical grief and trauma.

It is difficult for me to understand what Brave Heart’s intervention looks like. It is difficult for me to imagine what it could be.

My mother is gone.

Researchers find: transgenerational effects of white racism.8

Researchers find: measurable effects of growing up black and poor.

In one article, I read the analogy:

Some people are dandelions; no matter the environment, they turn out the same and are resilient when faced with stressful circumstances.

Other people are orchids; they’re highly affected by their environment. In good circumstances, they flourish, but ... “If anything seems to go wrong, they just crumble.”9

I can’t help remembering the time I was in elementary school and I picked a shining yellow dandelion for my grandmother on the walk home from school. I carried it through neighborhood side streets, over the sludge-filled creek and its soft-shelled turtles, across the wide-open fields our trailers encircled. I presented the dandelion to her in the kitchen, where she stood up to her elbows in dishwater. “I picked you a flower,” I chirped, holding it over my head.

“That’s not a flower,” my grandmother said, circling a dishrag over a plate. “That’s a weed.”

In this analogy, my sister is the orchid; my mother is the orchid, and I am the weed.

For a few months, at least, my mother sold orchids on the side of the road.

A year after I took 23andMe’s test, I bought one for my sister—I thought it would be interesting, to compare our results. But after the kit arrived, she messaged me to say she was sending the money back. “I’m not sure I wanna do it,” she said. She had stayed up too late reading about genetic testing—she wasn’t sure she wanted a private company to have access to her genetic information.

Still, curiosity got the best of her a few weeks later. She was disappointed in the results. In the initial report, she was “more” Native American than me by 1.2%, but I had been cheap and didn’t buy her the health and wellness portion of the
test. It didn’t take long for her to exhaust the simple ancestry report.

When I called my father’s sister to ask her to help my grandmother collect the sample, my aunt joked, “Wouldn’t it be nice if you found out Michael wasn’t your dad?”

I laughed and told her I was more interested in my grandmother’s health report—in our family’s history of dementia and Alzheimer’s, and whatever else I could find. “It wouldn’t change anything anyway,” I said. “Not after thirty years.”

But wouldn’t it? I would erase my father from my genome; I would erase him from my memory; I would erase him from our story, if I could.

But I share 23.9% of my DNA with my grandmother. I am my father’s daughter.

And according to my grandmother’s ancestry report, she is 99.6% European and only .2% Native American. It is almost impossible to know which tribe, but the name of my grandmother’s hometown, Manasquan, New Jersey, is of Lenape origin: island door, or point, or top. From another person, I would laugh at this kind of claim to Native American ancestry. But I can’t help remembering a photograph I once saw of my great grandmother, standing in the garden with her black hair in braids. She looked like me.

I think often of Heid Erdrich’s poem, “DNA Tribes,” and her red-eyed vireo singing, Here I am. Where are you? I think often of my days in the woods, on the sides of mountains, where I heard the vireo’s winding and rewinding call. Listen:

Native American DNA—
What Tribe Are You?

As if that could fool us,
make us forget the nesting grounds,
the red eye cast ever backward
to the place always known as home.”

We used to believe blood held the power; that blood distinguished families, nations, and tribes. We were measured by the purity of our blood, the pedigree of our bloodlines.

We know now that blood is only a vehicle—that what we inherit is actually transcribed in our DNA.

As if that could fool us.

Blood holds power. As Kim TallBear writes: “Shared blood constitutes identity, and a loss or denial of the blood relationship is often read as a loss or denial of one’s own identity. Blood is identity.” Emphasis mine.

Native American identity is measured in degrees. According to my Certificate of Indian Blood, I have ½ degree Navajo Indian blood. And among the Navajo, identity is measured by a person’s four blood clans. I am born first to my mother’s clan, the Tsí’naajinii, the black-streaked-wood people. And I am born for my father’s: bilagáana, the Navajo word for white people. My third clan is my maternal grandfather’s clan, the Tábąąhá, the water’s edge people. And my fourth, again, white.

My father and my mother both understood the
power they held over me; the blood debt I owed.

Endnotes

1 Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 163. TallBear asks the questions: Who is Native American? And who gets to decide? And her work challenges the hegemony of Western scientific knowledge.


3 In 1976, researchers Lynn Bennion and Ting-Kai Li published a paper in response to an earlier, flawed study by Fenna et. al that had found significant differences in the rates of alcohol metabolism in Eskimos and American Indians. The design and methods of Fenna et. al’s study were criticized because “hospitalized Indians were compared with healthy whites, and blood alcohol levels were measured indirectly by the use of a Breathalyser” (9). After studying a sample population of 30 “full blood” American Indians and 30 “full blood” whites, Bennion and Li concluded: “Since our study showed no significant difference between American Indians and whites in rates of alcohol metabolism, the conclusion cannot be drawn that racial variations in proclivity to alcohol abuse can be accounted for by racial variations in alcohol metabolic rates.”


5 One such study was conducted by C.L. Ehlers et. al and looked at a sample population of 243 California Mission Indians. A study by G.S. Peng and S.J. Yin in 2009 also found phenotypic variations in ALDH2 that had a protective effect.


7 “Join the Tribe!” in *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholic Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), 474-477. Each edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* includes personal stories from its members—stories that describe life as an alcoholic and how the program helped them on the path to sobriety. These stories are, of course, anonymous. “Join the Tribe!” appears only in the third edition but has been reprinted as recently as October 2013, in the Seattle Intergroup’s monthly newsletter.


9 Colter Mitchell, quoted by Marisa Taylor in “Poverty ‘ages’ genes of young children, study shows,” *Al-Jazeera America*, 2014 April 7. http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/4/7/genetic-effect-povertydisadvantagedchildren.html Taylor reports on Mitchell, et. al’s research, which found that the stress of growing up in poor, unstable households affected some children at the genetic level. Researchers measured this change by the length of their participant’s telomeres, the sequences at the end of each chromosome that
protects the chromosome from deterioration. Shorter telomeres have been linked to higher incidences of cancer and illness. The study found that children with a higher genetic sensitivity to serotonin and dopamine were more susceptible to environmental factors.


11 Kim TallBear, Native American DNA, 50.

Bibliography


post-nation/wp/2016/02/12/your-assumptions-about-native-americans-and-alcohol-are-wrong/


Danielle Geller is a writer of personal essays and memoir. Her first book, *Dog Flowers*, is forthcoming from One World/Random House in 2020. She received her MFA in Creative Writing, Nonfiction at the University of Arizona and is a recipient of the 2016 Rona Jaffe Writers’ Awards. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker, Brevity,* and *Silk Road Review* and has been anthologized in *This Is the Place* (Seal Press, 2017). She is a member of the Navajo Nation: born to the Tsi’naajinii, born for the white man.
1. One day a man from Maine walked along Lighthouse Beach on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas and discovered, to his surprise, a piece of his own home. The beach, facing the strong waves of the Atlantic, featured some of the softest, whitest sand in the Bahamas. The sand would remain in the grooves of the man's shoes, long after he departed and settled back into his own rockier coast of Maine. But that day on Eleuthera, he spotted something ahead in the foam crest on the shore, a familiar piece of Styrofoam. A lobster buoy, he realized as he squinted. He reached down to it and wiped some of the clinging sand from its shiny surface, and saw that the colors that painted this buoy were his family's colors: deep green and a bright red stripe through the middle. The colors of the McClintocks. He stared at the deep green in this new place, against the palette of white sand and teal water. How in the world did his family's buoy get there?

2. The inside of the tank house was cold and fluorescent; the air was stale and smelled not like fish or ocean but something subtler, something in between. You wouldn't know driving from the road that this plain-looking, steel-paneled building was filled with thousands of live lobsters, whose net worth was in the millions. You might suspect that something lucrative was going on, though, based on the security camera hanging over the door. The camera probably noticed that we were a small group of writers, notebooks
in hands, pens tucked behind ears. The camera would not have known that we were here on the remote island of Grand Manan, New Brunswick, to document changes in the island’s fisheries.

Inside the building, the entire floor was filled with tanks burbling quietly. In the tanks were cages that fell five feet below the floor line. Each of the cages was apparently filled with dozens of lobsters. Though I tried to peer, I couldn’t see their delightful, dinosauric greenish-brown bodies. I could only see the tops of the cages, which were tied up with the bright turquoise rope that I had begun to associate with lobstering activity on this island. I had found shards of the rope everywhere, strewn across pebbled beaches and nestled into the delicate troves of purple harebell flowers that line the coast.

The man who showed us around the tank house was named Stewart, a name from the old Scottish “guardian” or “warden.” It was an appropriate name, I thought, for someone whose job is to both contain and keep alive thousands of crustaceans. He had kind blue eyes, slightly bluer than the burbling water in the tanks behind him. And he was tan, built muscularly, with the heft of someone who has been hauling lobster cages for many years.

As he led us around, his big boots echoed against the steel frame of the building. I peered into the water hoping to catch some sign of lobster life, but could only catch glimpses of their dark forms in the cages. The cages themselves were three different colors that roughly corresponded to both size and age: the green, the most abundant cages, were for the 1-2 pound lobsters; the yellow, 2-4 pounds; the blue, 4-6 pounds; and in the orange cages, deep under the water, the 6+ pound lobsters, lobsters so big that their meat is too tough to eat, lobsters as old as thirty years, who move significantly slower than their younger, feistier counterparts in the green cages.

In the tanks all around us, none of the lobsters were feisty as none of them could move. Each of them had their claws strapped closed with rubber bands. Each of them sat in what Stewart called a rectangular “condo” just larger than the size of their body. Each of them was living in a torpid state, their bodies cold enough that their metabolism had slowed. In the tanks, at the torpid state, they need not eat nor defecate.

Torpidity explained the surprising quiet of water brimming with life—it was a hibernating life, a not-quite-still life.

When the lobsters first arrived at the tank house, they were their classic snappy selves. They flexed their bodies, thrashed their tails as Stewart and his colleagues wrestled them into the bands and the condos. Then Stewart adjusted the water temperature slowly—taking it from the temperature of the Bay of Fundy, from which the lobsters were drawn, and lowering it to just above freezing, so that their bodies fell into a state of torpor. In the wild, a torpid state allows lobsters to survive brutally cold winters underwater. In a tank house, a torpid state allows fishermen to hold the lobsters in biological limbo until their price on the market is high enough to load them into trucks and ship them away.

“It’s just a second winter,” Stewart said, but I wondered how a second period of extreme cold affected the creatures. “When they wake up,” he explained with what seemed like a glint of nostalgia or joy, “they’re really fierce.” Just as snappy then, just as spritely as they were when they went in—keen to grab at the fingers of anyone who dare process them for the market.
3. The buoy arrived at the beach in the Bahamas like this: likely, someone cut it from the lobster trap that it corresponded to, or perhaps the buoy was separated from the trap in frothy storm waves, even a Nor’easter. Freed, it bobbed along and was picked up by the Gulf Stream Current, which carried it up and up, to skirt the island of Grand Manan and the rest of Atlantic Canada before getting slingshotted over to the North Atlantic Current, which would carry it across the pond. Just before arriving in the English Channel, though, the natural trajectory of the North Atlantic, the buoy could have turned north up to the arctic, to Norway and then Northern Russia, likely to get frozen ultimately in some inhospitable cocktail of ice-filled sea. But the buoy did not stop in England, and did not turn north. Instead, it opted, unlike the cold-loving American lobsters it had helped to catch for many years, for warmer waters. Down and down, the buoy bobbed, floating in the Canary current, past Portugal, onto Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania. And then about the time it hit Dakar, Senegal, another cross-Atlantic slingshot. This time along the North Equatorial. Bobbing, bobbing, on and on until reaching the gulf stream again, which deposited the buoy on the Atlantic side of Eleuthera, on the soft sands of lighthouse beach, where the Mainer picked it up, incredulous.

4. Every year on the Island of Grand Manan, New Brunswick, which is located in the upper branch of the Gulf of Maine, the inlet of the Bay of Fundy, most of the island residents head to the North Head wharf and watch the lobster boats—fat-hulled, freshly painted, and charming—as they
race out to sea to claim the best spots for lobster traps. Once set, the traps will remain for the season, so the race to set first is vital for a season’s success. Families and children gather at high tide among the boats that sway as the crew hops aboard. I imagine the scene, all of them waving wildly as the lobstermen (and lobsterwomen, and lobsterpeople) set out to sea.

They are practicing a tradition that has been around for so much of Grand Manan’s human history, from the Passamaquoddy people, who first frequented this island from the mainland via canoe, to the herring fishermen of the early 1900s, who caught and sold herring all over the world. It is a tradition of hedging uncertainty, working to find fish, or waiting at home for the ships to return with the catch. Mid-way through the island there is a row of houses that feature prominent, ocean-facing cupolas. These were the waiting places from which captains’ wives looked in anticipation of the men’s return. Sometimes, as I drove by these houses, especially on nights when the island’s fog started rolling in, I could imagine the figures of corseted women staring out the windows by candlelight.

These days the waiting game has changed. Lobster boats will stay out for forty-eight hours at a time, return for brief stints, a Saturday of doughnuts at the Grand Manan Bakery, and then set out again for another long shift. A lobsterwoman described the shifts to me as zombifying. Crew members perform the same motions over and over, all day, into the night, and back into the day again. Hauling the traps, banding frantic claws, casting the traps into swells. Crew members are careful to watch their footing, for one wrong step could cinch someone’s foot to a rope moving swiftly to or from the ocean, where they could be dragged under in their heavy layers and boots.

Getting off the boat, they say, is a relief, but even then, when the shift is done, the rock of the swells will follow you into sleep.

At a party in Dark Harbor, Grand Manan’s quiet fisherman’s retreat, I shook the hand of a man who had been injured on a zombie shift. It wasn’t until I grabbed his hand that I realized its frailness; the slight nervous splay of his fingers. Later he told me that his arm had been crushed while he was out hauling lobsters, between quickly moving machines and pulleys. “At least I survived,” he said, which apparently hadn’t been true for all of his friends.

Setting Day, the day every November upon which fishermen set traps, is a big event on Grand Manan. Some captains will cut ahead of the others, frantically scanning the ocean floor with their sonar devices to find the perfect crevice for a lobster cage. The underwater geology appears on their screens, along with digitized fish schools and triangulating maps, lest they lose their way in the Bay of Fundy’s thick fogs. All of this technology reveals to the captains the sorts of places that lobsters like, the little dips in the ocean substrate that are irresistible to the crustacean sensibility. Other captains prefer a more cautious approach, placing each trap carefully, perhaps at the same locations at which they have set traps for years.

This first day of setting the traps is grueling for the crew. Long after their families have left the main wharf with the final hurrah of the departure, they continue to throw trap after trap out of the stern of their boats. The traps descend through the blue green waters, the small offering of herring pinned into the trap fluttering as it becomes engulfed by deeper and deeper water. Each cage is connected to a buoy. The buoys, holding fast to their ropes, are tugged northwards and southwards daily by the extreme pull of the
Bay of Fundy tides (home to some of the largest tidal variation in the world), as the traps themselves stay put, perhaps filled with waiting lobster bodies, somewhere on the ocean floor. The family colors are not just some quaint marking. They are an indicator of fierce territoriality. A Maine lobsterman once told me that a crew caught stealing from someone else’s traps could expect to have their own traps cut from their marking buoys, their catch lost forever to the ocean, the buoy lost forever. 10

Grand Mananers have sought lobsters for decades, for extra income, but mostly as an aside to the more lucrative catches of ground fish (halibut, cod, haddock) and the once-prolific herring. As these other fish populations have declined, lobster populations have grown. I learned this from the local fisheries officer, Soni, who offered to provide some insight on the state of the fisheries. I sat with him on his porch, which overlooked the North Head wharf, which was quiet at that time of day, as all the fishing boats were out at sea. Soni’s large lab/newfoundland mix rested his head in my lap for a while as we tried to imagine ourselves into all of the changes stirring beneath the waves. Soni told me that lobsters were booming in part because the large populations of ground fish used to feed off of young lobster larvae. These, by the way, are truly marvelous little critters. Speckled, translucent, brilliant, blue-green, pink-flecked. Something a fish would surely attempt to eat.11

Without predation, larvae numbers grew. And as sea water temperatures rose throughout the American Lobster’s habitat, the populations started marching upwards, preferring water that was slightly cooler, but not too cool; Goldilocks all of them. I should clarify: it wasn’t as if the individual lobsters all started marching northwards12—they are mobile, but not that mobile. Rather, the offspring of Northern larvae started to thrive in cooler temperatures, and older lobsters in Southern habitats began to die off from temperatures outside of their preferred range, temperatures that weakened lobster immune systems enough so that they couldn’t fight off paramoebae13, a parasite that attacks lobster nervous systems, ultimately leading to death. Former lobsterpeople at the southern part of the lobster range reported massive declines in their catches. According to Emily Greenhalgh at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, off the coast of New York, lobsters dropped by 97.7% between 1996 and 2014; from 9.4 million pounds in ‘96 to 215,980 pounds in 2014.

Soni described the Bay of Fundy, that water he watched every day, as a perfect new home for them. He said it was as if the geography of the long, thin inlet was an enormous lobster trap in its own right. And if you’re a lobster, why not settle in a place that is rich with offerings for feeding?14 So much food already set out and ready for the taking.

Still Life 4: Live lobsters, coming soon to a condo near you.
5. Though most stories about fisheries are stories of demise, the Gulf of Maine lobster fishery has been a source of inspiration for fisheries regulators. It is a story of brutality and cooperation, of lobsterpeople carefully monitoring each other’s behavior so that no one takes more than their fair share of crustacean. The fishery has been self-policing by the colors and stripes of particular family identifiers on particular buoys—a seemingly quaint practice that can at times look like this: Lobstermen will not only cut each other’s buoys but sink each other’s boats, drain gasoline, sabotage nets, do literally anything to stop someone from cheating the system.

But no matter how regulated the fisheries have been, no matter how spirited internal regulation of the fishery may be, the Gulf of Maine also happens to be one of the fastest warming bodies of water in the world, and so all of that self-regulation may be moot when global carbon regulation has run amok. While lobster larvae have recently thrived in the Gulf’s cool waters, those glittering larvae have started once again to show signs of distress. Recent studies have shown that the larvae are smaller than they used to be, perhaps a sign of warming temperatures again, just outside of the lobster’s range. Which means that they might start moving north again—and that means that Grand Mananers have to store as many of them as possible in Tank Houses in the interim.

6. Stewart grabbed a large hook and pulled a large cage of lobsters out from one of the very cold pools. I’m not sure what I expected they’d look like in their torpid phase, but they seemed extraordinarily sentient; their antennae swiveling back and forth and their eyes, short, black glossy waggling tubes. Their claws were larger than my hand and realizing that made me put my hands behind me, out of sight, just in case. But while the littler lobsters can take off part of a finger, apparently the big ones move too slowly for that. Too old and sluggish from life in the deep seas.

The solitary critters in the air before us were huddled together in unexpected companionship within the green web of the cage, limbs moving like metal mechanical characters at an amusement park. The black eyes of one of the biggest ones swiveled, probing the air for information about this glistening fluorescent place. Its eyes swiveled in our direction. Fisherman and writers: we were a human blur.

Stewart, standing firmly as he held up the heavy cage, started, “These ones are mostly for our Chinese market. We usually throw them back if
they’re this big, but people over there like to use them for centerpieces on the table.” Stewart went on to say that he and his colleagues would soon load up the 6+ pounders into trucks and then into planes, where they would be shipped half way around the world. I imagined them almost glistening, bright crimson and dead on the table, in their newfound cultural status. Since lobster flesh that old is too tough to eat, the centerpiece would probably shine for one night and then be discarded whole, taken out with the trash the next day.

“They love ’em for the red holiday they have over there,” he said.

The Chinese market for lobsters is, in fact, booming. As the Chinese middle class grows, so does the nation’s appetite for crustaceans. Many of the lobsters fueling that market come from Grand Manan, which is such an isolated island (accessible only by ferry and plane) that it seems surprising that such a place would be connected to an appetite so global in nature. However, so many Grand Manan lobsters eventually go to China that Chinese companies have begun to build their own tank houses on the Island. Several people told me that one was being built by the Grand Manan Airport, so that live lobsters could be loaded directly onto a plane without much hassle at all and directly shipped overseas. I pictured their spindly bodies in the plane. How does a torpid lobster feel in flight?

8. In Maine, a number of lobsterpeople have been using heroin. In Grand Manan, a drug of choice seems to be cocaine. Apparently the remedy for long days at sea (downer vs. upper, torpor vs. snap) varies across the international maritime border, “the Grey Zone,” a contested no-man’s-land between the U.S. and Canada, where anyone with a license can haul lobsters year round. This part of the Bay of Fundy is not just a territorial question mark, but a regulatory question mark. Neither U.S. nor Canadian policies apply to the lobster quota—so this area may well be the place where lobsters, like ground fish and herring before them, are being overfished. But no one can know for sure, even with the sophisticated ground-scanning cameras and regulation that does exist. What happens under the blue-green waves of the Bay of Fundy remains a mystery. And the trouble with the recent lobster boom is that no one knows when or where or how will bust, and what that will mean for the people involved.

Cocaine medicates the zombie shifts, the repetitive motions, the banding lobsters over and over, the hours of tiring waves rocking your body, the
staying awake, alert, astute. And heroin medicates inevitable muscle aches, tendonitis, the injuries, machine accidents. Neither drug, of course, is so good for any of these things over the long-term.

Even if a lobsterperson does not use drugs, they are likely to face another affront to their health: diet. I met with one of the island nurses, Hallie Bass, to talk about the relationship between health and the fisheries. She invited me into her house to talk, and her cat Bubbles, with blue-grey eyes, not unlike the fishery officer’s dog Soni, sat on my lap and purred throughout our conversation. Since the “Lobster Gold Rush” she has started to see more patients with diabetes in her office. She thinks this is because of the demands of the lobstering shifts. Out on the ocean, there’s no time to eat a luxurious healthy lunch, even if the fishermen could afford it. Instead, they’re likely to eat packaged food filled with sugar, along with caffeinated soda. Whatever can keep their energy levels up enough to make it through the shift.

She’s noticed that women on the island have also started to get married earlier, too. Young men in the throes of the Lobster Gold Rush offer to support the women financially, and so Hallie has seen that they are less inclined to seek their own employment, and more inclined to start a family earlier. And have more babies. In that regard, the Island reminded me of the fracking fields of rural West Virginia, where I have done other research on extractive economies and health. In the fracking fields, a man can make nearly $80,000 a year in the fracking business, some of the youngest fishermen in Grand Manan spend that much on cocaine alone.

None of this, of course, would be possible without the tank house, without the capacity to release lobsters onto the market when the price—in Boston or across China—was just right.

On Grand Manan, Hallie told me, young people are still learning how to live with the whopping increases in income. The island is filled with relatively new pickup trucks, many of which you can find at the bakery, at the bank, at the beach. My favorite on the island was lime green and had an enormous lobster decal on the side, so that there was no question where the money came from. I made a game with my writer friends of spotting it around the island, at the bank and the grocery store, at the beach.

But beyond the trucks, for many of these young fishermen, the money goes to drugs. While a pipe-layer in West Virginia can make $80,000 a year in the fracking business, some of the youngest fishermen in Grand Manan spend that much on cocaine alone.

Still Life 7: Lobster Rarities, New England Aquarium.
9. A lobster will molt when its exoskeleton can no longer contain its body. To prepare for an act as monumental this, the lobster takes in seawater into its skin for several days. When the time is right, its swelling flesh presses up against the carapace of the exoskeleton, and the lobster wiggles and presses its way outwards, leaving the old shell of itself behind. The new exoskeleton is soft for a period of several days, during which the lobster hides behind rocks or in the deepest crevasses, waiting for its skeleton, its protection, its container, its home, to harden. Sometimes, Stewart says, his friends and colleagues will catch one of these lobsters with a softer shell. But, Stewart notes, these don’t qualify for life in the tank house, because they won’t be able to last quite as long on the market. So the ritual goes: throw those ones back into the sea.

Each time a lobster molts into a new body, it is an opportunity for us, too, hominid onlookers, to reconsider. Lobsters molt through our cultural imagination, appearing in the most likely places. For many men living in suburban America, to take a woman out on a date to Red Lobster; to buy her the flesh of a lobster, correlates with an expectation of getting laid. “I’ll take you to Red Lobster” turns into “I’ll take you home” turns into “I’ll take you to bed.” And the brilliant red flesh of a lobster, on a plate before a date, becomes a transaction, an expectation for human flesh, too.

To consider lobster is also to consider pain, especially through the eyes of David Foster Wallace, who asked us the ethical questions around boiling a lobster alive. Does a lobster scream when its flesh hits boiling water? Can it feel pain? Swiss lawmakers have recently banned the boiling of live lobsters because of new research in animal cognition that has shown that lobsters do, in fact, feel pain. Instead, they suggest that lobsters be stunned instead of being boiled. And notably, they say that lobsters may not “be transported on ice or in ice water,” a move that seems like it could have implications for the use of tank houses, if the Swiss legal precedent makes its way across the pond, like our friend the McClintock buoy.

There is a levity with which people seem to consider lobsters, though, a levity to the act of reconsidering, too. It is easy to retweet that the “lesbian moon lobster” should return to the sea! Easy to read Wallace, to take note of new Swiss policy, to buy a date a lobster platter. But to really consider the lobster today, and all of its connections to the global market, and all of its connections to climate change, requires a wilder consideration than perhaps any of us could have ever imagined, because to consider the lobster fully would require us to consider ourselves fully, too.
As we were wrapping up our conversation, Soni said a curious thing that I can’t help but consider in light of tank houses: “Technology has always been the death of fish.” The continual evolution of this technology is all over Grand Manan. Just the other night I had watched fishermen set up one of the oldest fishing technologies—the weir—in the quiet cove of Dark Harbour. The way the men moved as a crew revealed their expert understanding of the unsteadiness of waves that rocked the craft. As I watched, men and raft swayed together, their silhouettes occasionally blurred by waves of fog that slipped by in sheets from the sea. Pulling up a stake, placing the stake, hammering it with the giant driver, hit by hit, as many clangs as it took to drive the sharpened tip of it into the ocean floor. Soon they would string the weir with twine, seine the weir, and haul herring from the sea.

Something about the tank houses is different, a new kind of “death of fish.” Death for the lobsters does not happen instantly; the tank houses keep the lobsters a different kind of alive, they are still life, until their death arrives by plane and by pan, hissing in the boiling water thousands of miles from the Bay of Fundy.

Since the bounty under the corrugated roof is so lucrative, Stewart’s boss has hired a security company to monitor the lobsters at all times. If anyone enters the tank house, Stewart is immediately updated by an app on his phone, an app that also allows him to monitor pH, dissolved oxygen, and ammonia levels in the tanks at all times. It is good that the lobsters are connected to Stewart by an app. The banded, condoed creatures that could once seek out these conditions on their own are now entirely reliant on him to stay alive.

In the Grand Manan Museum, a quaint white building with black shutters in the middle of the island, there is an exhibit that the very first director of the museum created, which documents the history of fishing. It starts with black and white photos of herring seining, a diorama of a weir, and the painted words: The story of Grand Manan begins and ends with people and fish. There’s something so charming about the manner with which these islanders have strived to catch fish, as outlined in the dioramas—figures made of clay holding clay fish in their hands, and nets, and poles, pushing technology and resourceful scrappiness just to the edge of its limits.

At least with other types of Grand Manan fishing it seemed as though the story was a collaborative one, co-written between people and groundfish, or herring, or periwinkles, or what have you. Full of frothy waves, deep fog, and the anticipation of the catch. But for the lobsters who could be seen underwater with penetrating radar, the
lobsters being held in artificial pools, breathing bubbles whose contents Stewart can adjust from an app on his phone, the story seemed already written. Past-tense. As I read the painted museum words, I thought again of the oldest crustaceans that Stewart showed us; their swiveling eyes. For them, for now, for this technology, for this particular molt, the story of people and fish had already ended.

1 I won’t tell you… yet, at least. For now, I will say this: when writing about a creature in peril it seems useful to start with an anecdote with a good sense of intrigue, something that makes softer; fun, even, a sense of imminent planetary collapse.

2 In case you were wondering, this adjective choice is grounded in phylogenetic fact. Lobsters actually did exist during the time of the dinosaurs. Of this coincidence, Alison Deming writes: “The oldest fossil lobster on record dates back to the early Cretaceous, the geologic period that began about one hundred fifty million years ago and ended sixty-five million years ago with the cataclysmic extinction that took down the dinosaurs. All during this period, lobsters were scuttling about the ocean floor on their ten legs and breaking open shellfish for supper… Next to their species’ longevity, ours is negligible. ‘They have been on Earth about six hundred times longer than we have.’ This history of lobsters on the planet, their longevity, becomes strange to reckon with when one realizes that fossil fuels, whose combustion leads to the climate change that is driving massive changes in the lobster fisheries, are derived from dead organisms that were alive within the history of this creature’s long history of “scuttling about the ocean floor.” Critters that once scuttled alongside the lobster, an ancestral lobster’s old buddies or foes, an ancestral lobster’s old dinner, have been combusted at such a rate that may ultimately lead to changes in a present-day lobster’s populations. I wonder how ancestral lobsters would consider that, or, from any current incarnations, how they do consider that.

3 Lobsters, by the way, have been the subject of still life for some time. Take for example a painting by the Dutch artist Willem Kalf, which features as still life a brilliant crimson lobster alongside wine vessel made of buffalo horn trimmed with silver; a composite that journalist Jonathan Jones at The Guardian calls “A monument to luxury.” Luxurious is the horn, the wine inside it, the lush velvety table cloth, the luscious peeled lemon just out of reach of the lobster’s dead claws, and of course the brilliant flesh of the lobster itself, practically asking to be crushed open and slurped up. Kalf crafted this oil on canvas in the year 1653, at which point lobsters had apparently become a luxury food item in Holland. Prior to that, lobsters were considered low-class food. Kalf’s still life, then, is not just art but a snapshot of cultural transformation.

4 Though, to be sure, a buoy’s need for hospitality is rather low.

5 While this particular reunion with floating waste was positive, if not almost unbelievably fortuitous, others are distinctly not. You have probably heard of the trash gyres in that spin and spin and accumulate plastic waste in the ocean. The North Atlantic Gyre, which the buoy would have passed on its international journey, is apparently hundreds of miles wide. So is the state of Arizona, from which I write to you about
distant oceans. Anyhow, it’s hard to know whether the Mainer’s buoy might have been sucked into this gyre on its way over to England, whether it could have released itself from the centripetal force of the trash heap. Ocean currents slingshot floating human inventions, crap on crap, all over the world, including onto Lighthouse Beach, where, working one summer at a nearby sustainability school, I found a mysterious flank of what appeared to be a space ship.

6 Yes, women haul lobsters too. Fiercely, efficiently, excellently.

7 If women haul lobsters and men haul lobsters and the binary is long dead, why not just keep this gender neutral?

8 Of which, I highly recommend the cinnamon, which is served warm, and with just the right amount of allspice.

9 For the record, doesn’t all of this start to seem invasive of the lobster’s privacy? Let them scuttle in peace! No need to watch & know everything about them.

10 Unless found fortuitously years later in the Bahamas.

11 Because of their interest in sparkling prey, A Grand Mananer referred to ground fish as “sluts.” If this enhances your reading of this story, great.

12 Though this, if you were swimming above, would be admittedly spectacular.

13 Evidently, the worst kind of bae.

14 Why not? As of the latest tweet, you might just get caught, and bought and sold on Amazon. Amazon.com’s original motto: And you’re done.


16 See also all of the people who depend on any of the above declining fisheries for a primary source of protein; see 97 percent of fishers are in “developing” countries, see FAO estimates that “[fish] provide two and a half billion people with at least 20 percent of their average per capita animal protein intake.”

17 …A phrase that, out of the mouth of a Grand Mananer, might strike some sense of fear in you, reader, given that most Gulf of Maine residents pronounce buoys BOYS.

18 Dear reader—I really do want to know: what distress does this cause you? How many times have you been asked to consider climate change? And what does me asking you to consider really do? It asks you to think, surely, as David Foster Wallace asked readers to do in his famous Consider the Lobster essay, but what then? My brother posted a photo on Instagram recently of dead lobsters in boiling hot water, with the caption “I considered all of them.” Kudos, brother, literary points to you! And kudos moreover because your caption shows the frailty of consideration, the frailty of thinking and then continuing to act anyway, which seems more or less like the way most people deal with the moral urgency of climate change, myself included, and perhaps yourself, too, reader. Consider and then continue. This, incidentally, was probably the founda-
tion of David Foster Wallace’s ethical stance towards the women in his life…maybe consider, definitely continue. Reader: It’s clearly time to reconsider an entirely new kind of ethics.

19 In reference to perhaps any number of holidays, potentially including Chinese New Year.

20 It seems that most environmental stories of late shift from biocentrism (the needs of other living things are more important than human needs) and towards anthropocentrism (the needs of humans are more important than the needs of other living things). In the grander scheme of things, it also seems that the market has already decided on which centrism will guide us forward. But haven’t the needs of human beings always been inextricably linked with the needs of other living things?

21 The Canadian lobstermen I spoke with, though, are far more somber and realistic about the reality of climate change because they feel as though they are experiencing it firsthand. And many were outright about benefitting from climate change firsthand—they were simultaneously thrilled about the boom and afraid about the looming emptiness that would follow. One lobsterperson predicted that it would last for about two more years. “Why not catch as many as possible now,” they said.

22 Maybe not lobster, not when your every waking moment has been lobster, not when your clothing still smells like lobster, not when lobster costs $13/pound, as it did this last winter, due to rough weather and steady cost increases from overseas demand from China, though surely the lobsterpeople themselves would get a discount.

23 And then there’s Beyoncé, who sings, “When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster.”

KATHRYN GOUGELET graduated from the University of Arizona with an MFA in creative nonfiction writing in 2018, and is the former nonfiction editor at Sonora Review. She writes about environmental health, pain, and justice, and was a Rachel Carson Scholar and Agnese Nelms Haury Fellow at Arizona’s Institute for the Environment. She is currently working on a collection of essays about coal, green chilies, lobsters, and the lives that people make around the booms and busts of extractive industries. Follow her on Twitter @kgougelet.
I moved to Duluth, Minnesota for college in 2006, and people would ask me, “What are you going to school for?” and I would always answer, “Because I’m supposed to.” As I prepared to flunk out and move back to my mom’s house in the suburbs of Saint Paul, I convinced myself I didn’t need college. My real calling—more important than solving for x, or learning to love and then disregard Freud—was to write a screenplay. The story was about a hip-hop artist on the come-up in Minnesota. It was a personal anti-capitalist manifesto combined with an unnecessary defense of youth culture and hip-hop long after hip-hop had already been welcomed into the mainstream. The screenplay died when I realized I was writing the hip-hop version of Wayne’s World. But before the end, I started building as much hip-hop knowledge as I could, especially turning backward to learn about the golden age of the ‘80s and early ‘90s. And the research kept going when the writing stopped.

I had a friend from high school named Pete who was a drummer and who also dropped out of college to be an artist. Pete was the type of drummer who would put a cymbal behind his head and do an over-the-shoulder backwards smash that I thought solidified his showmanship genius. On days we both weren’t working our retail jobs, I would drive to his parents’ house with a stack of blank CDs, and we’d trade from our libraries. I’d come back the next week and give a report on what I liked, what I didn’t, and particularly talked up the old school hip-hop he respected but which didn’t catch his interest the way it did mine.

I was also playing catch up, trying to learn about artists I felt I should already know: Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, Joni Mitchell. I wasn’t totally clueless, but at the time I was aimless, and learning about older music became an obsession. In a way, I was lucky that the severity of my childhood church kept my parents away from popular culture of their own era. I mean, they weren’t lucky to have missed out on so much. But their lack of opinions made it so I could listen to music from
before my time with no context based on their tastes. It was all new to me, and I had no concept of who was good, who was bad, who was poppy, who was a hidden gem. They were all hidden gems (or heathen gems) to me. My parents and I would have deemed all non-Christian artists sinful a few years earlier, but now there were no limits. I was learning in a vacuum. No one but Pete, a couple other friends, and my own ear to guide me.

In Pete's archives, I first encountered the New York hip-hop collective called the Native Tongues—consisting of A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers, and De La Soul. I liked Tribe, didn't know much about the Jungle Brothers, but my favorite was De La.

The three members of De La Soul are Posdnous, Trugoy the Dove (who now performs as simply Dave), and Maseo. Emcees Posdnous and Dave met in high school in Long Island, New York, adding Brooklyn native Maseo as DJ when they formed De La Soul in 1987—the year I was born. The three members also go by Plug 1, Plug 2, and Plug 3, monikers which came from a discarded concept for their first album where the group would be nameless broadcasters on Mars: Maseo would be known as the PA, and the two emcees, Posdnous and Dave, would be known only as their corresponding microphone plugs. They abandoned the idea but kept a brief skit called “Transmitting Live from Mars,” on their debut album: 3 Feet High and Rising. And they kept the nicknames.

From Pete's archive, I got two De La Soul albums, De La Soul Is Dead and Stakes is High, but the albums got lost in the shuffle of my billowing digital library. When I first heard Stakes is High, I was working on the grounds crew of a golf course a couple years later. At 4:30 in the morning, watching the foggy sunrise, spitting tobacco juice on dewy grass between the wheels of a Toro Greenmaster, with earbuds tucked under noise canceling ear muffs, I would bop around to “Pease Porridge,” “Fanatic of the B Word,” “Dinninit,” and “Big Brother Beat.” I loved channeling De La while I mowed greens, weed whipped around trees, raked the sand in bunkers, pushed a pull-start mower around the clubhouse, dug holes, laid sod.

At 21, I felt pastoral and nostalgic for a time I lived through but was sheltered from—De La's first album came out the year I turned two. And I tell you my origin story with De La Soul and the Native Tongues as an homage to the opening of the album Stakes is High, where multiple people leave voicemails for De La, recalling the first time they heard an album from KRS-One, always starting with the phrase “When I first heard Criminal Minded I was…”

At the church where I grew up, people who were baptized in the Holy Spirit would speak in tongues. As a form of prayer, it was more about the feeling than about the words themselves. It was about the faith that God understood even if they didn't. In a way, I kind of respect this penchant toward feeling over understanding since it was done in an effort to interact with the unknown. But it was also a curious act to behold. Here's what it would look like:

The sanctuary, long and wide enough to house two rows of three city buses, is empty save for the nine congregation members cross-legged near the pulpit. My preacher father, my teacher mother, my two elder sisters, Terry and her sons, the reformed Catholic priest, and Diana in morning rays so free they stream from river-facing windows to the opposite wall with nothing but dust motes and a dozen empty folding chairs to impede. So bright, the white of Diana's dress and head scarf glows.
There, in all that light, the final guitar chord hangs as Diana closes her eyes and sets her wooden tambourine on the carpet. It's time to pray.

A hum of murmurs, from the bowed heads of those who know the Holy Ghost, pours slowly into the room. My sisters, Terry's sons, and I sit quietly, unbaptized and uninitiated. Sound softly billows over our knees like fog over river stones. Each voice speaking to God as if alone, praising, glorifying with tenderly repeated phrases. Lingering, swirling, rising to our chests, gentle hallelujahs gather strength. Diana's thick brows furrow as she raises her arms, bracelet sliding from thin wrist to elbow, face turned upward. Her voice harshens. “Praise God Praise God Praise God!” she begins to yell. As the inertia breaks with the stickiness of a warm tongue dragged along a fresh popsicle, the others follow, raising hands and voices that echo against the vaulted ceiling, swarming the corners of the empty room. Rocking on creaky knees, bouncing on tailbones, the few sound like many.

Then Diana finds it. That something, that connection I haven't yet felt, haven't yet earned. That channel to the divine. Incomprehensible syllables spew out of her mouth as she bellows and shakes. Shifting, she presses her stockinged shins flat on the floor. She pitches back and forth so hard the white scarf would fly off her jet-black hair if she had not tied it beneath her chin. I recognize her sounds from previous weeks, but understand nothing. Between vowels rolled with R's and punctuated with sharp T's, she hangs a string of D's like tinsel: “D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D,” a placeholder as the Holy Ghost's presence builds and dwindles in flowing waves of spirit. Light-headed, she breathes heavy as the guitar strums out a fresh chord. One more song before the sermons start.

In other tongue news, the *Cymothoa exigua* is also known as the tongue-eating louse. A parasitic crustacean, it enters a host fish through the gills. Burrowing home with hind claws clamped around the base, it cuts off circulation to the fish's tongue. Then it bites, sucking and siphoning its fill of blood. With patience and time, the drained tongue falls off, and the *Cymothoa* takes its place. It's the only known case of a parasite taking on organ function for its host animal, operating as a tongue normally would, shepherding food down the fish's gullet, slurping up loose blood and mucus from the fish's meal. Pictures of the beast poking out of a fish's mouth make me shudder. Antennae and dark compound eyes in front of a pale segmented husk with wriggling legs, comfortably resting within a Snapper's gaping maw. Maybe it's the grubby sight that disturbs me, but maybe it's also the violation, the invasion, a raiding party that remains. Grotesque in the literary sense: a symbiosis inducing both disgust and empathy like Frodo and Gollum, Esmeralda and Quasimodo, Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. It's that shudder. The shudder of recognition.

In the 2012 novel *The Apocalypse Codex* by Charles Stross, a Christian cult implants giant *Cymothoas* into humans, replacing the victims' tongues and controlling their speech and their minds.

As a straight white man maxed out on privilege, I know I can come off as a pale parasite when I talk about hip-hop, burrowing in where I don't belong. Part of the power of hip-hop is its ability to speak against oppression, and I have advantages created by those oppressive forces. I know I am sometimes seen as violating the space, stealing from the voice of counter culture and African American experience. And sometimes I
turn that same eye on other white hip-hop fans. But, in another sense, that voice of opposition was something I found easy to relate with from my experience pushing against the control and severity of my childhood church.

One of the many things I love about hip-hop is the references, from the samples in beats to borrowed phrases to movie quotes. I always felt like the aura of reference isn’t one of theft. It’s about homage or pastiche, and it also seemed about testing me as listener. If I’m a real head, I’ll catch the reference and get a little something extra out of the song, like an inside joke. The tendency is not to name the reference, but to just drop it in. I felt like if I traced the references, if I built enough knowledge to understand, I could learn the language and belong.

Along with Pete and the few friends whose music recommendations I trusted, hip-hop artists guided my listening practices through their references. My vacuous knowledge of pop culture was quickly swarmed by hip-hop’s dense intertextuality—pointing to what came before and what was going on in the world at the time. Poststructuralist Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality, which is often used to examine how texts aren’t read in isolation but are experienced as a network woven together with other texts and the experiences the reader brings to their reading. Justin A. Williams applies the theory to hip-hop, saying audiences expect intertextuality that “helps to form and inform the generic contract between audiences and hip-hop groups and artists,” and he describes the ethos of reference: “hip-hop practitioners overtly celebrate their peers, ancestors and musical pasts… Whereas certain rock or ‘new music’/contemporary classical ideologies that borrow from Romantic notions of musical genius attempt to demonstrate an illusionary originality, hip-hop takes pride in appropriating and celebrating other sounds and ideas.”

Williams also cites Ingrid Monson who writes of jazz listeners: “The important point is that a chain of associations may be set off that engage the listener and unite her or him with a community of other individuals who share a similar musical point of view.” This is exactly what I feel when I trace references: a community, a group that invites me in but also wants to see what I bring to the table.

It could be that submerging myself in hip-hop was my way of mourning the community I lost when I left the church. Here was a new group of people that required me to listen and learn but with an emphasis on rebellious fun and self-expression.

There are of course negative messages in some hip-hop: misogyny, homophobia, materialism, violence. But that’s hardly the whole picture. And unlike the church, with hip-hop, I never felt commanded to obey, and I got to choose which people to take with a grain of salt or ignore altogether and which ones to listen to. Groups like De La Soul and the other Native Tongues appealed to me. I felt welcomed by De La’s storytelling, their big personalities, their playful irreverence, and their positive messages.

The poet Michael Robbins writes about this style of community building in his book Equipment for Living: On Poetry and Pop Music. Unlike speaking in tongues, which my church used as a way to create a personal, incomprehensible language between one person and God, Robbins says: “There’s no such thing as a private language; language is a social fact. So, because of its conditions of production and consumption, is pop music… Its form lends itself to communal participation. Or, stronger, it depends upon the
possibility of communal participation for its full effect." Robbins writes of the moment in the movie Almost Famous when the band stops fighting as they sing Elton John’s “Tiny Dancer” together. He says shared music works “for the same reason the Kaddish or the Mass works: it conveys comfort because it is a shared experience, one that reinforces a sense of community.” The moment of shared cultural reference provides for them what churches perhaps were intended to, the difference being "between an abstract principle of general transcendence and a practical occasion for transcendence as a shareable idiosyncracy.” It’s such a good example too because Robbins is using a cultural reference to prove that cultural references bring us together.

While Robbins focuses on pop music, being categorized as pop has been an insult for hip-hop artists. To “go pop” is to sell out. For example, the title of De La Soul’s third album, Buhloone Mindstate, is a rejection of pop. The album opens with the group chanting “It might blow up, but it won’t go pop” over the sound of a balloon inflating and then bursting. But in Robbins' definition, pop music is as much about its share-ability as its market-ability. De La and other hip-hop artists reject pop as a category because it implies compromising their counter culture status. It’s a little different these days as the hip-hop has become arguably the largest part of popular culture and yet is still able to hold sway in the counter culture.

When I started investigating pop culture and music in high school, I was looking for that “transcendence as a shareable idiosyncrasy.” I had listened to a lot of Christian hip-hop before I shifted to the good stuff, but the “shareable idiosyncrasy” of Christian music is more about doctrine and part of what I wanted to lose when I left the church. I only really dug into secular hip-hop around 2001, when the genre was 30 years old, and there was so much to cover. With each new artist I learned about, I’d get a reference to another one, and often I’d get a flash of something I had listened to in the past, sparking new paths in the web of collective experience.

While I got my first De La Soul albums from Pete, I should also give credit to Minneapolis rapper P.O.S. for adding De La Soul to my list of artists to check out. On P.O.S.’s song “De La Souls,” P.O.S. repurposes and rewrites lines from the De La Soul song “I Am I Be” found on Buhloone Mindstate. Serge Lacasse calls this kind of referencing “allosonic,” which means P.O.S.’s lyrics quote “the previous material by way of re-recording or performing the quotation in live performance.” This is in contrast to “autosonic quotation,” which is “quotation of a recording by digitally sampling it,” and which is a kind of sampling De La Soul pioneered.

Thanks to the website whosampled.com, it’s gotten a lot easier to trace autosonic samples. The London based site currently holds entries for 475,038 songs, 259,109 samples, and 160,239 artists. It’s essentially a Wikipedia for sampling, where there are moderators but anyone can submit and tag information about samples. When you search for a song, they give you side-by-side YouTube videos of both the song you searched for and the song it samples. They provide the time code for where the samples appear, and they have a little button that says “jump” which takes you right to the spot in the song. It’s so easy, it sort of feels like cheating. I don’t want to be all “back in my day,” but back in my day we had to scrounge, which isn’t really true since I was a fairly late comer and did plenty of Wikipedia referencing to learn about artists.

The site also gives a top ten list of the most sam-
pled artists. Here are the top three: 3) Public Enemy with 2682 samples, 2) The Winstons with 2731 samples, and unsurprisingly for many hip-hop fans 1) James Brown with 6946 samples recorded on the site, more than double the second-place artist. Although, per track, The Winstons take top billing, with “Amen, Brother” sampled 2729 times and James Brown coming in at fourth with “Funky Drummer” sampled 1420 times, which really means James Brown has many songs that get pulled from, whereas The Winstons are almost entirely sampled from just the one track. A lot of the time, artists are going to these classics for the drums, as is the case for The Winstons. But on the title track for De La Soul’s Stakes is High, the group samples James Brown’s voice, saying “Vibe—vibrations” from his track “Mind Power.” Brown also appears on “Down Syndrome” from Stakes is High, “Declaration” from Art Official Intelligence: Mosaic Thump, and “Trainwreck” from and the Anonymous Nobody, to name a few other De La samples.

In an article for The A.V. Club, Nathan Rabin writes about De La’s debut album, 3 Feet High and Rising, and The Beastie Boys’ sophomore effort, Paul’s Boutique, both released in 1989. Rabin says that the two albums “took advantage of the brief window when technology and artistry pushed sampling to new levels of sophistication,” adding:

Rabin also says the two albums “feel like album-length inside jokes in the best possible way. Instead of excluding listeners, the albums welcomed audiences into Beastie Boys and De La Soul’s friendships,” giving “listeners a glimpse into the world of its creators, their friends, and their collaborators.”

I was happy to find another person who feels hip-hop is full of inside jokes and that they are used to welcome people in. But the tragedy of De La Soul’s music—how revolutionary and positive it was, and how much the group is needed in hip-hop—is how hard it is to access their music now. The group’s first six albums have never been, and may never be, available in digital form. If you check iTunes or Spotify or any other digital music service, you’ll only find 2004’s The Grind Date and 2016’s and the Anonymous Nobody, the two most recent albums from De La Soul. Sick of the battles with record labels, the group crowdfunded and the Anonymous Nobody through Kickstarter and produced the album with almost no samples, instead spending “three years recording more than 200 hours of the Rhythm Roots Allstars, a 10-piece funk and soul band it has toured with… for the basis of the 17 tracks.”

Finn Cohen writes in an article for the New York Times that De La’s back catalogue is wrapped up in legal purgatory. Their early music was produced in an era when sampling wasn’t given the attention it is today, and there is language missing from contracts with sample source artists that keeps the group from gaining income and building their community through digital music. Tommy Boy, De La Soul’s indie hip-hop record label from their early days, sold their library to Warner Music Group, which has decided to bury the old albums rather than chase down all the samples for new contracts. With over 60 samples to clear on
3 Feet High and Rising alone, from Johnny Cash and Steely Dan to Otis Redding and Kraftwerk, one might empathize with the difficult task. But it’s still a tragedy. The album is a certified classic.

In 2010, the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress added the album to its collection of recordings noted for their “aesthetic, historic or cultural significance,” making it one of only 475 recordings preserved for such significance as of 2017, a collection which includes Thomas Edison’s voice on a wax cylinder, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s fireside chats, John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, James Brown’s Live at the Apollo, and Public Enemy’s Fear of a Black Planet.

Cohen quotes Questlove of The Roots, “3 Feet High and Rising is very much in danger of being the classic tree that fell in the forest that was once given high praise and now is just a stump.” Common, who appeared on De La Soul’s now hidden Stakes is High, said: “It’s obviously disappointing, because I feel like De La is timeless music, and I feel like there’s a 16-year-old that would find De La and be like, ‘Aw, man, that’s cool.” I am one of those kids, though I was 21 when I found De La. And since I checked them out based on samples and references, it’s a bummer to see that De La Soul didn’t crack the top 100 of most sampled artists on whosampled.com.

You can still buy De La Soul’s older work in physical album form, which is great. But it’s not the way music is usually heard these days, and as ambivalent as I am to the sacrosanct way people covet vinyl, there are a lot of people who will only hear of and not actually hear De La Soul if digital versions of their albums remain unavailable.

As I’m writing this, I’m cheating, listening to De La’s albums for free on YouTube, posted not by the artist but by random people, which means De La Soul gets no revenue for the plays. I feel guilty, but giving away their music for free is not against the ethos of the group.

On Valentine’s Day of 2014, Posdnous, Dave, and Maseo put out a call. They gathered email addresses from fans and sent out links to zip files of their first six albums, letting fans download digital copies for free. Cohen writes: “The links were available for a day, and the group says the response overloaded the servers hosting the music files.” Warner Music Group shut down the giveaway shortly after, but the message is clear. De La Soul would rather their music be a part of the community they helped build than to have it buried in the stacks. Maseo said: “We were frustrated with people not being able to just get it.” And such a stunt doesn’t hurt when you’re running a Kickstarter to fund a new album.

It’s also worth mentioning that the lines P.O.S. revised, the lines that opened me up to seek De La Soul, come from the song “I Am I Be,” where Posdnous says: “I am Posdnous. I be the new generation of slaves here to make papes to buy a record exec rakes the pile of revenue I create. But I guess I don’t get a cut ‘cause my rent’s a month late.”

I wonder who I would be if I had never found hip-hop and De La Soul. If my main cultural references were Bible stories like these:

Imag ine it: there you are, high above the city of Babel, hundreds of years removed from the great flood that swept this land clean, wiping sweat off your brow with the back of your hand that holds the trowel. You set a brick down and observe the majesty you create: a tower that will reach heaven. Little do you know, God is jealous. “Indeed the people are one and they all have one
language,” God says, “and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

You don’t hear his words. Instead, you call to your workmate, asking for a ladle of water. He turns to you but there’s no recognition in his eyes. “Water,” you say again, miming the ladle to your lips. He hands you the tool but when he speaks gibberish comes out.

Panic rises in the streets. Workstation abandoned, you push through the crowd, seeing groups forming, faces mixed with relief and fear. “We can’t trust the others,” you hear a voice say, and you search for it, for someone you can understand.

“What’s going on?” you ask.

The speaker hears you and waves you close, “We can’t stay here. Gather your belongings. We leave tonight.”

And so, you are fractured, separated, scattered.

Imagine it: there you are, walking the streets of Jerusalem in a time of turmoil. Fifty days since the man Pontius Pilate crucified rose from the dead, ascended to heaven. You’re a stranger from a strange place, passing through the city on your journey home, understanding little, saying nothing.

Then you hear a sound—the rushing of a mighty wind, pouring directly into a house nearby. From the house, a group of men and women burst into the streets. Above their heads hover cloven tongues of flame. Some of them shout, and you hear your language for the first time in months. One of the men jumps on a table and holds a hand up to the crowd, he looks nothing like you, nothing like your brothers, but you understand as he says, “It is prophecy fulfilled.” He quotes to you in your language, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, ‘I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

You are amazed and receive baptism with thousands of others. You are saved by this miracle of tongues, this proof that the crucified man was God on earth, this proof that the physical presence of God is gone but his Holy Spirit has come for all who wish to know it.

Imagine it: there you are, a blonde boy born in the year of our lord 1987 to a preacher father and teacher mother, taught to believe the two previous stories as absolute truth. Every Friday your sisters, your mom, your dad, and you pack suitcases and drive seventy miles east to live for the weekend at the Pentecostal church that’s a cross between hippie commune and fundamentalist refuge, nestled among red cedars and a river named for the pines. You pray, you read your Bible, you skip rocks with your dad in the river Sunday afternoons after he gives his sermon, after he and the other grown-ups speak with the voice of the Holy Spirit.

But what do you do when you go to public school in North Saint Paul, Minnesota? Do you tell the kids about the stories of the two men? Do you tell them about Diana and the way she channels the Holy Ghost the best? How do you make friends with kids you know are going to hell because only the fifteen or so people who go to your church have it right?

Ah, you’ll find some way to connect. Just give it time.
While researching this piece, I received a new reference to trace from *The A.V. Club* article by Nathan Rabin. When describing a car ride with his older sister, who had introduced him to hip-hop and who had taken him to a De La Soul show when he was younger, Rabin says he put on Dead Prez’s album *Let’s Get Free* and watched as his sister “sported a polite but undeniably pained expression… It was as if Dead Prez was communicating in a language she didn’t understand.” Rabin empathetically says, “Her response made sense, since hip-hop is a shifting language, an utterly malleable vernacular. I’m not just talking about slang; I’m talking about hip-hop as a musical, cultural, and even sartorial language, an elaborate code of conduct with perpetually changing customs and attitudes.” His sister had never been a huge hip-hop fan, he says, but she had lost the frame of reference that would help her decipher Dead Prez’s “righteous rage.”

Then Rabin drops the reference for us, comparing his sister’s experience, and his own changing knowledge of pop culture, to an episode of *The Twilight Zone* from 1985 called “Wordplay.” I found the episode on YouTube. It’s worth a watch. Comedian Robert Klein stars and Wes Craven directs. In the episode, Klein’s character is named Bill Lowery, until he isn’t.

Bill is a medical supply salesman, and we start the episode watching him wake up on a recliner in his living room, having fallen asleep there trying to learn the terminology of a new line of materials his company is selling. The trademark *Twilight Zone* spookiness subtly pops up as his wife, Cathy, played by Annie Potts, mentions their son is sick but she doesn’t care for their regular doctor’s current replacement, who is named “Dr. Bumper.” “Bumper?” Bill asks, thinking the name seems odd. She brushes it off, and so does he. Outside, as Bill gets in his car to go to work, his neighbor, played by Robert Downey Sr., announces their dog gave birth to puppies. Bill is surprised to hear there were nine puppies in the litter, to which the neighbor says, “I know. That’s quite a few for a small dog like an encyclopedia.” Bill pauses and asks why the neighbor said encyclopedia. And the neighbor confirms that the dog’s breed is encyclopedia. Again, Bill brushes it off and heads to work.

This continues and escalates, as throughout the day people use English words that Bill understands, but the people use them in ways that make no sense. One fellow older member of the sales team defends himself and Bill against some ruffian young salesmen, saying “It may take us a little longer to learn it [the new terminology], but we got the one thing only time can give you—mayonnaise.” The comedic timing and surprise of “mayonnaise” got me, and I caught a quick laugh in my throat. Like pop music, laughter is a social act, unconsciously performed to build connection with fellow audience members. Most people laugh less when watching something funny alone, which I was, and which means the line deserves credit for cracking me up.

Back to the episode. After some more confusing interactions, Bill heads to the elevators to go home for lunch, but gets riled up when a coworker asks him where he should take a date for “dinosaur.” Bill can’t let it go, asking if dinosaur is some “new age” way of saying lunch before the coworker walks off. Back home, the spook-o-meter ticks higher when Cathy also says she’s worried about their sick son who wouldn’t touch his dinosaur. Bill flips. Paranoid that he’s being set up by coworkers and his wife, he demands to know what the word “lunch” means to Cathy. “You know what lunch means,” she says, worried. “It’s a color. You know, sort of reddish. A light red.”
Bill is confused, but checks on his sick son and heads back to work, where things tip from spooky to insane. In one interaction with a receptionist on his way into the office, Bill is greeted, “Angularity, Mr. Lowery.” He pauses and asks her to hold his calls, which she doesn’t understand. He mimics with the phone that he doesn’t want any calls, to which she says, “Sure, Mr. Thunder.” In the span of a minute, even his name has changed. A coworker hands him a folder that says it’s for “Hinge Thunder,” which is now his name. Unable to cope, he rushes out of the office and drives home, prompted by a dash light in his car to “Fasten Stepdad.”

At home, Cathy is frantic. Spewing English words but providing no information, she grabs him by the arm and they run up the stairs to the son’s room. The boy is sweating and coughing. The parents rush to the hospital where Bill—or Hinge—can’t communicate with the doctors and nurses what is wrong, relying on Cathy and only finding out their son is okay based on reading her reaction to the doctor’s words. Sniffing and tearful, Hinge puts his hand on his son’s forehead and says, “Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much for my boy.” He turns his eyes up to the ceiling and says, “I hope you can understand me.”

In that moment, we see that Bill accepts it’s not the world that’s gone haywire. It’s him. He no longer has the words, no longer knows the language. Back home, he eats a silent dinner with Cathy and sits down on their son’s bed after, opening a vocabulary book and reciting “Wednesday” as he brushes his fingers over a picture of a dog. He’s trying to learn.

The feeling Bill has as he realizes he has to start over is so similar to what I felt when I left the church, or even while I was still a part of it. My family lived in two worlds. On the weekends, my family lived at the church—ate, slept, worshipped, played, fought, did everything in the language of the church. During the week, my dad worked a corporate job in Minneapolis, my mom was a special education teacher, my sisters and I went to public school. We performed a kind of code-switching, moving from the vernacular of dogmatic religion to the parlance of the workplace or playground. But there were limits.

My oldest sister, Bethany, had a friend who would drop movie references and pause to see who would pick them up. His most common well of material was Dumb and Dumber. And people ate it up. I was so jealous of the laughs he got from the rest of their friend group. I was the squirmy little brother, invading the edges of their youth group hang outs, and I wanted to belong. I wanted to get the joke, but more so I wanted to do what he did, to so effortlessly hold everyone’s attention. I’m sure that played a big part in my obsession with absorbing pop culture. I wanted to be cool, which is pretty common. Even trying not to be cool is its own kind of trying to be cool. It just depends which community you’re appealing to.

At the 2017 Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Washington D.C., I attended a panel called “The Written Orality of Hip-Hop Lyricism.” The moderator of the panel was the poet and performer Tracie Morris, and the panel consisted of poets and professors: Victorio Reyes, Derik Smith, Tara Betts, and Jone Mixon-Webster. The guiding concern for the panel was “Locating rap at the crossroads of written and oral traditions of African American culture,” evaluating “rap as a written art that is symbiotically wedded to oral culture.” In other words, the central question was whether hip-hop lyrics can and should be studied as writing or as verbal act. The answer, of course, is complicated, but the
panelists seemed to lean toward the inseparability of lyrics from verbal act, requiring that they be both seen and heard.

All four panelists had interesting points, but for the purposes of my exploration, there were two panelists who struck a chord. First was Derek Smith, who read part of a critical book that started as his PhD dissertation from Northwestern University, titled *Love’s Lonely Offices: Robert Hayden and the African-American Literary Tradition*. Smith talked about “the parallels between the presentation of hip hop artists with Black Arts Movement poets and preachers,” according to Renée E. D’Aoust’s conference report in the *Assay* nonfiction journal. In my notes, I wrote down Smith’s emphasis on poets from the Black Arts Movement who co-opted the style and verbal flair of preachers for their poetry, hoping to deter their community from the “trifling preacher” and the “pied piper.” D’Aoust quotes Smith who claimed that artists from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s wanted to appeal to the churchgoing people in the African American community, and to do so their poems needed

> to vibrate with the Dionysian power that was best exemplified in the oral artistry of the black preachers—and so, in their Oedipal battle against the patriarchs of the black church, BAM poets became versions of the preachers they sought to overthrow and replace. They did this because they wanted to connect with the black folk classes who had for so long ignored the black artist-intellectuals.

Smith extended the claim to say that hip-hop came about in the Bronx in the 1970s as an offshoot of the oral poetics of the Black Arts Movement, which was centralized in Harlem. I came along a generation later, and really delved into hip-hop in the early 2000s. But it’s likely that hip-hop appealed to me in a similar way to what Smith describes. Hip-hop’s artistry uses and rejects the trappings of preachers and sermons and provides a community and a channel for that kind of expression.

The poet and PhD candidate Jonah Mixon-Webster presented on how hip-hop artists use ad libs—the sounds, yells, grunts, emotive noises—found in the breaks and pauses of hip-hop songs. Mixon-Webster used the Latin definition of *ad libitum*: at one’s pleasure. Describing the vocalizations, he said they are an: “onomatopoeic device and a method to make side commentary or create rhythm.” And he said they “push beyond sense making” and signs, adding that “text can’t often capture” the voice and presence of an ad lib. This sounds a lot like the way I understood speaking in tongues. It’s that push beyond understanding toward feeling, which is maybe another reason hip-hop carries such an appeal for me—often both rebellious and familiar.

Mixon-Webster’s bio describes him as a “text/sound poet,” and he showed his sound artist skills as he gave examples of ad libs, from Lil Jon’s often parodied “Yeah!” or “Okay!” to Kanye’s “Hah!” Mixon-Webster pointed out that sometimes the ad libs are words or phrases like Big Sean saying, “Oh God” Sometimes they’re illegible like Busta Rhymes’ “Woo Ha!” or, maybe my favorite, Common’s smooth “Ugh,” punctuating verses. De La Soul’s song “Dinninit” from *Stakes is High* is built around an ad lib chorus: “Dinninit. Yo. Hey, hey, hey.” Writing them here, the ad libs lose impact, which was part of the point of the Mixon-Webster’s presentation, that to separate from the aural experience removes something.

I think Mixon-Webster tried to recreate J.J. Fad’s extended ad lib on the 1988 song “Superson-
ic,” which the lyrics website Genius lists as:

A sama lama lama lama doo ma nama lama seema nama
Lama nama doo nama lama nama seema nama
Lama nama doo nama lama nama seema nama
Lama nama seema nama doo ma nama, yeah

I say I think he attempted this, but my memory is fuzzy, and I can’t find corroboration from D’Aoust’s report, which seems surprising if it really happened. If you’ve heard the song, you know how fast and how difficult these lines would be to recreate. It’s a hell of an ad lib, and it sounds a lot like speaking in tongues.

Sunday morning, from the kitchen island where I crunch raisin bran and read the box hawking heathen Boyz II Men merchandise, I hear the heavy front door slam. Diana walks into the kitchen. Wearing her usual white dress, canvas Bible case in hand, glasses on a chain around her neck, she says good morning, and I try not to stare at the black horse riding helmet on her head. Things must be bad. Smiling between bites, I say hello. How’s school, she asks? Good. Your mom and dad still upstairs getting ready? Yep.

The demons first appear as a haze in her eyes, one I’m not sure is there until she puts a hand out to the counter, steadying herself. A knowing groan pushes from her throat. The blinking starts, and she clenches her teeth. I’ve never seen this part before, rushed out of the room when the evil forces enter. Part of me wants to watch, wants to see. But a bigger part is scared, afraid the demons will get me too, and I spring off my stool and dash to the stairs. MOM! I yell. Diana needs help! A beat, then footsteps pound in the hallway and down the steps. Where? My mom asks. The kitchen. Get upstairs. Turning before I go, I see Diana, crumpled on the linoleum, eyes wide, a string of drool leaking between teeth gnashed down on her tongue. Praise-God-Praise-God-Praise-God, my mom streams as she huddles over Diana’s shaking body. I start up the stairs but move to one side as my dad rushes down. I stop. Kneeling, I squeeze my eyes shut and ask God for help. Please, I say. Please help her. Please remove the demons. Please. Please.

During my most recent visit to the old church, I spoke with Diana a bit. When I first approached her before the service started, she looked puzzled, and I introduced myself. She recognized my last name but asked if we had met before. I was almost hurt. I had visited the summer before and spoken with her then. But I just said yes, that I was a part of the church until I was about 13 and that I had fond memories of her. She seemed embarrassed and asked how my parents were. I said they were fine, and I told her how I remembered her enthusiastic channeling of the Holy Spirit, asking her if she still feels that connection. She said it’s weaker now. There are fewer people in the congregation who speak in tongues, and part of what made it strong for her in the past was the reverberation she felt from praising together. I guess we both miss the community in our own ways, both rebuilt it in our own ways.

It’s one thing to talk history and cite academic sources and quote facts and figures about De La Soul. But hip-hop, maybe music in general, is like speaking in tongues—it’s more about feeling. It’s the feeling of hip-hop that builds a sense of community, that brings me back, that makes me want to justify my obsession as more than cultural appropriation.

On the Jurassic 5 song “Where We At,” Yasiin
Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) says between verses: “Remember that feeling? Remember how hip-hop used to make you feel? … Remember the first time—the way you felt when you heard ‘Planet Rock’? ‘The Bridge is Over’? There’s so much longing in his voice. He’s missing something lost. Maybe the community and connection he felt in the ‘80s when both “Planet Rock” and “The Bridge is Over” came out of New York. The Jurassic 5 song where Bey says this was released in 2006, the year I graduated high school and the time I started moving away from current hip-hop to dig into the older stuff. There’s a lot of hip-hop, maybe all along but especially from that time, full of nostalgia, calling back to what came before as proof the music has lost its way. Maybe that was part of the appeal of hip-hop for me too—a connection to that longing for the comfort and ease of a time past. It could be that I was watching a genre and an art form age, joining the scene as foundational artists were feeling the pressure from the industry, from their own aging, from new artists, and the nostalgia was for their youth as much as it was for a superior version of the music. But it was a feeling I could relate with: hurt by change, the loss of certainty as I left the church, angry yet also longing to go back, if only because it felt simpler.

I don’t remember the exact moment I first heard De La Soul. I’m sure I laughed at some of the skits on *De La Soul Is Dead*, and I know I fell in love with the positive, bouncy, jazzy vibe of songs like “Pease Porridge” and “Fanatic of the B Word.” I do remember the first and only time I saw De La live. It was May 29, 2011 in Shakopee, Minnesota at the Rhymesayers hip-hop festival, Soundset. The day was cloudy; it was supposed to rain but luckily never did. Pete was there with me. And De La Soul was playing the main stage. I was excited, finally able to feel that connection with De La in person.

But it didn’t work out that way. I remember a tension, a frustration from the members of De La Soul. When I check around online now, no one else seems to acknowledge what I felt at the show. The few reviews simply say that it was cool to see a group as old and well-established as De La still rocking. Maybe I’m remembering it wrong, but I did find a journal entry I wrote around the time that confirms I felt it then. There is one phone-recorded YouTube video of De La performing “Oooh,” and they look like they’re having fun, bouncing off each other, gesturing into the crowd, calling out to Minneapolis as every musician does on tour. Yet I remember feeling like they didn’t want to be there, like they couldn’t connect with us as an audience. We were a young, mostly white, Midwestern crowd. We were as psyched to see them as we were to see Brother Ali, Big Boi of Outkast, and Atmosphere, all who were performing after De La, who would headline almost any other show. I know I’m sometimes guilty of judging other white hip-hop fans, assuming they’re tourists or posers. I’m sure people do this to me too. On this occasion, though, I felt sympathetic to the crowd more than the artists on stage. I wonder if De La felt like we were just there to party and get wasted, showing a lack of respect for the artistry of their music, which I’m sure some were doing. It’s possible De La thought we weren’t real fans. But maybe I’m projecting my own insecurities.

To be fair, the sound equipment stopped working more than once during De La’s performance, and I remember seeing Dave hang his head in frustration. It was understandable. These were legends in hip-hop, playing in a muddy field in Minnesota on a cloudy day. And they couldn’t even get through their songs without technical failure. I can understand why they wouldn’t want
to be there. We weren’t their community, even if we wanted to be. And Posdnous, Dave, and Maseo are people, with emotions and lives offstage, and I have no way of knowing what else was going on in their heads. I guess I was just disappointed, but I couldn’t say whose fault it was.

I also remember that immediately after De La left the stage, Brother Ali came out fast. There’s usually a ten or fifteen-minute pause between acts at festivals like Soundset, but he was right on their heels. And he was in a touchy-feely kind of place, which made me think he felt the discord too. I’ve seen the Minneapolis native Brother Ali live a bunch of times, shook his hand once as I pitched him my never finished movie idea. He was kind and told me to keep writing. At shows, he’s often kind of brusque, quick with a glare or a speech about how to behave as an audience or hip-hop fan, which I like. Hip-hop shows are one of the few places I really get goofy, bouncing all over the place, throwing hands in the air, screaming when prompted to, feeling like it’s just the artist and me even with hundreds of other people around. And sermons from artists like Brother Ali help me know that’s how I am supposed to act.

Most recently, I saw Brother Ali in Tucson in February 2017. This was my first time seeing Ali outside of Minnesota, and he had the crowd moving yet maintained the preacher-like vibe I’m used to. At one point, between songs, he pointed out a specific person in the front row for standing still, saying we’re here to “party with a bunch of friends who live and feel and care about the things you care about.” Turning to the rest of the audience, he asked, “How many of you all found this music because somebody that loves you showed it to you?” The crowd cheered. Turning back to the person in the front row, he said, “I don’t mean to pick on you. [But] when I ask you to do stuff, you’re looking at me like ‘No.’” With some classic Minnesota self-deprecation, he said their unwillingness to get excited and to party wasn’t taking away anything from his experience because, “I can hardly even see you. I’m albino. I can’t see very much.” Turning back to the crowd, like a good preacher would, he said, “You’re really stealing something from all the people in here who want to feel what it’s like when we’re all on the same page at the same time with the same intentions and the same energy.” That’s the sense of community hip-hop is about, exemplified at a show.

And that’s the kind of direct, call-you-out style from Brother Ali I had experienced before, and why it was so surprising to see him take the stage after De La Soul on that cloudy day with his little spiral notebook. He asked us to give it up again for the legends. And then he asked tenderly if the crowd wanted to hear some new stuff he’d been working on. He got us loud and rowdy with some of his popular songs, but he also had this opening of his heart, doing acapella verses from his notebook, stuff he hadn’t recorded yet or even found beats for. His vulnerability wasn’t completely out of character, but I felt like it wasn’t premeditated. It was built up on the spot based on how he read the crowd. I think he knew we felt a little disappointed by the show, which I don’t mean as disrespect to De La Soul.

I’m a fan. I will almost certainly always be a fan of De La. Their records were instrumental in bringing me into the community and making me feel at home. But maybe the point is that those kinds of communities shift and change. Brother Ali was what I needed at the moment: a local guy who felt what I felt and who could be what I needed as a fairly new hip-hop fan. He spoke a language I could understand. De La Soul was the legendary crew, who had probably done the
exact thing Brother Ali was doing hundreds or thousands of times before. On this occasion, they didn’t. And they didn’t have to.

I think of the Bob Dylan line from “If You See Her, Say Hello,” where he says, “either I’m too sensitive, or else I’m getting soft.” And that is exactly why I need hip-hop and music and pop culture. It’s hard to find the words to express how I feel, which is maybe a ridiculous thing to say as a writer. It doesn’t mean I don’t try or that I don’t think it’s possible. But one of my moves is to point to a pop culture reference like the faces on a feelings chart. How am I feeling? Shuffle through the pop culture memory bank. Ding! Dylan. Ah, yes, I’m feeling like I’m being too sensitive, complaining that De La Soul didn’t like me as much as I wanted them to.

I probably overdo the pop culture references sometimes. I’ve been known to leave the group I’m talking with at a party to shuffle over to strangers: “Did someone mention J Dilla?” or “Are you the one who put on the Aceyalone song?” But it helps me talk to people, to connect with my barber who loves Marvel movies or the bike mechanic playing Atmosphere on her radio or the students in my classes who like J Cole. And I’m going to keep learning. Like Posdnous says, “Man, every word I say should be a hip-hop quotable.”

Caleb Klitzke is an essayist who writes about hip-hop, idealistic leaders, canoes, Minnesota, and the weird church where he was raised. His collection of essays uses those interests to tell the story of his separation from the cult-like childhood church where his father was a pastor and how the church continues to influence the way he sees the world. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, teaching writing at Century College and repairing canoes near Grand Marais in the summer.
Last summer on my way into Mexico, I stopped in Tijuana where I saw an animal called a zonkey. The animal is a donkey but painted with stripes of women’s black hair dye so as to look like a zebra. Hence the name zonkey. They are a surprisingly common site in Tijuana where tourists, for a small fee, can change into a poncho/sombrero number and climb atop the animal to pose for pictures. I didn’t know it before I went there, but that’s just a thing in Tijuana.

So on my first full afternoon in Mexico I was walking down an alley near the tourist strip in the city, when I sited my first zonkey. He was tied to a pole in front of a brick wall of graffiti that made him look so gritty and urban I thought he might as well have been smoking a cigarette.

I stopped to consider the animal. His zebra stripes had been painted on in an artisanal way, so he looked like he could almost pass as a zebra if he needed to. And yet, I thought his kind brown eyes and passive temperament were definite donkey giveaways.

I was just thinking something like “What a World,” when an old man passing through the alley carrying a bucket of paint said something to me in Spanish, like, “Go ahead, pet him.” He gave an imaginary soft pat to the air with his free hand showing me how it was done in Tijuana.

I hesitated, but the old man pet the air again like it would be so relaxing and maybe? He really wanted me to have the experience of touching silky Zonkey. Nose fur.

On some level, I didn’t want to disappoint him. When I come into a new country I’m just flattered that anyone will interact with me at all. The people I encounter seem to be doing God’s work just by pointing me to the bathroom or selling me food. No one owes me any favors as I see it, because when I need something in a language I don’t speak very well, I tend to just throw out nouns, a toothy smile and jazz hands, a sort of “Look at me go/And…. Then I’m out,” gesture. So, if this random old man had an impulse to tell me I should rest my hand on a warm zonkey snout for a moment,
I thought it was the least I could do to be friendly. It was nice that he was talking and gesturing with me, and I know I wanted to pat the zonkey, but also that it just seemed rude? not to pat the zonkey at that point.

“Well why not,” I thought as I finally went in for a little stroke. And right after that is probably when I blacked out because I remember thinking “Well why not?” and the next thing I knew this zonkey was chomping down on my hand with a force that felt like a lifetime’s worth of pure pent up rage.

His teeth were dull and they came down not like it was in his nature to eat a human hand, but like we'd driven him to it. And even as I thought please, please not, my hand, and I need that hand? I do some things with that. And Ohmygodnotlikethis. And my knees buckled with his intensifying chomp, and his zonkey lips sealed over my hand, and I considered my death by exotic-domestic beast in a Tijuana ally, I utterly understood what was happening: The zonkey was a joke to everyone, underappreciated, his identity misunderstood so bad he could only really express the injustice in his heart by taking my hand in his zonkey mouth and pressing hard with his stone-like zonkey teeth until he wounded me, perhaps mortally.

I heard the old man yelling, but he just kept walking around behind us apparently not sure what else to do. It was not a great time for brainstorming for me either. But as the pressure continued to increase, I was able to grab a handful of zonkey molars with my right hand and try to yank upwards to pry my crushed left hand free. I remember distinctly wondering if I was doing that right, as if I had time to deploy technique or to feel bad for not knowing the proper technique for unlocking a zonkey jaw. I could feel his wet nostril breath, as I pleaded silently for mercy, when finally, on the third try I yanked up with the full force of my pent-up rage and his mouth released me.

The skin on the back of my hand was on its way to bruising. It was swollen and just barely broken by fat, dull teeth marks, the exact impression in my mind of righteous zonkey fury. The old man shrugged and said he had never seen anything like that before. The old man laughed, at the zonkey.

That night I went to a pharmacy called Similares, their tag line, “Lo Mismo Pero Mas Baratto,” (The same but cheaper) appealed to me.

I walked up to the pharmacist. He was a young and clean-cut guy in a white medical-official’s jacket. I presented my hand, just a single backward jazz hand this time for inspection. I said, “Un cerro? Come mis mano?” A…zonkey? Ate my hand? Because I don’t know the verb for bit, which is actually what happened to me.

He looked me right in the eye and goes in English: “That’s fucking crazy.”

I asked about an antibiotic, I didn't know where the zonkey's mouth had been, and the pharmacist put his hand on my hand on the counter. “No, you’re going to be fine on your own,” he said, and he patted the angry zonkey bite I probably deserved. I’d like to say the little scar reminds me of injustice and exploitation of beings everywhere, but when I look at it, I think: What. A. World. And: how fucking crazy was that?
Once I got a ticket for riding mass transit one stop outside of Fareless Square in Portland without fare. I went to court hoping to use the “I was wearing my iPod and didn’t hear the announcement” defense, but when I came before the judge he was pissed at the big group of defendants, and he just scolded us and gave us the choice of paying a $90 fine or doing eight hours of community service. Someone had carved “This judge is a fucker” into the bench I stood by, and that made the scolding bearable. I was also glad the fucker was offering us the eight hours of community service, because I didn’t have $90.

When I got to the used clothing store I’d been assigned, the manager was already exhausted with me. She told me not to hide, and that she could tell “when you guys try to hide.” I was a little insulted that she thought I was the kind of person who would hide from a manager at my court-mandated volunteer job.

So, at first, I wanted to impress her. I hung and color-coded used bath mats, dickies, tube tops, and bedding to prove I was a good person. But then my back began to hurt. I’m not really suited for physical labor, or any kind of labor, and although I had planned to stay away from the other convicts, I soon found myself in their aisles with questions: Was this Dutch-boy-and-girl figurine, with handles, a vase or a mug? Was this blouse, with bell-shaped sleeves, a men’s or a women’s blouse? Why did people own plastic flowers? Who would pay $2.99 for a Taco Bell Chihuahua that had been Free with Purchase? What would have to happen in your life to make you stoop to buying used underwear?

After a few hours, I decided to ask everyone why they were there, just to see if anyone had tried to run from the transit cops. I asked one guy who looked like he was at work on casual Friday (khakis and short-sleeved polo), and he said he didn’t know anything about transit cops. He’d been caught stealing from Microsoft. He’d sold everything using his Microsoft work account, which was first then last name at Microsoft.com. “Really
dumb,” he confided. “If you ever need a laptop or anything,” he said, and gave me his card, which had a Yahoo address on it. “Nothing stolen anymore,” he assured me.

I came up to the next guy hanging holiday sweaters, and I felt a little weirder about prying. He was scruffy, yes, with scabby hands, yes, but handsome. “So why are you here?” I asked.

“I got drunk and broke into a car and stole some CDs.”

“Oh,” I said.

Hesitantly he asked “And you?” suggesting he had slightly more respect for my privacy than I did for his.

“Murder,” I said.

He struggled to normalize it. “So they just like gave you lots of community service hours?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said.

Then I asked a girl sorting worn-out, old lady shoes what she had done. “I shanked a dog,” she said, smiling. I stared at her poofy bangs and suspiciously long hair while I struggled to match the verb with its meaning. “I was living on the coast,” she said, as if that explained everything. And it did explain some. “Shank,” I thought. “To shank?”

Then: “Oh, Jesus.”

“I was at a party and this dog came after us so we got a sword out of the trunk and shanked it, and then poured gas on it, but the police got there before we could light it on fire, and the police had to taser me ten times. They said they have never had to taser anyone that much.” She kept smiling and sorting whitish collapsed church shoes while she talked.

A volunteer work buddy sorting with her nodded and bragged, “She has more than a year of community service left to do.”

“Wow,” I said, and walked away.

I found the scabby/handsome guy in the book section, along with an 18-year-old boy who was given eight hours of volunteer work for possession of meth as well as a woman's stolen checkbook. We decided to arrange the books by category, and then alphabetically.

Most of the books were about golf, fondue, cats, Jell-O, Bible trivia, early-90s politics, debt blasting, and losing weight while eating more. My back hurt so I sat down and read a little lesbian erotica and a book about using hypnosis to quit smoking.

Scabby/handsome had read Oprah Books, including The Lovely Bones and Lucky by Alice Sebold. I admitted I hadn't murdered anyone. He hid some books by Sean Hannity. Then I told him that the girl sorting shoes had shanked a dog on the coast “Oh, Jesus,” he said.

After a while the boy who had been caught with meth came back to the book section with a buzzer from Scattergories and used it to disagree with us about how to shelve books. “Maybe you should think about giving up meth,” I suggested, and he laughed, exposing a missing front tooth.

“No, really,” Scabby/handsome said from the ladder.

We had just sorted the self-help shelves and were feeling bold. The manager came back to the book section—no doubt tipped off by the Scattergories buzzer and the anti-theft mirror—and said she didn’t think it took three people to organize the books. Because I was doing the least I went back to hanging the yellowing, overpriced T-shirts.

In the last hour of my job, the boy who was caught with meth abandoned the books and followed me (me, a woman without $90, a woman who spent the day hiding from a manager of a used clothing store) and tried to make sexual innuendo about every mundane task I was involved in. When I picked up a shirt off the ground and
hung it, he said slowly, “I can show you how to hang that.” As I laughed at his clumsy meth-affected lines, he leaned over and whispered into my ear, “We could get a six-pack of Pabst and go back to that couch in the warehouse.”

“Maybe you should stop doing meth,” I said.

“We can get a six pack of O'Doul's,” he countered. “I don't care. I can drink O'Doul's.”
Once, in Brazil, I ended up eating dinner in a section of Salvador called Pelourinho, which my Lonely Planet said was the old slave auctioning and whipping site, but that was now filled with charming, overpriced tourist restaurants. I was with a Japanese girl I had met in Rio. She swore like a Yakuza member, but she read her guidebook diligently. I was alone as usual, and she allowed me to follow along as she took the right buses to the beach and showed up at the bank to change money during business hours. In exchange for my freeloadinig she occasionally demanded we must eat some of the “must eat” dishes in some of the “must eat” restaurants pictured on the shiny pages of her Japanese guidebook. Monika, a Canadian who was model gorgeous and fluent in her parent's Portugal-style Portuguese, but had trouble walking on all the cobblestone in flip-flops, ate with us. Yoko deliberately ordered us dishes from Africa with okra and shrimp and peppers, and we sat outside in the warm night (where slaves used to be whipped) listening to drum beats in the distance and talking about how unforgiving the Brazilian bathing suits were.

I walked back to the hostel to take a shower. When I got back to my room from the bathroom, I heard police sirens outside. I leaned out the heavy, framed colonial window with a swimmer’s towel to my hair. An Israeli on the guy’s floor below me looked up. “You should come down here,” he said, gesturing from my floor to his with a lit cigarette.

So I came down without shoes to lean out the hallway window and try to see the police. He offered me a Marlboro from a box with a photo of a premature baby hooked up to machines on it. He had another box that illustrated impotence with a woman in a king-size bed looking away from a man with his head in his hands. A third box featured a photograph of black charred lungs. They must have been meant to deter kids and illiterate adults from smoking, but although I don't normally smoke, I took and started to smoke a cigarette from the low birth weight baby box for the novelty of it.
It felt good. I told the Israeli that I sort of liked violence, which is the sort of asinine thing only someone who has never been the victim of violence or has never been forced to victimize others can say. What I meant was that I find memorable those times that are so confusing and intense that you are forced to be totally conscious of the present moment. So I followed up by saying, “I mean I don’t like it, but at the same time I like it. You know?” He agreed as we looked down the street and saw some riot police marching on the cobblestone. He told me his name, which was unpronounceable and hard to remember. I tried to say it a couple of times, but then gave up. I told him my name was Emily, and he said he knew that name from Beverly Hills, 90210. I forgave him for having seen that much 90210. He said, “Maybe, Emily, you wouldn’t like violence so much if you came from somewhere with more of it.” I agreed with him, and he explained how there were some fun times in the Israeli army, but mostly it was a waste of time.

I soon heard Monika stumbling up the steps in her flip-flops, a loud posse of youth hostel guests trailing behind her. Yoko’s favorite swear-word, mukatsuku, floated up to us several times before they reached our floor. When Monika and Yoko did reach the second floor, they said they didn’t know what was going on outside with the police and they both raised their eyebrows with interest about the Israeli. I shook my head no, we were just two people sharing a conversation about violence and an entire pack of cigarettes decorated tastefully with a photo of an underweight baby.

Once they passed, the Israeli told me that after he got out of the army, he spent a year in Maryland selling massage devices called Mr. Tinglers from a cart in the mall, and that’s how he was able to save up enough money for this trip to South America. “Wait,” he said, and ran to his room. When he came back he was carrying the Mr. Tingler contraption, which was a little wooden knob with wires coming out of it. I laughed at the amount of space this must be taking up in his luggage, but he told me to stop laughing and turn around and close my eyes. So I did. As he let Mr. Tingler’s wires come down over my skull, he spun me around and kissed me.

Being hit on is about as common for me as being caught up in street violence, and it felt similarly thrilling and overwhelming. He pulled me into the hostel bathroom and we made out against the tiled wall. Every moment with him made me feel suddenly conscious and clear-headed. Then he pulled away from me for a moment. It hit me I was making out in a hostel bathroom with someone whose name I couldn’t pronounce who had seduced me with a Mr. Tingler. My breath smelled like Marlboros. I felt dumb, so I told him I should go back to my bunk, and he was cool about it.

When I went downstairs for breakfast in the morning, Mr. Tingler and I nodded to each other and smiled. His table was full of Israelis speaking Hebrew, and Monika and Yoko had saved a seat for me. The TV was turned to CNN, which was focused on violence somewhere. I could not tell where. The experts in their suits and hair-sprayed hair presented the conflict as if conflict was inevitable. They agreed it was happening now and could be prevented, but at the same time at the conclusion of the piece they smiled politely and signed off as if the violence was also occurring in a land so distant it might as well be the past.
EMILY MALONEY’s stories have been included in *Best American Legal Writing* and twice in *Best American Travel Writing*. She has been a contributing editor at *World Hum* and a columnist and features writer at *The Smart Set* where her writing was chosen as “Article of Note” by *Arts and Letters Daily*, and “Notable Travel writing” by *Best American Travel Writing*. While pursuing an MFA in nonfiction at the University of Arizona, she was a Foundation Award winner in poetry and had fiction published in *Drunken Boat*.

What’s more, Emily Maloney has a license in Ikebana flower arrangement, an outdated lifeguarding certificate, and would have gotten the presidential award for fitness in junior high if it hadn’t been for the flex arm hang. It should be said here that Emily Maloney is kind of bottom heavy, Her thesis is a collection of stories about traveling the world in a take-no-prisoners pursuit of weird, weird friendship, and she is always open to meeting new weird-weird friends. Her email address is emilymaloney@me.com.

“Volunteering” originally appeared in *The Smart Set* and “Mr. Tingler” appeared in *The Smart Set* and *Best American Travel Writing 2008*. 
Keep coming back to me
  speaking too much
  the talking as thick as
  seaweed clinging to rock
as if to say:
  there are no rocks here
only shapes of rocks
of undulation

wide suffocating tongues licking at the shoreline
coaxing
  like vertigo or
like a mother cow licking an asteroid shower of me
while standing in the frozen
foods section staring at the meat and ice cream

those freezer doors big wet eyes

suddenly smearing
the pit of my stomach

your motion tiny rapid upward sweeps of oxygen of rabid stars

mother, great invisible body invisible mouth
  take me whole move me to the salty insides of this certain sea
I look up from my notebook to see the cylindrical body
of a gull zoom past
spongy and smooth
carved against the gray cotton sky

it has some other creature’s head, could be my head
gazing out at a water that has made this body
that has said *drink*

for a bird this state of scanning
never stops

how do I stop?

a heart could be a boat
tipping and dipping
somewhere inside this body’s chest

wings cannot take on water but a boat can
a heart can

these are things that can stop
I hear you blinking through the pillow
the scrape of your eyelashes against the fabric case
brush of traffic outside the window
I hear you trying to quiet your thoughts
to learn your day’s learning
hear you echoing your own shudders
shuttering your day
I say

time to be quiet, time to rest your body, time to be quiet, time to rest your body,
my voice a boat

I am holding your hand because
sometimes you ask me to
I look up into the ceiling of glow in the dark stars
we attached to fishing line and taped to the ceiling and
I feel vaguely as if underwater
your chest the seafloor surge small
cage of ribs contract expand
elegant and secondary

lying here holding your hand
a small soft starfish
skin fingers of mother son
cupping our time together
sticky and brief
very numerous as in the tinkling of multitudinous bells from the herd, consisting of or containing many individual elements, literary of a body of water vast.

Phosphorescence on moonless nights, bacteria in mouths, glittering gut colonies termites in their mounds, bones in dirt, insects that clean heartbeats housed in sentient beings in non-sentient beings

(blood is and is not a metaphor)
water being sucked up in roots pushed out in flowers

Questioner: *How are we to treat others?*
Answerer: *There are no others.*

winds and sand, heartbreak songs, heartbreak movies, heartbreak poems, heartbreak sex, heartbreak living inside of hearts, escape routes the great walls

(blood is and is not a metaphor)

baby teeth bouncing out of babies, shoelaces, bobby pins, thumb tacks figurines of wrestlers, dead leaves like leaves sheets of paper pens cow’s tails, flies swishing waves and waves and waves
teeth and whispers, tongue, eyelashes, hands,
spoons
seizing hearts, (attacks), guns, pimples, tiny tires from tiny toy trucks
tiny toy trucks, string and ribbons, eyeballs, scales,
hail
   \textit{(blood is and is not a metaphor)}\textit{ }

horror stories, mice, mothers, motors, engines, boats, turbines
dirty movies
hairs of varying lengths, tattoos, yards and yards of skin
scalpels, ringtones
profiles

The tinkling of the sea, the larger repetition of the crickets and their legs

\textit{How are we to treat others?}
\textit{There are no others.}
Accumulation is minute
fossils really know how to do it

cellular bingeing
the long haul of coral

but now it is you into me

one day you will refuse my

warmth of cupped hands kisses on your face will be replaced

wing taps on my fingers
labor only a flutter

the first time I felt you move inside me they said butterfly

but it was heart inside of heart inside of heart

like an eyelid

today you have a broken blood vessel in your eye from probing with your own finger because you said
you could see the end of your
eye and you wanted to feel it too

dthis is what I assume it will be like
the tender red aftermath

and I will be
there is no edge

CLAIRE MCLANE earned her MFA in poetry from the University of Arizona in 2017, and currently works in the Honors College at UA. Claire’s work explores themes of grief, motherhood, the natural world, and unseen structures or ghosts. Her poems are interested in asking questions, and looking at what experiencing the world through the quotidian means from moment to moment. Claire was the recipient of an Academy of American Poets prize in 2017, Recipient of a 2016 University of Arizona Foundation Award, participated in the Grand Manan Field Studies program, and has work published in the Columbia Review.
what made yellow what made antlers shed flower flower out

a cactus in February a doe she'd handle
season without handles is out of bed before plans to have

had sun a lifetime left in pastime is a cowboy man
tugs his buckle out a Chinese buffet at dusk tangled hue

call the dig sites ours on file letters with no tribal replies drill sites
asleep to gas station lights sunflowers in the jar
coworkers get along fine well enough called yellow though habit kept

drain the thing dead really they're brown in the jar the way out is
far gone a buck in sun releases testosterone I'm bleeding
in snow a coworker boss' nephew wants me
apologizes his jacket smells like his trophy deer

leftover tracks a slow pregnant with fear I know where you live
saw over the weekend a red motel renovated after the oil boom

a former boss visits talks about his jumpstarted heart ketchup
mustard annual javelina hunt cases of beer stairmaster
when I speak the federal room laughs over my mother’s labor
how I came late my supervisor head of minerals
always says we’re shooting ourselves in the foot here I wear
my heart the sole of my foot in mouth
hang dry bouquet of wild thoughts thinking this could’ve been
anything had I not made it this could’ve been anything
had I not
nations are competing to re-walk on the moon
bottle the unseen water. I can see the moon
this morning tucked halfway in the doubtless
blue sky
    blue is the thing in itself
while the moon carbon copied is the naming of it
    I don't always see a point
wording around words
    my brother considered
erasing our father from his name weeks ago
but then didn't
    see how that would alter
the present by way of the past

in the news there's a quantity to the grief
numbers of deaths
    acres of land

California named after some myth
    dark Queen Calafia
ruling dark ladies on an island east of Asia

every time a hawk flies over I say wow
and point like its mine

what is the word for this blue so blue
you can consider the idea of purple
AN IRISESSENT STONE
I DON’T RECALL THE
NAME OF

CLAIRE MEUSCHKE

you haven’t shot a gun before? pictures of galaxies and not having
to be there minerals tech insisted on picking me up in his Ram
mug with tricolor geometric wolves show me around cross
Colorado we ran over a sparrow I read as the word sorrow
rainbows of any amplitude rainbow in the sink the sparrow trapped
his exhaust unopened letter from a dear friend he entered a dirt
road toward a bluff all beige dried blue greenery sage and juniper
blue all above that sometimes hurt to look verdigris steeples
statues sweat under a heavy coat thrift collar button ups winter sun
darkened my face red reeds against teal river I held his
pistol heavier than expected shot at a bottle like a protagonist
though I was more extra or dwindling river glass dump yard antique
oil swirl a year signed away on government sheets expected to see
the bullet trajectory as a result of my trigger
he took a piss in plain sight declarative shirts you go girl earlier I stumbled down to a parched river bed wildcat canyon road flamboyant socks enough space enclosed rot scent of deer before I saw her ribs squatted on my good leg other extended visible weather to talk about place distance a cloud streaks down a mountaintop fire management officer told him to look out sure to be a heartbreaker loose tea a variety of petals could probably drink any man under the table
said I was not interested cartoon fruit depictions don't worry you're not that special six fray ends stringed instrument a lover coiled once he dropped me off red L shaped apartment complex two storied must've been a motel before when oil flowed essential oil aisle and not buying anything I lived ground floor pinned in the hinge of angle upstairs neighbor every finger broken hardly looked like hands listened to *hey must be the money* over and over knocked my door he knew I lived alone tried to enter when he was loaded I cooked dinner in a 45 pound vest to pass the fire test one hundred pushups a day and no safer hot and sour soup wood ear lily flower black fungus my mother sent afraid of landlock how I posed to correct my limp wanted to possess soft of a horse mouth and all that power
Claire Meuschke received an MFA in Poetry from the University of Arizona in 2017. *Upend*, her first book of poems, which she wrote during her MFA years, will be published by Noemi Press in 2020. She is a lecturer at the University of Arizona and serves as assistant poetry editor for *Diagram*.

“atrocious horizon” was selected by CA Conrad as the poetry contest winner for *Beecher’s Magazine* in 2016.

“no name” appeared in *BOAAT Journal’s* July/August 2018 issue.

“an iridescent stone I don’t recall the name of” was selected by Oliver de la Paz as the Mountain West Writers’ Contest winner for the *Western Humanities Review* in 2016.
The statue in the yard has the peculiar effect of following us with its eyes. Perhaps this is because it’s the only thing in the yard, and because the yard is walled with six-foot white-painted cinderblocks. Perhaps it is because it used to be a living thing, now frozen for viewing pleasure. We walk around it and each of us swears its head tilts just so its eyes can follow us. But only when we look at it, which is not often. We have to keep looking at our feet as the ground is composed of rocks the size of five-year-old-human skulls, and is generally difficult to walk on.

Back when it was alive, the statue was a floating creature named Beatrice. It mostly looked like what we would call a human, though this could be said for most mammals, one of us mentions, depending upon how specific the criteria we use to determine this is. So: the creature Beatrice looked exactly like a human, except for the two stubby wings attached to its shoulder blades (imagine a dolphin’s flippers) which never moved, and a sort of fusing together of the legs (imagine a taproot) which became foggy and undefined as shin area approached ankle. Ankle became nothing—no feet (imagine a ghost). In life, Beatrice’s coloring was a transitioning from dark gray at the crown of the head to a bone white at the hips, and then to colorless or transparent at the ankles. As a statue it is a silvery mirror.

Beatrice’s head hangs low, arms outstretched as if holding onto or leaning against something: a wall, a fence, a lawn mower.

We don’t know why we’ve been brought to this place, why we’ve been instructed to look at this creature’s statued form, but we are glad for the opportunity anyway.

Inside of our collective body it is dark and murky—we bump into and slide past each other like those greased pigs in the pen, part of a game humans play, sometimes. We are not so mindless, though, brushing our bodies against one another. It is a hug without arms, a reaching out, a touching of hands, fingertips. We cannot quite describe it. Beatrice is not of us, could never be, even while
alive, but this creature saw us and we felt that was a kind of hug, in a way.

One of us thinks it was a Saturday when we first met Beatrice, but the rest of us agree it was a Wednesday.

We were huddled in a deep shadow between two buildings as we do when we find ourselves stuck inside the maze that is called “downtown.” If it were any other time, if the passerby was anybody else, we would not have been seen, heard—we would not have registered on any of the others’ senses. But this passerby was Beatrice, as we came to know, later. At the time we thought it was human, so its calling out was shocking, startling our hearts. We now describe that initial feeling as “deeply unsettling.”

Hello? the voice said to us. What are you doing here? Are you lost?

We are not sure what gave the creature this impression, though it was true we were lost. With a human approaching us, scared, too. Frightened. To tears, almost. It was then, when a few of the braver ones looked closer at the figure speaking to us, that we saw the “wings” and “ghost tail.” We never learned what Beatrice called these parts of itself. Even the most timid of us released our breaths, though we all could only breathe shallowly.

We have no outward mouth with which to speak. Our voices face inside our collective body, so we can converse among ourselves but it only sounds like deep rumbling to outsiders, large rocks falling off a mountain far away, we’ve been told. So while we said:

He-hello.
Can it hear us?
Why are we being spoken to?
Can you help us?
We are lost. How did you know?

Beatrice said:
Your voice sounds like large rocks falling off a mountain far away.

We stopped talking to listen. We stopped talking because there was no point if we were not going to be heard. Then it said:
If you are lost and need to find the way out of town, you can follow me. I’m headed out anyway.
So we followed on our many feet.
You can call me Beatrice, the creature said.
So we said:
Beatrice.
Beatrice.
We have no names but you can call us however you like.

We had no use for names before, had we?
What would you like to be called? one of us asked another of us.
You can’t ask me that so suddenly! Ask another of us!
You said me! You have individuality now!
We slid over and under and between each other with greater velocity. We laughed.

Beatrice.
Beatrice, we’ll remember your name.
Beatrice said:
You sound happy.

We followed the creature through a series of strange turns where sometimes the sun was in our eyes and sometimes it was at our back. Human construction, “roads” and “buildings,” baffle us. But Beatrice led us out, safely. We saw not a single human.

The reason Beatrice is here, statued in this yard, now, must be because it met a human. Creatures like Beatrice are sometimes made to still in times of peace, “for fun.” Humans usually do the stilling, but not always. We are not sure if Beatrice is dead now that it is a statue. We think it might be
sleeping, and so this is a prolongation of its natural life, and only if it ever rained enough would the mirror-lacquer come off, and Beatrice would be free to move again. We hope so.

We have stilled other creatures before, to preserve their beauty. It is not a human-only process.

We wouldn't be standing around the Beatrice's statue now if we had not been noticed, again, by another creature. It looked entirely like a human, but it cannot be one if it could see us, we decided.

We said:  
A human? A real human can see us?  
No.  
Unprecedented.  
Must not be human.  
How can you tell what is and isn't a human? Is it just looks?  
That, but there are other things only humans do, certain behaviors. You'll understand once you come across more of them.

We were not as frightened this time as we were with Beatrice. But we do not know this one's name. It didn't tell us. It said:  
You're very beautiful. Would you like to come see a friend of yours? A thing with wings, and no feet.

We said:  
Who?  
A friend? Do we have that?  
Is it…  
Beatrice?  
Beatrice!  
It suddenly stopped coming to see us.  
Do you know where it is?  
We used to talk for hours, though Beatrice could never hear what we were saying.  
Beatrice!  
It took a step back. It said:  
Are you coming or not?

We said:  
We're coming.  
Those of us who are younger laughed and rolled over one another, while the older ones walked silently, watching carefully. It was the first time we had been so split in emotion.

This new-creature led us around the back, led us into the yard. It said:  
This thing wanted to see you. Please look all you like. I mean, I insist.

So now we are looking, and we are remembering, and:  
Why has Beatrice become this way?  
Beatrice is not a thing. We are all creatures here, aren't we?  
That's true.  
It was more beautiful when it was talking to us.  
When it was floating above the grasses.  
That's right.  
Now look! It's tethered to this marble block!  
What ugly work!

We bump into one another and our hearts don't feel well, our heads don't feel well.

If we lay Beatrice in the stream, shouldn't the lacquer come off?  
Isn't it only rain that does that?  
It never rains.  
Maybe the stream will work.  
Maybe.  
Maybe.  
Shall we try?

The second-creature enters the cinderblock enclosure and most of us don't notice until it is upon us, pouring silver polish over our bodies. Our mass has spread thin since we took up different positions around Beatrice so as to see all of it, all at once. We cannot reach all of us in time. We feel one of our lungs fill up with the thick liquid, one of us harden, the fright solidifying within the small body. Then another. We lift our feet and roll
over each other to come together more quickly. We cannot feel those of us who have stilled. It is like a blankness has appeared in the corner of our eyes, our ears, our minds. A hole. Like our hearts are not actually separate as we thought, but together, one, and, bit by bit, a tiny, sharp-clawed hand is reaching in, puncturing holes or cutting away at the sides.

But there are many of us. Several of us launch ourselves at the second-creature, but it is quick and evades us. The rest of us surround the stilled-us and lift and lift, but they are so heavy now—we had not realized they would be so immobile.

More lacquer comes.

More of us still, their anger solidified. We think they will be experiencing the feeling until the rain washes the polish away, if it will ever wash away, now that we know how invasive, how complete the process is.

We can't save all of us.

I and two others-of-us grab a few sharp-edged skull rocks and slide over to where we are spread thinnest, where the living-us are trying to get away from the silver polish pourer, abandoning those who have already been stilled: Beatrice, a bit of us. We three hack at ourselves. We think we will be able to sever our collective body this way. After all, when the old wither and pass, they separate from us, and we do not see them again.

The polish-pourer knocks the rocks out of our grips.

It says:

No! You were so beautiful and no one could see. I just wanted everyone to see you. Now look at you. Now look at you.

One of us three dies and our collective body rips in two. Most of us disappear through the gate, their voices no longer surrounding us who are left: the statued, our dead sibling, we two. Our hearts feel so small we fear we do not have them anymore.

When we look up at Beatrice, its eyes are accusatory and sad. The creature-like human cries for we who are dying.

Michelle Midori Repke is currently writing stories that attempt to grasp the newness of an experience, when one might not yet have the words to express what they are feeling or sensing, or when one has knowledge of the words but these words have no meaning. As in, a tarantula with a strong hearing sense listening to a saguaro sing for the first time; as in, a child who knows the words (stone, night, chair, sun, stars, etc.) but has no association or experience to assign the words. She is also refining various pieces in her imagistic-inspired story collection, which includes “Regarding the Statued Creature.” Beatrice comes from a shape Michelle saw upon the stucco ceiling in her apartment, whose posture seemed to say do not look at me.
MISSION STATEMENT

Sometimes it happened in the office, and sometimes in bed, and sometimes I was on an airplane, shielding the screen from other passengers so they wouldn’t see what I had to see. Sometimes it was honorable, sometimes dirty, and sometimes I didn’t want to do it anymore, but I knew if I didn’t the next time I’d have to do twice as much. I did it in secret, mostly.

“So you look at porn all day?” my friends would ask, pressing me to reveal what exactly a non-technical employee did at an early-stage startup if he couldn’t code. I had worked for DateDate for a few months, but only recently had we started to gain traction. We were the App Store’s App of the Week, a period of time during which we gained nearly 500,000 new users. Now that DateDate was popular enough to attract the attractive, my friends wanted to know all about it: how do the algorithms work? Is the desperate quotient real? Like, if I spend too much time browsing in the evenings, does the app actually rank my profile lower? Is it true {celebrity’s name redacted} uses it under an alias?

I’d pretend their questions were ridiculous, but of course we had our secrets. There’s always more going on under the hood of an app than its creators want to admit. I’d refocus the discussion back to my work, insisting that I did much more than remove porn from DateDate. I’d explain that I also helped implement clever in-app solutions for users struggling with serious issues: cutters and anorexics, depressives and the bullied. If you included “suicidal” in your dating profile, for instance, a pop-up would appear with a link to a website with helpful resources. Out of 20,000 users who typed “suicidal,” 5% clicked the link. That’s 1,000 lives I might have saved. Incredible scale.

I responded to all our customer support emails, too, and logged all our bugs on neat spreadsheets so our engineer could fix them. Sometimes the Founder even came up with special projects for
me. Like when he thought it would be a good idea for me to work on our mission statement. “You like to write,” he said. “This is perfect for you.”

This was in my first year at DateDate, when we were only three people: an engineer, the Founder, and me. Our office was in a windowless room that we sublet from a solar-panel company. As our only non-technical employee, I took on all tasks that were not engineering or design. Including, apparently, writing our mission statement.

It was odd that the Founder hadn’t come up with a mission statement before he launched the app. When I asked him about this, he cracked open a Red Bull and explained that the best way for people to know what DateDate does is to show them. “Nobody cares what you say you’ll do for them,” he said. “It’s all about execution.”

I was eating a Nature’s Valley granola bar, or at least trying to eat a Nature’s Valley granola bar. As soon as I bit into it, the entire bar crumbled into a thousand tiny pieces, losing themselves in my keyboard. “In that case,” I said, “maybe we don’t need a mission statement at all.” I wasn’t trying to get out of the work. I would do whatever the Founder needed me to do. I simply wanted to use my time efficiently. We all worked sixteen-hour days and had to prioritize.

The Founder rolled his chair closer to me. “Listen,” he said. “A mission statement can serve as a guide. What you write today will remind us of who we are down the road.” He gulped his Red Bull. “Besides, the investors are hassling me for one.”

I always felt like I owed the Founder everything. He’d brought me on as his first employee before he had even hired an engineer. Unheard of in the Valley. He never doubted me, and I wanted to live up to his expectations. In fact, maybe it was that—the Founder’s idea of me—that drew me to DateDate in the first place.

Anyway, it wasn’t like I needed to come up with the mission statement from scratch. By that point, the Founder had given plenty of interviews detailing his vision. In writing the mission statement, I’d need to carve from these materials a few words that captured our purpose. It wasn’t so much writing my own brand-new thing as it was taking what already existed and saying it in a new way. Which I guess you could say about all inventions.

A mission statement seems easy to write until you try to write it. It needs to be direct and simple, but also inevitable, like a poem. I grabbed a pen and a sheet of printer paper and jotted down some initial ideas.

- To connect you with the perfect romantic partner. Too straightforward.
- To find your perfect match. Not ambitious enough.
- To bring you perfection. Too vague.
- To make the world more perfectly connected, romantically. Maybe, save it.
- To bring humans into more perfect union. Ehh.
- To bring humankind closer to perfection. A serious contender, but did it stray too far from what we actually did: help people hook up with algorithm-approved maybe-soulmates?

After that first brainstorming session, I stalled on the mission statement for weeks. I wanted to give the Founder a quick turnaround, but we were experiencing hockey-stick growth after our App Store feature, and I could hardly keep up with content moderation, much less think about other projects.

It didn’t take long for us to hit 1,000,000 users. The Founder liked us to write out the number like that. “1,000,000” instead of “one million.” It was a marketing thing. He said seeing all the zeroes would help people understand the magnitude,
though honestly “one million” always looked impressive to me. Anyway, at 1,000,000 users is when I lost control. I couldn’t work on another project for more than fifteen minutes before I received an email notice: Warning: Content Review Queue Full.

That email meant the queue had reached 1,000 images, roughly an hour’s work. I’d navigate to a webpage called Flagged Photos, an admin-only site which showed a 7x7 grid of images reported by our users. We couldn’t automatically remove these photos because lots of users reported images that didn’t violate our guidelines. Alongside dick pics and zoomed-in screenshots of porn clips were photos of family reunions, weddings, teenagers hanging out at the mall. In the grid I’d select the photos that needed to be removed—racist memes or a photo of a teenager with SLUT photoshopped across her forehead—and hit Submit. The selected photos would be removed, while the others were allowed to stay. Then, the webpage would reload to display a new 7x7 grid. About 30 refreshes later, I was finished and could move on with my day, at least until another warning email popped up in my inbox.

I’d make mistakes. With that many photos, they do tend to blur together. You start to see things that aren’t there. These users would email support (also me) with complaints, and I’d review their deletion. Oftentimes I’d see the same photo I’d already removed correctly—the same erection or anal-sex video screenshot from the day before—but sometimes the photos were entirely innocent, not a violation of our guidelines at all: a man grilling vegetables, a tourist posing in front of the Eiffel Tower. After re-reviewing the photos, I’d wonder how I’d ever thought they were violations. Were they honest mistakes, a mis-click of my mouse? Or had I seen something then that I couldn’t see now?

After we hit 1,000,000 users, we began to seek a Series A investment. In our pitch deck, we estimated our community would grow to 10,000,000 by the end of the next year. If I’m doing ten hours of content review per day now, I calculated, I’d be doing one-hundred hours per day by then.

I begged the Founder to let me hire someone.

The Founder said the VCs wouldn’t want our early hires to be user support agents—we needed more engineers, maybe another designer—but that after we raised funding we could hire a contractor to help with the workload. A contractor was ideal from the VCs’ standpoint because we’d pay them by the hour and offer them no stock options, equity we could save to attract new engineers.

“By the way,” he asked, “when can I expect the mission statement from you?”

It had been over a month since he’d assigned me the task.

I had a list of my top five, I told him, but said I needed distance from the work before I could evaluate them properly.

“Bring them in tomorrow,” he said. “We need one for the pitch deck.”

I nodded and began working on the job listing.

It wouldn’t be a problem for me to hire a new contractor. I knew dozens of other liberal arts majors who had moved to San Francisco to work in the tech industry. I posted the contractor position on Techmeme and circulated the posting among my friends. Allie responded immediately, inviting me to her monthly Fuzzies in Tech Meetup, an excellent place to recruit new talent, she insisted.

That night, at Allie’s apartment, I lingered in the kitchen, dipping a Tazo orange-chiffon tea bag into a paper cup, still too hot to hold. I scanned
the items displayed on her fridge: a membership invitation from Scribe Winery, a Save the Date for a wedding in Monterey, a newsletter from Farm Fresh to You CSA.

When Allie walked into the kitchen, I asked if she had milk. I didn't want milk in my tea, but I also didn't want her to know I'd been studying her fridge. I guess I thought it better for her to think I'd been staring at her fridge longingly, wondering whether milk was inside.

"There should be whole, almond, soy," she said.

I chose whole, a preference that made me feel rooted, still, to the Midwest, even though I'd now lived in California for over six years.

"You're doing lots of moderation these days, I take it?" she asked.

"More and more, yeah."

"Creeps into your head, doesn't it?"

"It's a little numbing." The milk made the tea orange-creamsicley.

"Totally," Allie said. "I mean, at first it didn't really matter, and in truth it kind of turned me on—not the corrupt shit, but every now and then a scene would work its way into my head. Over time, though, I never wanted even to think about sex. The residual effects, that numbing, stayed with me for almost a year after I quit."

She asked me how many photos I review every day, and when I told her, she said, "Ethan, that's too many."

"Right, that's why I'm here…"

"No, I mean, you need more than one person. Most startups at that stage will contract out the work."

"Meaning pay people overseas to do it?" I'd always hated the idea. Not only because the workers were underpaid, but also because it distanced us from our community. If we didn't know about the illicit shit people were into, how could we say we truly knew who used our app?

"Well, yes," Allie said. "They're trained properly for the work."

I sipped my tea.

"Anyway, what else are you guys working on?" she asked.

I hated this question so much I would sometimes ask acquaintances at other startups just to see how they deflected. The lamest response I ever received was from this Harvard bro who founded a real-estate startup. We're working on the future, he said, a phrase which, sadly, a slew of other companies had begun to adopt for use in their FAQs. "Well, I can't really talk about it," I told Allie, which was the truth.

"Because it's classified or because you don't know?"

"I signed an NDA," I said.

Allie laughed. "Everyone's signed an NDA," she said. "Those documents are meaningless. Well, I guess they're only meaningful insofar as anyone treats them as such."

"Right," I said, "like money and—"

"Is this your way of deflecting?"

"Look," I said, thinking this might be a good time to try out my mission statement. "We're always working on new ways to bring humankind closer to perfection—"

"What?" Allie said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I mean is, there's a few paid add-ons that can help you boost profile views, but we're not even sure we'll release those yet. The truth is, we're just trying to keep the ship from sinking as we're growing so fast."

"Such a bullshit response," Allie said. "Everyone's saying you guys are a Trojan Horse for something else. Like you're actually in stealth mode but you're distracting us with this dating crap. I mean,
honestly, how many dating apps do we need?”

Who was everyone, I wondered. I spent all my time cooped up inside the office, reviewing porn or responding to support emails. “Don’t you think it’s possible these are just rumors?” I asked.

“Just feels there’s some truth to them,” she said.

“So then what do you think we’re working on?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, but something out there, based on the photos.”

“What photos?”

Allie looked at me like she was trying to figure out if I was bluffing.

“You need to meet Noma,” Allie said, calling after Billie, who was on her way out the door. “Billie, tell him about Noma.”

Billie and I had been friends since college. We once took a trip to Mexico City together, though I hadn’t seen much of her in the last year, since I started at DateDate. I hadn’t even noticed her at this meetup. She looked different now. I couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Maybe it was that she was in all black, a wardrobe she’d inherited, I’d learned on social media, from her rich old aunt, a New York transplant who lived out her final days in a Pacific Heights mansion, high above the rest of San Francisco.

“Noma has made a career out of dealing with all kinds of shit,” Billie told me, as we walked out of Allie’s apartment, into the Mission. Across the street, an ivory shuttle with deep-tinted windows dropped off a gang of corporate techies. They scattered in different directions, eyes glued to their phones. “Companies call her in when they have a problem they need to solve. You know, before the FCC gets on their ass.”

“She should write a book,” I said.

“Noma would never.”

“Why not?”

“We’ve all backed ourselves into the same corner, right?” Billie said. “What happens if we disclose what we know? We’ve built careers out of handling sensitive information, and if one of us were to rat out a company we once worked for, nobody in the Valley would hire us.”

It’s fascinating, all the secrets we keep, I thought, as Billie and I walked down Valencia Street. I guess we’re trained to fear the NDA, and the armies of lawyers these companies keep waiting in the shadows. But if you think about it, if a company did react in any way to your claims, they validate them as true. Would they really bother with litigation? If there’s something you really need to say you could probably say it. At least that’s my hope, anyway. I think of this book as my taking that risk, an attempt to disclose what I discovered, though so far finding the right way to disclose this information to you isn’t coming so easily for me.

We dropped into Dog Eared Books on our way to BART, and Billie asked for recommendations. I couldn’t recommend any novels because this was around the time they all started to feel false to me. We stared at shelves of poetry. This one, and this one (Ross Gay, Ocean Vuong), I said, and she decided to buy them without even reading the back covers. Trust, I thought. True friendship.

“Have you read Adrienne Rich yet?” she asked me, and when I said no, I hadn’t read the book she’d bought me in Mexico City three years ago, I didn’t mean for my answer to carry any connotations, but I fear it did, like I hadn’t read her because I think she’s bad or overrated, even though the only reason why is because I can never achieve all I set out to achieve, or meet other people’s expectations of me.

“I like the way she talks about women,” Billie said, and flipped through On Lies, Secrets, and
An honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love”—is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.

“A process of refining the truths they can tell each other,” I read aloud, reflecting on the phrase. It was a mission statement I could carry with me.

BLACK BOXES

Noma was by far the most experienced and sharpest of all the candidates I interviewed in the following weeks, and I knew I would hire her within the interview’s first fifteen minutes. It was the last fifteen minutes I was unsure about, but I managed to bury my uncertainty temporarily. So desperate was I for help that I refused to admit to myself she was dragging me into something dark.

“Do you see the black boxes when you review photos?” Noma asked.

“Sometimes, yeah,” I said. I assumed she was referring to an image which, sometime between when it was flagged and when I’d seen it, had been deleted already by the person who’d posted it, and would then show up as a black box in the review grid. It always bothered me when these showed up, and in fact I’d been devising a plan with our engineer to automatically remove them, which I told Noma about.

“What do you mean?” she said. “You can’t remove them.”

I began to describe my proposed method, but she interrupted. “No, I mean, you don’t want to remove them. Can you pull up a grid on your
screen? I want to see.”

Technically non-employees weren’t supposed to see our grids, but Noma had signed an NDA. There in the bottom right corner of the grid was a black-box photo. “Can you print it out for me?” she asked.

“Why?”

“So we can see it better.”

I began to feel bad, because at this point I wasn’t sure I wanted to work with Noma. Maybe all the content review had gone to her head. She seemed so smart and practical at first, but now, what was she trying to prove? Still, I printed out the grid for her, a collage of dick pics and photoshopped teens’ faces. And in the bottom right corner, the black box.

I handed the printout to Noma. From her back pocket she took out a small flashlight. “Hmm, yes,” she said. “And how many black boxes do you think show up in a day?”

“Maybe a hundred,” I said. “Why?”

“That’s about ten times what I’m working with at the other startup.” She looked away from the image, at me. “Wait, you don’t know, do you?” She brought the paper over to me. “Look,” she said, standing behind me, her flashlight fixed on the printout of the black box. “You see?”

I could see the outline of something in the box, but it was unclear what it was.

“I have an entire wall of these in my apartment,” she said. “I’m not sure what it is either, but we have ideas.”

“What what is?” I asked.

“This,” Noma insisted, tapping her flashlight on the photo of a black square. “Don’t you want to see where they go?”

I discovered the portals on my own, long before I hired Noma at DateDate. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to disclose this to her, during the interview; it was simply that I had forgotten. No, “forgotten” isn’t the right word. It was more like I’d lost the information somewhere inside myself. I didn’t even know to dig it out until I was sitting across from her, in the conference room, and even then, it would take me a long time to realize where I’d been.

My discovery occurred in my first month at DateDate, as I was at my desk analyzing server data, searching for the profile on DateDate that most closely matched my own. I had answered over 10,000 questions in order to build a profile that was a true representation of myself, or at least a true representation of how I saw myself, and so I figured my top match would be as close to an ideal partner as I could ever hope to find. Not that I was looking for a partner, then. DateDate kept me much too busy. But I did need to find out, for testing purposing, if my top match seemed accurate enough.

The tell-us-about-yourself questions had been written by some hippie psychologist in West Marin—“a friend of a friend,” the Founder said—and seemed so innocent and lightweight that the typical user answered approximately three-hundred in their first hour on the app. This was part of the secret to our success, the ability to induce a kind of flow state in the user on signup. The algorithm started out with easy questions—your favorite foods, your favorite activities, your favorite color—and then began to pepper in questions on more sensitive topics: your fears, fantasies, medical history. The user, not wanting to break momentum, would answer those questions almost without thinking, and therefore truthfully, in order to keep the questions coming. Only after answering 1,000 questions would we show you a few of your matches.
By the time I sorted through the data, I found that the highest compatibility rate between me and my top match was 99%. Almost perfect.

This was information a typical user would never see. We needed to keep our churn rate low, so match results were throttled. Instead of showing your top match right away, we'd show you profiles with an 80% compatibility rate. Only after you had dated all matches in that bracket would we show matches in the 90th percentile. Most users found true love somewhere in the 91-93% range, and thus never met their top match, though of course they never knew that. (We did not display compatibility rates publicly.) In fact, by the time I discovered the portal, hardly anyone had used the app enough to discover their top match. Two users, to be exact.

My top match was posed in a vineyard, a glass of wine in hand. As I stared into the photo, I felt something inside my body jump. It was the sensation you get in your half-sleep when you're here and someplace else: threshold consciousness, here and not-here. And then there I was, not at my desk or in the vineyard I had been staring at, but in an undefined space that seemed not-yet filled out. A vast, empty space. Well, not entirely empty: I was in a field, with tall, wet grass, and above me the sky was wide and filled with birds, and in the distance, even though I couldn't see it over the grassy knoll, I could hear the ocean, the churn of waves. Gravity worked, but I could tell it wasn't pulling me down the same way it usually did, because I felt light, like I could fly, although when I tried, somewhat self-consciously hopping, I only floated in place for a few seconds before tumbling to the ground. Hello? I cried, and nobody answered. Panicked, I ran as fast as I could through the tall grass, almost up to my neck, towards the sounds of the ocean, and then, suddenly, I was back in the office.

“You okay?” the Founder asked. “I can hear you breathing.”

I looked up at him, then down at my clothes, which just a second ago had been soaked from the wet grass, but were now dry. “I’m fine,” I said, then I looked down at my phone, which was opened to my DateDate profile. The last featured image on my timeline was a black box.

“I have one of those black-box photos,” I told the Founder.

“They seem to be cropping up more often,” he said. “Can you reproduce the steps you took?”

“I'm not sure,” I said.

“Log the image ID in the bug report. Hopefully we'll get enough data to track down the problem.”

When I tapped on the black-box photo, the black seemed lighter at the top of the image, and there were darker spots within that lighter black. At the bottom of the image, alternating shafts of lighter and darker black, like grass. I filed the image ID but took a screenshot of the image before deleting it from my profile.

I printed out the screenshot and taped it above my bed. Every evening I stared at it, peering into that place I had gone. Details emerged. I could make out the grass blades. I noticed a path veering off in another direction, a direction I had not taken. Sometimes I could even hear the ocean in the distance. I tried looking at the image with a magnifying glass, and even borrowed a friend's microscope, but such investigations turned up nothing new. It was only my repeated looking at the image that allowed whatever it contained, wherever I had gone, to surface.

For the next couple months, I worried less about finding matches on DateDate and more about finding the black-box images. Some were actually buggy photos, which happens often on
older model phones with weak cameras, but others seemed to have gradations similar to the one that appeared on my profile, only what they depicted seemed different, as if from worlds different from the one I had visited. I never said anything about the images, and in fact often doubted whether what I was seeing, and where I had been, was anything at all, because I had not been able to replicate the experience for months, no matter how many times I navigated to the photo of my top match in the vineyard. I didn’t want to distract the Founder with speculation, with a fever dream I’d spun into some far-out theory. I wanted DateDate to be successful, and I wanted to be successful at DateDate. I wanted promotions and bonuses and my name mentioned in interviews the Founder sat for. I started to come up with alternative reasons for what had happened that day. I convinced myself I had just fainted or blacked out, a state likely induced by lack of sleep, not enough to eat, and too much Red Bull. I stopped looking for the black-box images and, in my pursuit of other goals, managed to forget about them completely—that is, until Noma came along.

**Josh Riedel** is working on a novel and a collection of short stories. His work explores technology’s role in our attempts to understand and connect with others. His novel, *DateDate*, from which this is excerpted, is the story of an employee at a dating startup who discovers that a bug in the company’s app creates portals to other worlds. Josh was a 2017 Field Studies in Writing Fellow in Grand Manan, New Brunswick, where he researched fog. He used to work at tech startups in Silicon Valley and was the first hire at Instagram. Find him on Instagram (@josh) and Twitter (@joshriedel).
start with us getting lost in the backtrack. you always walking say-
ing oh it’s this way and me not budging. or sometimes budging.
crossing the stream without helping each other. the horse standing
there batting an eye, kicking a cricket. explaining the dilemma of
the swimmer. how terrible how what we see will seem much easier
than what you feel. like a stone. the horse saying it. there will always
be a force pushing you horizontally and no one will ever see it. you
moving forward. you saying duh. into the river.
when I step into the clearing you’ve got your fingers in the blood. you poking and the blood setting and me getting all iridescent. bent over a puddle. when I look for a body all I see is the horse pacing the perimeter, eyes at the ground. me calling out with a blood scream. you with your fingers in the air and the horse all it’s a physical expression of alienation. finally making eye contact. when we left it a day ago it was like breaking an orange into segments. like following each footstep away from its source. into the pine forest. that kind of loss.
the trail ends and I am standing a few toes in the river. a discount that sounds cute like the horse joining me all-in. this is always happening in our forest. the long delay. there is a tiny boy with a sister wanting something more than the walk to the fishpond. when the movie ends the fish in the pond are belly-up but faking it. put another way, there cannot be two phenomena with the same speed. the same postulate. then one day they walk to the pond and get in and despite the nibbles on their toes they keep walking. and despite the terrible nibbles they creep toward the ever spiraling center. like pennies.
ANTICIPATION GUIDE

PEYTON PRATER STARK

dawn feels slick like a spilled thing. your hands are for pulling your body together

pulling yourself from the river

your face is out and wet

the scientists in nine countries use their telescopes to take a picture of the black hole at the
center of the galaxy

the picture is the composite

no one takes the picture

the scientist says that taking the picture is like taking a picture of an orange on the moon

things look like they are where they are and sometimes this is true

see the horse in the shadow of the fern looking small or far away

or you’re big and far away

put your hoof in the river and watch it sink like a root in the silt

now dry your face in the dimlight

where the light on your neck feels like horse breath

this is not a metaphor for morning, or distance
light is not so easy to describe

a branch both of and parting from its tree

shines through slits on the screen and you count the marks it makes

this is how you know light is particle/wave:

bands of dark and light

interference

the shadow of the black hole should appear in the photo as a body

disturbs the porchlight

like water drawn into a glass

now take a part of a picture

no one ever tells you what it will look like but it looks like

a shadow coming out into light
“the test” poems were first published in Issue 1 of Oxidant Engine: https://www.oxidantengine.com/issue1

“light is not so easy to describe” was first published in the Spring 2018 issue of Oversound

Peyton Prater Stark is from Denver, but currently lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she teaches 11th grade English. She is a poet and book artist, with specific interest and training in letterpress printing. Her poems, essays, and artist books explore interactions between the “real world,” imagination, and science. She also explores these interests as a teacher, by coordinating creative writing and science workshops in the community. She is currently working on a series of poems about technology and dreams. Her poems appear in Colorado Review; Oversound; Eleven Eleven; Forklift, Ohio; Oxidant Engine; and elsewhere.
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