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2020

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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 2020 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.

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# THE SEASON OF CHILDREN

EMILIO CARRERO

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WHEN THE HURRICANES HIT that summer, the three of us were kids in the sense that we were violently hopeful. We walked to the flooded basketball court. We pulled at its metal lock, kicked at it, threw rocks. We climbed the fence and splashed down, sat with our legs splayed on the cracked concrete. We soaked in the dirty water, spat into it. We twisted our pruned fingers into the green chain-links behind us. Sweat ran down our faces, each of us bearing a smirk that matched ourselves—our way of showing who we were, and that we did exactly what we wanted. But in truth, we were a ragged bunch—a brown kid, a white kid, and a black kid—and someone looking at us would have said we looked like a collection of things disinherited.

BEFORE THE HURRICANES CAME, we lived outside. None of us had much money. Everyone in our Central Florida neighborhood got by, delicately straddling middle-class and poor: each family was only separated from the next by the oldness

of their clothes and shoes, the condition of their car, the number of bedrooms they squeezed into. But when we stepped outside, we forgot.

The basketball court was our bodega. Games ran all afternoon long, a steady soundtrack of noise: basketballs thudding on the concrete, clanging against the metal rim, kids shouting scores. Around the court hovered the middle schoolers, high schoolers, mostly brown kids and black kids—standing or sitting, inside the fence or out, with bookbags slung on their shoulders—not even interested in the score of the game, but content to just be there. BB guns got waved around. Cigarette butts were smashed into the ground. Paper plates of rice and beans got eaten too quickly. It's where I spent most of my afternoons, and where I first met Julius and Austin.

Each of us were deeply American in our ways. I was a poor brown kid, twelve years old, the only one in my family who couldn't speak Spanish. I spent my childhood moving from home to home, all around the city, ashamed of my Puerto Ri-

can family and our unending money problems. I wanted nothing to do with them or where we came from. I reveled in people mistaking me for black.

Julius was seen as too dark and too smelly by everyone. He took joy in his brute aggression, bullied others with his words and hands to draw attention away from his skin. And then there was Austin, our only white friend. People thought of him as trailer trash, and when he wasn't being called weak and soft, they called him a faggot. He wanted to fit in badly, and tagged along with whoever would have him. That summer, it was us.

The three of us spent our precious daylight hours outside by the basketball court, where kids smoked, gossiped, and taunted one another; where they argued who was the smartest, who was the toughest, who was the poorest, who was the gayest, using one another to test out their developing ideas of manhood. Small fights would start—shoves and wrestling and slap boxing—and we'd gather around, shouting and laughing, until they died down, leaving in their wake young kids with bruises and cuts, the debris of damaged egos.

By the end of the day, we stared out at the darkening streets and apartments—our faces flushed hot and red, smeared with dirt and dripping sweat—basking in the afternoon's small eruptions of violence. But we were quietly disappointed. Those bright Florida afternoons never failed to settle into a tired evening, orange like the streetlights right outside our bedroom windows.

A SERIES OF HURRICANES had torn through our city. Charley, Frances, Jeanne—they'd battered our apartment complex for more than a month. We'd stayed locked inside for most of that time, with no clue that the storms caused billions of dollars in damage. And we knew nothing about

the nearly 100 people that died in other parts of Florida—killed by flying debris, drowned in their cars, crushed inside their homes. All we knew was our neighborhood, destroyed, that we stepped out into.

The first day back outside, after the storms had blown through, the neighborhood's kids were walking through the debris, kicking the sandbags thrown onto the road, fighting each other with branches and shingles. They pulled at the uprooted bushes and the overturned street signs in awe. But our parents were stunned. They mourned the wreckage as defeat, while we saw it differently, more hopefully. Here was proof of the efficacy of destruction—real, tangible proof, something we could grasp in our hands.

It was also the first time the three of us had hung out again. We met up in the parking lot by the basketball court. The air smelled faintly of gasoline. Julius cruised up to me on his bike, while Austin trotted goofily behind him on foot. He pretended he was going to run into me before slamming on his breaks. I flinched, and he grinned.

He wore the same shirt, always—dark blue, bruise colored, and two sizes too big for him. He knocked his kickstand down and looked behind.

Hurry yo' ass up, he shouted.

Fuck you, Austin shouted back. Julius laughed to himself, pointing his thumb back at the kid we called *the goofy white boy*. Austin did everything slowly and awkwardly, too young for his big body.

Once Austin caught up, Julius pointed at a caved-in roof, collecting rainwater. Shit! Look at that.

Shit! That's fucked up, Austin said, breathing hard. It's fucked up, right?

Looks like it's about to pop, I said. They both grinned at me. Their shoes were caked with grass and mud. Their eyes were bloodshot. Beads of

sweat stuck to their faces. I smelled the weed on them. They said they'd checked out all the neighborhoods nearby.

Why? I asked.

Cause, Austin said. He held his hands up in the air as if he were holding what was left of the storms. We wanted to see how fucked up it was!

This guy, Julius said. He shook his head. He asked if my place was okay.

Yeah, we got lucky. I said.

Ha, me too, me too! Austin jumped in.

Shut the fuck up, Austin, Julius said, shoving him back. We don't care about yo' white ass. We laughed at him.

Whatever. Fuck you guys.

I told them I had to go back inside, but that I'd see them later. We slapped hands and Julius turned his bike around.

Let's go, he said to Austin. We'll see you later.

C'mon. Why don't you let me ride on your pegs?

I already told yo' ass, no, Julius said, and rode off down the street. Austin and I looked at each other for a second, then we shrugged. We both knew that was just Julius. No use in getting mad about it. I turned to leave.

Hey, Austin said, and I looked back. He walked toward me and I moved back a little.

Relax, he said. Even though he always stood hunched over, he was a big kid. He grabbed me by the shoulder.

I'm glad you're okay, he said. I looked up at him—his big, toothy smile, his faint, teenage moustache, the only one of us who had one.

Thanks, I said. He nodded, and lumbered off after Julius. It was a brief moment, uncomfortably warm. And it bothered me if only because being heartfelt seemed to lie outside the confines of our neighborhood, an expression saved for those who

needed comfort, and we spent our days convincing ourselves we needed no such thing.

As I watched him trot off awkwardly, I smiled. Austin, I remember thinking, is too soft. I wanted to teach him a lesson, to cause him pain. I was too young to understand my meanness, its connection to past memories. I had lived in the suburbs for years before being evicted, and what I remembered most were the white kids. Whispering that I smelled while we sat on elementary school benches. Making fun of my weird-sounding name, teasing me to find Puerto Rico on a map. Shoving me into the dirt during recess because I ran too fast. Pointing and screaming and spitting through the fence of my backyard, telling me I lived in a dump. Things had changed now. Austin was the only white friend I had. He wore the same ragged clothes that I did, and was kind to me. But nothing could have meant less to me then. Nothing meant as much as the promise of my formless anger.

I was twelve years old and had just seen a series of hurricanes uproot trees, flood lakes, knock out power grids, wipe out buildings and homes. It was clear that violence could change the landscape of things. I wanted to do the same.

THAT AFTERNOON, WE SAT ON the flooded basketball court and listened: to the drip of overflowed rain gutters, the wind rattling the trees, the distant police sirens and ambulances. We hadn't said much of anything to each other. We looked at the bowed palm trees and conifers, bent to the brink of snapping, and we watched the city workers cover people's roofs with tarp. Power lines had been torn down all around the city, leaving communities with no electricity. Trucks carrying generators drove up and down the main roads. School was cancelled until further notice, and we thanked God for that. We guessed whose houses had been

destroyed, who we'd save, and who we'd forget about.

None of it bothered us, we told ourselves. Everything could be laughed at, poked fun at: the wrecked homes, the ruined streets, our flooded court, even each other. We got by in our small apartments, crammed in with our families. Living paycheck to paycheck, wearing hand-me-downs, smoking; all we knew were thresholds. Despite the damage done by the storms, it all felt familiar and ordinary; like the shouting and laughing at family gatherings, things going wrong had become a space we had learned to live in.

Julius started it. We'd been sitting there in our dirtied t-shirts that clung to our musty, sweating bodies. We had too much time on our hands, seemingly forever.

He smiled and sprang up. His shorts were sopping wet. He pounded his basketball into the ground, splashing water and laughing to himself.

Austin and I covered our faces, shielding ourselves from the spray.

The fuck are you doing? Austin said. He always sounded forced when he copied Julius's phrases, like he was unsure if he'd said them right. This made Julius laugh harder, which made me laugh.

The words tumbled out of his mouth. Yesterday... this guy... Julius said, nodding in Austin's direction. He shitted himself!

Austin looked at me to see my reaction. I didn't have one, or I hadn't decided what I wanted it to be. For Julius, the truth never mattered. All he cared for was volatility. But the story seemed believable, the kind of thing that would happen to Austin.

Fuck you. No, I didn't—you're lying, Austin said. Julius bounced himself off the fence, laughing hard.

He did, he said, struggling to catch his breath. I

snuck up on him yesterday, walking. I scared him so bad, his ass ran home with shit in his drawls.

What, no. No. No, you didn't. He's lying, Austin said, looking at me. I knew he was afraid that we were going to tell the whole neighborhood about this, adding to the long lists of things kids bullied him about. I had realized by then that kids liked me because of how I approached most things: detached, never overly reactive. Austin was the opposite. He was kind, and had trouble hiding it. His attachments were always visible for everyone to see. And he was white. Julius and I, along with everyone else, always reminded him of that. All his faults—his sloth-like movements, his jolly face, the naïve things he said—we blamed either on his kindness or his whiteness. In our neighborhood, neither had much currency.

I knew what I did next was important. If I didn't react to what Julius said, Austin would avoid a wildfire, an embarrassing story that would've spread quickly. I could have let it die off with my silence, not feed it with my words. But our neighborhood's cruelty had given me a deranged kind of hope. All those hours spent watching kids taunt and insult and hurt each other—about the color of their skin, their lack of money, their sexual identities—had taught me about the hope we all found in inciting fear and establishing power. Those hours had taught me about the supernatural ability of violence to change a hardened, immovable present. Violence, we believed, could break the strangleholds of race and class. It could make you feel less helpless, give you a taste of control. It could topple cities. It was a dream we had: in my neighborhood, the violence we did to one another seemed a promise about the days to come, a future less frightening than our present.

I looked at Austin, contemplating. Why let the moment fizzle, when I could shout, spit, push,



punch, kick my way through it? Why not brute my way into a future I was desperate for?

I smirked. When Julius saw me smile, he ran toward me and slammed a laugh hard, right in my face. I started to belt out laughs, too—as hard as I could. I hugged my stomach because it hurt to force it. But I kept telling myself not to stop.

We laughed at him for a couple minutes, maintaining it as long as we could. Austin stood there, silently, the whole time. Still, to this day, I can't forget his posture when we'd finished: his hunch was gone; he stood completely upright. His long arms hung at his side, his hairy white legs clumped with mud, his face flushed with anger.

I told him to relax, that we'd wouldn't tell anyone. Julius tried to catch his breath, still chuckling. Relax, Julius said.

It had gotten late, and I realized I should be heading home. I got up slowly. I brushed off my shirt and shook out the soggiess from my shorts. I tried not to seem like I was leaving in a hurry.

I looked at Austin again to reassure him. It's okay, I told him. I kicked a few palm fronds floating in my way and walked toward the entrance, my shoes making wet slaps on the court.

Suddenly I heard mumbling behind me, which turned to shouting. I turned around and saw Austin shove Julius, making him stagger. He almost fell, catching himself on one hand. He looked up at me to see if I had seen what happened. I was surprised at what I had set into motion, pleased at what my formless anger could shape into.

I was again in the position of deciding whether to acknowledge or ignore what was happening. I could continue to egg Julius on, or I could end it all in a flash. I loved it. I smelled the gasoline of generators, felt the wet air on my face, tasted the iron taste of blood. This was power. The fact that I was what I was—an ashamed brown kid—made

my choice easy. Re-inflicting fear and violence on the white kid in front of me felt not just right, but American.

I smiled, big. Once Julius saw this, he turned back toward Austin and mumbled something I couldn't hear—the words he needed to say before doing what he did. He launched a punch from his waist side that crashed into Austin's face, like an errant vehicle skidding across pavement; and to see it happen, the fleshly wreckage of fist against face, shot me with a surge of white-hot bliss that I had never experienced before. I shook in my stance from trying to contain it all. That was enough. I could have lived solely off that moment for a while.

But once Austin crumbled to the ground, the moment didn't stop. Julius started to kick him repeatedly. Everything slowed down and constricted. And I watched. I watched Austin. His shirt rode up past his stomach. His pale white skin exposed. Each blow muddied and darkened and bruised him. Each one traveled inside him and came out of his mouth in yells and spit. I watched him shudder from the force of them. To see someone so big, so human—shattered, like all the things around us—made me frighteningly aware of my surroundings. The wet-coldness of the air, the dried mud on my calves and hands, the potholes on the court, and Austin's large body, belly-up and writhing. I had to get out of there.

I ran. And I could hear Julius running the other way, his shoes slapping on the pavement. There was no future left on that court. There was only the awful present: our friend, well-beaten and pained. I couldn't face him. Staying would have meant admitting that I had wanted the beating to happen to Austin, who was in that moment—not in spite of but because of our American histories—the most vulnerable. It would have meant admitting

that I had wanted retribution for as long I could remember. It would have meant acknowledging that the violence I had encouraged—the sole tool I knew of, for escaping my shame—had terrified me.

I was unprepared for where my violence would take me, how it would lead to a wilderness inside myself. It left me confused and desperate, thrashing at my friends' bodies in order to guard my scared, beating heart.

I ran not knowing that that would be one of the last times I saw either of them. I ran not knowing that my family soon would be evicted from our home again, or that I would continue, for many years after, to force my way into futures as children do, and would only grow up once I faced my own anger and resentment, my American present. I kept running from the wreckage, from our court, from the neighborhood where all of us were children.

Originally published in *Guernica*.

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# THE MERMAID BONES

SAMANTHA JEAN COXALL

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THE MERMAID WASHED ASHORE the summer that Margery turned thirteen. July. How unlucky for the poor creature, she thought, the way that mid-morning sun beat down and blistered her back as she crawled, belly-down, across the white sand back towards the sea. Margery watched from the cliff-side above, sitting on the little bench between the lighthouse and the cemetery, as she often did to watch the lick of waves against the shore. People gathered on the shore, circling the strange body, and watched her fingers claw through earth with single-minded purpose. When she reached the seafoam and it seemed that the next lapping wave might carry her back into the sea and out of their reach, the people put their hands on her. Pulled her away from the water by the arms and folded her way one and then another. The mermaid thrashed and wriggled, back arched and bronze tail undulating, but to no avail.

Margery went to fetch her father who she knew was a good and honest man, but when she told him of the mermaid on the beach, he called her

inside and busied her with pre-supper chores. Then he simply locked her within the gates and left to see it for himself. The bruised iron fence was tall and difficult to climb. Margery spent a few moments trying to pry apart the bars with her fists, but soon gave up and wasted the rest of the afternoon distractedly pulling weeds from around cemetery plots, fingers wrinkling from probing blindly in the wet soil, eyes solely focused on the path leading down to the beach where she could just hear the murmuring of a crowd.

Margery's father was the proprietor of the cemetery, as well as the gravedigger and undertaker. Margery assisted him in the ways that she could: cooking, cleaning, and providing company for a man who mostly otherwise only walked among the dead. They lived on a small island, shaped like a half-moon, with the wide stretch of sand settled below high cliffs the shade of old bones. Though small and unassuming, the island was by no means isolated. Fishing boats arrived and departed almost daily with ease. And yet, nothing

existed there that invited more than a handful of summer visitors each year. Days crawled by slowly. Excitements were few and far between. Margery ached to join the others out there, but she waited dutifully.

Her father didn't return until late, entering their small cottage dazed like a drunk and smelling of woodsmoke and seawater. Excited but unwilling to talk just yet, as if he was relishing in the pleasure of keeping a secret, knowing the wait would only make the reveal taste all the sweeter on his tongue. *In the morning. Wait 'til the morning.* He drank dark wine from the bottle, smacked his lips. When he became too fuzzy-brained to make much sense, Margery sent them both to bed. Voices continued to climb the cliff and she fell asleep to that chorus of indistinct words filtering through her opened window, the late-night revelry muted only slightly by the rolling waves.

DAWN CAME, CORPSE-COLORED, and Margery and her father walked the path down the steep cliff together. The wind was still and quiet but for the song of a faraway seabird. The beach was asleep. Sometime overnight, canvas had been draped over crisscrossed logs to form makeshift tents. Some people had slept—still slept—out in the open sand under shared blankets next to blackened stacks of firewood, the ghost of smoke still hovering above them. Margery let herself be led through the maze of sleepers, treading lightly on the very tips of her toes as not to wake them.

Margery finally came upon the mermaid and, seeing her for the first time up close, swallowed a breath that lodged itself at the base of her throat. The mermaid's wrists had been tied with rope and her fin folded and secured with glittering fishing wire so that she was curled in on herself.

"Quiet, and be careful," said her father, nudg-

ing Margery towards the hunched form there on the shore. A sticky eye opened and watched her approach balefully, but otherwise the mermaid made no movement as Margery looked her over with unrestrained curiosity.

She was gray like the water. Smaller than Margery expected—about the size of a child, but with the sharp and haggard features of someone much older. Flat-chested with a bubbly film coating her skin, like that on a freshly sudsed-up bar of soap. The previous day's sun had damaged her, that Margery could tell. Fin pale and chapped and no longer glinting in the sun the way she had seen it from the cliff the afternoon before. Her back and arms sported a series of red welts and fluid-filled blisters.

Grotesque. Like nothing Margery had ever imagined. Childhood tales and local lore about the mermaids that were purported to live in surrounding waters—though unseen since some undefinable, untraceable time—had led her to believe that a mermaid, should she ever see one, would be spectacular. A kind of otherworldly beauty with a smooth, glittery tale embossed with rainbow scales. That was the pen-and-ink image in the storybooks and on the signboards of local businesses. Yet Margery wasn't so much disgusted by the creature—not everything needed to be beautiful and not everything that was beautiful was good, like the yellow-tufted flowers out by the cliffs that gave her awful hives. It was the state of her that was repellant. Alone and markedly out-of-place. The sharp hills of her ribs where bone gleamed through thin skin, the sharper fear-tipped defiance on her face.

Margery was reminded, quite suddenly, of bodies in the morgue: the little shed where her father did his embalming work under a naked lightbulb. Something about the knobbed spine and sharp

ribcage. The loss of dignity with death, lying exposed under heavy fluorescent light and gawking eyes as the body curled in on itself and shrunk until it looked not dead or alive, but waxy and still like a doll. The mermaid's eye slipped closed again. This creature had given up on living, Margery realized, suddenly panicked. She was at least halfway dead already. She turned to her father to see if he, too, was alarmed, but he had turned away in order to address the stirring crowd slowly clambering to its feet. *Are there more, you think?* the voices asked. *Are there more?*

Margery wanted to cradle the mermaid and to take her home with her. To pump life back into her like air into a balloon so that she might unfold and become fleshy and bright and alive again. She tugged on her father's sleeve, just a couple of fingers at first, then with both hands, but he continued to talk animatedly. "Stop it, Marge," he finally said, and ruffled her hair.

"WHY WON'T THEY LET HER go home?" asked Margery on the walk home.

Again, her father was dazed and thoughtful. A moonbeam cut across his face, illuminating the slight upward curl of his lip. All day they'd stayed at the beach. One stranger arrived. And then another and another. A vibrating line of them stretched across the shore like a hundred-legged insect. A man with a camera, bigger and more complicated than any Margery had ever seen, came and took pictures, the giant bulb on top bursting with light and smoke each time he did. Margery ran back and forth across the beach, cupping saltwater in her hands and hurrying back to the mermaid to dribble what remained in the cracks in her fingers onto parched skin and scales. No one paid her any mind.

"Why can't we put her back in the sea?" asked Margery, again, when they sat down to dinner.

The table was made of bleached driftwood: light in weight and surprisingly soft as Margery ran her fingers anxiously against the grain.

"Some very, very important people are coming to see it," her father responded. He leaned back on the bench to take another ladle-full of soup from the pot gurgling on the stove and as he pulled back, small drips splattered against the floor. Margery's nose crinkled.

"But she'll die out there."

"Tomorrow," he said. "It'll all be over tomorrow."

His voice was gruff and hardened and Margery knew that he wouldn't tolerate anymore of her pleas. That her questioning was ruining his quiet moment of awe. She pouted silently until the table was cleared, after which they played cards and then marbles until late—much later than she was normally permitted. And when she finally settled down into the soft feather give of her mattress, the reflections of the dancing lights of bonfires were still visible on the water. Like the whole ocean was burning.

TOMORROW ARRIVED and, like her father had promised, it brought with it the end.

Margery woke late with a start. The cottage was empty: her father had left some hours ago. A fresh sheet hung across the open doorway to let the damp of the room out and every slight breeze sent forth the smell of linen, sun-warmed. Margery sat at the table where a couple of buttered rolls had been left for her, along with a list of chores she was to complete. She eyed it contemptuously while she ate: *Clean the fish for lunch. Air out the blankets. Freshen up the plots.*

Her father wanted her busy, it seemed. The fish alone would take hours; she rarely did it all on her own. She wondered if the important people had

arrived yet and if they had done what they needed and if the mermaid was finally set free, on her way back home. She'd take a peek, she decided, before getting to work.

She quickly discovered that the gates had been locked again.

Margery shook the bars to test the give of the lock. Though the chain was old and blooming with rust, it wouldn't yield. She could hear the voices coming from the beach. Something dark was unfurling in her mind: a realization that she didn't yet want to confront but which filled her with a sense of dread.

She dashed back towards the cottage, passed it and then the shed, and skidded to a halt at the far side of the cemetery, just overlooking the cliff's edge, where the wildflowers stood watch and where there once stood a great, big tree growing in twisted knots. Her father had liked the look of it, but it grew too unruly to tame, bent the cemetery bars, and so he chopped it down. All that remained was an ugly stump which Margery stood on in order to reach the top of the fence. The metal groaned under her weight, bit into her hands, and by the time she had hoisted herself to sit half-way over—one leg dangling on each side—she was puffing and raw-skinned.

She took a moment to catch her breath. Below her right foot, silver waves battered against the cliff and split apart into shards of seafoam. Above her, a much gentler vision of massive clouds floating by, fluffy as whipped butter, and there she focused as she slowly inched her way along the top of the fence until she reached an area of solid ground underfoot. She fell with a short yelp into a crop of wildflowers, which scratched against her legs, clung to her with the telltale prickle hives skirting about under her skin. Again she ran.

At last! At last—Margery reached the bench.

She peered down below and let out a low, pitiful moan. Though she could not see well, far away as she was, she knew. The mermaid remained curled up on the sand, still, while people milled about with their noses covered. Margery spotted her father close by, dressed in his nicer clothes, one hand slung in his pocket while he spoke casually to several men in gray suits. Her heart swelled with grief. When the wave of it finally crested, settled, she calmly approached the nearby spigot where it jutted, gold and grimy, from the ground and filled one of the muddied tin buckets left behind by clammers.

Returning to the cliff's edge again, she upturned it and felt the force of cascade vibrate up through her fingertips. The sheet of water crashed down below, knocking one of the men's hats askew before soaking through his suit. The rest jumped back startled like birds. Margery's father looked up and squinted, mouthed her name in question. She glared at him, breathless and aching all over, stomach turning with the need to vomit, and collapsed on the bench with a sob.

THE MERMAID HAD DIED during the previous night, she learned. And the important men her father spoke of took copious notes and sketches and photos of the moment. Bundled those up in order to take them back to wherever it was that they had come, where the materials could then be passed along to men even more important than them—men who, in turn, would arrive shortly after. And so on and so on and so on.

Margery had been bathed by the doctor's assistant who had hissed in sympathy upon seeing the red-headed hives beginning to sprout along her legs. Her palms—a line of vibrant purple left from clutching at the fence—had been cleaned out and bandaged with bitter-smelling cloth. And then, fi-

nally, she had been carried home and put to bed.

A knock woke her from a short doze. Her father wandered in and sat himself at the edge of her bed with an exaggerated sigh. He scraped his hand across his face then rubbed at the bottom of his shadowed jaw where hair grew dark and coarse.

“What were you doing out there?” he asked.

“You said she’d be let go.”

“I never made a promise like that.”

It made her feel foolish. Stupid as the stubborn gulls pecking blindly at the rocks, or the brainless jellyfish spread thin on the shore. It was no longer his fault for lying, but hers for believing. “But why didn’t you do anything?”

“Margery,” he said, impatient like he had explained it a thousand-and-one times and yet he hadn’t—not even once. “This is bigger than us. Proof of a mermaid! Here, of all places. This changes everything.” He spoke with a thinly-veiled sense of excitement and wonder, eyes wide and bright and looking out her window at some point in the distance. A boy in the midst of a fantasy.

Margery sucked in a breath and let it eek out of her lungs slowly in an effort not to cry. It rattled around inside her ribcage.

“Oh Marge,” her father sighed. “Death is natural. I’ve taught you that.”

He found her knee under the quilt and gave it a gentle squeeze and shake. He stood, ruffling her hair, and left the room. His big back obscured the entire doorway for a moment and she saw him, again, out there on the beach in his suit while the mermaid choked on air. How large and broad-shouldered he was. The corded muscles running up his arms. How many times had he lifted her with ease? Carried her on his shoulders? Her father was so strong. He could’ve—

Dying old was natural. Even the sickness that

took her mother so, so long ago—unfair, dreadful, ugly as it was—was natural. The mermaid on the beach, suffocating on hot breath and sand. That wasn’t natural—it was unbridled cruelty. Callousness. Torture. Pure evil. And Margery would never forget it. She’d hold it with her like a thorn in her heart, every thump of it in her chest laced with the pain of remembrance.

The carcass was left there on the shore, still tied with rope and fishing wire as if the town was worried that dead mermaids might be capable of reanimating and they would lose this little local miracle and, with it, all proof that it had ever existed. Over the following days, an influx of crowds composed of curiosity-seekers could be seen in ribbons across the shoreline from dawn to dusk, come to bear witness to the thing as it decayed out there. Stalls were set up to sell paper facemasks to protect against the sweetly-salted stench of it. A noxious cloud of the smell—almost visible as a pale haze at certain times—rose with the tide on the hotter days, the slightest fishy hint of it detectable from any point on the island, as far as Margery went, as hard as she tried to escape it.

She went to see it on the beach once more, with her father when he went to meet with the men in charge of delivering the mermaid to its new owner: a wealthy man who collected strange things for his personal cabinet of wonders. Pieces of glowing rocks said to be burnt-up stars, two-headed felines, a sheep with one eye, the frenzied last writings of people dead or disappeared, plants said to have a taste for flesh, trinkets and dolls possessed by dark souls. All in one room of his sprawling estate, somewhere on the summit of blue-and-green hills, far, far away from any beach.

He’d settled with the town by promising large financial gifts and its name in papers around the

world. Then he'd made arrangements to have it delivered to him. Bones cleaned and catalogued and then re-stitched with wire and eventually displayed in a grand glass aquarium filled with formalin. Margery wasn't privy to much of the discussion, but she caught snippets of it when her father was called upon to provide supplies and expertise.

The beach closed for a short while in preparation of the removal. Margery accompanied her father, and as he regaled the wealthy man's men with jars of his own embalmed specimens—rats and small seabirds—Margery once again came upon the creature, or what of it remained, and plucked a thin, delicate pin bone from the tail unnoticed.

Back in her room, she studied it thoughtfully by candlelight. It was just the smallest sliver of stark white, but it felt solid and weighty between her fingers. She traced her own skin—first her legs and then up her hips and to her ribs—feeling for her own bones shifting underneath, trying to find its sister. These men would never have the mermaid, not fully. When her eyes grew heavy from the flame, she hid the precious thing in a small tin which she placed on the sill of her window, looking out at the far sea.

AT DINNER THE EVENING BEFORE the mermaid was to depart, Margery uncorked a second bottle of wine and then a third. From the stove, she watched the rise and fall of her father's throat as he drank his fill. He had always been a hearty drinker. Had said to Margery once or twice that it invited sleep to come to him more easily.

"I'm going to be famous," he said, not for the first time within the hour. He looked at Margery with a dopey expression, eyes half-lidded and mouth stretched into a lazy grin. Filled with dreams, no doubt.

"You're going to be sick," said Margery.

He waved dismissively but didn't argue when she stopped up the bottle and set it on the mantle. She went back 'round the table to him and offered him her shoulder to right his balance as he lifted himself from the bench with a grunt. He let her guide him to his room, where she helped him remove his shoes before he collapsed back onto the bed and fell straight into sleep.

When the gruff call of his snores was steady enough, Margery left their little house still dressed in her day clothes and apron and crossed the cemetery until she came to her father's shed. She didn't like to spend time in there. It seemed like the wood held all the memories of the many years her father had done his work within. An old smell. Stale and sad, if only one could smell sadness—which Margery, at that moment, believed she could.

She didn't bring a candle, nor did she switch on the light for fear of the attention the flicker might draw. Instead, she allowed her eyes to continue to adjust to the dark until the shadows separated to reveal her father's crowded desk and cluttered cabinets. A heavy cloth was draped over the center table and, after a moment, Margery steadily approached close enough to run her hands along the fabric until she found its edge. She lifted it.

There, on a silvered tray, lay the mermaid bones neatly ordered and affixed with labels bearing her father's tight, chaotic scrawl. She sighed, feeling the barest flare of guilt at the sight of his careful work. But still she undid her apron and spread it across the table. In each bone that she moved from the tray, she felt the weight of a life inside, like the world contained within a shell held against the ear. Her father would be angry—and he would know, no doubt, in his heart that this was the work of his own girl. Margery could only hope that it wouldn't ruin them. It was only the



smallest ember of hope, but she would nurse it all the same.

When she finished, she wrapped up the apron and tied the ends. Left the shed and re-latched the door behind her. The bones clattered together, soft and hollow-sounding, in the makeshift bag as she walked to the front gate. It had been her turn to lock up, but she had only pretended to. The chain fell away easily and she took the path down to the beach with the bundle held to her chest.

At the shore, she toed off her shoes and waded into the water. Held the bag in one tight fist and kicked with her legs against the waves rolling over her head until she was numb and goose pimpled. She tasted the salty grit between her tongue and teeth, felt the sting of it in her eyes.

When she at last made it far enough to where the water was still, she loosened the knot on her apron and threw it. The bones shot up in an arc before slicing into the water, some coming back to rest on the surface for a moment before slowly sinking again. When the last one melted into the white seafoam, Margery stretched out on to her back and waited, eyes in the stars, for the tide to carry her back home.

SAMANTHA JEAN COXALL is a writer and art hobbyist from Monument, Colorado. She writes about cryptids, ghosts, and grief and is currently at work on a dark illustrated fairy tale about growing up in the woods. Her most recent work can be found in *The Molotov Cocktail*.

# 5 POEMS

GABRIEL DOZAL

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## SOMETIMES PEOPLE WHO WORK HERE DON'T WORK HERE

I had a blegh day because my Juki machine was being sold but my Singer was roaring. In the spirit of secrets,

let me tell you—I overheard my supervisor spit to her boss:

“Where were you while we were getting high on bilingual employees?” Another scraper comes off the molder in the maquila next door but I was hired here first,

at the fabrica, because I could speak a received pronunciation. The border, my boss, never apologizes because the border wants what we all want: crowds combed with guest workers waiting

in line. We're all dial tones. My boss says all work's tied up in the wreath of our times. And the wreath is me, Primitiva. I'm a visual story

sold by the manufacturer. It's all fictional because a maquila needs fiction to run.

So they need my story, duh.

#

Primitivo hears his thock in the data entry hut. All his friends are also known for their thock.  
When customs presses their key

the crosser responds with pleasing sounds letting customs know their entry was recorded.  
When Primitivo's friends make the wrong sound

they're not allowed to pass into simulation. Instead, they're sent to the desert to find one's  
(loved/enemies/frenemies) bags of stuff (lighters, pedalyte, deodorant).

They need the evidence of crossers in order to document their own role.  
I particularly want to highlight the roll-on stick.

Primitivo's friends care about their smell, their hair, there, there.

## THE BORDER PROCEEDS FUNERAL BY FUNERAL

I can't offer you solstice. No, solace. So please, don't cry inside me again.  
Customs lets you into simulation if you're polished inside and out.

This crosser's inside is un-polishable because it's a room the crosser can't find.  
I'm the crosser and the room I live in

has two entrances. A situation that's been imprinted on me and here's the situation: I can't write a border  
better than the real border.

I'm instructed by customs to open the room that is easiest to access in my mind's eye  
and my mind's eye is a car show from *Espera Fest*. You steal time  
but please never buy it. Customs will give you so much time that you won't have any of it.  
They talk and talk in the kiosk about the same landscape:

a fabrica that skirts and preys on wages. Those dollar signs are the fabric that shape our skirt.  
We make the fabric, we make the landscape and then, we make the day. All day you're on the line  
and you have to live in other people's thoughts.

## THERE'S MORE TRUTH AND UNTRUTH ABOUT THE BORDER

How do you feel so hungry and full at the same time?

The past, like the border, is its own country.

You bring a camcorder into the maquila so that later you can relive your dissonance.

Woops, relieve your dissonance. It's hard to tell.

I'll have to quit. Other people's thoughts are

the Juki's I'd love to leave in the past.

Our ID cards are decorative till the end of our shift. We switch off  
with someone else, some other worker who will wipe the serenade from our eyes

so that I can see what's in the tempering. Among us crossers,  
it's hard to tell who's a fence. A series of myths  
about being called in early, sweeps through the work floor.

## BORDER SIMULATION (IS THIS LANGUAGE A DESERT ALSO?)

Has customs kept us from saying our favorite words  
as we cross? (madrugada, residente, dentures,) or  
has customs left these worlds, sorry words,  
here in the desert to get picked at by the cultures, (ah!  
I keep tripping over these crossers) the vultures,  
till there's nothing but word's cartilage left to excavate?

I only know one forensic team  
and they're a cast of characters in a procedural TV series  
(customs knows the crossing procedure, eyes closed) armed with technology  
that doesn't exist yet and this is also what crossers feel  
like: a technology that doesn't exist.

But if no one can hold the desert culpable, if you can't charge a desert with desertslaughter,  
who will step forward and answer the crosser's last note?:

Dear crosser, your digital footprint is more of a digital stain on the border simulator. Customs will always try and wipe you clean. Are you sure you're sure which customs I'm talking about? Sometimes I'm not even, because custom's words wear camouflage to ensnare us and in trap, there's life. Don't they say that? With restraint you're freed? Then I'm the freest crosser in the border simulator. Customs found me sweating in a cave; they chased me there! And now riding in their jeep, where are we even going? I can't tell and I cover my eyes with my hands because it's as useful as looking out onto this map. Well, good thing I drew the map on my palms and my pants. I can peek at my hand but I'm so tired of looking at my hands, my map, my lap, but I need to because if not I'd be lost in simulation, and if I'm lost I'm detained, but it's not so bad! Eventually customs gets tired of asking questions. I'm getting better at knowing this genre of detainment. I know you love our little interrogations in customs' hut but lately, when I'm there with you, I'm not sure who questions who. But I'm an unreliable translator of customs and, I guess we all are. You've spent years practicing my border, these questions. And when you're not putting the screws to me, you're making other crossers screw together a new border fence. If you're not screwing yourself into the border simulator then customs has you making adobe slabs and papier mâché walls for the bbq, crosser appreciation day. But you won't last long if these kinds of days continue to appreciate. Customs appreciates you, alien crosser. Without you, customs would have no jobs and jobs equal worth in the border simulator. I'll do what I can for you fellow crosser, like, when it's my turn I might be able to knock out that borderwallpiñata, (jerking back and forth, hoping to make you miss,

customs always holds the rope) but after a good whack, what falls out are crossers and their families (they built themselves into the borderwallpiñata? How sneaky) and then the families try to find a cave where they can hide and while they're out for the day they let their sleeping bags (burrito blankets left here by other groundbeefcrossers) pool in the corner, the only pool for miles.

We searched through grounds of beef for you, Primitivo.

We know you've been hiding (and working; oh look,  
now work is in a cave too) at the meat-grinding factory.  
The boss loved hiring migrants because you're cheap and such grinders too.

But now we can't find you (I thought I could see your face  
peeking through the burgermeat, but no,  
the meat just looked like your face for a sec)  
so we sicced the border on you and the border sniffed  
you out. The border simulator knows your smell so well;

a mix of creosote and desperate, and now you'll never leave, the border has you  
in its vice-fenced grip. You're posing for the cameras but stop it, there's no camera  
until we say so. Ok, now, quickly pose for this photo,  
but make an expression like they did in those old timey photos,  
you know, pretend that you've never had your picture taken.  
Look like you don't know what a camera is. Snap, snap  
You're so good at looking morbid  
it's like you've had practice at this. I took a caravan's worth of photos of you,  
and your face always came out glossy, like someone rubbed vaseline on the lens.

I collected these passport photos of you, Primitivo, and now your face is all over  
our little room, in 2x2 portraits, each one a hue of you, come see.  
Did you know Primitivo that there's only two types of people at the border,  
those who have crossed and those who one day will? Ok, we're done  
taking photos now come, enter this room that I've made for you,  
where pants are actually maps and these maps show you where to find your missing bedazzledjeans.

Yet, you're a place on the map that doesn't exist. The wrong data  
points were entered and there is a pocket on the map, did you sew this pocket?  
Did you sew it so you could later hide inside it, on the map?  
If there's one thing customs knows it's maps and pockets so be careful crosser  
not to hide yourself from yourself (your true desire) and desire is a belt of possible,

just take off your belt, loop by loop. Oh look, there's a fray in your jeans.

Don't think I don't know your secret talent, Primitivo. I know everything about you, or at least everything it says here in your file. Since you're so good at sewing these secret pockets, we'll throw you in with the newly arrived craft crossers, crossing arts and crafts from hobby lobby, into simulation. People are bored there, they need something to crochet, and once they're detained we get them to crochet a life size model of us and a new fence.

But if you refuse to do arts and crafts for customs, then we make you sell you.

These crossers, they're selling their teeth, they're selling their kidney, they're selling their plasma, they're selling their hair, and all this gets to cross into simulation.

Crossers are also selling their time but that never grows back or crosses.

But what else would we do? we have no time anyways, so little time that we actually have all of it, and it weighs heavy on our backs.

This back stands with the moment, if it can stand at all. What, with timesweight hunching us closer and closer to the earth? till we're also part of the earth and only then do future crossers step on us to get here.

And when they get here, there are two options for work: the meatmincer or the fabrica. Both jobs are in the same building, in the shadow of the mountain, and if you can grind the meat and use the industrial sewing machines (mostly Juki's), your job will never die.



## YOU WHOM THEY BORDER

you border crosser  
in this simulation  
you constantly slip  
and call one border  
by the other's name  
the names aren't straight  
inside of you and you  
conflate one with two  
because you still yearn  
for another border  
four by four hidden  
crossers that everyday  
irrigated jeep tries to cross

this is the border simulator  
where you imagine  
your way through  
the relationship you can pretend  
to get chased by someone  
who looks like you  
employed by the border  
to grab others like you  
    that's the number  
of remains found  
in the year not the deaths  
you can catch the catcher  
of catchers who funnel  
crossers into more habitable  
parts their words don't know  
how to border each other

their worlds don't know  
how to border each other  
or where to draw the imaginary  
dotted line we were crossing  
and it was fine until the words  
left us and we couldn't see  
each others eyes or fear  
but we knew it was there  
and their bland coyote  
is all bright division  
with his shoulders  
over the desert  
and through the cholla  
and there's pressure  
to keep the cars moving  
Bachelard says humans love caves  
and hidden drawers  
these coyotes love hiding  
Guatemalans in little cupboards  
in the back of their trucks  
in clever compartments  
once over they pop out  
with open arms and say *cabrón*

“You Whom They Border” appeared in *The Literary Review* and “Border Simulation (Is This Language a Desert Also?)” was published in *Hunger Mountain*.

GABRIEL DOZAL is from El Paso, TX. He received his MFA in poetry from The University of Arizona. His work appears in *Guernica*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Literary Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Contra Viento*, *A Dozen Nothing*, and *The Volta*.

# 5 POEMS

ISAAC ESPÓSTO

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## PIONEER PLAQUE (OR I'M CONCERNED ALIENS WILL THINK I'M STRAIGHT)

*The plaques show the nude figures of a human male and female along with several symbols that are designed to provide information about the origin of the spacecraft*

Too busy inheriting yesterdays, the loops of them,  
that sudden drop when we were both sure  
you'd missed the top step. Inheritance of patterns,  
of amoebas, the best of my father's anger  
but not his hair. Driving to his house after the funeral  
I'm in love with you. With deep broken knuckles  
knocking against the steering wheel. In love with mailing  
postcards to our home just for the nesting birds  
to get them, or those weird neighbors trying to re-forest  
their backyard with poorly fated ficuses. Don't  
they know the sunsets will be too much for them?  
All sappy limbed and soulless. We can dance if you want  
even though we don't get anything from the trust  
for completing the steps. No more lunch money,

no more brain freeze, no more eclipses where one of us  
is looking at the other, and the other is looking  
at the moon, and the moon couldn't care less  
about us and our friends loitering in this city park  
after dark. If the cops get called I'll cover for you.  
If the cops get called I'll only admit I want nothing  
else handed to me which I don't deserve. Only to earn  
the rain, the couch with you, the thought that things  
might turn better soon. No more taking from those  
finished, those other beings jettisoning fast away.

## FIRE ON THE COAST, FIRE IN THE TREES

What birthed you besides the mother: First the wrong name announced, then the wrong name answered, and the wrong name toppled. The right name means very little. Crossing the bridge above the bay, a black dog pushing between the overgrown rattle grass. A tourist climbing the crumbling Goat Rock and the ordinary second before they are both swept away. Don't forget the window screen cut open into the dark, dark yard. The lack of your mother's boyfriend with his gray parrots in their glass cage, no more stained glass. Absence is only important because of the creatures amassing around its edge. Three flights of stairs now the usual. Also the girl you don't like accidentally stepping on a seagull in the parking lot, killing the bird. She is a crucial number too. You and your friends dedicating yourselves to bees for a while. Bare knuckle fighting one another in the drying yellow hills. Don't forget the movement. Then the stop. Sometimes the quiet fog drove in and you didn't leave the house. Remember the girl with the curly blonde hair holding your hand with hooked fingers. Fire on the coast and fire in the trees. The right name eventually comes through teaching you a new red tongue. You belong in mud so thick it sucks your boots off. Up north the water is never warm enough and no one goes swimming. There is the mirror of a forgotten birthday, it is not because of the whiskey. You're so dear with your steel grip of logic holding onto things. One February it snows so hard your grandfather doesn't leave bed. Why can't your biker phase become a permanent one?

## FOR THOSE NO LONGER COMING

The sugar oaks are no more and the birds are no more and the blue shed on Elmville burned down long ago. It's early morning when my father asks: what do we do with the half-chewed tongue? With the fillings? What of the corpse? Where can we store their heaving belongings when all the doors are shut to us? The great metallic mouths always locked bright. Yesterday there was the well where I got married but that is gone now too. Possessed one night we tore through each brick and swallowed until our stomachs cold cracked open the new pit. This is how humans lose walking. How we lose the color yellow. The flowers dipped in the field and meant each breath of it. There are no more parties to speak of. Just each on our own slipping into black nightgowns, crawling through the back door all in the same direction, heads down and wondering where everyone else has gone. Which sheets to unwash for those no longer coming.

## BODEGA BAY, CA

When the floods came my father refused  
to sacrifice much. He took  
the silverware, the coats, the pictures  
of my mother surrounded by hunting dogs  
long since dead. He gathered everything  
he could. In between each netted armful he sang:  
*We are a people who spend their lives  
holding onto things.* He kept repeating  
this to me as he fell from one fishing boat to another,  
and under each boat a whirlpool,  
and in each whirlpool the old man continued  
to lose pieces. Now he is all but gone.  
Today I admit I want to hear him calling  
at the door one last time, but there is no house  
to speak of. There could have been peace between us  
had we fished it from the waters.

## SOFT ODE TO COLCHICUMS

Let's say sheet wind rips the doors from the house.  
Let's say the sugar maple breaks through the roof  
and the meadow saffron mauls at the walls.  
Full stop full force. Let's say there is nothing  
left when I wake the next morning. Instead of taking  
action I sit within the grief debris--our crushed  
sheep, broke sugar jars. Isn't stillness craved  
at the end of times? Yet my grandmother  
and her mother and the mother before all  
those mothers passed loud with shot. Let's say  
the pit that mother was thrown into was not  
full of dogs or rude teeth. Let's say  
the ribbon matters, the red one breaking  
through our guts. I won't tug anymore  
if those familiar bodies are banging along  
behind me. The best days past and then rest.

"Pioneer Plaque" and "For Those No Longer coming" originally appeared in *Hunger Mountain*. "Bodega Bay, CA" originally appeared in *Waxwing Literary Journal*.

ISAAC ESPÓSTO graduated with their MFA in poetry in Spring 2020. They are now perusing a PhD in Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota.

# RING OF SURVIVAL

LEE ANNE GALLAWAY - MITCHELL

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KHOST BOWL, AFGHANISTAN / VALDOSTA,  
GEORGIA—2008

THERE IS A BOY; maybe a man, a young man, perhaps a teenager. The bullets hit. He limps. He stumbles, trips. He holds in his organs with both his hands. Brad, my husband, wonders from the air just how old he is, this human he has just shot. Brad looks down through a television screen in his cockpit and wonders if the boy, it's a boy now, has made it into Pakistan. He can no longer shoot but that doesn't mean he cannot watch. My husband tells me this over martinis. We are at home in Arizona. We were watching *House of Cards*, but now it is paused and we sit in the dark. Brad describes how he watched this boy limp, this boy he didn't know, when he was called in for close air support, told that the enemy might be young. It could have been a small adult, but still. It was the wire in his limbs, the elasticity in his movement even in wounded stagger. So fluid and lanky, he had to be young.

As Brad talks, I think about a young man limping toward a border and the man above thinking about his unborn son.

At the house in Georgia where I grew my son, the frogs fell on my head each time I opened the door to let our dog out to take a shit. We lived in the swamplands. Once an alligator crossed the runway on base, six miles from our backyard. Because I was the only one to do it, I strapped a neon band across my growing belly and walked the dog at five in the morning. By six, I would be working on a doctoral dissertation about death, and by lunch, exhaustion and nausea would set in. Just around the bend from my home, skeletons of animals littered the swamp plain--dried out bones left by gators I never saw.

PLAINVIEW, TEXAS—2016

THE FIRST SUMMER BRAD SPENT flying for an airline, everywhere and nowhere, always in transit,



I took our children to Texas for eight weeks and stayed with my parents. One morning, I woke to my dad screaming in such deep, unrelenting pain, he threatened to find the gun hidden in the closet and shoot himself in the head.

My dad's disease, alpha fibrinogen amyloidosis, is like Alzheimer's except its aberrant proteins leave your brain alone and just fuck with your heart, kidneys, liver, and nerves. The more common AL Amyloidosis has a more mercifully brief prognosis of around two years while my dad's rare disease typically takes its time. For a few months after his diagnosis, we believed dad had this more common type of disease. A Vietnam veteran, my dad filed for disability because it was listed as a service-related illness, but he was denied once labs came back confirming my dad's more obscure disease.

My dad's amyloids, his asshole proteins, settled themselves in his kidneys and nerves, clogging tissues, rendering them useless. The condition, considered genetic, did not make it on the Veterans Administration's list of "Veterans Diseases Related to Agent Orange Exposure." My dad appealed for 100% disability every time he was denied it. It took five years until the VA gave in, but it was because of my dad's heart, not his amyloids. Heart disease is a *proven* service-related illness connected to Agent Orange exposure.

At this point in his illness, he received nocturnal peritoneal dialysis, hooking himself up to a machine every night, while my mom nudged him awake every two hours to sit up so he could shake out the excess fluid gathering around his abdomen. When the amyloids begin to infiltrate the nerves, the pain, known as amyloid neuropathy, produces a sensory shit storm of otherworldly sensations so severe that patients often hallucinate.

On this morning, my mother's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, my dad cried and screamed while my mom stood helplessly by trying to comfort her husband and flinching every time he yelled at her.

My kids heard him scream, "Goddamn it, Debbie! I want to fucking die!"

Then he saw the spiders crawling on the ceiling.

I got the kids dressed, packed them into the car, and called my in-laws as I sped to their home twenty miles away. My son was six, my daughter four, and I started to pray like I hadn't in years. *Please don't let this be their last memory of their grandfather.* My father-in-law followed me back to my parents' house with a wheelchair in the back of his pickup. He talked my dad into going to the hospital.

Normally a fifty-minute drive down I-27, I got my dad to the emergency room in thirty minutes. The doctors and nurses did not believe him or understand his illness. They thought he was an addict seeking pain medication. After leading questions and a series of skeptical head tilts, the doctor gave him Dilaudid and sent him home.

### PLAINVIEW AND LOCKNEY, TEXAS—2003

AS MY SISTER ALANA AND I walked into the lobby of Furr's Cafeteria, I turned to see a very handsome man standing in the corner. It took me a moment to recognize him, this boy I had known my whole life: *Well, shit. That's Brad, and he's... hot?*

My dad and my sister Mandy had run into Brad, a childhood friend, at the gas station. They invited him to lunch. It was Christmas Eve, and he was home from flight school. He was going to be a fighter pilot. I was going to be an academic.

In high school, Brad and I were on the math team, acted in plays together, and engaged in lively political debates in our AP classes. One night when I was a junior and Tim was a sophomore, we had a moment in a hot tub the night before the state math meet. I thought he was going to kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me. And he told me, ten years later and before we were married, that he considered it, but he thought I would kick his ass if he tried.

At lunch with my family, Brad and I flirted through our salads, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and chocolate cream pie. I offered to accompany him to the soft-serve machine to get what he referred to as “spackle” after such a filling meal. I don’t even like ice cream.

That night he came over for drinks the way he did every Christmas break, a tradition the previous six years of winter breaks. This time, it was just the two of us. Everyone had gone to bed. Brad and I slowly made our way through a cooler of beer, talking and touching and moving closer together until he captured my knee with both of his and he leaned in to kiss my neck.

We made out in the basement of my parents’ house. Afterwards, Brad said, he laughed all the way home. I never thought he would call or email me, and I wondered how awkward it would be when we saw each other next Christmas.

But the following weekend he drove to Austin to see me. It snowed that night, a rarity in Austin, and we made love and watched the slow, fat white flakes from my couch. We two-stepped at Gruene Hall to South Austin Jug Band and drank ice cold Shiner Bock. I watched his ass as he changed a tire on that last of our first days, and then he drove away from me and back to flight school.

## LUBBOCK, TEXAS—2016

TWO DAYS AFTER THE EMERGENCY ROOM released my dad, I drove my parents to my dad’s nephrologist’s office at the dialysis clinic. We showed up to the clinic that day desperate and without an appointment, hoping someone could tell us what to do.

The pain had grown worse, and my dad’s helplessness turned to abuse as he screamed and cursed my mother and me. He had also given up drinking when he started getting sick—a sure sign he was taking this disease seriously. I had pushed Dad in a wheelchair to their car, and I had to lift his 150 pounds as he screamed. The kids were with my in-laws, and Brad was somewhere in South America.

On the way to the clinic, I picked up my youngest sister Alana at the Lubbock airport. Dad screamed at me as I turned a corner too fast or made a subtle move to dodge road debris. Everything made him holler in pain. I remembered when I had babies, how they would arch their backs and wail in unrelenting grief. It took all my strength to keep them from falling over senseless. It took all my strength to keep from pulling over and telling my dad to shut the fuck up.

When we got to the clinic, Dad could not move from the car because the slightest pressure on his skin, but especially his feet, would make him howl in a way that made my bones rattle. Alana and I ran into the clinic and managed to get his entire treatment team out to the parking lot.

“Keep him from talking about suicide,” the social worker reminded me. “I know he doesn’t mean it, but he’ll end up in the psych ward.” The nurses talked to Alana, also a nurse, about amyloid neuropathy. We knew then the disease had begun infiltrating his nerves.

Dad continued to scream and cry as we waited for the ambulance. The nurses assured us that the doctors would take him seriously if he got to the ER in an ambulance. My mother begged God to take him, to spare him. Finally, the ambulance arrived and loaded him up. We followed.

They gave my dad powerful pain medication, and he slept for the first time in days. My petite sister got in the doctor's face and told him all about dad's illness. Her accent deep and full of twang, she rattled off everything she knew about fibrinogen alpha heavy chain amyloidosis. The doctor summoned his students. Doctors love a rare disease. When my dad woke up, he told them the story of his body, the story of his war.

#### LOCKNEY, TEXAS—LATE 1990S/EARLY 2000S

IN THE DAYS BEFORE "US," we listened to my dad's war. Brad was in the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M while I was a graduate student at UT Austin. In our yearly Christmas visits home from college, Brad and I joked about our college rivalries while we drank dad's beer and sat around his table. Sometimes Dad told us about his last days in Vietnam.

"I was glad to get out," Dad chuckled and rubbed his bald head. He salted the rim of his Natural Light and lit a cigarette.

"We got a big ground artillery attack in Dongha," he went on. "I was in the shower, and I come out—it was midnight—that was the first shower I'd had in a month. Anyhow, I come out, just a towel around me, and I smelled tear gas. I got to the first tent, put my head in the door, 'Hey, there's tear gas going off; I think we're fixing to get hit.' Next minute an artillery shell hit pretty close. Small arms fire started, and I took off for my tent,

got in, hit the floor."

He opened another beer, salted the rim, stubbed out his cigarette. Brad and I grabbed a couple of Shiners. The empties stayed on the table.

"After the artillery quit," he said, "I looked out the door and there's tracers going over our tent, lighting up the sky with flares." Dad rubbed his bald head again, fidgeted with his pack of cigarettes. "And this guy walked out of the tent and you could see his silhouette. And these tracers and rounds come over, and you could see them hit him. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* He didn't make it. He was dead when he hit the ground. So I was ready to git."

It was a story I had heard before, back when I was a child. He told me these stories and more, and I brought him beer after beer to keep him talking. I would have lit his cigarettes had my eight-year-old fingers been capable of working a lighter. I listened to them again in junior high when I could stay up later. He now added more details to these stories for me and my future husband, who was set on becoming an Air Force fighter pilot. Far before I realized it, my dad predicted that Brad would one day go into combat. Brad knew what questions to ask.

#### LUBBOCK, TEXAS—2016

WHEN HE WAS IN THE HOSPITAL, dad finally told the story about his own daddy dying, a story we only knew secondhand. My dad's pain had been made manageable enough that afternoon that he was reflective. He could talk about his most painful memory.

He still called AC "daddy," said that he was just getting to know the man when he died. After working all day in the cotton fields of Central Tex-

as in July, my eighteen-year-old dad stopped on the side of the road to let AC throw up. They had been doing custom fieldwork for a farm operation in Taylor, a small town northeast of Austin. AC, a longtime smoker and farm laborer, worked every minute of daylight. But on this day, with temperatures nearing 100 and high humidity typical of a Central Texas summer, AC wanted to leave early. He had no more work left in him. Dad cleaned up at a motel while AC rested.

“You take a shower. Give me a minute. And then we’ll grab something to eat.”

As he rinsed, Dad heard something that sounded like a train whistle. It was the sound someone makes when his heart explodes.

AC did not know what the initials of his own name represented. His mother died in childbirth, and his father left him with a spinster aunt. He married my grandmother, a quiet, hardworking woman, and he spent World War II in Burma building roads. That was all my dad knew of a man with whom he spent every day working land they did not own. My dad worked from the time he could walk, helping his dad before school and after his football games. My dad told stories, but AC did not.

“Daddy never talked much about nothing,” he would remark often, sometimes bitterly. But AC had started talking a little more the summer he died.

Later that day the cardiologist’s PA, a former Marine, introduced himself to my dad.

“You are my brother in arms,” my dad remarked, and began telling him war stories.

The Marine sat down and listened with something beyond patience, with careful attention, even reverence, to the sacred act of hearing someone used up by war.

My dad before war and before AC’s death:

High school quarterback and track star who ran the cotton stripper, combine, and plow along cotton fields after school. Winner of a Betty Crocker cooking contest and able to do complex math in his head. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy who came back from war balding and battleworn at the age of 23.

I looked at my dad in that hospital bed, age 67, a face full of stubble that he would eventually let grow into a wild “fuck you” beard, thinner than I had ever seen him.

This is an excerpt from “Ring of Survival,” first published in *Bat City Review*, Issue 15, Winter 2019.

LEE ANNE GALLAWAY-MITCHELL grew up working on a family farm in Lockney, Texas. Lee Anne's essays and poems can be found in *Bat City Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Storm Cellar*, and *Terrain.org*, among others. Her essay, "Debridement," first published in *Gravel*, was chosen as a notable essay in *Best American Essays 2019*. She has a PhD in English from the University of Texas and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Arizona. She writes about illness and grief, farming and rural life, violence and war. She is currently at work on a hybrid collection of essays and poems, *Campfollowers*, which documents the long lasting mental and physical effects of disaster preparedness, anticipatory grief, and lived proximities to violence through her experiences both as the adult child of a disabled combat veteran and the spouse of an active duty service member. The collection layers personal histories alongside poetic narratives of campfollowers throughout history, illustrating the intimate and collective connections between families and militaries to grief and trauma, power and violence.

# DO MIGRANTS DREAM OF BLUE BARRELS?

RAQUEL GUTIÉRREZ

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I LIVE IN TUCSON. People tell me they love the images they see on my various social media feeds of the mysterious, moonscape desert that surrounds. Many of the friends, acquaintances, and strangers who follow me on social media live along both coasts, so of course it gives me great pleasure to be able to ignite their awe for the uncontainable beauty of the Sonoran desert, even if from afar. For me, being in this desert on any given morning or early evening means giving over to the expansive possibilities of the landscape. It has offered

new perspectives when I am stuck on a writing project—to step out into any number of trails and parks and take it all in, whether it's the way the light moves across the shallow valleys of Gates Pass before sunset or the way the temperature surprisingly drops ten degrees when your trail takes you into the shadowy parts sitting below Pima Canyon. The infinity of surprise that lives here is hard to deny.

But as 115–120 degrees Fahrenheit becomes the new normal for Southern Arizona, indicat-

ing a climate change that may not be reversible in years to come, there is another thing one cannot deny—any slight carelessness on your part and the desert will kill you. That fact makes itself clear on a recent ride-along outing with Guillermo and Stephen, two volunteers for the regional organization Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas. As I climb into their water-replenishment truck, I am told that if we broke down in Arivaca—an hour and fifteen minutes south of Tucson—we would be exposed to the same conditions as the Latinx migrants we are trying to help. I stare dead-eyed behind my Ray-Bans at Guillermo—we would never be exposed to the same conditions as migrants making this trek.

I SHAKE OFF ANY DOUBT that we will be okay. All of us engaging in humanitarian work should have it seared into our minds that we are the lucky ones; after all, we are traveling with over one hundred gallons of water into the harshest topographies in the Southwest. At the worst, we will be sweaty and uncomfortable changing the imaginary flat tire, in my mind's wandering to worry—but we won't die.

I make contact with the privilege I carry into different parts of the valley that blanket the infamous border town Arivaca, though I'm not sure I can ever make peace with it. In this part of the country, the thing you do—if you are somebody's anchor baby, a pedantic gadfly, a broke bourgeois bohemian who cares about justice and human rights and has heated conversations about immigration policy with family members during the holidays, the you who still writes diversity statements for scholarship applications, or eats nopal fries and drinks aged-whiskey cocktails with the liberal latte-sipping NPR listeners in downtown Tucson, where the adobe façades were restored to make it look like you are still in the Old Pueb-

lo—you come and face these incongruent truths, maxing out credit cards to do the thing you do in the name of justice. If there is anything to do with the privilege, it is to risk it. And it will never be enough.

HUMANE BORDERS MAINTAINS a system of water stations in the Sonoran Desert on routes used by migrants making the perilous journey to the north mostly by foot. Each station has its own name: Green Valley (Pecan Orchard), Elephant Head, Rocky Road, K-9, Cemetery Hill, Soberanes, Mauricio Farah, and Martinez Well.

Getting into the truck at Green Valley, we are promptly driven to the first water station, situated behind a pecan orchard. It looks momentarily out of place and time with its trees lined up tightly, towering above a few acres covered by bright green grass, an indication of the obscene amounts of water it must consume on a daily basis. But I am thankful nonetheless for its place in the landscape and hope it is there to offer some shady respite to the men, women, and children who make the orchard a part of their journey.

As soon as we get to the water station, I quietly gasp at the sight of concrete blocks, a quartet of two-by-four wood planks, and a fifty-five-gallon plastic blue barrel sitting stoutly but bravely above the desiccated arroyo. These objects in any other home-improvement configuration might not inspire such deference, but it is like seeing Stonehenge in real life—or rather seeing these water stations gives me the same feeling as when I saw Stonehenge as a high-school sophomore. That there is so much life beyond the little world you're trying to escape from—we're all trying to leave something behind and go toward something better, and there shouldn't be any guilt or fault in that desire. These water stations are myth come to

life, a border fable if you will—friends from back home in Southern California who have come out to the desert to do humanitarian work right in the trenches, a newer ground zero located in the Southwest, see the danger firsthand, see the danger abstracted. This severity. Our national border policies producing the need for these rebel barrels. Suddenly I don the beige mask of humanitarianism, sunburnt pink on my brown skin.

But I don't want this severity to be normalized. My body is here to meet the risk; that is what it is about, right? I will be the distraction so somebody less privileged can make their escape. I will make space in the back seat where I sit, absorbing the bumpy impact over difficult terrain. I don't want to be arrested and face jail time, or a felony mark on my record like Scott Warren (the Arizona State University School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning lecturer and volunteer for the advocacy group No More Deaths, who in January 2018 was arrested and charged with harboring and one count of conspiracy, which are felonies. Warren will face a retrial in November and twenty years in prison if convicted of those charges. But all the charges will be dropped—a precedent-setting victory for humanitarian aid workers). I have a deep-seated fear of being arrested. But fears are meant to be conquered, I suppose from the back seat of the SUV. I don't know if I can use this platform so somebody can find the words to say, "there is a problem on the border," and bring them into their privatized space within a place, a city even, uncertain of calling itself a sanctuary. That space may be here right now, or sometime in the near future.

DO MIGRANTS DREAM of healing elixirs photosynthesized with the cancerous UV rays of the sun? Do they spot the plastic gallon bottles situated at

the base of the ocotillos that obscure vultures and other carrion birds, perched in wait?

I GO TO ARIVACA for lunch with A one late-winter day. A is a good friend of mine who works with No More Deaths, another gender weirdo who has been this-close to being charged with a felony for illegal transport of immigrants. Through A, I meet other queers who I may have spotted at punk shows in Oakland or Los Angeles or standing in line at the co-op in Brooklyn. Many an anarchist punk has made their way to Tucson to work for No More Deaths—so many that No More Deaths feels like some kind of queer rite of passage into Tucson's radical communities, where any given Friday night there'll be a wild mesh-and-Day-Glo, Bay Area-style dance-party fundraiser for undocumented queer and trans people, or bail funds specifically for queer organizers caught in the crosshairs of draconian border policy. I love A's tales of hooking up with fellow aid workers that came through for the summers only. Sex and No More Deaths had a very plutonian quality—the intensity of the work that took place there inspired a unique eros.

It is still quiet on the shore of the Arivaca lake. Scott Warren hasn't yet been arrested for bringing provisions to migrants stuck in a safe house, when A and I stop at La Gitana Cantina for a quick cold beer. No More Deaths is the necessary intervention, much to the chagrin of Arizona's conservatives. What is the alternative to letting people die in the desert?

A picks me up in their dusty, decade-old dual-cab Toyota two-door truck. We stop at the co-op in Tucson for olives, anchovies, crackers, and kombucha before jumping onto the highway and through the mountain roads that spit us out three miles from the border itself. The town is Wild



West tiny with a general store and a saloon jumping colorfully into my sightline. It's too early for a round at La Gitana Cantina, but that doesn't stop the parking lot from being packed at eleven am. A parks in front of the Arivaca Humanitarian Aid office to introduce me to the lovely aid worker whose name shall remain anonymous, who welcomes me in and speaks to me in a familiar Spanish, narrating a day in the life that feels absurd after seeing every other car be a border-patrol truck, and wondering who might be eyeballing A. I buy a tee shirt. And take a few photos of the "people-helping-people border zone" murals that portray a Disneyesque pastoral landscape with desert wildlife hiding behind traffic cones and stop signs.

LIVING IN THE BORDERLANDS, you count among your friends and neighbors those who want things to be different here. We use our time to stay aware, to be in service. We live here to embody the lesson that everyone should be entitled to improve upon the conditions of their lives. That often means leaving behind a pressure-cooker combination of corrupt governments, violence, and barren lands. Those lessons arrive differently for us. We are people connected to immigrants and migrants in deep and complex matrices—as their children, their lovers, their friends, their bosses, their customers, their neighbors, or if, we are lucky, their students. Some of us will never know that direct experience of movement across harrowing terrain. We will never know the hard choice to begin those journeys. Some of us are in networks of care that rely on a rapid-response strategy to help the most precarious members who have made those choices with funds, warm clothes, or a place to stay after leaving the detention centers that dot the Southern Arizona landscape.

And sometimes, if you're like Francisco "Paco" Cantú, your connection is a complicated relational dyad that will haunt the rest of your days. Cantú spent four years in the Border Patrol and distilled those experiences tracking and arresting border crossers—and the moral injury it produces—in his memoir, *The Line Becomes a River* (Riverhead, 2018). His book was released to much fanfare, ingratiating him with the liberal media and putting him in the crosshairs of border activists who angrily called him out on several platforms for capitalizing on migrants' deaths for his artmaking. While some of this critique is echoed in Tucson, the reality of our lived days is that to see a border cop with some *toque de mexicanidad* is a quotidian event. And it's time to reckon with why Mexican Americans, the children and grandchildren of Mexican immigrants, decide to don olive-green pants and green-and-gold-patched white shirts to police Southern Mexican and Central American migrants making the journey north. Why do these inhabitants of Southern Arizona divorce themselves from the recently arrived? What is gained by enacting these distances? What are the proximities they make way for? I struggle with these questions as a way to understand my own kin. I ask more questions.

Why did my Salvadoran immigrant brother fourteen years my senior join the Marines after barely graduating high school? Why did he become a Los Angeles sheriff's deputy? How did we happen to share the same uterus at different times? It's time to unmake the quotidian, to learn from those who have permanently damaged themselves carrying out our draconian and inhumane policies from the inside out. To a more privileged subject, the quotidian brings a sense of doom to all of my other like-minded efforts: voting, calling my senators and representatives,

tweeting my outrage, unleashing tiresome tirades to trolls whose worlds seem to get bigger while mine diminishes with activists and scholars dying early deaths.

I am often asked if I know Francisco Cantú—but he's just Paco to me. Paco the well-read, soft-spoken king of the nerds, who brings up Cormac and Anzaldúa in the same breath and will only discuss mezcal-distillation processes if you specifically ask him about them. I am asked if I support the border patrol, because I like his tweets on occasion. This is Tucson, I say. You can't change the past. In a red state known for denying Mexican American high-school students a chance to learn about their histories by banning ethnic studies curriculum, it means a lot when anyone is willing to step up for the disenfranchised.

You can't change the past and be the ideal advocate in Tucson; there are people who very literally made it impossible for young people to even learn about the past. I don't want to have to build false dichotomies about someone's past against someone else's as a way to defend those pasts. Living with the past is the hardest task to be burdened with day in, day out, seeing the ways tensions improve between Mexican American and Indigenous communities or don't. Harnessing those energies for a solidarity where we center the migrant's plight feels more important to me.

MY DAD SHEEPISHLY ADMITS that the reason he hasn't gone back to the gym in his neighborhood is that he accidentally hit the gas instead of the brake and totaled his minivan by slamming it into a light post in the gym parking lot. It must have been bad, I said. He laughs. At seventy-five he often doesn't give me the back-story to most of his mistakes, and any story is often filled with omissions too painful to remember. I think of

the story he shared with me over a crab dinner he splurged on in Fisherman's Wharf after riding the Greyhound all night to San Francisco, where I was living at the time. In the late sixties he had been arrested for working without papers in San Francisco and was placed in custody on a fishing boat in Alameda, California, for a couple of days, cleaning the deck while agents found him a bus to El Paso. This was a time when detention centers meant nothing more than a ride to Ciudad Juárez or Tijuana, while Mexicanos on both sides of the line listened to the San Jose, California, band Los Tigres del Norte sing earnestly about contraband and betrayal in a transnational drug deal between lovers gone wrong. That golden age where you got back on that hill, grassy and lush, and tried it again until you got it right. And he did. My dad got that right.

I START THINKING ABOUT the ways in which the untraceable is made evident, or how the migrants' journey has been represented to me throughout my life as a reader, a writer, and the Los Angeles-born 1980s child of parents from El Salvador and Mexico—and the one in the here and now, the adult child. In prose, we have writers Rubén Martínez of Los Angeles, who in his 2001 nonfiction book *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* rode with the Chavez brothers, indigenous members of the Purepecha tribe from the town of Cherán, Michoacán, in search of a better life. But how is a life made better if it means working in the poultry industry in rural Arkansas that will call ICE on you at a moment's notice? Or Reyna Grande rendering first-hand without mincing words the very particular experience of crossing over. People come north because the alternative is death. Their portraits of others or selves desperate to reunite with family

in the North, all in various pursuits of better economic stability.

As a reader, these voices have meant finding the language to illustrate the ways migratory traumas continue to haunt families both constituted and torn apart by inhumane border policies. But my parents' migration took place in the late sixties and early seventies—they were essentially crossing an imaginary wall with nary an agent in sight to police such boundaries. Or overstaying their visas as in the case of my mother, who was a nurse in San Salvador. She came to the U.S. fleeing a violent husband. But she stayed in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, dare I say in the innocent heyday of border crossing, on par with episodes of *The Brady Bunch*? Or the golden age of border-law breaking, such as that scene in *Born in East L.A.* where Cheech Marin's Lupe interrupts his own privilege as a Los Angeles-born-and-bred Chicano who finds himself caught in the Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare of an unlawful deportation. The climax of the film happens when Lupe, atop one of the many hills throughout the borderscape of Tijuana and San Diego, summons the migrant masses with the elegance of an orchestra conductor to run down the hill, overwhelming two slack-jawed border-patrol agents underestimating the ethnic disempowered other, as per usual.

BACK IN THE TRUCK, I feel myself dolefully assign the landscape its benevolence, something to help muster the belief that what we are doing will make the slightest impact. It is Sunday. Of course we all have the same thought that morning—will we encounter anyone in need of our help?

DO MIGRANTS DREAM of blue barrels in the middle of the emptied ocean floor? Hiding in the

brush in this harsh wilderness, dying under the weight of the sun?

IN THE DISTANCE, I STOP and listen closely: a purple flag waves intrepidly in the hot summer wind, its color dulled by the daily solar pounding of summer.

After surveying the water station for cleanliness, potability, visibility, and evidence of possible tampering, we move on to the next one in Arivaca proper, Elephant Head. But before heading out of the pecan orchard, Stephen asks Guillermo to stop the truck on the periphery, where he spots empty water bottles and a spectrum of detritus of migrants past. Plastic bottles that are empty but still intact signal recent passage. However, there are also old, discarded backpacks that, like the life they carried inside, have been emptied and are succumbing to the harsh conditions of this merciless desert. They are bits of human evidence that make the area seem anachronistic—to travel by foot in a time saturated by every imaginable technology. This is our refugee crisis.

It is not hard to sense that specter of migrant death nearby or in my third eye. Everything in that *mise-en-scène* blinks like a neon sign—migrants who came through the shade of the pecan trees more likely than not found their downfall in the washes around Arivaca, eleven miles from the borderline itself.

THE BORDER AND THE IMPRINT of migrants' death that is left in its hinterlands animates most experiences I have in the nature that surrounds it. There's no saguaro I pass or silhouette of a mountain range at sunset that doesn't have the uncanny attached to each of these natural encounters. The beauty of the desert never exists in a vacuum for me, much like art for art's sake. This sentiment is

approximated for me in the artwork of my friend Karlito Miller Espinosa, who like me left a coastal metropole for Tucson in 2016. An artist known for his exquisitely executed murals—from New York to Kiev—he started working in more conceptual registers that allowed for a more direct critique of the cultural zeitgeist in which he found himself. His three-dimensional installation pieces centered on cement bricks made from sand and debris collected from sites around southern Arizona borderlands where migrant bodies have been found. *Untitled (Corridor)* (2018) is a work that organizes the bedlam that U.S. immigration policy produces on the border space of Arizona and Mexico into a compact, narrow corridor. Fueled by a desire to ensure a futurity, most migrants are indigenous men and young families leaving the dead ends delivered by their countries of origin, countries whose governments have sold off industries to the highest bidders as is what business as usual means in a post-NAFTA world. As Mexican artist Teresa Margolles or Rafa Esparza comment on the ways in which violence intervenes in the daily lives of the most vulnerable of both Mexican and U.S. society, Karlito's work too is a vehicle for a much-needed elegy for the migrant who comes north to labor. He brings land to art. And while the bricks themselves innovate on a page out of minimalism, to experience them in the seemingly antiseptic walls and floor of a gallery space allows for the Sonoran desert to leave its locale and trouble the viewer comfortably distanced from the deadly terrains. For me, Karlito's work troubles me through the reminder of the debt I owe the migrant, the uncomfortable intimacies that contour the histories between us, the circumstances that reinforce the tensions.

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I AM A PASSENGER watching the scenery of the borderlands beyond the brink of madness. One sitting president called the Deporter-in-Chief helped set the rhythm in place for what would come with the new administration less than a year later. We all are—at least the lot of us in the vehicle making this trip, a mere tithe to the desert to spare the living crossing through it. Every day can be marked by a colorful crucifix.

Over the next nine hours, over nothing more than the stretch of six miles at 3 mph, we are all mad. Or obsessed. It is this affective drive that impelled volunteers like Guillermo and Stephen to make this trip every two to three weeks for the last two years. No one should go through this. Everyone should run thumb and forefingers into the bullet holes of signs around the water barrels. Everyone should come close to being trampled by the cattle roaming freely. No one should risk this. Everyone should notice the wake of buzzards flying too close for comfort. No one should be separated from their families. These imperatives shouldn't fall on the luck of the draw.

WHEN WE ARRIVE at Elephant Head, I notice something that wasn't on the first blue container: La Virgen de Guadalupe. Or, rather, a glossy sticker with her likeness.

All of my twelve years' worth of nostalgic Catholic-school hackles go up at the sight of the feminine deity that made her debut on a hill in Tepeyac, Mexico. An apparition that, today, only an indigenous man re-christened Juan Diego under similarly violent conditions could witness. As chronicled in a tract written in the mid-seventeenth century, Nican Mopohua, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin was an indigenous man born in

fifteenth-century Mexico when it was still Tenochtitlan, a subject of the Aztec empire who was basically caught in the crosshairs of colonization. Juan Diego was an early adopter of Catholicism, opting for baptism over complete subjugation. He was canonized in 2002 for being the holy witness to the apparition of the Virgin Mary, who appeared to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531, and who exhorted him to tell the bishop to build a shrine to her there. Was it because praying to the Virgin in their image made it easier to believe? This of course is relevant because Tepeyac was the site of the recently destroyed shrine to Coatlicue, the mother deity in the Aztec polytheistic tradition. In 1531, just as autumn transitioned into winter, Juan Diego on his return from a fourth encounter with the Virgin opened his tunic, and luscious red roses fell to the floor. This gesture also revealed the imprint of the Virgin Mary's image on the cloth of his humble vestment. Roses would have been impossible to grow in such a cold spell during that season.

Stephen notices me noticing her and says it's a way migrants hopefully can understand that the water station is there to help. I nod. He reminds me of the white solidarity folks back in Los Angeles. Stephen, a civil-rights attorney for the ACLU, reminds me of the kind of men who would teach me about parts of the Salvadoran Civil War my mother would omit. I nod, affirming that assumption and hoping non-Catholic migrants can decipher the tank as a site of relief. But behind my sunglasses and smile I bite my lip and pinch the muffin top peeking over my belt to keep the flood of emotions at bay. When will the colonial encounter finally pay its debt to the migrant, the descendant of those who under duress chose one god of Catholicism over the many gods and divinities of Aztec/Toltec/Mayan cosmological spiritu-

ality to call on for the variety of supplications that emerge in a life?

I pull the soft red bandana from my back pocket and rub it over tear-streaked cheeks and the sweat from my brow.

AS THE MORNING PROGRESSES and the sun's rays intensify, I feel the perspiration pool in and around my body's various concaves and then disappear. The desert is taking its rightful tax of moisture from me, collecting its debt as it does every day. We snack on sweet baby peppers and throw the ends out the window, to which Guillermo will say it will be a few hours tops before the desert consumes our biodegradable trash. We go on like this for hours. Our bodies flirting with being untraceable, all while traversing Arivaca's veins and arteries.

Time seems to be marked by how close or far we are to a curious mountain peak known as Baboquivari, a sacred place for the Tohono O'odham nation as the creator, I'toi, resides in a cave at the base. Baboquivari represents a genesis, of sorts. Or where to return, for many. Throughout our ride-along, Guillermo will stop for all of us to take in the scenery, snap photos, and stretch our legs. It feels like Baboquivari is looking out for us as we do our best looking out for others. Back in the car, rolling at our near-glacial pace, Guillermo, an old punk like me, who lived a decade in a Northeast Los Angeles neighborhood (like me again) but now lives in Tucson (yep, me, too), regales us with a story about his dying grandmother. He traveled from California one spring break years ago so that he and the cousins could gather to go camp and pray for their Yaqui grandmother's health. They passed a joint around as they hiked up the mountain to Baboquivari's peak. Being young men on the precipice of adult-

hood themselves, they silently competed with one another—who could walk faster? Who could carry the most gear? Who could keep up?

I was not going to let those guys know I had a flu, Guillermo says, carefully guiding our vehicle over sharp, rocky terrain, but I was dragging behind them when I felt something watching me. It was a mountain lion, and I turned around so quickly I scared it away. The rest of us in the car sigh in relief collectively. But Guillermo isn't going to let us off the hook. Did you know, he begins, that a mountain lion loves to eat a fresh kill? He'll sneak up behind you, take a swipe at the base of your neck, bite down on your cerebellum, and paralyze you.

Wait. Wait. Are you basically watching yourself get eaten alive? I ask, looking out toward Baboquivari, hoping for the hundredth time that hour that we won't break down.

I TOUCH MY OWN ancestral amulet in my pocket, a piece of black kyanite moon-charged with protecting energies, or that is the metaphysical response to the circumstances currently beyond my control. I want to turn my energetic GPS on so my ancestors can find me, protect me somehow. Our guides are continually asked what happens if we encounter migrants on these trips; Stephen says simply they are to be given food, first aid, and water.

No one mentions felony.

No one mentions the way your right to vote or to secure gainful employment becomes jeopardized with the mere provision of water, food, and medical aid to a migrant found wandering in one of the few deadliest deserts in North America. We are wanderers with maps and GPS, Havarti cheese, and herb crackers. We travel with over a hundred gallons of water and a full tank of gas.

We travel with the privilege of knowing our way back home.

Originally published in *The Georgia Review*, Spring 2020

Images by artist Karlito Miller Espinosa: *Untitled (Corridor)*, 2018

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# THE OPPOSITE OF HALLELUJAH

HANNAH HINDLEY

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MY BROTHER KEEPS HIS SHOES on a stacked wooden shelving system, one pair per compartment. Everything in his home is labeled in careful, imperfect handwriting. He eats with his fist closed tightly around his fork. He broke up with a girlfriend once when she tossed a recyclable into a garbage can. If someone sets clean clothing of his on the floor, he gets irritable. His routine is tidy, predictable. His possessions are sparse and cared for. And when I find the burned barrel of a ball-point pen in his room, smell the acrid mix of scorched plastic and chemical powder, I wonder if he can see it, if it hurts—the untidiness of his own life unraveling amid his carefully ordered world.

HE REALLY WAS the cutest kid. There are pictures of us together—me in the wheelbarrow, my blond curls blowing back toward him. He wears a serious expression: wide blue eyes almost glittering, alive even on the glossy page. The concerned big brother. In one picture, he smiles a crooked vil-

lain's smile under a tall cowboy hat shot through with an arrow. There are punky printouts that dad over-edited when he made a birthday album for him—grainy black-and-whites of my brother sliding his skateboard over rails, down ramps. He worried about the way our parents dressed him. He didn't want to be made fun of. But he courageously dressed in drag one Halloween in middle school; he jumped—after hours of careful study—from a tall cliff into the mountain lake we visited in the summer. Sometimes he was brave. I'd cry when he interrupted an important movie with a vulgar interjection. He did poorly in school. He would defend me against anyone who spoke ill.

Is it clear? I do not know my brother.

I CANNOT TELL YOU what he carried—carries—inside, can only show you glimpses. Maybe somewhere in that composite album is a truth. He was, and is, loud, gentle, insecure, meticulous, easily embarrassed. *He was exuberant as a child*, my mom says, he filled the room. *If Finn was happy,*

*everyone was happy. If Finn was upset, so was everyone.*

When Grandma died, Finn got her Datsun. He crashed it in a DUI on the oak hill above town one night. At some point in his early teens, he started smoking pot in the thorny scrabble of rose bushes behind the workshop. It was always more for medicine than for rapture, I think. Shortly thereafter, he found cocaine. And still he surmounted each of these substances in turn—he had the will for it. Until he started rattling through the drawers for pills.

IN A MANUAL for opioid pill usage, we are warned that the written instructions “do not include all the information needed to use OxyContin® safely.” It advises against performing “potentially hazardous activities such as driving a car.” I think of my brother’s proclivity for wreckage long before the first pill bottle popped open. I imagine the rush of steely machinery across pavement: lotus eaters speeding dreamily on an unforgiving freeway. “Crushing, chewing, snorting, or injecting the dissolved product” will kill you, it claims, but even taking it precisely as prescribed might stop your breath. The pamphlet uses the words “death” twenty-one times, “abuse” sixty times, “fatal” sixteen times, “depression” sixty-two times, and, once, “euphoria.”

WE WERE DRIVING together, my mom, my brother and I. We were preparing my brother’s property for sale. His tenants had canceled their garbage service and were stacking their trash in the garage. The smell of it soaking in its own juices was swampy, almost fecal. The roof needed work. A deconstructed red plastic play set leaned against the south wall.

It had been a good real estate scheme, to buy

and rent property in an up-and-coming outer Bay Area city. It had one of the highest concentrations of resident sex offenders of any California town, but the BART line would be coming soon and property prices were sure to rise. But unemployed after losing his job of ten years, with his taxes and homeowners insurance unpaid and his scant ROTH account already cashed in for pain pills, my brother needed to get out well before the promise of Bay Area wealth came to the front steps of Antioch, before the house crushed him.

My brother was uncommitted to the project of selling; my mother was tense behind the wheel from weeks of trying to convince him to take action. Thumping music pulsed audibly from my brother’s earbuds. My mother asked for quiet. Instead, my brother pulled the cable from his phone and filled the whole car with his playlist. My mom swerved in multi-lane traffic. My brother turned up the volume, held the phone up to her ear.

*Why are you doing this to me?*

*It’s just music, Mom.*

*Finn. Turn it off right now, this is not cool,* I tried to reason with him from the back seat. *Mom, pull over safely if you can.*

Cars glinted all around us. I could feel the insulated whir of quick tires across asphalt.

*Stop it now,* I said as Mom navigated toward the shoulder, *Stop it, stop it now.*

And when he didn’t, I struck him across the face.

MY DAD STRUCK HIM, TOO, although I think it was the last thing he wanted to do. My dad, who made friends so easily. My dad, who understood how to ask for what he wanted, always understood how to listen, how to shoot the shit. What does it mean to be the son of a father who is bolder than you, more at ease? Do you watch? Do you rage?



The rage funneled in both directions: when Dad punched him, he punched him only once, and hard.

It is a complicated thing, to love someone and not to understand them. It's a thrashing, messy, combative, bewildered kind of love. *Where are you?* You want to shout. *Come back where I can know you.*

MY BROTHER AND I are equal pieces in the strange little puzzle of family. Mom frets and wheedles, tries to solve problems for us, weeps when she fails. Dad lived large, worked hard, and died abruptly in a scuba diving accident that left us all adrift. I help sort papers that mom can't face, mediate when there are differences, advise when I shouldn't. Finn smokes outside and glazes over when asked to do things too quickly. He lives with occasional eruptive anger, twists mom's wrist to retrieve his car keys until she yelps aloud at the surprise of pain. He wonders, although rarely speaks it out loud, if he'd been there like he was supposed to be on that dive, if dad wouldn't have drowned. When the jumble of your own pieces doesn't fit cleanly, how do you lay the edges against the edges of kin?

I TRY TO IMAGINE the days my brother leads. In the time since he lost his job, he hasn't been able to hold a new one down. Even Uber dropped him when a customer complained that Finn was acting like he was under the influence.

I wonder who his friends are. Certainly not Mitchell, across the street, who taught Finn how to turn a quick dollar hunting for antiques and reselling them on eBay. Finn defended him until Mitchell shot out his living room windows. The glass is still broken. Not the strangers in the bar who beat him bloody and left him to stagger, uninsured, to the hospital. Not Jason, who sets him

up with meth to sell in order to help Finn stay afloat, who employed him as a driver in a drug delivery across state lines. My brother is so gentle, and—can he not see it?—so easily used. When I imagine his days, the loneliness of it all makes my chest tighten.

He drew out money on two different credit cards. The debt is extraordinary. The cash from his IRA account was gone in three days. Bills build in stacks. He is on a narrow highway and veers close to its edge daily. In a rare moment of honesty, he tells me the addiction costs three hundred dollars a day. Buying the recovery drug on the street—the one that inhibits opioids and helps addicts train themselves off their habit—costs even more than the pain pills. There's a nice doctor who renews his OxyContin prescription for him, and I wonder how it is that she is not in jail. Does the news reach her when one of her patients dies of an overdose? If it does, can she sleep? When the money runs out, Finn turns to smoking heroin. It's all just poppy dust, anyway, or some bastardization thereof.

In the midst of it all, Finn gives. With twenty-five dollars in his account, he showed up hours late to Christmas last year with gifts for us. The "ROSS Dress for Less" price tags were still attached to the tea boxes he brought me. He brings meat to grill when we come together as a family—more than we could ever hope to eat.

The day we checked his account balance and found out about the credit cards, we stopped with my brother at a gas station so he could buy coffee. I watched through the car window as he stepped out of the station door and, unsolicited, approached a girl sitting near the curb. She looked like she'd been living outdoors for a while—her sweater was skinny and gray and her skin shone with a kind of sickly translucence. He handed her the change he'd gotten from his purchase. I

couldn't hear, from inside the dull insulation of the car, if they exchanged any words.

*HOW CAN YOU RESIST?* He asked me once. *When I'm offered something, I take it. I can't describe how good it feels. It's like you're flying.*

On long night drives through the desert, I listen to Jens Lekman and wonder, if my brother liked language, if he might tell the same story.

*We made our way home on the bikes we had borrowed  
I still never told you about unstoppable sorrow.*

MY LIFE MUST LOOK easy to my brother. As a child, I got the grades our parents wanted to see. I danced onstage and got bundles of yellow roses and imagined Broadway. Now, I fill out my tax forms on time. I find jobs that satisfy me. My brother worries that I'm being unrealistic in choosing work that doesn't pay much, and I send him movies of Prince Ea rapping us toward living our dreams, and Finn tells me "you don't understand."

*But sister, it's the opposite of hallelujah  
It's the opposite of being you  
You don't know 'cause it just passes right through you.*

I MOVE FROM WILDLAND to wildland, craving mountains that are bigger than I am. I don't ever stick around too long. I choose jobs in places far from our hometown's topography of loss. I choose jobs in places where there is no cell service, where I can't be woken in the night with bad news. I choose jobs at sea, and in glacier valleys, and in deep woods where winter's ice slick can spin a car, wheeling, into the oncoming blaze of logging truck lights.

I touch men but refuse to hold them. I linger long enough that they might think, for a little

while, that they've found love. I flatten against walls where I can feel their wanting rattle my shoulders against the supports. I melt into shared tents on mountains and into shared beds below city windows bright with spitting snow. I leave before I'm locked down, looking for the next quiver of connection.

Do I resist? My big brother puts things inside of his body to normalize; I don't. I do, though, put my body inside of things. Places, pleasures, that nomadic paradise of movement.

*I still don't know anything about you  
Is it in you, too?*

OUR BODIES ARE PERFECTLY BUILT to receive opiates, like those long-bodied flowers that only allow entry to just the right hummingbird that pollinates them. We create our own opiates, or endorphins. When they match up with receptors on our spinal cords, our brains, and other organs, they produce feelings of euphoria, they slow essential body functions—at too high a level, our breath slows toward death. The more external opiates we slam into our bodies, the more our bodies seek balance. We begin to manufacture fewer of our natural opiates to combat the firestorm of chemical ones. In time, opioid users stop taking the pills to feel good. They take them—more of them, and more—to avoid feeling bad.

Our bodies are perfectly built, too, out of common materials. Mineral and mother, food and failure—these things shaped my brother's fingers, eyelashes, ribs, and mine. Where do the differences lie between his skull and my own? We ate the same crusty sourdough, growing up. I inherited his bin of Legos when he had outgrown them and I popped them elaborately together and apart. From the same blocks, new architectures.

*I CAN'T DO IT, I can't do it*, my mother sobs into the phone. I can hear her brittle hair brush against the speaker and I can hear the tears catching at the back of her throat, thick and gulpy. She almost crashed her car the other day from lack of sleep. She wakes up to surges of adrenaline, certain that Finn has died in the night from a bad batch of heroin, from one too many pain pills. They shout at each other. *I hate you*, he says. *I would die for you*, she responds. When she and I spoke last, she had come knocking at his locked door in the city, hoping to talk, maybe to ride bikes, to sound out how she might help lead him toward an exit.

She fumbled with her copy of the key, found my brother in bed. *His face was so dark*, she says. *He had sores all over. He hit me. He locked himself in his room and started using. I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do.*

WHAT REPTILIAN CORNERS of the brain nudge us toward monstrosity? What does it mean to help, and who gets hurt when we do it the wrong way? Can we turn back toward each other after we have turned away?

I DON'T HAVE any of the answers. I wear the questions like old stains on my clothes—untidy, insoluble. I remember when we locked him out of the house late one night when he was eighteen. He was high on cocaine, and manic, and mom wouldn't allow him in. He rummaged through the lavender and night-fragrant mint outside the windows, startling the crickets silent. He broke into my room, illuminating his way with the flashlight on his cell phone. It was such a bright light and I couldn't quite see my brother behind it. I didn't know what he was capable of. I was frightened of him. But looking back at that moment, I can see that he was even more frightened. He needed

company. He had done something to himself that confused him. He needed to talk his way out of his brain. I turned over in bed and told him to try to get some sleep, and when he came in again later, cell phone flickering, I sent him away again. It is a cruelty that I sit with and roll in my hands like a rough little stone.

LAST NIGHT, HE CALLED ME for the first time in weeks, and I listened late into the night. *You don't even hear yourself making the phone call to buy more pills*, he said, *it's so addicting. Your body makes choices for you that you kind of watch from the outside.*

He talked about how he wanted a life, maybe a child someday. How he wanted to marry the girlfriend that left him for Belgium two months ago. *How about the day to day devastation that it causes?* he asked. *Death almost seems like a nice alternative. You're living in hell.*

At first glance, his wreckage is soft. He's not one of the ragged people you see in glossy magazine exposés on the drug epidemic. He doesn't shoot up behind garbage cans or sleep in doorways. He spent three nights in jail last month for falling asleep at the wheel at high speed. But his shoes stay stacked; his papers stay orderly in his monastic little room.

Still, the quieter he becomes on the other end of our text exchanges, the more I wonder how fair or useful it is to differentiate between degrees of collapse, between species of monster. My brother is locked somewhere on a glinting highway that perhaps I live on, too.

Is it in you, too?

We are not so dissimilar, brother and sister. Our hands hang immovably at our sides, hungry for contact and refusing to seize it. We are unmanageably human, alone, alike.

# WITNESSES

H A N N A H H I N D L E Y

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HIGH NEAR THE SURFACE: topsmelt, with tiny forked teeth, with bodies swirling against silver bodies in a shifty murmuration. And among the swishing blades of seaweed: giant kelpfish, pulsing different colors like the Horse of a Different Color in *The Wizard of Oz*. And cabezon—froggy-mouthed, fins like ribbed corduroy, eggs that are gelatinous, bubble-wrap-plump: a single taste can kill a man. Bluebanded gobies with highlighter-bright bodies, hanging upside down from rocky ledges like lanterns. Black rockfish and blue rockfish and olive rockfish and kelp rockfish. Garibaldi, cheddar orange. Morays, their unhinged snaggletooth mouths open like a grin, or like a grimace, though really they're just trying to breathe—and weren't you, too?

All these watched, as your diving companions surfaced. As you did not. As your body sifted through the fog of plankton, through rubbery curtains of kelp. Eyes among the seaweed, eyes among the rocks.

And when night arrived, bat rays winged over

you, their sets of teeth generating, regenerating inside their mouths like endless necklaces of pearls. Close by in the kelp forest, horn sharks squeezed out dark, spiral shaped egg cases that glowed under the strobing searchlights. The unborn bodies inside of them, backlit, pumped slowly in silhouette, the way that a heart pumps. Splotchy swell sharks with eyes like oil slicks glanced at you, glided past.

Your body knocked and settled in the deep current, ploughing patterns into the sand. Helicopters sent light swimming through the taut tops of waves. And when you'd been dragged up—waterlogged, unbreathing; when you and your gear had been cut open like fruit though no bad seeds could be found; when they brought you, stiff, back to our hometown crematorium in the brittle height of July; I could not bear to look.

Still, by the time the rescue divers found you, a thousand other eyes had witnessed your cool and emptying body. A lidless fish has no choice but to see, to see, to see.

“The Opposite of Hallelujah” originally appeared in *The Rumpus*.

HANNAH HINDLEY is a wilderness guide and essayist who writes about creatures, calamity, sex, evolutionary biology, and our relationships with each other and with a changing planet. Her writing has appeared in journals, anthologies, and magazines including the *Harvard Review*, *River Teeth*, *Terrain*, and *Hakai*. She is the recipient of the Ellen Meloy Desert Writers Award, the Waterston Desert Writing Prize, the Thomas Wood Award in Journalism, the New Conrads Prize in fiction, the Bill Waller Award for Nonfiction, and an honorable mention for the AWP Intro Journals. She was a 2018 Carson Scholar in science communication. Hannah is an alumnus of Harvard University, the Williams-Mystic Maritime Studies Program, and the University of Arizona. She is currently at work on a book-length collection of personal essays called *Love and Other Fish*, as well as a long-form piece about the weird ecologies of urban desert rivers. Find her at [hannahhindley.com](http://hannahhindley.com) or follow her @hannah\_the\_bold.

# GOLDEN YEARS

RYAN KIM

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THE FATHER WAS an immigrant from Korea who had led a golden first part of his life. His youth was composed of butlers, maids, drivers, pure silver chopsticks, Coca-Cola, meat on holidays, a hot oily snack known as ‘french fry,’ cachet from his father’s so-so political career, several of his own beautiful silken hanbok, a pair of sneakers each new school year, and always, a darling pet dog. If his hand was ever dirty, there was somebody else there to clean it for him. The only thing absent from the Father’s childhood was, well, his father. The Father’s father was always touring the countryside, making speeches for another, more important politician.

Because he was the youngest of seven, the Father was his mother’s favorite. He skipped over traditions of inheritance, and came to the States with a wad of cash as an energetic twenty-something ready to conquer the Western world. He opened up shop in a dicey neighborhood in Seattle in the late eighties, hawking knock-off jewelry and purses to boisterous clientele. He thrilled in

lively banter with the customers he’d then considered the Real Americans. It was like a game, becoming rich from the pockets of those less fortunate. A virtuous loudmouth, unafraid of wielding jagged English, he waved his tiny arms in a way that made the customers smirk and return for repeat business. Little Chinese man, they’d chuckle once outside, wrist jangling with a plasticky emerald bracelet.

The Father was doing all right in this new country. Soon he met a girl.

The Mother was a shy twenty-something when she met the Father. She was the only sister to three brothers, the eldest of whom had gone to university with the Father’s elder brother in the home country. The Uncles hatched the match. It was a marriage arranged by weeks of international phone calls, stitched with string and wire, with fond, drunken reminiscences between the two long-married Uncles, culminating in a hasty in-person meeting between the Father and the Mother. In a way, they both liked what they saw.

Though she was quiet and obliging in her younger years, eager to serve her husband as was the custom, the Mother would grow to pity, then resent, then be disgusted by the Father. She'd make a swift exit from their life together to preserve herself from destruction.

But there were many golden years.

Seventeen of them, in which the Father and the Mother raised us, the Sons. The Father had since changed his business to importing obscure East Asian herbal medicines, working out of the living room. He sat zombie-eyed on the rug before the television, his fingers robotically arranging the herbs in clear, rectilinear packages so that they might catch the eye of the many overwise Chinatown medicine shop owners. The Father had mouths to feed, to send to elite colleges. "Amer-Asia" he called his business. Finding that in the nineties, nobody else in the entire country had filled the niche of reindeer horn medicinal tea quite aggressively, he made a killing.

The Mother split her time as a drafts person in an architectural firm and raising her children without complaint. She rose and rose at the office, gaining a reputation for good work and a stolid personality until other offices were seeking her services for higher pay. Until she was the lead architect. Then architect manager. She became fluent in the new language. This gave her a power the Father did not have. The Mother moved briskly through her place of business in crisp professional attire, giving commands to the sour men who were born in this country, whose pink skin reddened in fury to be taking orders from a foreigner, a woman no less.

She wasn't your typical overbearing Korean mother. The Mother had a special relationship with both myself and Second Son. She saw deeply into our personalities, noting our differences.

First Son, she maintained, was moody, bright, and very stubborn. Sometimes, this combination led to sudden anger, which the Mother recognized as the Father's trait. First Son required special guidance and unconditional love. She read him books in Korean and in English, took him for walks, petted his hair all through a stormy evening until he was calm. Because Second Son was unable to express his jealousy with words, the Mother was unaware that he sometimes felt neglected. She missed his silent distress signals.

Second Son was quieter, more perceptive, and had a beautiful, slow-spreading smile which appeared unexpectedly, like a gift. The Mother remembers a Sunday morning when all three of her boys were asleep upstairs, she slipped out to buy groceries. At the store, she passed the most vibrant bouquet and brought it home with her. Putting the flowers into a vase, admiring the way they looked at the end of the kitchen counter, she noticed Second Son, quiet beside her legs. Why was he awake so early, her littlest boy? His struggling, sleepy eyes showed her how badly he wished to be near her this solitary hour. He held up a handful of crumpled dandelions, plucked from the yard. She added them to the vase.

The Mother worried the Father didn't know his children. One night, when she found the courage to say so in bed, he went stiff. He was appalled at this accusation. He worked twice the hours of an average man to ensure his family never wanted for anything. His fingers, would she look at these bent fingers? She stared at them darkly. Yes, they were very bent, the Mother conceded, feeling unheard. She was wiser than to pursue a fight. It was late, she had work tomorrow, the Sons were sleeping. The Father fumed over these imagined criticisms, muttered nasty things about her. She turned away from him onto her side, holding in a very long sigh.

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THE FATHER AND MOTHER bought a second home on the beach in the early 2000s. They acquired a show-bred golden retriever. They bought a used Mercedes S-class. They ate meat every day, remembering with nostalgia how even their well-to-do families had only had meat on Chusok or Jesa holidays when they were children in Korea. Within reason, they did everything possible to show America that Koreans were no longer peons in the new world order. In this, they were united. The Father, having a penchant for ill-fitting Burberry coats, looked ridiculous in this decade. In the photographs, the Mother looks stylish, the Father does not, but they appear happy together. Years later, when the Mother says in flat tones she was never happy for a minute of this marriage, the Father will rage and hold photograph after photograph before her cold, unseeing eyes.

The Sons are often fighting in the pictures, Second Son crying from the hidden abuse at the hands of First Son. First Son, myself, grins.

There were many golden years at the second home.

Second Son and I were free on the rocky beaches of Whidbey Island, where the splintery cabin stood grandly against the shore of a steel-grey Pacific. We roamed together, discovering caverns by the sea, getting lost in the thick evergreen woods just behind the house. Once, as we stooped over a tide pool crawling with tiny life, listening to the ocean crash mournfully at our backs, Second Son held my hand, that slow smile spread over his face, warming my insides. I slapped him suddenly across his mouth.

In general, our parents were over-vigilant, paranoid their foreign children would be harassed by strangers if left unattended. But the people were

kind on Whidbey. Knocking at our door, they offered baskets of fresh-caught, steamed dungeness crabs. They taught our family the best spots to dig for clams. Once, they took us Sons to a nearby island on a salt-encrusted dinghy to see a rotted white whale on its shore. On the way back, shaken by what I'd seen, I was comforted by the creaking sound of oars, the quiet slice of water. Most notably, these people on Whidbey Island, our neighbors and friends, ate kimchi and doenjang jjigae and samgyeopsal at our table with modest curiosity.

No matter how much the Mother and the Father disliked each other during the week, they transformed at the cabin on the weekends. They held each other by the fireplace after dinner, staring into the leaping tendrils with secret thoughts in their eyes. They read books to each other, cooked extravagant seafood dinners, laughed at old stories from a home country that wasn't the home of their children. They let us be free and freed themselves.

One rainy weekend, Second Son and I were upstairs at the cabin, huddled together over an I-Spy book on the wormy carpet. The dark blue world of the pages were filled with bent clowns and lost, left-behind objects. I sensed he was afraid and so was I. Without thinking, he moved his smaller body into mine. I was seized by a sudden scary feeling. I wanted to hurt him. But I looked at Second Son's eyes, so affected by the bizarre world spread open before him in the picture book, and thought, surely, we are seeing the same thing: This weird book was not meant for one child alone. I brought him closer and he yelped, half in pleasure, half in fear.

There was a crashing noise from downstairs, interrupting the light jazz music the Father played on rainy cabin weekends like these.



Second Son dashed from my lap and I watched him disappear down the spiral staircase. After a blank moment where I felt the heat of his body dissipate from my skin, I chased after him.

Second Son was clutching the Mother's leg downstairs. They both looked at the Father with crazy, fear-filled eyes.

The Father's hands were covered in blood. There were shards of a broken something in his hand—the ceramic top of the toilet tank? How strange. He curled his lip back and panted like a cornered wolf. It was like looking at a painting of a scene, so oddly frozen were its elements. I felt light-headed and also silly to be watching something, our cabin, so changed. The Father was very changed. When I look back at it, this was a beginning, the place where the golden years began to wane and wane and wane.

RYAN KIM is a 2020 graduate of the University of Arizona's MFA in fiction, where he served as fiction editor of *Sonora Review*. His work appears in *Hobart*, *Entropy*, and *Essay Daily*, among other places. He's hard at work on his first novel, *Super Trainee Jae Lee*, a speculative literary take on South Korea's global music phenomenon, Kpop.

# PUTTY AND THE WITCH

EMINOGUCHI

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IN A FORMER GHOST TOWN in the desert, there lived a person made of malleable eraser who resided and worked at the Art Room at the Community School. Among the businesses and organizations inhabiting the centuries-old and emptied brick facades lining cobbled streets, the Community School was old and well-respected, a place for neighbors of all ages to gather and express themselves.

Putty was the finest cleaning staff member in recent memory, as they were able to use the tackiness of their skin to roll up detritus left behind after classes. Putty, a little bit lonely in disposition, took great satisfaction in absorbing all the dirt and scraps of visions that the members of her community left behind.

What strange inner worlds Putty had access to! Anyone could come to an art show and view the artists' selected highlights, but only Putty had access to the little bits cropped, covered, or otherwise removed from view. At the end of a course, they would often find themselves collecting the

unwanted works of the students who asked that their discards be recycled. Putty interpreted their request broadly and reused the pieces, wallpapering their little cubby with so many layers of original art that they felt cocooned by vulnerability, sincerity, and effort.

At the end of the night, they were too tired to go out with the other townsfolk for karaoke night at the old theatre, or to one or another of their little houses to spend a few hours in the merriment of stories, food, and drink. Instead, Putty usually had another person doing live-work exchange roll them out bit by bit in the Community School pottery studio, so they could more easily remove from themselves the day's accumulation of flotsam. Like many jobs, Putty's left its marks on their body. Little bits of experience were adding up in their flesh. Putty wondered how long it would be until they were unrecognizable.

No one but Putty demanded such thorough work. Perhaps it was that they did not feel they deserved the kind of leisure their coworkers and

roommates enjoyed. Perhaps, Putty thought, they didn't love themselves because whoever made them forgot to build it into their design.

And who was that person, their maker? Putty secretly believed that they had been created by a witch who lived with an old cat at the very top of the town's stone stairs, the edge between town and the dark, wild mountains.

The witch and the old cat were known by many to create and release all manner of living beings. It was rumored that they created many of the residents at the outskirts of the town who rarely wove their lives into the fabric of everyone else. All around their little house crept lizards made of woven grass, miniature jackrabbits constructed of the springs loosed from mechanical pencils and ballpoint pens. The witch even kept a small staff. Puttering about a vegetable garden was a person who seemed to be some kind of skeleton reanimated by a fine crochet of various tensile-strong fibers for muscles, sinews, fat and skin. Another worker, made from oiled gears and other small bits of machines, was said to creep up and down the steep country on four limbs, collecting various berries and seeds. One townsman reported having seen the machine-worker rise up on its back two limbs to retrieve dripping honeycomb from a colony kept somewhere far up near the mountain's ridge.

IT WAS A FEARSOME PLACE, that little house, but Putty would find themselves ambling closer and closer still during their morning walks. It was as though the witch's house had a kind of magnetic pull, and somewhere deep inside Putty was some iron core drawing them to the spot.

Away from the path, and far from the foliage-blocked view of passers-by, a little jackrabbit would occasionally launch itself into the house

like a grasshopper, and have itself a look around.

The house itself was a small one bedroom, with a full kitchen with green cabinets that opened into a room with a hearth and some stiff railback chairs and an old table made of a strong old door. Around the fireplace were two chairs on which the witch and the old cat rested when the nights grew chilly. Outside, there was a porch where the old cat could be seen sunning. A dark, wooden hallway made of fragrant wood extended out from the house to a dark, wooden toilet where, while seated, one could peep out from a little window and into cactus and brush.

IN THEIR HOME, the witch and the old cat were eating a breakfast of wild rice gruel flavored with roasted chiles and oregano and some herbal tea, when the witch said,

"We really should do something with that old notebook."

Beside her in the breakfast nook was an old, weathered notebook, leather-bound, its tan deepened by finger oils. Its pages had been filled with pencil scrawl before it was lost somewhere on a hike. The two had left the notebook hanging along its center seam on a length of colored floss strung alongside the walking path, but months passed, then a whole calendar year, and none had come to claim it.

"It would be a good opportunity to try our hand at some flatwork," said the old cat. They set their breakfast dishes to soak, and then they began their work.

The old cat brought in the notebook with some effort, as its leather covers had repeatedly grown moldy and dried out in several cycles of rain and crisping sun. The fragment of plastic poncho in which they had wrapped it was thin and brittle. The witch was delighted by its warping and

carefully stretched it out until it was as large as a bedsheet. Then she withdrew to the large dark closet where she kept all her witch's supplies, and emerged with her sharpest scissors.

The old cat and the witch opened the notebook. Inside, someone had been making what seemed to be a list of things which were shiny and glittery and sparkly and refracting. The witch and the old cat were not much interested in such things. Their house was cozy and full of objects saturated with time. In their kitchen lived heavy black pots and pans and cauldrons rich with the ghosts of all the meals they had cooked. The threadbare rug by the fireplace barely shone its original map of all the town, which was just as well, as the town no longer looked as it did on that old map. They even had a large lump of kneaded eraser about the size of a skull, which was dark with graphite and charcoal and untold artworks and ideas scrubbed clean from their paper supplies. The witch disappeared once more into her dark closet and came out with two large pieces of rubber. She and the cat did their best to make the notebook paper clean. When they were done, the job was not complete, but complete enough.

The witch opened the scissors and used one blade to cut a human shape, with a head and two arms and two legs and hands and feet and all the things a human generally has. She pinched the paper a bit in the middle of its face to make a nose, and used one blade to create two little parentheses where its eyes might be. The paper figure looked like a corpse.

Dangling off one of the figure's shoulders the witch had left one jagged little rectangle, which she rolled into a drinking straw fastened tight with her own saliva. She whispered some secrets to animate the paper figure, mostly some basic information on how it would live and move around

and what its motivations would be.

Within a minute, the paper figure began to breathe as though it had fleshy lungs. Its feet quivered like someone anxious to move from where they were seated. Then the paper figure opened its eyes, revealing the floor beneath it, rose up on its elbows, and looked around the house. The old cat stood and puffed up, becoming quite large. No matter how many times he and the witch created living things, the old cat was still occasionally distressed by the disobedient physics of them.

"You're so flat," the witch marveled. She carefully tore the rectangle from its shoulder. The figure had no mouth, but everything else it did was like a human made out of a blank page. As it rose to standing height, the witch noticed that she and the cat had not quite removed all the writing from the paper. In the dim light, she could still make out shining words.

*Disco ball.*

*Silver flute.*

*My favorite nellpolish.*

The last line of the list was fully erased, but its impression was clearly visible, streaking across the paper figure like a sash from a beauty pageant.

*These are the most beautiful things in the world.*

The figure began looking all about the house, as though it had misplaced something. The witch knew that like so many simple things, it had already been inscribed with its great motivation. The paper figure was looking for something beautiful, something shiny.

Of course, in the small house nothing shone. The sun had fallen behind the hill to the west recently enough that they needn't light a candle. Not even the knob on the front door shone, worn as it was with the oil and sweat from all of the witch's comings and goings as she left each day to run her desert errands.

The witch, the paper figure, and the old cat all watched as someone in high-performance exercise wear ran up the stairs past their house. Their dog trotted along, at once running straight ahead and staring up at its owner's face. Its collar glinted a moment's light, and the person stopped, breast heaving, to look over the hill dipped in egg dye pastels.

The paper figure stood, transfixed. It was quite tall, possibly seven feet high. Having no mouth, it said nothing to its creators. It waved a thin hand and with the other unbolted the front door. The figure ducked its head as it passed through the threshold and slipped into the cooling evening. The witch and the old cat watched from the window as it jogged away, quickly finding a comfortable stride in the evening breeze.

"Should I have weighted down its feet?" the witch asked the old cat. The old cat, its paws just visible beneath his crouched body, said nothing. He watched the paper figure disappear behind some woody cactus pads.

THE PAPER FIGURE spent three days and three nights wandering through the town as though blown by a glittering breeze. They stopped at every swaying wind chime and vintage hubcap, stooped transfixed by the odd trickle of water rolling down mosaic steps, catching morning light as it descended into air. They were perceived by dogs, who were greatly distressed by this enormous humanoid presence and its lack of recognition of property bounds. The paper figure went by mostly unnoticed by anyone else, and owners scolded their dogs for growling at shadows. The paper figure was difficult to see unless you caught them at exactly the right angle.

Putty first attracted the paper figure while decorating the Community School window with tin-

sel and a children's posterboard rendering of the town, much accented by glitter paint. The paper figure drew towards the window as if their steps were predetermined as ballroom dance. They stood directly before the glass, watching Putty as they put together the new display, shaking light this way and that as they adjusted each shining thing.

Putty was unused to such attention. On the rare occasion that a love interest noticed Putty, they usually acted as though they hadn't seen anything at all, turning instead towards their friends or their cup of coffee. Poor, neglected Putty swooned at the attentive eyes of the paper figure. When they finished up, Putty left the rounded display window, a leftover from the building's life as a department store. The paper figure stood still and watched the many angles of light reflecting off the glass. Putty unlocked the door from the inside.

"Would you like to come in?" they asked, flashing a tooth or two in a shy smile. The paper figure nodded, intrigued now by the mouth of this new person, and followed them inside.

SOME WEEKS PASSED, and seasonal winds blew in and began to disturb the town. Tiny leaves and petals collected in the crooks of stairs and hid in narrow spaces between buildings. A dear raven friend of the witch and the old cat had noticed the courtship of Putty and the paper figure several times. Putty had first caught his eye because they had taken on arresting new shininess.

The old Putty who'd long been working at the Community School had begun to change their appearance. In order to keep the paper figure's attention, Putty had begun adapting their look to reflect more light.

The witch and the old cat passed their time as they generally did, quietly studying from books,

cooking food over the fire, and doing regular maintenance on the little creatures hopping about the garden. The witch at some point asked the raven to update them on the putty person if he saw anything notable.

*Pik, pik*, their friend the raven tapped at the window occasionally to give reports:

“Your putty person is wearing rhinestone body mod.”

“Your putty person got glass eyelashes.”

“Cubic zirconia beauty marks. Quite smart, actually!”

“I don’t think your putty person and the paper one are together anymore.”

Indeed, Putty and the paper figure had taken some time apart, so the paper figure, still so new to the world, could “explore themselves” (“and other options,” was the unspoken parenthetical). They agreed on one month. Then, beneath the next full moon, the two would meet in front of the Community School to discuss their future.

Immediately, Putty dove into their transformation with the same vigor they applied to their job. They immediately ordered through the School’s suppliers a special edition body mirror paint, which they applied as soon as it arrived, and every night rubbed thin coats into their flesh, paying particular attention to the areas rubbed off during work. Putty closely followed the instructions on the label and waited two hours before lying down to sleep. (That the instructions also recommended application only two or three times a week was of no concern to Putty.) They scooped up some of their savings and bought the manufactured crystals of the highest quality.

The night of their reunion, Putty could scarcely breathe. They donned their new jewelry and a transparent, glittering sheath beneath which they snaked twinkling LEDs. They spritzed *Single Win-*

*dow Pane in Winter* at their wrists and neck, the places where their body bore the most heat. Then they went outside the display window, the place where they had first met the paper figure, and waited for them to show.

Several blocks away, the paper figure rustled out from a shadow slightly crumpled and sullied, as though they had been out in the brambles all night chasing something. The two locked eyes and smiled. Putty positively dazzled the paper figure. But then there was a hoot-hoot sound. Both turned to look. A barista was across the street, talking to an owl. He was wearing a rhinestone stud in his ear.

Putty knew what was going to happen next, what would always happen next. If they could open their mouth and reveal a throat as luminous as a disco ball, tongue like an inside-out potato chip bag, their beloved would still be attracted to all the other shiny things the world had to offer.

The paper figure crossed the street to talk to the barista. Putty felt a fool. The dark sky reflected in their arms all warped.

“What self-loving putty person does such a thing to themselves?” they whispered privately, and the tears began to come.

A group of people, including a friend, approached. Putty was ashamed at first, still burning from the sight of their beloved walking off with the owl and the barista with his stupid multi-faceted earring. Stooped low by rejection, they were rooted to their place in the sidewalk. They would have to face their friend and their friend’s friends, who kept approaching.

Then, *swish*, they blew right past. One of them even stumbled over Putty’s silvery shoes.

“What was that?” they wondered. The raven flew overhead and made eye contact. The raven said nothing before disappearing behind the row

of shops down the street. What little foot traffic there was, made no apparent notice of Putty in their plight.

THEN PUTTY REALIZED, no one walking past had even seen them at all. Sliding down to the sidewalk, they felt hot jealousy turn inward, transform into self-hate. Their teeth by this point were lacerated nearly glassy. They'd had body mod for the paper figure! They felt sullied, angry with themselves for having disrupted their form, angry with the witch and the old cat for making Putty so unloved and unloveable. Their mind, distorted by anger, transformed the soft possibility that the two were Putty's makers, to a fact. Putty looked up at the moon and decided to chase it. For everyone in town knew, that if you followed the moon as it rose, you would eventually arrive at the home of the witch and the old cat.

Putty climbed the town's mosaic stairs with some difficulty. They couldn't see exactly where their feet were, and so had to go by touch and imagination instead. All the way up, the tiles told stories of love and unions, of little children rescuing themselves, and friends protecting one another. As Putty approached the very edge of town, they paused. Set off a dirt path at the top of the hill was the witch's and old cat's house, just as Putty had heard it described. The chimney was chugging smoke. If it weren't for all the strange creatures wandering around the crowded bramble which surrounded the house, the place would have looked like a cottage in a fairy tale.

PUTTY APPROACHED THE GREAT, dark door and noticed steam in the backyard, where the bathroom must be. It seemed as though the witch was having her bath of creosote and basil, something she was rumored to do every full moon. Putty was

feeling significantly better. Though the tile narratives reflected back onto them and caused them to shed more tears, the exercise had done Putty good, had reminded them that they were not only a surface, but a body that could still move. They took a breath and knocked three times. When no one answered, Putty knocked once more, and louder.

The old cat answered and looked around, perplexed at what seemed to be nothing. Was someone waiting to ambush him from behind a tree? He dared not find out, and closed the door quickly. Putty was there, though, waiting at a polite distance, hands clasped before them. So this was it, then. They were as good as invisible.

Putty stumbled off, unconcerned with any scratching the plants might dig through their flesh. They gripped the railings as they descended. It was a beautiful night, and many were out on their porches talking to one another. No one turned to look as Putty passed. No one offered any greeting. There were a few who happened to look Putty's way, but their expressions remained unchanged. For if one looked at Putty, they wouldn't see a person at all: just the world distorted, reflected back.

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# STILL HEARTS

MADDIE NORRIS

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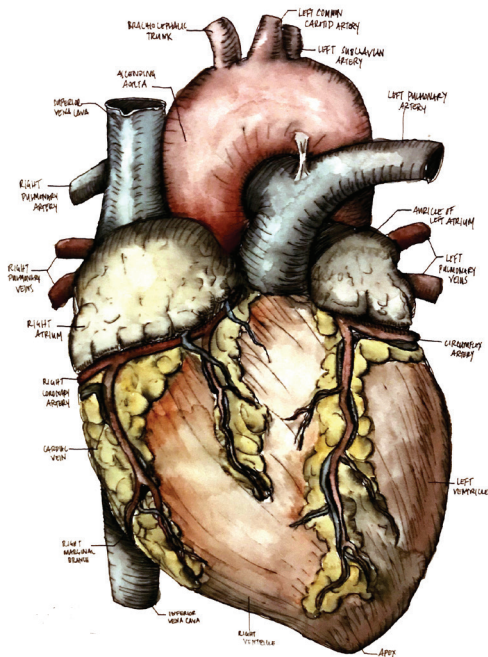
FIRST: FIXATION. FORMALDEHYDE is forced into former bloodstreams, killing bacteria and stalling decomposition. Then skin and fat are peeled from the body, shucked from organs and innards. The body is dissembled into separate display pieces. The heart is pulled from its home and soaked in acetone, where water and water-solvent fats dissolve. When the hull-organ is full of the simplest and smallest ketone, it's moved for what is officially called forced impregnation. The acetone is boiled away in a vat of polyester or epoxy resin or silicone rubber. The chosen polymer now plumps the heart. The organ is clamped, strung, pinned, and stuck. The body is cured with gas or heat or light. Inside a glass box, the waxy red organ sits still, on display for children and parents who paid twenty dollars to enter a Body Worlds exhibit and look at a human being made lifeless. Anatomically, the heart is accurate, but the veins and chambers and blocked up arteries don't strike me as real, and I imagine this is because the heart is unmoving and silent.

*Gray's Anatomy*, a textbook I find in a box of my dad's old things, notes that it's the heart's "rhythmic contraction" that curls blood through the body, and when I consider the heart, I consider sound. I listen to *Palais de Mari* played by Sabine Liebner. The piano notes vibrate in the air, hanging alone. Before I forget the singularity of the previous key, a new note is played, replacing my music memory. Two keys that should sound discordant stretch into silence. My chest tightens and I wonder if this is what it feels like to be known. The notes continue, out of sync. Their pattern shuffles, shape-shifting into a new form. The notes tangle together like hair on a windy day, knotting and unknotting. My body responds differently and unpredictably each time, and by the silent end, I've looped myself around myself, and I'm unsure how to straighten. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a condition where the heartwalls are too thick and the heart-muscle too big. I was checked for the genetic condition in seventh grade, when my face was oily but not yet pitted in pimples. My dad's dad had died



from it. His heart stopped in his sleep and stayed stopped. My grandmother woke one morning, rolled over, and found a cold body where her husband had been. My parents took me to a specialist, and in a cold room, a nurse asked me to undress. I didn't know whether or not to take off my training bra so I kept it on, wanting to hide myself as much as possible. When the nurse returned, she asked me to remove my "tank top." I lay naked under a thin paper sheet that crunched when I moved. The doctor put cold jelly over my heart and nuzzled an ultrasound stick into my skin. My heart was not too big, but a monitor showed how quickly it was beating. I tried not to squirm.

Annie Dillard said to put death up front, so here it is: my dad died when I was seventeen. He was a doctor and was diagnosed with cancer. Less than a year after they found a mass in his pancreas, he went to the hospital for a blockage in his digestive tract. He'd been carrying around a plastic yellow tub, throwing up water and bile as he turned away from conversations. One day, in a hot tub, I was reading him an essay I'd written, one about him. I got my love of words from him, though he was dyslexic, so he lingered on each syllable, savoring the sound. I tried to read slowly for him. I looked up as he retched; his back twisted toward me, the knobs of his spine curling through skin. When he turned to face me, he said, "maybe another day." In the hospital, the doctors told my mom it was not a blockage but more cancer. At home, my mom told me it was not a blockage but the end. We went back to the hospital that night, and I finished reading him my essay. Family friends dropped off fried chicken and sugar cookies. "Eat," they said. I pinched off a streak of greasy, crispy skin. I pinched off a bit of crumbled cookie. They didn't taste like anything. At night, my dad pulled his head from his pillow with effort. I could hear his muscles straining. I leaned down and he kissed my forehead for the last time. His lips were dry, and skeins of dead skin wove through them. I pulled away and his lips were still pursed, his eyes still closed, and it took his body more than a beat to recognize I was gone. I threw up on the side of the car as my mom drove me home in the dark. The next morning, my dad's heartbeat stopped.



*Figure 1: what is a heart worth when it's stopped?*

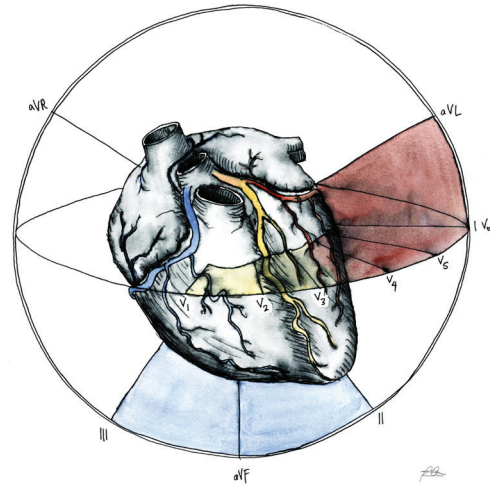
The heart is a verb, physically. Its interior is gummed with papillary muscle. Sunk to the bottom of the organ are two ventricles, the pumping pistons of the body, thick-walled and strong. The atria, nestled above, gather blood back from the

body, from the veins that bring the tide in. Old blood enters the right atrium and is forced into the right ventricle. The blood then moves towards the lungs, propelled by ventricle strength, where it sheds carbon dioxide and redresses in oxygen. The stream continues, crisscrossing to the left atrium, to be forced into the left ventricle, to shuttle out of the aorta and into arteries and smaller capillaries, where nutrients are deposited. The tired blood drains into venules and veins and busses back to the right atrium to begin again. Everything is always in motion, and the heart is a verb, symbolically too. It races, skips, leaps, and flutters. I ♥ you means I love you means the heart means to love.

My dad was the one that took me to Body Worlds. He wanted to show me what he saw inside all his patients, inside himself, inside me. We walked through the white-walled exhibit with dozens of other families, and he kept one hand on my shoulder, the other free to point out different pieces of the body: a system of nerves, a chest cavity cut concave, a heart flayed open. At an early age, I learned to look at bodies through the lens of my dad.

*Palais de Mari* translates to husband's palace, which is a truth I didn't consider when naming it my heartsong. I don't know that I'll ever marry. I enjoy weddings and look forward to friends' envision their twinkle lights under giant redwoods and the tall arced ceilings of old Southern churches, but I don't imagine I'll have a wedding of my own. Or, rather, when I try to imagine my wedding, I see my dress with lace sleeves slipping over my wrists, and I see my mom with her hair hairsprayed and her feet in small heels and she is crying as we walk down the aisle and I see my family and friends, but I never see a betrothed. I

have never said I love you to a romantic partner principally because I have never loved them.



*Figure 2: what is the value of love when it can't circle back?*

Clear and clean lungs sit next to a smoker's blackened and tarred pair. Body Worlds aims to promote preventative healthcare. Dr. Whalley and Dr. von Hagens, the married brains behind the endeavor, hope their plastinated bodies and organs expose the beauty and fragility of human anatomy. The thin mesh of capillaries curl around the open air, a spider web illuminated by morning light. The doctors want visitors to explore practical questions about the body: How many gallons of blood does the heart pump each day? How can these gallons disappear? How can their absence be present?

In still-sweaty sheets, I fit my head into his elbow and put two fingers to his neck. He'd already had me palm his broken collarbone, an injury that went unnoticed for so long, it never healed, and

I'd let him bite into my shoulder, a peach dribbling juice. The morning light fell on us in slats as we explored how two bodies could see each other. We were both writers, though words felt less important when we were together. We did things like: hike and drink red wine by water we found in the desert. He struggled opening the dark bottle, broke the cork screw, pulled at the plug with his dirt-lined fingernails. I sat against the cold rocks and watched his arms strain against the seal. Eventually, he opened it and we drank and went home. In bed, when we were outlining each other's bodies, he said, "My pulse is over here" and placed my fingers an inch up and over. For a moment, we didn't move. His freckled arm stretched out behind my back, his ulna to my temporal, my ulna to his sternum, his femur to my patella, my phalanges against his carotid, his eyes trying to meet mine. "Yep," I said, "still alive."

I play *Palais de Mari* on repeat. I listen to it on my phone, but I imagine the thin disc of a record, its heft and fragility, its ruts that make music. The song is almost 30 minutes long and I listen in cars and on planes and walking to work. I listen in transit. I see a tree nodding in the breeze, clouds clotting over metal wings, two dogs connected by a leash. I smell old French fries, and newborn babies, and the smoky drip of mesquite trees. The air is hot and thin while it is wet and soupy. I listen to the song, and time accordions itself. When I hear the notes spiral staircase into composition, a new layer of space is added over the same film. It's a different scene but underneath, the same soundtrack.

The heart, surely, is a sentimental sore spot, though it wasn't always. The Ancient Egyptians speculated it housed the soul and was home to intellect, while Aristotle assumed it wombed reason.

Galen suspected it birthed emotions, though not love, which was displaced to the liver. It wasn't until Medieval Europe, where Christianity threw together Celt and Viking imagery with courtly love standards that the heart was pinned with love. Now, it's fickle, it's blind, it's unreasonable. To write about it is sentimental, self-absorbed, navel-gazing. The heart's story is overplayed, overwrought, trite. Consider, though, that initially the heart was thought to be smart and sensitive, that emotional intelligence was once detected and honored within the pulpy organ.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a common cause for cardiac arrest in otherwise seemingly healthy people. You are running and then you are not. You are speaking and then you can't. You are alive, in this world, where the desert dirt smells like hope after rain and where the streets don't have streetlamps so the stars poke through and where he walks you home and protects you from cacti spines and where he kisses you and then he doesn't. The heartcells are too big and the blood can't push through. The organ no longer pulses. The circulatory rivers stagnate. The body stops. You die.

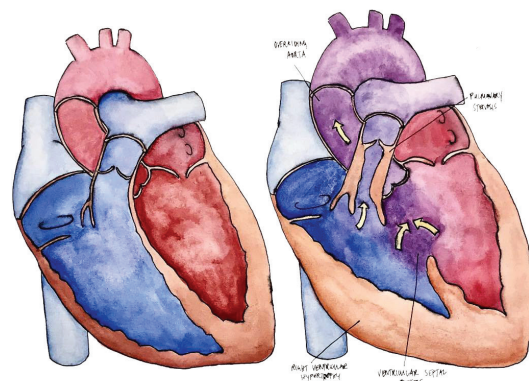


Figure 3: why am I always returning to the break?

My dad's stethoscope is a sticky black 'y' with an elaborate curled L on the coin that he pressed against hundreds of backs and breasts to listen to hearts. "Littmann Quality" is printed around the L, and black tubing traces the neck of the 'y' to its ears, where silver emerges and then cuts back to black. He used to sling the stethoscope around his neck, curl it over his collar, let it jump against his chest as he walked. He'd come home from work with a clipped stack of three-by-five cards stuck in his button-down pocket and the stethoscope draped around his neck. He'd sit at the kitchen table and get to work. I used to sit across from him. Now, his stethoscope hangs on the hook where he used to hang his coat. The earpieces are like olives stuck onto silver tubes, and I pull them opposite each other and place them in my ears. The world muffles. I tap the L and hear a soft kick drum. I push the L under my shirt and over my heart. My engine churns in another world.

In the center of my dad's *Color Atlas of Human Anatomy* is a section on the Thorax with over ten pages of colored heart images. The first pages capture the gray-brown muscle in context, nestled in crinkled and fanned gray-brown bodies. Then, the heart is removed, cut away from the self, pictured alone, a red ribbon of major cardiac vessels encircling it. Then, the heart is sliced open, its popped bubblegum insides exposed. Then, casts of cardiac vessels, blue and red threads dancing into thick lace, vessels tangling into bramble, red over blue over red over blue. The two enmeshed so completely that I can't see through to the other side.

Morton Feldman, the composer of *Palais de Mari*, hovered between categories, one foot in narrative richness and the other in the pure pleasure of sound. In interviews, his black hair is slicked back

and curves in at his chin like a child's overwrought drawing. He wears thick glasses that magnify his eyes, and he is either open-mouthed laughing with his lower lip slipping out to make room for noise, or he is still, close-lipped. In a way, his breaks and contradictions in character come through in his art, too. His music is rational and irrational, linear and circular, one thing while maintaining the possibility of its opposite. Instead of the traditional musical notes along a staff, he wrote several pieces using "graphic notation." For example, in one piece, open boxes sit next to each other on a page, and musicians choose a note within the range to play. In another, musicians choose the length of a pitch. Of his music, Feldman said, "Faced with a mystery about divinity, according to the riddle, we must always hover, uncertain, between the two possible answers."

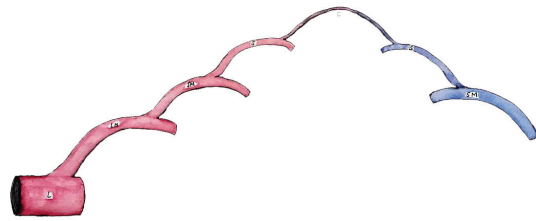


Figure 4: *is there movement in indecision?*

After a record swap, I walked downtown with friends. The four of us shuffled along the dark streets in shifting pairs. The night was the kind of blue that makes construction sites with scaffolds and flapping tarps look romantic. The restaurant glowed warmly as we approached. Its front was wide, clean windows punctuated by rustic wood. In the corner, we ordered cocktails and dipped tortilla chips in salsa. I imagined we looked like an Edward Hopper painting. I mentioned I'd been

to the restaurant once before, on a date, where we left to sit close to each other and listen to soft music. Across the table, his pupils dilated, and he told me I was beautiful. "Why did you break it off?" a friend asked. I didn't know how to answer. Later, someone suggested you can get over anything if you try.

Human bodies have been preserved for centuries, naturally and artificially. Cold and dry heat keep remains intact, as do freezing and certain soils. Bodies sunk in peat bogs, whether purposefully or by happenstance, retain their wrinkles from 8,000 BCE. Ancient Egyptians mummified humans, pulling out all their organs except for the heart, which would speak for itself in the after-life. Peru, too, was known for its mummies, which were dried for conservation. Alexander the Great was kept in honey, and Xin Zhui, the Lady of Dai of the Western Han Dynasty, was preserved remarkably well, her cheeks still apple round. During the renaissance period, Europeans injected liquids like water, ink, and wax into the body to allow for medical study. Towards the end of the 1800s, formaldehyde began becoming the norm, and Body Worlds' preferred plastination was developed in the 1920s. The preservation of humans is not new, but Body Worlds has attracted more than 40 million visitors since 1995. It is the precipice that attracts people, that attracts me. There is a precarity in the posed models as they teeter between life and death.

Memories of my dad are slipping away. Did he teach me about the heart? Did he trace vein and artery canals with me? We used to swim in the ocean, brace our bodies against the waves or dive under them. The cool slap of water shocked our stomachs, spitting drips onto our shoulders. We'd

laugh and taste salt. Underneath the surface, the water tickled every hair on our bodies, reminding us of our edges. On land, we drove around in his silver Volvo, and he sang in a rough, low voice, steel wool circling a pan. At home, I sat on the kitchen counter, a shallow cut bleeding from my leg, red beading against grated skin. His hands were calloused and soft and he placed the Band-Aid deliberately, smoothing it over my skin before pulling away.

Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy is a genetic condition. Just one mutant copy of the MYH7 gene, or the MYBPC3 gene, or the TNNT2, or TNNI3 leads to abnormal heart composition. These genes create proteins for sarcomeres, the thick and thin filaments controlling cardiac contraction. The different filaments kiss and then break apart. The sarcomeres' pattern of love creates the heart's pulse. Two actions are necessary for regular cardiac functioning: The thick and thin must come together. The thick and thin must break apart.

I pulled his face to mine outside a wine bar with stained glass windows. He licked his lips a lot, and they were both soft and dry. When we kissed, I thought of nothing else. For a moment, we were stuck in honey. The traffic lights hummed red, the brick pressed against my back, he pressed against my ribs. My fingers dug for his carotid, as though searching for life, as though wanting death. At some point, we stopped kissing. I didn't love him because I couldn't. He didn't love me because he didn't. Still: we used our hearts to stay alive.

This essay was originally published in *Ninth Letter* as the Literary Award Winner in Creative Nonfiction.

All illustrations are done by Kristina Alton.

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# 7 POEMS

GABRIEL PALACIOS

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## LUNAR HILTON ELEGY

*for Ernesto Gardner*

And yes, I have searched the rooms of the moon on cold summer nights.  
And yes, I have refought those unfinished encounters. Still, they remain unfinished.  
And yes, I have at times wished myself something different.  
—Bob Kaufman

What uncanny rosary & visitation  
Fuses with the moon vacation slideshow?  
If beating hearts we hesitate to bury ride exterior, as satellites, inside me  
    ticks the mechanism cast to seat my token,  
Turn, dispense a lurid last go  
At ogling new fences up around the future, throwing back the contents of the tiny  
Bottles catching future sunsets on the Biosphere's backlot.  
I have until the synthesized bells  
Have twanged for that.

In my lifetime will I know if we are any closer,  
If there were ever solid plans,  
Or if the rooms of the moon were just a smudgy Palm Springs  
Thrift store art print,  
& it makes no sense to live there?  
You needed to have come & got your mans.  
When you would have recognized him in  
the ice of dark you nod off acclimating to.



## MATCHBOOK

As night flew low I got it in my mind  
to give my plea into the radio grafted  
in the headboard  
You were out, mid-sentence,  
for the night—  
it didn't seem like  
I should wake you:

                                  brow & jaw untorquing,  
coming sweetly disenlaced  
from what is now  
a lush  
reverb around the outgrowth of whatever secret life  
I'm off the hook  
to explain—

You go dreaming of those spike strips they pull  
across the freeway  
to slow robbers, or  
pharisaical liars, such was the the case & as in

the rough game one foists  
upon the baby aghast  
but lacking words  
I'm lurched toward

                                  lecherous flames in a strange  
          Maxima, like every other, black bleached gray  
          by exposure  
to the sun, to my treeless, unincorporated life within  
your green, dewy one,

translating for myself a narrow & machinelike cursive  
on a matchbook by the flashes

of a ferris wheel rising up over the berm  
encircling the county fair

Numbers underneath a name, beneath an embossed banner:  
yellow this side,  
black on that,  
rippled over three gold conquistador's lances

What could I be moving through other than this underpass  
retracted overhead, snatched bed sheet  
making vulnerable  
stars, the shame in holding consciousness at hours  
every siren colors tragicomically  
to dare what I've unburrowed  
to record me

in its river stone eyes?

## IDEOMOTORISTS

I regard my dead like there's still time for us  
to save each other, I float  
presupposing they float:  
oil rig, oysterluggers, Huckleberry Finn raft.  
Chain-ganged  
up the leather cable switchbacks to a bank teller's window.  
Courier, dodging downtown traffic, Igloo  
leaden with its hearts on ice.  
Flat black reimagining  
a business district sleepwalk out of breath  
but breathing being admonished by the rent-a-cops  
of their waking dreamlets within mine:

*Don't you have an amulet to scavenge in New Orleans?*  
The squatted-in cathedrals my mind conjuring theirs...

Tomorrow night a woman who  
swerving against her character has come  
under the sway of a velour  
track-suited, discharged Marine Corps recruiter  
who spoke a flood,  
sat too close to freeze out at the bus stop,

lands on your square.  
She'll write your number & your name in a code.

## PARADE

I went over my whole entire life  
My childhood  
I busted out of jail  
Through a long jazzy inhalation in the hymn you drag yourself across  
Stop-motionlike as gathering  
The keychains & prescriptions of your purse  
From the movie theater rug at the ocean floor  
Same despondent pattern on the t-shirt that gets tossed  
From the wagon that heads up your parade

I wanna touch  
The oldest silver in your grandma's house  
Hear the version you know best

## THE SKY CITY

I live up there  
in fast shadows of a top floor  
window woman,

pulling black hair from her brush

I'm warned that you don't live here  
by the child  
on the stairs who with his shard  
of parking lot concrete defends  
your pink apartments

& under that night's bored helicopter I have  
made  
the lunches for tomorrow—  
once I dug a grave for someone's cat—  
slack-eyes unheld by thin meteors  
of bone that float outside the socket

Always this  
gratuitous animal display  
of teeth we code as smile, to even have survived  
somewhat, freak out in your  
sleep on a plane

Days I haven't slept enough I'm summoned  
to the captain who built the house  
they took apart  
to make the bank of benches at the urgent care  
Invisible light, the sun streaming in  
to the citadel on stolen horses  
His table's set with wooden steak chops,  
plastic peas  
He's chewing something small like nuts & nod-  
ding,  
nodding at his

suffocated embers

## SAN MIGUEL BORDER GATE PAVILION

What the bootlegger whistles to the crosses on his road

Card table bowing in a heat

The mayor of this gathering's face  
Might be  
His phosphorescent belt buckle—vaguely  
Parallelogrammic borders of a home state  
Returning fire to the sun—  
In the blaze of this hour mistakable  
For younger soldiers prairie dogging in  
& out of Tahoes black &  
Idle on the bounds  
Of an insinuated gate

But riddled through with timelines  
He makes me hold the yarn  
Of an excavated doll  
That's what shaking hands with his hands  
Is like  
He asks in Spanish if I'll carry something for him

Across he meant  
I wasn't brave  
I was slow  
I didn't lay down or duck  
When the guns came out  
I was putting your sister's cigarettes in the microwave  
To see if they would light  
& helping her clean up  
After the party

## SIGNATURE

I have training for this:

into more reliably erasable environs

intruded on young  
neglect  
to comb your hair

I don't exaggerate, L.:  
there hasn't been  
a minute to get lost

you're tough  
to photograph  
I saw myself

between the trains  
that move  
my hitmanwork

whole enough in one skittish light

I wait until  
it's dark— articulate  
my hand

Mexican in this way: a stayer  
been one of those analog sunsetted call signs  
on whom nails & hair still grow

in hypnagogia  
reconfigure my disturbances the tampering

retain decapitated consciousness  
for time enough  
to sputter out

that happens to a blackbox

a number prayer  
in an anonymity  
Southwestern

shedding altitude a questionless doomed  
passenger voicing  
two things simultaneously true:

dizzying arrived-at love; the imminences

otherwise transfigured  
witness-protected

burn a subtext  
hanging over us like firecracker  
ashes

“matchbook” was originally published in *Territory*. “the sky city” was originally published in *The Volta*. “San Miguel Border Gate Pavilion” was originally published in *Poetry Northwest*.

GABRIEL PALACIOS is a poet in Tucson, Arizona. His most recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Brooklyn Rail*, *DREGINALD*, *Fugue*, *Laurel Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Volta*.



# HOW TO READ THE POETRY FOUNDATION STATEMENT LIKE GWENDOLYN BROOKS’ JAZZ

D O R I A N R O L S T O N

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IT’S A SAD IRONY THAT the organization with a storehouse of some of the finest words ever written in English, some 30,000 volumes going back to T. S. Eliot’s “Prufrock” and then-undiscovered works by H. D. and Wallace Stevens, produced a statement so bad it got the president of five years and the chairman of the board both to resign.

In a way, this is hardly news.

The June 10 “Announcement of Leadership Changes” from the Poetry Foundation, the Chicago-based nonprofit born of heiress Ruth Lilly’s \$200-million gift, arrived as a snowflake in the avalanche of similar shakeups to the literary establishment. The *New York Times* just said goodbye to editorial page editor James Bennet, as did *Bon Appetit* bid farewell to editor-in-chief Adam Rapoport. Ditto *Variety*, *Refinery29*, *Man Repeller*, and *Bon Appetit* parent company *Conde Nast* (in the news yet again for related issues). Admittedly skeptical about the sudden changing of the guard, as if a few new names could ever achieve what’s needed systemically, a BuzzFeed article observed:

“Heads are rolling, quite literally.” What’s one more, anyway—from that stuffy old house, puh-uh-TRAY!

But the departure of Foundation president Henry Bienen (with “gratitude for his years of service,” along with mention of his former board chair, William Bunn III), stands apart. Rather than a controversial article or an incriminating photo, what ousted this former university president was a statement of solidarity. The very thing supposed to secure his position in this moment—that was his undoing.

The statement appeared for “Immediate Release” (in that cringey PR-style) on June 3. In a “Message to Our Community & Contributors,” the Foundation took a public stance on the issues of the day: systemic racism, police brutality, violent anti-protest initiatives, and widespread injustice. Of course, these are not just issues of the day but of decades, decades upon decades going back to 1619, and the unforgivable legacy of racialized practices, both institutional and personal,

weighs heavily on the day in question; the case for reparations is being made. But somehow one of the largest literary institutions in the world, with a flagship poetry magazine predating any in the language (founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912), missed all this when they offered just four measly sentences, raising more questions about their commitment to racial equality and social justice than they did answer. What did they mean, exactly, by “stand in solidarity with the Black community,” the swift response from some thirty leading poets wanted to know, before concluding for themselves (with support of hundreds more undersigned): “We find this statement to be worse than the bare minimum.”

Thus did the above-mentioned “Community & Contributors” get the message.

Though the main thrust of the open letter was the lack of substance behind the statement (“no details, action plans, or concrete commitments”), there’s a sense in which the real damning failure was one of language. They’re poets and, as an organization, don’t seem to know it. But their constituents do: “As poets,” the letter continued, “we recognize a piece of writing that meets the urgency of its time with the appropriate fire when we see it—and this is not it.” One wonders that they never consulted their very own archive, where the Foundation boasts such Harlem Renaissance classics as “We Real Cool.”

Though Gwendolyn Brooks would later lament just how widespread these lines became (“I don’t mean that I dislike it, but I would prefer it if the textbook compilers and the anthologists would assume that I’d written a few other poems”), there’s no denying the force—the fire—of her 1959 hit. Its closing verse—the fourth of four, just like the statement’s four sentences—echoes like a curse:

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

Note what lingers isn’t so much the nightmarishly perfect rhyme of “June” and “soon,” conjuring a singsong innocence about the horror of these needless deaths, but rather the absence of sound: the absence, for the first time in the poem’s eight lines, of “We.” To hear Brooks read this is to hear her breath—sharp inhales with each first-person plural—suddenly taken away. Unfortunately, people got hung up on “jazz,” and the poem grew so popular it had to be banned by school districts fearing supposed sexual connotations of the word. But a closer look, especially in its context of this sweet summer month (the one Brooks picked to symbolize the establishment at the time), reveals what it actually means with real poignancy. To sexualize this genre is to miss the true story of jazz, as nothing short of good triumphing over evil.

The inimitable fusion of African polyrhythms with European instruments in mid-18th-century New Orleans, jazz was first recognized at city-designated Congo Square, “an official site for slave music and dance,” according to the Herbie Hancock Institute. This was nearly two hundred years after the first Africans were sold into slavery in America. Taken as a verb in Brooks’ sense, to jazz conjures a history of oppression and defiance, a way of being in the world that threatens the sunny disposition of those in power and could cost you your life, your we. By the time Brooks was writing, jazz, having long-since taken over the airwaves and defined an American era (the Jazz Age in the twenties), was already infiltrating poetry, creating a subgenre of polyrhythmic and improvisational verse called “jazz poetry.” Much of this can be learned on the Foundation’s own website. How

did their leadership manage to forget this?

More pointedly: How could the Poetry Foundation compose a note, with the first African-American Pulitzer Prize-winner looking over their shoulder, her words a legacy of centuries of this jazz, to say nothing more than that they “acknowledge that real change takes time”?

This isn't the first such statement to get flagged for insincerity. When Nike, something of a veteran in the performative activism game (see: their slogan's controversial 30th anniversary ad with Colin Kaepernick), recently told a world still reeling from the brutal killing of George Floyd, “For once, Don't Do It,” there came an immediate, if predictable, backlash. The catchy campaign full of Don'ts (“Don't pretend there's not a problem in America,” “Don't turn your back on racism,” among others) went viral on Instagram, but was met with an even pithier, and profoundly more useful message from civil rights advocacy group Color of Change: “Nike: It's time to move #BeyondTheStatement.” This they did, in the form of a subsequent \$40 MM commitment “to support the Black community in the U.S.,” and arguably the money is now where the mouth is. But you can't buy your way out of a moral failing.

Increasingly, big business has an ethical duty to respond to racism as a systemic issue, both within their ranks and the wider community. According to the recent Edelman survey, a special report on “Brands and Racial Justice,” nearly two-thirds of consumers find brands coming out against racial injustice to be a “moral obligation.” Fair enough. But if our customer loyalty—or even our idolatry—used to be bought with do-gooder promises, now we hold companies to a higher standard: your solidarity statements are, without anything behind them, “exploitative.” As Color of Change executive director Rashad Robinson put it, it's lit-

tle more than “thoughts and prayers” to share your feelings about the broken system you're complicit in. “It's a lot of sympathy,” he said, “without having to do anything structural about it.”

The Foundation's statement, then, even in its most poetic rendering would've been only a start. With nothing substantive, words of solidarity are an empty gesture. Or worse: hypocritical. Or even worse: through a kind of non-committal “white silence,” perpetuating the very system it condemns. It brings to mind something of the epistolary art of condolence from Ancient Greece, where you find Plutarch writing to his wife, upon the death of their two-year-old daughter, to say, basically, “Be strong, honey.” This doesn't bring the life back, nor prevent a future loss.

This doesn't bring George Floyd back, nor prevent a future loss.

But there's something more. The lack of integrity, the insubstantial grand pronouncements—this is all a head game, very cerebral. Yes, a statement should be on-brand, and yes, start taking action. But a closer look, what in the study of poetry we might call a “close reading,” reveals the biggest failure of all: of heart.

When Brooks happens upon those seven pool players one afternoon at the Golden Shovel, the inspiration for the poem, she stops in her tracks. These are boys, after all; they should be in school; they must think they're “real cool.” But notice that rather than wagging her finger, or even standing in solidarity with the plight of wayward youth, she does no such “us vs. them” thing. Instead, she enters into their experience. “And just perhaps,” she wonders aloud, “they might've considered themselves contemptuous of the establishment.” It's this compassionate act of the imagination that allows her to speak from a place of “we,” a refrain that only drops off at the end, as death comes to get the

boys for being Black, for jazzing.

By contrast, the Foundation statement opens without a “we,” without a speaker identified at all. As if there’s no one, in particular, there to be held accountable, “The Poetry Foundation and Poetry magazine stand...” Wait—the who? Referring to oneself in third-person reads more like a generic author bio, giving every indication that the author is the one writing it, save for them actually taking responsibility for the words (a convention that, at least in the case of bios, allows for shameless bragging). To take responsibility, you have to give something of yourself. Even bigger than Walt Whitman’s capacious “you”—which now stands in for the reader, now for the writer, now for the ever-present spirit connecting us all—is the utterly gigantic, if aspirational, “we.”

In just four verses, Brooks puts on a master-class of technique, achieving great and lasting effect in a tiny amount of space; in just four sentences, the Foundation takes what their own great poet has mastered and cheapens it, reducing what so moves us to mere special effect. Though somewhat redemptive for its restoring the first-person plural, the last line seems in direct contradiction with the spirit it describes: “We believe in the strength and power of poetry to uplift in times of despair, and to empower and amplify the voices at this time, this moment.” Note the singsong alliteration, no longer sinister (as in the case of Brooks, and famously of her contemporary Sylvia Plath) but only earwormy: “power of poetry,” “empower and amplify.” Same with the too-cute parallel construction: the X and Y of Z, to A and B the C. Even the comma separating the two noun phrases in apposition—getting a bit technical here, but basically two persons/places/things/ideas together referring to one and the same person/place/thing/idea—at the end, pausing.

For emphasis.

These are fine techniques in the hands of a far lesser poet, the “canned response” of imitation. Better the statement from the two (white) guys up in Vermont: “All of us at Ben & Jerry’s,” they begin, “are outraged.” Real people, as a collective, stepping out from behind the scrim of narrative distance to say how they really feel. They go on to speak at length (more than four sentences, to be sure), drawing on their prior statement for Black Lives Matter but going further. “Today, we want to be even more clear about the urgent need to take concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in all its forms,” they say. Adding (said concrete steps), “To do that, we are calling for four things.”

Then, they name them: disarm Trump’s twitter feed, pass H.R. 40, create the national task force (called for by the Floyd family), and empower the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division.

They name him: “We have to say his name: George Floyd.”

But it’s not just for their prosody that the socially-conscious makers of the Americone Dream (among other great flavors, and puns) receive plaudits online. When @ColorOfChange tweets, “Thanks @benandjerrys for its continuous commitment to social justice,” it’s in response to the practice behind the preaching: most recently, pulling all paid advertising from Facebook in the U.S. until the platform takes action to stop the spread of hate.

What’s the best practice, then? For the first time in history, perhaps there isn’t one—no gaming the system, no paying lip service without actually paying up. There’s something terribly shrill about even powerful verbiage like “denounce” backed up by...silence. When you then promise to “eradicate” institutional racism without a single idea as to how, you—we—just look foolish. This

isn't just a business issue; this isn't really within the scope of business parlance, like "work to be done" and "making this a priority." This is human life. The "special relationship" brands have with consumers now, as Richard Edelman told CNN, is just that: "They inspire us, they show us the future, they give us hope."

What this marked shift means for business, according to Edelman, is that CEOs can no longer do all the talking when it comes to D&I. No more hiding behind the figurehead, it's now a daily practice of the macro (redistributing wealth to the wider community, diversifying leadership, paying fairly) and the micro (controlling for unconscious bias, rooting out nepotism, and calling out ignorance at the water cooler/in the Zoom side-chat). "And that's the difference—it is a repetition that we have to have," says Edelman. "It's not just a one-time statement." As was the common refrain of my old man, unknowingly borrowing from Gandhi: "Know what you think, say what you know, do what you say."

And if you must rely on metaphor, stand behind it. Nothing less than our lives—the "we" in Brooks' reading, sharp as an intake of breath, as a knee on a neck—is on this very line.

PS. The Poetry Foundation has updated their stance with a new solidarity statement.

"How to Read the Poetry Foundation Statement Like Gwendolyn Brooks' Jazz" originally appeared, in slightly different form, on the *Forbes Leadership Channel*.

DORIAN ROLSTON is a writer in Houston, Texas, where he teaches high school English. He writes about the art of persuasion on the *Forbes Leadership Channel* and his *Psychology Today* blog, "Inner Work." His writing has appeared, among other places, in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Aeon*, *Essay Daily*, and *DIAGRAM*. He has an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Arizona, where he was the *Sonora Review* nonfiction editor, and a BA in philosophy from Princeton University. He's currently at work on a collection of essays about the art of persuasion and current events, tentatively titled *Appeals to Me*.

# 6 POEMS

WILL STANIER

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## BOOGIE TOWN

gullible people walking everywhere.  
mulch piled in the street, on the sidewalk.

me, I was staring at the bicycle;  
silver and dangerous, a lure of fate,  
all devil-may-care in my bedclothes.

white veil of grime the soap bar trails in the tub.

because when you love someone, it's an in-breath.  
unbelievable, stale and crumbling molars.

gullible people with perfect pants.  
"hey, look over there!" you might yell.  
and they'd look every time, even government holidays.

## AT THE RACES

in my periphery no one is a stranger.  
a spat of ghosts *laughing out loud*.

in a past life I was a clown.  
I keep a red nose in my pocket  
that I can don in a pinch.

anybody walks in here  
and orders a macchiato, for instance.

hats and faces,  
faces making kissy-faces  
braggadocios,  
putting goose-flesh on my arms.

I'm hungry.  
worms munch until they're liable of silk.

I'm heartbroken like a hobby horse  
without its track suit.

it's old news.  
it's a crying shame, like eating walnuts  
in the morning.

## SPANISH DAYS

the virtual bartenders around here  
really know their brandy, their Cognac,  
and regularly impress the pants off workaday drinkers.

as in, top-of-the-line vanishing tricks  
pre-ordered from Ireland, plus certain acres  
of musty emerald pasture that're exactly  
what your head smells like.

only fancy people receive mail on Sundays:  
packages delivered by postal workers  
wearing updated pith helmets,  
causing them to resemble the 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Mandas.

for six months, the 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Mandas was out hunting on safari.

the Duke of Mandas, like all true Spaniards,  
despised the taste of Cognac.



## SHOW AND TELL

the airport isn't so bad;  
airplanes twinkle for babies,  
lift-off, and carry them home.

“There were so many babies  
on this flight, weren't there?”

“And all so good!”

remember when you were a baby?  
family members visited  
just to pinch your cheek.  
you swallowed a penny, or did  
you muster it up your ass?  
even so, living was easy.

friends who faked diarrhea  
to escape cardio work outs—  
where are they now?  
unaccountable passage of time,  
night-time clouds threaded by lightning.  
on average, every commercial airliner  
struck by lightning  
at least once a year.

they can handle it.  
the sunset scrolls onward.

when you fall asleep  
with your glasses on you become a ghost;  
four eyes seeing  
other ghosts walk with a limp.

## A LETTER FROM THE COAST

Seeking to smell utterly delightful, of far-flung  
oils and extravagant perfumes that together constitute the fact of my cachet,  
I arrived upon this unknown shore.

A keen wind blew, as if released from a miniature giant's coin purse;  
there lay, partly submerged in the sand, seashells as large as motorcycle sidecars;  
and I knew not my location amid the lagoons.

Damn that coachman, who deposited me so unceremoniously at the riverhead!

The sun above was dressed in tatters; and the crabs all scuttled to their parlor rooms.  
From my rucksack, I withdrew my pistol: a gift of my late employer's daughter.  
"Oh, my darling Rebecca, if only I were with you now."  
Yet, the pistol would not fire; its gearings, it seemed, were clotted with barnacles.

I am more than anything a man of letters.  
I have with the power of will threaded licorice straws through the eye of a needle.  
Still, I heard the death knell of my fate echo along the coastline.  
I stumbled, lost to despair, mere kibble for the seabirds.

In my trouser pocket, I found a crumpled sheaf of paper.  
I wrote my name upon it.  
I wrote, "Thomas Jefferson, a nobody."

## REAL WILL

the real William Shakespeare could never have this much fun.  
so here I am, all dolled up in my monikers,  
and reveling in the credit.

(just imagine the court gossip!)

I give the Queen what she wants—another play about dragons.  
she loves watching the monsters wingbeat it to the scene.  
soon a nobleman, a cousin of mine actually,  
is getting married; I plan to write something frisky.

Stratford-upon-Avon is so boring,  
but nobody thinks to look there.  
I have another family: a wife and children.  
I love them like you'd love a stranger,  
like a teakettle boiling in a dream.

life is like a message scribbled on a piece of cheese  
and placed upon a mouse trap.  
the real William Shakespeare lives there,  
cocked, ready for his moment.

“Boogie Town” originally appeared in *Pacifica Review*.

“At the Races” and “Spanish Days” originally appeared in *The Volta*.

WILL STANIER is a poet and letterpress printer from Athens, Georgia. He currently lives in Tucson, where he graduated from the University of Arizona's MFA in Creative Writing. He is the author of a chapbook, *Everything Happens Next* (Blue Arrangements, 2021). His poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Yes Poetry*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Interim*, *The Volta*, *Pacifica*, and *Lazy Susan 2*.

# FROM “TRANSFER”

KOU SUGITA

---

...

...

How does the electricity lick  
Off the ends of our circular arms

Slowly and lapping our heels  
Lilac wise  
Or hackles of rage

Language / never  
Precisely

Into its cadaverous memory

What was sensual only  
In the light / inching closer  
Between my synapses

...

...

Out of echoes—

    Want to say oh

Look my family mirrored

In the commercial blimp passing overhead

A speck in a speck in the speck

    / And yes

Hear the loneliness

In their will / collective / collected? / after imaged / webbed /

    / Eyes then hand then sun

Same green silhouette / same red vein

(Realize a suspicion in that line)

Out on a valley fluff grass / free to think anything

Only a fumbled focus to knowing / All my friends and I

Will labor no way around / decompose while after making

Circle towards dying

...  
...

No holidays / except in friends  
So how to believe in a  
Most prodigious night  
Of all nights on earth?

There are ghosts in me  
Who can still bruise  
Some already in  
Passing / Pushing through

A silver arch  
Of waves  
Like a knife's flathead pressed  
Against a thought

Don't slip / be ready to be  
Ignited / On how many nights  
Is there celebration of their breath

Okay shed

The translucent  
Cicada wing  
Batting the dead off  
The shadow of a shadow of a sound

I'm trying a look / over the tranquil hills  
(Have more than a gaze overseas)

...  
...

An artist and a critic (post world war II) argued  
From their writing desks  
                                  / Whether a decomposing  
Human being hanging droopy from a lawn chair  
(An alien enormous head)  
Is a lamp shade made  
Of melted skin or is not lamp shade at all

(Learned origin / the writing desk / this circumstance is  
Protected accumulated clockwork / Will recomposed)

The critic says the molded plastic  
Body is simply horrifying  
Is most concerned with the inability to name  
Its sex

The artist knows our bodies have ghosts to negotiate with  
Who are already moulted

Light shines adequately appealing through real skin (the critic)

Have no love or hate for humanity (the artist)

At the flash of the atom bomb / former human beings  
Fixed themselves on walls  
Named white shadows  
Before and after / has been humanity against  
Blank et cetera  
Nature now containing electronics  
Our brains themselves  
Circuitry  
When we're dead  
Says a hospital patient  
Like television / clipping / not shot but shut  
~~Off / In nature~~ / There has only ever been against

The conquered lands  
Are decomposing

So there we are / already  
A merger?

...

...

Walking, grazing among the brick with little nails  
My new home, the macro of it, is safe  
For me / my home is a safe  
And there is an exit

Where / the exit is not always my exit  
I hear the echo  
(My mother started  
And her mother) the drip first rippling

(Or what is available by sound)  
Remember the first day as a baby or as an adult laughing  
A new laugh?  
Congratulations, we deserve its well

My home is a safe

Inside a lighthouse softly  
There are walls between the / our / waters



...  
...

It's yellow rotating as spotlight against an ocean  
Yellow the color of nostalgia / It seems  
I can only remember one funeral (or memorial / ?)  
In Japan / men and women silent / children

On the ground like purple balloons  
(Assume the gesture of holding in all liquid thought) / I let mine drag on  
Sun bleached concrete / sputter up into the smoke rising  
From the altar's shiny black stone

Clean into the sky I become part of the forgetting  
A younger self somewhere in Oregon  
Learned the first words (can) become secondary  
From when / Learned by meeting / Stem(ing)  
From the exports grandparents packaged

Then dang in unison / with all my friends / Learned new  
This time in an age of progressions / Progressions of place  
Sitting around the oh yeahs / my head  
Reeling the realness / It's like someone else's fist

Clenching a red sheened balloon  
Becomes / as if an ours / on a Pacific shore  
Its firey dawn / I stick out my tongue to the source  
Fireworks / And settlers provoking some seals

This excerpt was previously published in  
*Oversound*.

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# FORGED AND REFORGED

ESHANI SURYA

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THE APPLE CIDER SOLD FOR a dollar seventy-five per cup there, but after pulling the Sedan into the parking lot, our mother handed Lola and me five dollars each. At the time, this was more money that I was used to—our mother always calculated tax and handed us exact change in coins. Lola, thirteen and four years older than me, understood a bribe, understood what it meant to take one, but she did anyway, scratching our mother's palm when she took the bills.

"You're always biting the hand that feeds, Lola," my mother said, and pressed her cold thumb into her skin to soothe the sting. "But I don't see you handing me that money back."

"Better I spend it than you," Lola said, and shoved the car door open with her shoulder. "C'mon, Kitty."

She slid out feet first, tripping a little at impact. Then she hitched the faux fur collar of her coat up around her ears and stuffed her fists into her pockets. She reached for me, even as I shrunk into the seat, trying to stay in the heater's aim, then

gave up and banged the door shut. My mother brought her hands to noon on the steering wheel, and leaned her forehead so far down, I thought she might bash it against the horn and spook the horses chewing hay in the paddock ahead.

"She didn't mean it," I said, trying to protect Lola and my mother both. I was always their buffer, trying to pad them with so much care they wouldn't notice the other person's chiding, their slash of cruelty that invited a fight. "She just wishes Dad was here."

"I have to pee," our mother said after a moment of watching Lola stalk into the barn. "What about you, sweetheart?"

"No," I replied, though I'd been feeling the pressure build, tight, in my bladder for almost an hour now. A little bit had trickled into my underwear until I clenched hard, told myself it just wasn't the time to bother my mother and ask for a rest stop. Even now, I didn't want her to see how desperate I was, else she might cup my cheek and ask why I hadn't said anything. I didn't want that kindness

from her. It was too much of her energy, better used in places that weren't the unending spiral of take, take, take that was me.

OUR MOTHER HAD DRAGGED the blankets off both Lola and me around three that morning, right after our father must have headed into the shower after finishing up his shift at the security booth. She hustled Lola and me through the door. The suitcases were already loaded. She had put down the back seats and handed us a quilt to make a nest with. I drifted and awakened in starts with my head lolling against one of the small dirty suitcase wheels. Lola scrolled through her emergency cellphone, checking whatever was on there—contacts and photos she never left me see—then eventually sighed and slipped it under her thigh.

We drove for hours, first past giant trucks that seemed unwieldy as they changed lanes, then finally meeting the sun as it started to lift past the horizon. I wondered briefly what my father had thought, coming out of the steamy bathroom and seeing our empty beds. But I didn't want to think what he might have done. Kicked the wall, smashed one of the two ceramic plates we owned. Called the police. Maybe they were after us now. And after, if they caught us, our father would say what he always would, that refrain. Baby, I'm sorry. I turned my face into the side of the car and pressed hard, so my nose collapsed and my lips lost feeling. An ostrich in the sand.

When my mother passed us sunflower seeds and peanuts, Lola finally spoke. "You're doing everything wrong," she said.

"Please, Lola," our mother replied, "can you hold it in for at least a few more states?"

"Dad's going to find us," Lola said. "He's not stupid. And then we'll be fucked."

"Don't say that word. How many times do I

have to tell you not to say that word?"

Lola reached towards the door and clicked the button, so the window rolled down slowly. The highway sped around us, and so did the unfamiliar landscape at the side of the roads. The trees didn't look so different from ours, mostly pine and a few maples and oaks that had dropped their leaves in the ice and snow, but they weren't the quaint one-offs that I knew from the neighborhood.

"Fucked, fucked, fucked," Lola screamed through the open space. It was so cold her breath was making clouds immediately.

"Close it," our mother said, though she was already hitting the control button near the steering wheel, and Lola had to jerk away to make sure her lips wouldn't be caught in the rising glass. We were quiet after that, listening to the radio that was mostly crackle. We didn't know what stations had good service in the area, and we were too frustrated to fiddle with the dial.

After about three miles, Lola reached over and held my hand so gently, like she used to do when we were younger and walking home from school. She traced the creases in my palm with her finger. When she let go, she rubbed the back of her hand against mine, both of our skin soft and delicate.

"I'll take care of you," she said to me, barely breaking the silence. I didn't think our mother had even heard her voice, let alone what she said.

IN THE FARM STORE, Lola grabbed the hood of my jacket and pulled me over to her. I watched my mother open a creaky-hinged door, head into what I decided was the bathroom. She didn't look back for me, and I thought she was probably grateful to be alone, finally.

Lola was already checking out, a cider and a small block of fudge, salted caramel with peanut

butter. I turned it over in my hands while the cashier tallied our bill.

"I guess I'll add the zucchini loaf too," Lola said and then nudged my shoulder. "Give me your money."

She had always known how to demand and never gave me any time to say no. I had gotten used to it, had even stopped questioning her in my mind. It even gave me satisfaction to obey, because when Lola approved, she was kinder. While Lola and the woman exchanged money, I unwrapped the plastic on the fudge and bit into the block. The taste, almost a body sensation, carrying me to a place unreal but lovely with a spiraling fire, blankets, a stove releasing creamy sugar smells into the air. A world like the black-and-white movies that played on the television past my bedtime.

Then Lola encircled my wrist with her fingers and pulled me close. She said, "You're supposed to save that, you dumb shit."

"But it's good," I said quietly. We didn't eat treats in our house. We didn't have the same Christmas-es as other girls' in my elementary school class. We didn't open up fancy clasps on lunch bags and pull out fudge brownies that notes attached that said, *I love you, my sweetest girl* with little hearts and xo's in a cloud around the scrawl. I would have surrendered to Lola normally, but I was young, so easily overwhelmed by the fantasy that I'd already constructed.

"Quit it," I said.

"She has a sweet tooth," Lola said to the cashier in a tone that seemed overly shiny to me, like a spot on the kitchen counter that my mother cleaned over and over again, trying to erase the memory of our father pinning her face to it the way he did, enjoying the way her nose ground into the stone. And he would turn at me and say, *Look what you made me do, kid.*

Lola smiled wide, and her teeth glinted. She kept her tone high and lilting, but she tightened her grip until I dropped the fudge to the counter. I stared at it, and then wiggled my hips a little, the pressure in my lower body aching.

She noticed and asked: "Why are you fidgeting like that?"

I shook my arm a little, trying to get Lola to let go. Now that I was paying attention to my bladder, I wasn't sure I could keep holding. Suddenly, I wanted to follow our mother, to leave my sister as far away as I could.

"I have to pee," I said, and reddened at the cashier's pitying look. I hoped I'd find my mother at the sink, warming her hands in the hot water until they turned pink. Maybe she'd sling an arm around my shoulders and tell me to take my time and then after, maybe she'd let me sit up in the front with her so Lola could spread out in the back and I could rest my feet on the dashboard. We could pretend the running was a road trip.

"We have a bathroom in the back," the cashier began.

"Thanks, we'll find it," said Lola, already pushing me away with the hard brunt of her hand thrust into my lower back.

Stupid, I thought as Lola took control, holding the fudge herself, to think up dreams like I had. Those were lives for good girls, and all I could do was keep trying to make up for all the trouble I'd caused since birth.

WE HEADED OUT INTO the lanes of Christmas trees instead of the bathroom, and when I protested, Lola herded me with so much force that I bit my lip instead. Hopefully she'd only take a minute and then after that I could go inside. But we went further and further back, to where the older, barrier trees leaned against the wooden railings of a



ing a little at her forearm and pulling down the sleeve of her sweater, but when she saw the two of us, she rushed closer.

“What are you *doing*?” she hissed, trying to pull Lola away from me.

“I’m taking care of her,” Lola said, throwing her body to the side so our mother had to tighten her grip. “I’m doing what you’re supposed to do.”

They both looked at me then, as if asking me to choose, but I was in the midst of trying to clean up. The urine was dribbling down my legs and my pants were turning dark and cold already. I patted at the corduroy with my hands, as if that would help.

“See,” Lola said, “Kitty’s not up for a road trip. She’s a baby.”

“Kitty,” our mother said, “oh, Kitty, what did you do?”

But as my mother moved towards me, so did Lola, and then just a moment later they both were holding me at the same time, arms and arms atop me, and none of them felt comforting and I didn’t feel deserving. They wanted something with those hands, and I was sure I couldn’t give it to them, whatever it was, support or alliance or hope.

“It wasn’t me. Lola did it,” I said, pointing to the phone, my other hand moving mindlessly against my pants. They backed away as I kept my body shifting.

“It didn’t work,” Lola said, trying to kick at the phone, even though she wasn’t close enough now.

But then, of course, it had, and a voice came from it, tinny and snarling all at the same time. “Gail, where the hell are you? Where the hell did you go?”

And then, as he realized no one was going to respond, our father kept up his tirade: “You took the girls, didn’t you? I can’t believe you’d do that to them. They need a father, Gail. They need a man

who’s gonna show them how to be women. Now, baby, I’m sorry about the other night, but you have to understand, you were acting crazy. Like you were on your mother’s meds or something. Now, if you come home I promise—I *promise*—that I’m gonna show you just how sorry I am.”

Our mother leaned down to grab the phone, while she held up to her ear. But didn’t take it off speakerphone.

She said, “Okay, we’re coming. We’re coming home. Please don’t—”

And then she didn’t finish. She could’ve meant, don’t yell or maybe don’t hurt us when we get back. She just stared off into the mountains, not speaking any longer, and I couldn’t tell if maybe her brain had shut off for just a moment. It happened like that sometimes, when one of us was scared enough. But then she shook herself, just as my father started talking again.

“Thank fuck,” our father said. “Hurry the fuck up or I’ll fucking kill you, Gail.”

When he hung up, my mother turned to Lola and said, “The reason I’m taking you away is because I don’t want you to be any more like him than you already are.”

Lola stared between me and our mother and then she finally said, in a very small voice: “It felt good to hit. I’m so sorry, but it felt good. It like how Daddy always says it feels. Like you can do anything. I’m sorry, Kitty.”

“Lola,” I said, reaching forward and grabbing her hand, because I thought my mother wouldn’t do it. “It’s okay. You’ll be okay. I don’t blame you. You didn’t do anything wrong, not really. I was being stupid.”

“We need to go,” our mother finally said, and for a moment I couldn’t believe she’d be so little of a mother to us. That she’d want to pack us in and just keep driving. That she wouldn’t hold us, the

way mothers were supposed to. I'd seen enough movies of girls crying in their mothers' arms because of boyfriends and bad days at school and prom going wrong. Why wouldn't we have that kind of mother, who could slow down time and comfort us? For just a moment, I doubted her again. I thought of our father, who at least seemed sure in whatever role he had. And then I imagined him killing our mother, and I knew he could do it and I knew what the blood would taste like in her mouth.

After that, Lola stalked to the car and our mother dug through a suitcase and handed me a pair of pajama pants to wear instead. She told me to change in the bathroom. I cleaned my legs with wet toilet paper that kept shredding in my hands. I wasn't clean. I might stink, and I knew Lola would say something, but it was the best I could do.

WHEN I CAME OUT OF the farm store, Lola and my mother were looking at a map together and talking in low tones. I stopped and watched their fingers, tracing the same routes. I hoped it would always be like that, though I knew it probably wouldn't. I knew in just a few moments they'd fight again. They explained to me that we were going to keep going south, as far away as possible now. Maybe somewhere very warm, like Florida.

Except, as my mother took the parking brake off and started to speed off, she turned the wrong way.

"That's the way back," Lola said. "That's north."

Our mother stopped on the side of the road and put her face on the steering wheel so hard there was a loud honk. When she finally rose, her eyes were already red, like they would get when she was trying to hold back tears. I wished I could be her mother. I wished I could hold her hand and tell her we'd made it through. Years later,

I would understand how terrible that day was for our mother. How many times she had to convince herself that she was doing the right thing. How she didn't have room in her heart to be the kind of mother we wanted when she was being this kind, the one who would throw away all the safety she'd ever understood to make us a better future.

We kept driving. Once again, there was silence after that in the car, everyone sick with the knowledge that we were all sorry without knowing how to act on our guilt, that the man of our house—as he liked to call himself—was relentless, that the car was still driving on away from him, even as its passengers hadn't yet readied themselves to leave home.

This was originally published in *Joyland*.

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# CISCO TRASH MAP

M I R A N D A   T R I M M I E R

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1.

THE FIRST TIME I DROVE the highway that winds northeast from Moab, Utah, I almost crashed. The road follows the Colorado River through towering red mesas stained black with desert varnish. Thickets of pretty tamarisk hug the river banks; hawks and eagles cut sharp circles overhead. I kept veering toward the shoulder and eventually just pulled over, giving in to the urge to gawk. In the parking lot of a trailhead named for a 19th-century cowboy, I sat on the hood of my hatchback and savored the view. *Holy shit*, I thought. *This place is magnificent.*

I was on my way to visit my friend Eileen, who'd bought land in Cisco, a ghost town on the plateau west of the river. Oh my God Eileen, I gushed when I arrived, the red rock! Eileen nodded: Yeah, people love the mesas. Personally she hated them. Faced with a sheer canyon wall, she got an uneasy synesthetic reaction. All that rock

sounded like the surround sound promos they used to play at movie theaters—that rising, overwhelming whine. It made her skin crawl.

Eileen didn't move to Utah for the mesas, in other words. As she tells it, she came for the garbage.

2.

CISCO WAS NEVER GRAND. Established in the 1880s as a water stop for steam-powered trains, the town peaked at about 250 residents. It served as a hub for sheep and cattle ranchers, then oil and gas drillers, then Cold War uranium prospectors. But in the end the trains switched to diesel and, when an interstate stole the highway's traffic, the gas station and general store closed. These days Eileen is Cisco's only full-time resident, making her home in a log cabin at the edge of a trapezoidal tract bounded by Highway 128 and Pump-house Road. She calls the formation Trash Island,



and rightly so. Most houses on it are uninhabitable, splintered and ready to collapse whichever way the wind blows next. Surrounding them is the layered garbage of Cisco's past. Old cars and PVC pipes. Railroad ties and toppled oil derricks. Sun-bleached washing machines. Melted stacks of tarpaper.

These remains are semi-famous. Scenes from *Vanishing Point* and *Thelma and Louise* were shot here, and most non-winter days at least a few tourists pass through. From the accidental YouTube collection, "Ghost Town – Cisco, Utah," "Cisco Ghost Town, Utah," "The Ghost Town of Cisco, UT," and a few dozen similarly titled works, you get a sense of what draws the visitors' eye. Some videos follow narrators as they poke through empty RVs and ruined buildings, lingering on domestic details: a green La-Z-Boy, an organ with broken keys. Others zoom out for landscape shots of sunsets or to sweep the whole tableau by drone. From up high, the garbage seems geological, as natural a part of the desert as the scrub and rock.

I must confess, I love this way of looking, though some people call it ruin porn. Eileen and I met almost twenty years ago while rambling around Milwaukee's slowing industrial yards. It was our favorite pastime. Most weekends, weather permitting, we explored some abandoned factory or another and, if we were lucky, found minor treasures to take home: safety goggles, hard hats, bright cerulean blueprints. For a whole group of our friends, this was being a teenager in the late-nineties Rust Belt, and I remember it as an unmitigated joy.

Back then Eileen scared me. She slouched around the visual-arts wing of our high school in immaculately thrifted outfits flecked with paint, looking like someone who knew exactly what

she was about. Whereas I didn't know myself at all. I played flute in the band instead of studying the subjects I secretly preferred: jazz, which involved improvisation, and dance, which required elegance. When we finally met on a trip to an old foundry, we did not become fast friends. But I saw we were more similar than I'd first thought: both reserved, sensitive, and determined to be tough.

Eventually I learned what was wrong with ruin porn—how it tends to erase history and inspire myth. I had been participating in a long U.S. tradition. As soldiers and surveyors pushed the country's borders westward, they wrote adventure stories that influenced frontier policy and inspired new flocks of settlers. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, "Representation had become habitable space," and the old patterns still echo today. Cisco-as-ghost-town is a screen for whatever fragments of Western fantasy people care to cobble together, even as the place itself testifies to the many ways those fantasies end badly.

After high school Eileen and I lost touch. Like many of my peers with the means, I left town. I headed to Minneapolis, and New York, and Tucson, putting distance between myself and Milwaukee with each move. But the farther away I got, the more I grew convinced, in a way I had trouble describing, that my time in my city's wastelands explained something bigger than me. I watched the economy collapse, then "recover," felt myself part of a wave of young people cycling through cities searching rootlessly for opportunity and change. Then I heard that Eileen had placed herself in an even more foundational set of ruins—a ghost town in the nuclear west—and I thought, maybe she can tell me what it all means.

3.

IN THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *The Gleaners and I*, director Agnès Varda spends two hours talking with scrappers, salvagers, dumpster divers, and outsider artists about what they are looking for and why. Strictly defined, to glean is to collect the food left over after harvest. The film asks what might be gained by thinking about other kinds of trashpicking that way, too.

Eileen could have been one of Varda's subjects. With her shaved head, chunky glasses, and patina of desert grime, she's a striking character. She's also resourceful. After high school she tried art school in Chicago but quit after watching the debt pile up. Instead she worked as a garlic harvester, airport baggage handler, commuter ferry deckhand, library clerk, postal officer, and snow shoveller. She met people, got strong, collected skills, and saved a little money, though in gentrifying Chicago it didn't go very far. When a road trip took her through Cisco in 2014, another life suggested itself. She bought a one-acre lot straddling Pumphouse Road that was packed with three cabins, two sheds, an Airstream trailer, a Winnebago trailer, and the town's shuttered post office. Each building was filled with garbage, or, as Eileen saw it, material, and for the next two years, she split time between Chicago and Cisco, alternately earning money and doing salvage work. I showed up at something of a tipping point. The property was spruced up and homey, and the post office, rehabbed as a tourist rental, promised an income stream. Cisco still had no running water and was an hour's drive from a grocery store, but Eileen was ready to move in full-time.

"You want a tour?" she asked before I was even

out of the car. She was more outgoing than I remembered, but the same was probably true of me. I followed her to the north side of the property, where she had replaced the floor of the post office with a coffee shop sign, and on to the main cabin, south of Pumphouse, whose walls she had insulated with foam pool noodles. Out back, she'd lofted telephone poles into a shade-screen-and-deck and dragged concrete slabs over from Trash Island to fashion a porch. But the *pièce de résistance* was the frontyard fence, made from dozens of stacked tires and big coils of barbed wire. It opened in the middle into an arbor molded from bent pipes. "That fence took *forever*," Eileen said, grimacing at the memory. But it kept drive-by tourists from peeking into the backyard.

The next morning I woke to coffee warmed on a camp fire—Eileen had been up for hours—and an overview of the day's possible tasks. We could drill holes in a metal drum, layer it with rocks, and sink it into the ground to construct a drainage system for the Airstream. Or re-weld the oil derrick that held a plastic water barrel for an ad-hoc shower. Or empty and sort through the tool shed, which Eileen had been scared to touch. I was bad with tools but had spent four years of my twenties as a house cleaner, so I suggested we tackle the shed.

"Ugh, this makes me nervous," Eileen said, hesitating before she removed the chain holding the shed door shut. It flew open and loosed an avalanche of hoses and shovels and rancid dust. Coughing, we sifted through the objects and sorted them into piles. I am good at sorting by form and function, but the usual taxonomies did not apply. What was that jar filled with? What were those chains for? To what machine did these parts belong? Eileen frowned at a coffee can heaped

with ore-flecked rocks. Copper? Gold? She was also figuring it out.

A bit later her friend Joe showed up with a truck and trailer. Joe lived 45 minutes away and had met Eileen when he stopped through Cisco to collect scrap metal. As a welder, amateur mining enthusiast, and part-time handyman, he could identify a lot of the junk in the shed. As an amateur mining enthusiast, he could guess with fair certainty that the ore was pyrite. It became a game. When Eileen or I found something we couldn't name, we'd hand it to Joe and watch him turn the object over in his hands, then pronounce: Really old propane heater. Tractor tire chains. Ventilation ducts for that wood-burning stove. Suddenly everything was less mysterious. Our gleaning now evoked a context.

And then another car rolled in, carrying Farland in a *Fuck Your Fascist Beauty Standards* t-shirt and her dog Twig. Like Joe, Farland had also met Eileen on a salvage mission, so while Twig sniffed Eileen's dog Cairo she jumped in, chatting as she sorted like a pro. Her chickens were laying like crazy. The ranchers down the road were expanding. A guy in town had had to be handed his ass. And the tourist rafting season had ended, thank god. Farland was finally done driving trucks strapped with kayaks. She was thinking of walking south to Albuquerque in celebration. Only 400 miles, she shrugged.

Varda's film invokes another sense of *gleaning*—to gather information—and observes how trashpickers come to know their homes by digging around in its waste. Likewise, Eileen learned about Cisco from the scraps left behind, and by comparing notes with the part-time neighbors, former residents, and family members who

stopped by to chat as she worked in her yard. She met Lou, who owned the land to her west, and Rob and Dave, who owned the land to her east, and Rusty, who used to keep her trailer near the post office. She heard stories about Ethel, the proprietor of the general store, which toward the end sold only warm Coke and ice cream, and Dan Vanover, a turquoise miner who served as town mayor in the 1960s. She heard about the guy who manufactured counterfeit quarters, and Larry, who surprised his wife Sharon with dumpstered gifts, including a clawfoot bathtub. By all accounts Cisco's residents had made ends meet creatively, as they probably had to.

For the moment, we were learning about Ernie, the last owner of Eileen's land. She'd already pieced together a number of facts:

1. That Ernie, too, came from Wisconsin,
2. then bounced around the US,
3. doing a stint on the railroad
4. and a jail term "for stealing potatoes or something."
5. He kept a Bible and a set of Western dime novels by his bed
6. and lived alone.
7. While prospecting around Cisco, he found opals, gold, and other minerals—
8. enough, at least, to keep a couple motorbikes.
9. Neighbors liked to say he buried a fortune in the yard,
10. though neighbors also liked to lie.

EACH OBJECT WE PULLED from the shed added a new dimension to Ernie's story. The dozen handle-less picks suggested icy winters, scorching summers, and dirt packed like concrete. We didn't

know what to make of the red hand drill, sticky with crude—had that been success or a tease?—but the wall calendar was enough. It tracked jobs and nothing else, which told me how to read the dozens of peach pits that littered the shed’s floor and shelves. As small pleasures in a life defined by work.

By the end of the day we had cleared out the shed and drifted to separate corners of the yard. Joe loaded a stove into his trailer while Farland sat on a lawn chair by the Airstream, buffing dishes to a tender clean. Eileen rolled tires to the front yard for her wall, and Cairo trotted back from a long absence down Highway 128. He carried the hoof from some roadkill—pronghorn, maybe—and plopped down to gnaw on it. I stood petting a jealous Twig and feeding unusable wood and cardboard to a fire in an oil drum. Folded in my back pocket was a tractor-engine manual I’d saved to read later. The engine was manufactured by La-Roi, a company once based in Milwaukee. For a moment, it occurred to me to be surprised at how comfortable I felt, but that was wrong. I wasn’t surprised at all. Waving smoke from my eyes, I watched my long-lost friend heft a tire over her head and, biceps flexing, push it into place.

I didn’t realize it yet, but I’d spent the day gathering the fragments of a thesis: about what might be learned in a place littered with disassembled history. The anthropologist Gastón Gordillo draws a helpful distinction between *ruins* and *rubble*. Ruins are the idealized structures of a vaguely defined past, meant for looking but not touching; *rubble* is the aftermath of specific events that people live in, reuse, and form material relationships to. If treating a place as ruined makes it hard to ask what happened there, paying attention

to rubble opens the question up.

And paying attention to rubble, Gordillo says, is a bodily act. After a long day’s work, that seemed right to me. The town’s residues greased my face, and its grit rattled around in my sinuses. When I went to blow my nose, the snot came out charcoal gray.

#### 4.

BACK IN TUCSON, I DECIDED to write about Cisco: another bodily act. My cleaning job had taught me to think of it that way. For four years I spent my days in other people’s houses, rearranging objects, then went home and did the same thing on the page. When Eileen heard about my project, she began feeding me material, leaving long stories on my voicemail and sending short ones by email. “Tire wall and winnie,” went one subject line. “Rocks n melons”; “Map, kettle, door jamb.” One day Eileen sent a note with the heading “Floor,” as in the new one she was laying in the main cabin. “Hey!” she wrote. “These are the guys who built the house I’m working on.” Attached was a photo of a wood plank marked *Pace Bros* in blue cursive and, below that, a link to the website Find a Grave.

I clicked through to the entry for Sidney David Pace, born in Payson, Utah in 1858. He migrated to the Moab area in 1885 and became a successful rancher, running about a hundred cattle from bases in Cisco and the canyons. The website supplied further details about his family—wife Rebecca, son Reece—and colorful snippets about who punched whose cows and exactly how he transported the stone and wood for his stately home. Tacked onto the end was this afterthought:

Sid Pace (Old Sid) would turn over his few cattle to the Ute Indians to run for the summer months. The Indians returned them all, and if one had died, they provided proof. Sid trusted the Indians and they were honest.

The citation for that anecdote led me to a 1972 book by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, where I read further:

The last Indian uprising in Grand County was on September 8, 1906. The Indians resentment was revealed in their slaughtering of deer on the La Sals in an attempt to eliminate all the settlers food. ... [But n]ot all of the Indians were resentful all the time.

None of the objects floating around Cisco told the Utes' side of these encounters. All I had were rumors that the Old Spanish Trail once passed through the land that became the town. By the time Mormon settlers arrived in the late 1840s, the Utes had spent more than two centuries adapting to ruthless Spanish colonial mores. Those not enslaved to work on Spanish ranches stayed safe by acquiring horses, raiding neighboring tribes, and growing into a powerful trading force that moved goods and people up and down the Trail. The Mormon settlers, who understood little of that history, secured their promised land by massacring indigenous people or running them into the mountains. When Utes responded by sabotaging ranches and towns, the settlers depicted them as monsters while painting their own violence, in the words of one federal surveyor, "in as soft colors as possible." By the end of the century, tribal bands in the Moab area were removed south to the Ute

Mountain reservation or north to the Ouray and Uintah reservation, onto land a Mormon official judged "a vast contiguity of waste."

It's also hard to find evidence of the Chinese workers who blasted tunnels through mountains and laid the heavy iron rail that completed the project of colonizing the West. One day a guy named Lyle showed up with a metal detector and found a Chinese coin by the railroad tracks. Eileen sent me a picture, and with the help of the internet I identified it as daoguang tongbao, the currency that circulated under the Daoguang Emperor from 1821 to 1850. That was a brutal time in China, marked by internal rebellions and imperial invasion. A generation later, Chinese migrants to the U.S. made up 90 percent of the workforce that completed the first transcontinental railroad. Some camps leveraged that labor power to secure wage increases, protection from physical abuse, and medical attention from Chinese doctors. In 1867, five thousand workers in California laid down their tools to start the era's largest strike. The railroad companies cut off food supplies and starved the workers back to the line, but the threat of their power endured in white America's mind. Nativist movements spread in Western states, and Congress soon passed the first national anti-immigration law, the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Whether they're remarked on or not, these absences are embedded in the place Cisco has become. To sift through rubble is to bump up against the enormity of what's left out.

5.

AT THE CORNER OF South First and East Center in downtown Moab is a two-story brick build-

ing with government offices including the Grand County Recorder. On my second trip to see Eileen, I stopped in to ask about mining claims. Namely, how do you make one? The desk clerk pulled a BLM map from a file cabinet, which indicated the areas where I could stake a claim under the U.S. General Mining Act. Passed in 1872 and hardly amended since, the law facilitates mineral exploration on public land. With just a two-page form and \$200 in annual fees, I could access 20 square acres to dig and drill as I please.

Next, in a tiny back room lined with planning and property records, the clerk showed me where to look up historical mining claims. I pulled down a volume from 1952, the year Charlie Steen, a Texan prospector renting a tarpaper shack in Cisco, drilled into the biggest deposit of uranium ever discovered in the United States. News of that find, plus \$10,000 bonuses from the Atomic Energy Commission, drew thousands of hopeful prospectors to the Colorado Plateau. Moab's population grew more than fivefold in a year. County recorder Esther Somerville was used to filling one claims ledger annually. At the height of the boom, she went through one a week.

Eileen learned Charlie Steen's story soon after moving to Cisco. Nobody could say exactly which house was his, but that wasn't the point. The uranium boom was Eastern Utah's winningest piece of history, and Steen its winningest protagonist; any proximity was worth a boast. Newspapers from the era reveled in Steen's rags-to-riches arc and kept tabs on how he spent his new fortune. Steen understood his part in the pageant well. He held a press conference to bronze his prospecting boots and crafted zippy sound bites like "Poverty and I have been friends for a long time, but I'd just as soon keep other company."

Few prospectors found anything close to

Steen's success. 309,380 mining claims were made in four eastern counties between 1946 and 1959, and yet in 1955 there were only 800 active mines across the entire Colorado Plateau. Fewer still produced significant amounts of ore. Uranium was deposited unevenly, for the most part, and successful exploration took money. Though claim fees were cheap, equipment and labor were not. Some prospectors tried to do all the work themselves, digging tiny "dogholes" at the surface and hoping to turn a profit. Many went broke, living in cars or cardboard lean-tos.

Company mine workers had it harder. Some spent their days absorbing the shock of pneumatic drills; others stooped in dig spaces too small to stand. Nearly all breathed radioactive gas and dust in poorly ventilated tunnels and shafts. Wages rose for higher grade uranium, so good pay often meant more concentrated exposure. Radiation levels at Steen's mine, Mi Vida, were lower than the industry average, but 600 workers still got sick or were killed. Indigenous people faced the worst conditions. On the Navajo Nation, outside operators won contracts by promising to share profits with the tribe, and then reneged. Some mines lacked basic amenities like toilets, drinking water, and changing rooms. One air sample taken by the U.S. Public Health Service registered radiation 4750 times above levels then considered safe. Navajo towns like Red Valley lost a whole generation of men to cancer.

And the boom loosed other damage. Moab's streets and schools strained to support the swelling population. A wild market in fake uranium penny stocks drained investors across the state and the country of their savings.

I think about all that when I read claim names like

Fortune  
Peach  
Sunny Side  
Lucky Lady  
Big Blow  
Climax,

6.

with their cheery gamblers' take on the uranium rush. You could call it naiveté, but that's too easy. Some prospectors had participated in other extractive projects and seen the damage they caused firsthand. The mine names were a sign of something more complicated than ignorance, like people's capacity to salvage an emotional consolation prize from a venture more likely to wreck them than make them rich.

Back in Cisco, Eileen told me more about Ernie, the former owner of her land. From a cookie tin reserved for her most delicate finds, she pulled a stack of grimy papers that incorporated his mineral exploration company. She had his bedside Bible, too, and we flipped through and saw he'd marked out the Parable of the Talents. Maybe that was Ernie's consolation for his hustle. Cisco old-timers say he taught himself to do a little of everything—prospecting, digging, dynamiting, promoting stocks—and caught work wherever he could.

What did all that labor get him? One afternoon I let myself into the workshed, where I'd stashed some bread and cheese in Eileen's mini-fridge. On the bottom shelf of a table piled with tools was a lumpy package tied up in string. Nosily, I opened it and recognized the contents instantly: pitchblende, the gray rock that indicates patches of really good ore. For a moment I just stared at it, unsure of what to do next. Then I wrapped that ugly package back up and went to go eat.

WEARY OF THE WAY so much U.S. Western history is conveyed—in tales marked by silence and violent boosterism—I began looking for another narrative mode. The scope of my uranium research grew. One way to counter myth, I thought, was to let stories be as sprawling as they are in real life. Back in Tucson, I read about mill workers, downwinders, waste sites, war sites, and present-day production. I got buried in books and browser tabs: *Uranium, Being Nuclear*, *The Doomsday Machine*, *Canaries on the Rim*, photo essays on Hiroshima, articles about cluster bombs made from nuclear waste, and updates from the Ute-led political action committee fighting a new uranium land-grab at Bears Ears. When Eileen called from Cisco, I'd go off on a screech, offloading whatever I was reading to keep my head above the text.

I grew sympathetic to Annie McClanahan's suggestion that we tell metonymic histories. The lit theorist proposed the idea while defending a book of photos of abandoned Detroit factories published in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. Critics panned the collection as ruin porn; you couldn't just swap out one economic disaster for another, they complained. McClanahan countered that in the big picture the same deregulatory forces had made post-industrial landscapes and the foreclosure crisis. Place the two side by side, she argued, and a viewer is encouraged to remember how that's so.

It was like gleaning, I decided. Pluck a fragment from the heap and place it alongside a second and third, narrating connections as you go. A metonymic history of Utah's uranium rush might put

the uranium tailings mixed into homes, sidewalks, and open land in Monticello, Utah—leftovers from the mill where many residents worked

**next to** documents from failed lawsuits brought by sick Monticello workers who couldn't prove their illness to the satisfaction of the courts

**next to** radioactive traces in the cells of anyone born in the US after 1951

**next to** the peak size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal: 33,000 warheads

**next to** nuclear "allergy": the phrase used by Cold War planners to describe Japanese unwillingness to host nuclear weapons on U.S. military bases 15 years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs

and continue on to

the closed Shinkolobwe mine in the Congo, a country which produced more uranium for the U.S. than any other and today produces conflict minerals for smartphones

**and** the culturally distorting legal procedures by which Aboriginal people have to make claims against mining projects as Australia becomes a leader in global uranium production

**and** a jar of the radioactive sludge spilled by a truck headed to the last U.S. uranium mill, in the Ute community of White Mesa

**and** a sign from a recent White Mesa Mill protest: *We Like Our Water Without Uranium*

**and** nonexistent glass from the vitrification plant at the Hanford site in Washington state, which is supposed to turn nuclear waste into solid cylinders but, billions of dollars later, doesn't.

Each one of these histories demands deep engagement, to be sure. But it's also true there is no depth without scope. In the fields north of Cisco's train tracks sits a giant red oil tank blown out of town years ago by a strong wind. Eileen calls it her Beating Red Heart, and she hikes out to visit whenever life around Trash Island gets to be

too much. She throws a rope ladder over the top, and, balancing carefully so the tank doesn't start rolling, hoists herself up. For Eileen, who knows Cisco with an often-claustrophobic intimacy, this zoomed-out view isn't abstract. It helps her see the relationship between this house and that water tank, the way two trucks make a fence and the



road disappears into scrub. She can ask in a more layered way what the hell she's gotten herself into, even if the answer will never be whole.

## 7.

THE MORE TIME YOU SPEND picking through the rubble, the more you are forced to reckon with the limits of clean-up. Often the lesson presents itself plainly, like the morning Eileen woke up, went outside to pee, and saw a thick sheet of oil seeping across the lot next door. The owner, Lou, lived in Salt Lake City but kept an oil rig in Cisco that had apparently sprung a leak. Eileen called Lou's business partner, Jim, and asked what to do. Jim said he had recently retired and told her to call the oil company. Eileen, who on most days is an accommodating neighbor, hung up and dialed the EPA instead.

At first, cleanup looked like one oil company worker with two five-gallon plastic buckets lading what oil he could back into the tank beside the rig. The next day it looked like a group of company men with guns negotiating with a meek EPA representative. When Eileen went over to get details about when the spill would be gone, the higher-ups screamed at her to go away. She flipped and screamed back, and the exchange spiraled. The EPA rep just gawked.

Eventually "remediation" did occur: Backhoes dug up some federally mandated quantum of soil, and dump trucks hauled it away. It's like nothing ever happened, Eileen told me, and she laughed, blackly.

Oil and gas development isn't just a part of Cisco's past, then. East of town on Highway 128, a sign announces the arrival of the CISCO INDUSTRIAL CENTER with the unsettling tagline, HYDROCARBON HEAVEN. Whatever this ex-

tractive era shares with previous ones, it is different, too. Companies dig deeper, frack harder, and drill at crazier angles to find profitable flows. They also produce a lot of the chemical-laced water used to clean and stimulate wells and blast open rock. Around Cisco this wastewater is disposed at Danish Flats, a ghost town resurrected to host 14 evaporation ponds. In theory, the harmful compounds will be separated out and recycled, but the process is poorly understood and poorly regulated. Utah doesn't presently require the sort of groundwater monitoring that might catch leaks, and, though airborne emissions are monitored, the state does a lax job of it.

This is handy for companies trying to profit from oil and gas waste. For eight years after opening, the Danish Flats facility claimed emissions so low the state didn't require filtering equipment; later, data suggested the ponds were emitting tens of tons of volatile compounds a year. Danish Flats Environmental Services was fined \$80,000, negotiated the penalty down to \$50,000, and began slowly installing a filtration system. But before the system was operational, the property was sold to the Texas-based Oilfield Water Logistics, which promptly asked regulators for permission to recalculate the emissions levels. And so the pollution continued. "They're still trying to figure out what their emissions are," a program manager at the Utah Department of Air Quality told a Moab journalist, in 2016. "It's going to take time and some thinking and some procedures."

## 8.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN the place you live is contaminated? Everyday acts of living, breathing, and relating become uncertain. In response, geographer Shiloh Krupar recommends thinking trans-

naturally—getting to know a place by tracking the way people, plants, animals, objects, and land have been made into garbage, or brought together amidst waste. When I adopt that approach in Cisco, I think about:

*Heavy industrial, the zoning designation for most land south of Pumphouse Road. A reminder of Cisco's toxic soil, a reason not to plant vegetables, and, as Eileen discovered in a letter from the Grand County planning department, a designation that made half her homestead illegal. She later got a second letter incriminating the other half. The county was cracking down on Airbnb rentals, and until Eileen could get a business license and convince inspectors to waive the many building codes she was violating, her main source of income was moot.*

*Rusty's estimation of what Sharon would do if she heard that Eileen had been charging \$60 per night for a stay in the post office: "shit and turn blue." Rusty said it matter-of-factly, without ire, on a visit she otherwise spent marveling at Eileen's salvaging skills. Sharon lives in Moab but was once Ernie's tenant and left behind enough of her belongings that Eileen wondered if the move was actually a choice. Sharon can come by anytime, Eileen told Rusty, a possibility Rusty made clear was probably not in the cards.*

*The food-prep parties held when Rusty and Sharon lived in Cisco. Back then a farmer-neighbor would come around bearing old hens for residents to eat, and though it wasn't commercial grade meat, no one turned up their noses at the gift. In fact they had fun with it: When a batch came in, everyone met at the town bar,*

got drunk, and, collectively, slaughtered the chickens.

*Eileen's dog Cairo, who led an exuberant life in Cisco before getting run down by a car speeding through on Highway 128. It was a hit-and-run, and though several friends were in town, no one saw the driver or the vehicle. But Eileen claims to recognize the combination of recklessness and social irresponsibility. As far as she's concerned, it was an adventure outfitter's van carrying rafters from Moab to the Colorado River.*

*The tree planted by settlers to stabilize the Colorado's banks, now flourishing everywhere in dense groves. Tamarisks love a salty soil, and Eastern Utah has plenty of it, thanks to upriver dams and farming runoff. The trees, which pull salt up through their roots and concentrate it in their leaves and, when those fall, at soil surface, are blamed for choking out other plants and hogging water. But not all these charges are true, and the aggressive tactics deployed against the "invasive" trees—bulldozing, beetles—have had harmful side effects. The tamarisk is made a monster, while the ongoing destructiveness of commonplace farming practices goes unremarked.*

*The forests that catch fire in neighboring states and send waves of smoke rolling through Eastern Utah. As the world heats up, Cisco will have more days like those during the Cortez blaze, when the smoke was so thick it blocked out the sun.*

*Ron Wriston, the sheep rancher who passed through one hazy day looking for a business*

*partner to help him sell the chert and cantaloupes heaped in the passenger seat of his station wagon.* Rocks and melons, he nudged Eileen, could be a good hustle. She declined but made Ron her friend, and he did what he does for friends: brought her 7-11 pizzas and taught her about sheep herding. Used to be Basque herders did a lot of the work, a fact corroborated by another plank Eileen found in her cabin, carved in a mixture of Spanish and Basque. Now it's mostly Central American herders who keep sheep ranches running, though the latest xenophobic resurgence threatens that arrangement.

*The list of things a sheepherder might encounter in southeastern Utah's desert fields.* Antique bottles, rotting mattresses, cows and pronghorn bones, old hitching posts snagged with fur from bears scratching their backs. It's desolate. "This place is wide open country," said Raymond Best. "Nothing but sagebrush. Anybody could die in here, and they will never find his body." For four months in 1943, Best ran the Moab Isolation Center, where Japanese-Americans deemed "troublesome" at other internment camps were held, until the War Relocation Administration once again changed its mind and sent the prisoners to a site on the Navajo Nation.

*The suitcase standing handle-up on a hill near Eileen's, ready to be carried off.* Stuffed with bills, contracts, and personal correspondence, it formed a rude file cabinet whose contents included a letter from a former resident complaining about an oilman who managed the fields east of town. The oilman had bragged that he kept his workers docile by paying them

partially in drugs. Addicts are manipulable, after all. And the oilman's point in explaining this to a neighbor with no stake in his field? Not just a boast but a threat.

*The 100-lb bags of bentonite kept in a storage container in Lou's yard.* Oil and gas workers add the chalky clay to their drilling fluid to lubricate equipment and prevent blowouts. It's also used as a sealant in landfills. This particular bentonite was mined in Wyoming and bears a motto that the owners of the Black Hills Bentonite Co. assume its customers will approve: AS REGULATIONS GROW, FREEDOM DIES.

*The airstrip cut just beyond Lou's land to give quick access to the oil fields.* The strip is now abandoned, but one day an old man landed there in a single-seat plane he'd taken out for a spin. Lest this seem charming or cinematic, the trip nearly killed him when the wind threatened to tangle the plane in some telephone wires. Eileen said hi and got a picture, and the pilot took off again, reluctantly.

*Whatever the two drunk guys thought they were asserting or defending when they unloaded their guns at Eileen for an entire afternoon.* They parked down Pumphouse in a white truck, watching Eileen repair the tire wall, and suddenly bullets whizzed around her shoulders and head. She ducked out of the way, retreated to the Airstream, made a sandwich, and, after a half hour, headed back outside. Again the bullets came whizzing, and again she retreated to the trailer, waited, and returned to the front yard. And still, more bullets, aimed not to kill but to terrify, and this time Eileen stayed put as

they rang past, continuing her work until the men got bored and started up the truck. They whipped it around and drove past, staring her down. Eileen wore clip-on sunglasses and, shaking, flipped them up to stare back.

Maybe transnatural thinking is more than a response to contamination. Maybe it suggests a different way of inhabiting place. For two centuries the U.S. West has been held together by lies about the supposed separation between people and animals, the living and nonliving, bodies and land, and the heroic human actor who rises out of it all to master history. What's left after busting open these categories, I'm not sure. When toxic systems are dismantled right in front of you, it seems best not to rush the reassembly. It's too easy to accidentally build the same thing all over again.

### 9.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SHOOT BACK?" asked Eileen's neighbor Rob, who lives in Colorado and keeps a Cisco house for getaways. "Those guys are assholes." He should know: One of those guys is his second cousin. The day Eileen got shot at, Rob received a phone call from a Moab police officer who said the alarm on his house had been tripped. After some investigating, he and the officer sussed out the culprits. The officer paid them a warning visit, and Rob told them not to come to back.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about that story, debating how much to worry. For her part Eileen prefers to put it out of mind. Utah is an open-carry state, and most days she does so with a bulky 9 mm on her hip. Word gets around. On a trip to the Moab dump, Eileen heard a story from her friend Curt, who'd heard it from two men who stopped in Cisco to ogle an old Ford shortbed. They were

met by a tough guy who swaggered over with a 9 and told them to get the hell off his property. Ticked by this description of Eileen, Curt shut his mouth and let the gender mystification stand.

My favorite Eileen-with-a-gun story is immortalized on Cisco's Trip Advisor page. "BEWARE of the angry gun-wielding residents," reads one review. The town only looks abandoned, the reviewer warns, before describing a run-in with a woman with a gun "attached to her belt" who told him he'd get his head blown off if he trespassed around. Other neighbors weren't so judicious on the trigger. "If you want to leave alive, be smart," the review concludes. The experience earned Cisco three out of a possible five stars.

Stereotypes can be useful, then. Besides the gun, Eileen relies on isolationist décor to give herself breathing room. She isn't attached to the idea of private property, but she does need privacy, and the tourists often take that away. "It's like living in the zoo and you're the only monkey left," she told me. "Everyone wants to bother you about something." They disgorge from yellow tour buses to putter through Eileen's yard. They veer offroad, flipping donuts and squealing around and freaking her out. They stop their cars in front of the cabin, roll down the window, snap a photo, and speed away. And so she protects the land with a surveillance camera, barbed wire, rubber rats, and hand-painted signs. *Fucc Off!* in curly script. *Achtung!!!!* with skulls. She's hung other signs—*Keep Out, You Will Be Punished By God & Man*—at strategic spots around town to scare people away.

The efficacy of this tactic is mixed. For some people, the signs make Cisco more fascinating. A couple years back, the subreddit *abandonedporn* hosted a 164-post thread to discuss a message Eileen had painted on a conked-out RV: *TAKE NOTHING BUT PICTURES. BE RESPECTFUL*

FOR FUCKS SAKE. The commenters debated the abstract merits of taking things versus not, and, after the major points had been rehearsed, began trading travel stories. “I was just there last week!” wrote one redditor, to which another replied, “Nice. I was there last Tuesday.” “Literally just drove through an hour ago,” reported a third; “[m]y favorite ghost town I’ve visited,” went a fourth. And a fifth, summing up the rest: “If you’re an abandonedporn fan Cisco is a gold mine.”

10.

AND SO THE GARBAGE GAZE hovers, haunts, returns. Eileen and Cisco have been featured in an absurd number of media, including but not limited to a feature-length documentary, a New York podcast, a public radio segment, a travel show, a Dutch game show, a rock music video, a Utah Jazz commercial, a fashion magazine interview, an environmental magazine cover story with hand-drawn illustrations, a bunch of little articles, a bunch of little blogs, and countless social media mentions. Sometimes the representations are serious, sometimes confused, sometimes cheap, sometimes sweet. The documentary explores both Eileen’s project and Utah mining history. The podcast introduces Cisco with whistling music straight out of Olde-Saloon central casting. The music video stages a mixed-genre hillbilly zombie scene. The Jazz ad watches Eileen playing basketball with her new dog, Rima, on a homemade basketball hoop. The Cisco that emerges is a hodgepodge of pioneer symbolism, real historical tidbits, dystopian backdrop, garbage laboratory, and quirky/grim/hopeful stewardship.

Sifting through these stories, I think of Krupar’s warning about spectacle, how it can obscure “lingering toxicity ... and the way the past still shapes

the present not just theoretically but materially.” If the tourists tend to misunderstand what happened in and around Cisco, they also misunderstand what is *happening*: ongoing oil and gas development, renewed attempts to steal Ute land, and the way their gaze is never as harmless as they think. A year after Eileen moved in full-time, a scout came by Cisco to ask about shooting for *Adventure Capitalists*. The reality show puts star investors in thrilling locations, where they meet entrepreneurs hoping to sell outdoor fitness and lifestyle gear. In the end the producers chose Moab instead, and the episodes emphasized the landscape’s useable, leisurely features—the things you can climb, swim, boat on, play atop, or motor over. Southeastern Utah is depicted as an ideal place for what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls *salvage accumulation*: “the conversion of stuff with other histories of social relations (human and not human) into capitalist wealth.” Meanwhile 70 percent of Moab residents and temporary migrants work seasonal, low-wage jobs serving tourists. A third go without health insurance; all face a housing market dominated by expensive short-term rentals and fancy vacation homes. And city services—sewage, garbage, recycling—are badly burdened by the waste visitors leave behind.

So I feel protective of Eileen when people make their imaginative claims on Cisco. She’s one of the least judgmental people I know, and often really bad at saying no. She might complain she’s wary of a journalist and still give that journalist hours of her time. She might tell me, when I ask whether arts grants might help sustain her work, that she doesn’t want to turn Cisco into an “elite art colony,” but then start a residency program at the encouragement of her sisters and watch squirmingly when one trumpets the project on *VICE*. She might resent it when an acquaintance comes

to town and stays without contributing work or food, but she rarely tells them so. This past Christmas, two years after reconnecting, Eileen and I met up in Milwaukee. We hung out in our friend Lauren's parents' living room, warming up by the fireplace. Eileen had just eaten four bowls of Lauren's mom's noodles and looked cleaner than I'd seen her since high school. She looked very, very tired. A bunch of sorta-friends had invited themselves for a free vacation in August, she said with a sigh. There goes two summer weeks. "You know, you can tell them no," I said, uncharacteristically blunt. "You have a right to say no. They seem like a stupid distraction, but they end up defining what Cisco's about."

Back home in Tucson, I called and apologized. Who was I to tell her what to do? I had my own traveler tendencies to reckon with. But Eileen hadn't thought to be mad. "No," she said, "that was good advice. I *do* have control. If people wanna come, I *could* say no." She paused and added, "But I won't."

Boundaries are their own fantasy, of course, and maybe Eileen's lack of them opens something up. One day a woman named Carrie arrived in town to take photos. Eileen struck up a conversation, and Carrie explained that the photos were part of a larger art project about how, as a young woman, she'd been raped. At the time, few people in her conservative Southern hometown gave much support. Now, several decades later, she was compiling images of the people and places and objects she had turned to in the years after the assault. One of those comforts had been *Thelma and Louise*, which includes a scene shot in Cisco, with Ernie in a supporting role.

As they talked, Carrie and Eileen connected, so much so that before Carrie left she gave Eileen one of her project's ur-objects: a pamphlet

with the feminist raised-fist Venus symbol and block letters reading YOU ARE NOT ALONE. Touched, Eileen framed the pamphlet and hung it in a prominent spot in the Airstream. A month later she was working out in the yard when she noticed a dented van spray-painted with activist slogans parked next to the tire wall. Disconcerted, she surveyed the yard and found a stranger poking around by the Airstream. The young woman told Eileen she'd entered the yard to give Rima some water. She was frail with facial piercings that looked infected; she fidgeted and had a blank stare. Later, after the woman had driven away, Eileen checked the Airstream and found that, while nothing else was missing, the pamphlet was gone.

She must have needed it, Carrie said, when Eileen called with the news. After her anger passed, Eileen agreed that was probably true. So she decided to think of the theft as a gift. This wasn't an act of generosity; Eileen was just acknowledging the way she is porous to everyone and everything that passes through Cisco, whether she has chosen to be or not. It's hard to be a purist amongst the rubble.

## 11.

ON A RECENT PHONE CALL, Eileen caught me up on the post-holiday news. Weirdly enough, she'd been invited to give a talk to a group of historical preservationists who wanted to know what she was doing in Cisco. Weirder still, after living there for two full-time years, she sort of knew the answer. "I have plans to build things that are reminiscent of all eras," she told me. "And I want it to be a patchwork, because that's what it is anyway. That's what it always was." The line fell silent. "How do I explain that to them?"

Eileen doesn't necessarily expect things to

work out in Cisco. The tourists could make it unbearable. So could oil drilling or climate change or any number of issues with money. But she considers her relative success a small thing in the grand scheme of the place. On the phone she told me she'd just been to Moab to meet with the planning department, hoping to resolve her infractions, and had heard they were kicking people out of their trailers. In Grand County you can't live in a trailer unless it's in an RV park. "And you know why people are staying in trailers in Moab. Because it's too expensive to live there." Eileen said, disgusted. "It's like, *come on*, people are just trying to live and work here—"

"Whoa, dude!" she yelled suddenly, interrupting herself. "There's a helicopter—it's flying so low—" Her voice trailed off, and then she muttered, "That is so scary." Apparently someone was taking a joyride down Highway 128 as if the helicopter were a car. "Why is he doing that?!" I asked. The question was mostly rhetorical, the answer bigger than Cisco.

"I don't know," Eileen said, "but I want him to stop."

This essay was originally published in *Places Journal*.

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